



Tear Me to Pieces (Sinners and Saints #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: First comes love. Then comes marriage.

We all know how the rhyme ends.

Except I don't want love. I sure as heck don't want another marriage.

But a baby? That I'm desperate for.

And I know exactly who can help me with that.

Simon has always been there for me. He listens to me. Supports me. Makes me feel like maybe I'm not as broken as I think I am. He wants me to be happy. To move beyond the pain of my past.

That's why I'm shocked and more than a little disappointed when he doesn't immediately agree to my offer.

Until he explains his conditions. Then, I'm downright terrified.

There will be no single-motherhood for me if we do this. Simon wants not only in my bed, but also in my life.

I'm not sure that's a deal I can make.

And when the past comes back to haunt me, I might not get the chance to decide.

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MYRA

I GLARE AT the ceiling above my bed—like it’s the problem and not me—trying to concentrate on the task at hand. Narrowing my eyes, I blow out a breath, determined to make myself focus. I’ve got to get this done so I can get on with the rest of my day. Unfulfilling as it will be.

Unfortunately, everything seems determined to be unfulfilling today.

I’ve been laying here for twenty minutes now, vibrator buzzing away against my clit, and I’m not any closer to getting off than I was when I started. It’s the third day in a row I’ve had... problems. And I’m starting to get pissed. Annoyed by my body’s unwillingness to get with the program.

It’s the latest in a streak of failures I’ve had to face lately. Nothing’s going the way I expected, but at least I still had this. Still maintained the grip I had on the pleasure I was never supposed to want and sure as heck was never supposed to chase.

Hoping it will help if I eliminate as many distractions as possible, I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking out the half-finished room around me and the early morning light streaming through the cheap blinds covering the windows. I need to get my mind in the game.

After all, that’s all my life really is. A game. One where the goal is to do the exact opposite of what I was raised to do. To go against the bullshit rules put on me by small-minded men suffering from the illness of arrogance and the epidemic of control.

Self-pleasure was at the top of the list of no-nos enforced on me. It wasn't just frowned-upon, touching yourself was entirely off-limits. Now I know why.

If the women these men kept under their thumbs understood what sex was supposed to feel like, it would have been anarchy. Expectations would have been established. Demands would have been made.

The men I used to know weren't big on having expectations put on them by their wives, and they sure as hell wouldn't have tolerated demands.

Sadly, now that I'm a year into a monogamous relationship with my vibrator, it seems the excitement has worn off. I've reached the point where my morning masturbation sessions feel more like a chore, and that's really freaking aggravating.

Blowing out a sigh, I give up, switching off my toy and dropping it to the mattress beside me. I love starting my day off with a big fuck you to my past, but I guess that's not in the cards for me today. Again.

Flipping back the covers, I sit up and swing my legs off the bed, standing on the clean but unfinished floor of my bedroom. One more thing that fizzled under the weight of my own expectations.

The minute I moved to Memphis, I took off running, righting all the wrongs that had been forced upon me. I cut my hair. Pierced my nose. Got a few tattoos and filled my closet with clothing that would have horrified my piece of shit father and my piece of shit husband.

Ex -husband.

Since Matthias was in prison when I divorced him, I was able to get a pretty good deal.

All the money in our checking account became mine, along with over half of what we had in savings and investments.

Once I got the money, I decided to purchase one of the buildings in the neighborhood where my sister Lydia and her husband Christian live.

I wasn't really thinking through all the shit that came with the purchase, I just liked the idea of owning property.

Another thing that was off-limits to me before.

Unfortunately, while the place wasn't in awful shape, 'former office building' wasn't an aesthetic I wanted to live with.

Initially, the idea of bringing the vision I had for the building to life was exciting.

But once I started actually digging into it, the task of making it a home felt overwhelming.

Honestly, everything has begun to feel overwhelming. All the steam I had for overhauling my life has started to sputter out, leaving me stalled and stagnant. All I do is go to work at the day spa I manage, then come home to my bare-bones house where I eat takeout in bed before I crash.

It's not the exciting, empowered life I imagined, but it's still a million times better than what I came from. And I wake up with a smile on my face every morning.

Except this one.

This morning I'm pissed off. At my vibrator. At my body. At myself. I've been stuck too long, and now it seems another part of me has decided to stall out.

And I'm tired of just letting it happen. Sick of my own excuses. Over the myriad reasons I can come up with to justify my lack of progress.

It's beyond time to get my shit together, and I might as well kick it off with a bang. Take back something I've been missing so much it hurts. Something that was once a huge part of my identity. It was the only bit of me I was proud of. The only aspect of my life that didn't only bring misery.

I'm ashamed I let it go. Or let them take it from me. I'm not really interested in figuring out which right now, and I'm not sure it matters anyway.

After taking a quick shower and pulling on a pair of low-slung jeans and a cropped vest I'm going to call a shirt, I make my way downstairs.

Whipping up a quick cup of coffee in the only finished room of my house, I pour the steaming goodness into a travel mug before heading out the door.

Not giving myself time to second-guess—or linger too long in the chilly fall air—I march straight to my sister's house, taking the back steps two at a time before knocking and letting myself in.

“Lyd?” I loudly call her name. I learned the hard way to alert her to my presence in her home as quickly as possible.

And to not look around when she's not easy to find.

All it took was one earful of the sort of sexual interaction I've obviously never experienced, and I decided to stick to the kitchen and wait for her to come to me. Always.

Because I do not want to hear Christian demanding she come for him again.

Especially since she's nearly ready to deliver their first baby, and that's a visual I don't have any interest in wrapping my head around.

Thankfully, they don't seem to be going at it this morning, because it's only a handful of seconds before Lydia's voice filters down from the second floor. "Be right there."

A breath of relief escapes me, because I'm not sure I could have faced yet another of the mountains I have to climb so early in the day.

I thought masturbation would be sort of a gateway drug. That I would quickly move from it to a physical exchange with another person.

I thought wrong.

Like so much else, my immediate and aggressive strides forward stalled out.

But maybe that had more to do with the only man I've had any interest in making himself scarce than it did with my flakey nature.

At any rate, maybe it's a good thing I couldn't get off this morning.

It's forcing me to move forward again. Shoving me outside the comfort of the new box I've been crammed into.

At least I'm the one who built it this time.

Lydia's steps are quick as she skips down the stairs and across the entryway.

My position inside the back door means I see her as soon as she rounds the corner, her big belly peeking at me before the rest of her.

The sight of my little sister so blissfully happy and safe and cared for never fails to bring a smile to my face.

It's something I never thought I would see.

For so long, I assumed her path would be the same as mine.

She'd be married off to the man who could provide the most for our father—be it money or power—and left to a life of misery.

But Lydia proved to be braver than I was. Stronger. More determined. She refused to be a pawn. And before any of that could happen, she walked away from her life—our life—with nothing.

And then she came back to save me.

“I thought you had to work today?” Lydia comes straight for me, giving me a quick hug before making a beeline to the coffee maker.

“I do, but not for a couple hours.” I trail behind her, taking a seat on one of the stools lined along the counter of the gigantic kitchen island. After pulling in a deep breath, I push out the reason for my visit. “Is Christian here? I was hoping to ask him a question.”

Lydia slides a coffee mug into place before popping in one of the metal cups of coffee grounds the machine requires. “He's upstairs, but should be down in a second.” She sets the machine to brew and then turns to me, pale brows pinched together. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Everything's good.” The answer should be truthful, but it doesn't feel entirely accurate. “It's nothing big. Just something silly I was wondering about.”

Again, my words don't feel entirely truthful. What I'm going to ask is big. Bigger than maybe anything else I've done. It's about claiming a part of myself. Owning something I was told was a gift I was meant to give everyone else.

Yet another bit of me they claimed for themselves.

My sister must not see the turmoil inside me, because Lydia's smile is easy and genuine. "Okay. I just want to make sure you're doing okay."

Okay probably is a good description of how I'm doing. Things are going acceptably. I have a good job. Money. A home. Everything is... Fine.

But that's not how I imagined it would be.

I had years to dream about breaking free of all the bullshit, and when it finally happened, I came to Memphis with expectations. I expected to be like Lydia is—blissfully happy, loving every minute of every second of every day.

Instead I'm just... Acceptably fine.

Christian strides into the kitchen, his eyes locked on where my sister—his wife—stands.

I know I should turn away as he pulls her close, one hand spreading across the curve of her stomach, but I can't.

My eyes refuse to look at anything but how carefully he holds her.

The way she's the only thing that seems to exist.

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No one has ever looked at me like that, and I'm beginning to think no one ever will. Not because they won't want to, but because I might not know how to let them.

"Myra came over to ask you something." Lydia tips her head at me, directing Christian's attention my way, and he seems to notice my existence for the first time.

I lift one hand, giving him a little wave from where I sit. "Morning."

Christian turns to me, focusing on me the way he has countless times before.

His respectful attention always drives home the difference between my before and my now.

It's a stark contrast to what I'm used to, what I was raised to expect.

For as righteous and godly as the men from my old life claimed to be, there was nothing good or honorable about them.

They treated women like objects. Belongings.

Things to be coveted and desired and used.

And when they were called out, the blame was put on us. We were the ones responsible for their indiscretions.

"What can I help you with?" Christian keeps his eyes on me as he turns to the fridge, pulling out the creamer Lydia loves as he waits for my answer.

“I was just wondering—and you can absolutely say no—if maybe the next time you and Tate have a gig, I could possibly sing a song with you.” I say it casually, and avoid mentioning the name that might give away my unrequited—and safe—interest. But both my sister and Christian still stop in their tracks, eyes fusing to where I sit.

My sister’s the first to speak, her voice barely above a whisper. “You want to sing again?”

I shrug, hoping to make it seem like I don’t really care. Like it was just a random thought that hit me while I was walking over. “I just thought it might be fun. But I know you guys have played together forever, so if you don’t want to mess that up...”

I begin backtracking. This was probably a mistake. Maybe I should just stick with being stagnant. It’s so much easier than trying to unpack all the baggage I’ve collected.

“Of course you can sing with us,” Christian answers before I can get out of the spot I’ve put myself in. “I think it would be fantastic.” He flashes me a grin. “I’m sure people are getting sick of hearing me sing all the time anyway.”

I snort, because I doubt that immensely. Christian has a great voice. One that brings women in from miles around. I’m sure there were plenty of hearts broken when my sister snatched him off the market.

He tips a bit of cream into Lydia’s coffee, caring for her like it’s second nature even though it goes against everything he was once taught. “We’re playing at The Cellar this weekend, so you had good timing.”

That sends all the blood draining from my face. “This weekend?”

Christian seems to notice my sudden panic, but he misreads the reasons for it. “If

that's too soon, we can wait until our next gig. No pressure."

I force in a lungful of air and push what I hope is a smile onto my lips. "No. This weekend is fine."

The performance isn't what I'll need time to mentally prepare for.

Christian beams at me, looking both excited and proud. "Awesome. Get me a list of songs you know and I'll get with Tate to come up with a plan." Leaning against the counter, he adds, "Simon won't be here until the last minute, but he can play pretty much anything, so it's not a big deal."

My stomach twists. Or maybe it's more of a flip happening in my belly. It's also possible the tickly sensation would be what some people might call butterflies. Regardless, they're all due to one, single word. A name I can't seem to wipe from my brain no matter how hard I try.

"Yeah. Okay. Good." I grab my cup from the counter and slide off the seat, backing toward the door.

"You and Tate can just pick the one you think will work best." My hand hits the doorknob and I twist, needing a little bit of space.

Needing time to react to this new information alone in private, without my sister watching.

I've worked hard to hide my interest in Simon. The last thing I need is Lydia getting suspicious right before he comes home.

He's coming home .

Christian's brows lift. "One?" He gives me a wink. "I might try to talk you into at least a couple."

"Great. Cool." My mouth is on autopilot now, all my brain function focused on making my escape. "See you guys later." My foot hits the stoop and I start to close the door, but then remember I'm not an ungrateful asshole. "And thank you."

Once politeness has been accomplished, I rush to close the door, fighting to get a full breath of air. This is not what I was expecting. Simon hasn't been home in three months, so I thought it would be a while before I'd have to face the music.

Face him.

I expected to have at least a few weeks to come to terms with everything involved in this new middle finger I've chosen.

I was wrong.

Clutching my coffee to my chest, I hurry down the steps, ready to escape into the building I call home.

I'm practically at a jog when I reach the sidewalk, every step coming faster and faster as I seek out the privacy I need to wrap my head around this new reality.

To smother down all the wild fantasies I've let run wild in Simon's absence.

As I try to pass Tate and Piper's house, I'm forced into a dead stop when a giant truck pulls into their driveway.

Frickety fuck.

The twisting in my stomach amps up exponentially as the truck and the fifth wheel it's pulling come to a stop, the back end of the camper blocking my path and making it impossible for me to make a quick escape.

I still try.

My feet are on the curb and I'm about to duck around the backside of the camper when I hear the truck door slam behind me.

All the hair on the back of my neck stands up as awareness creeps over my skin.

"Myra?"

Simon's deep voice hits me like a sledgehammer, the impact of it rocking me to my core.

The same core that was giving me fits not long ago. It chooses this minute to flare to life, tightening my nipples and sending heat pooling between my thighs. That's what I get for occasionally letting thoughts of him creep into my morning ritual.

I take a steadying breath—knowing it's not going to do me any good—before slowly turning to face one of the main problems I have with this new life that's found me.

Lifting my chin, I attempt to look unaffected by Simon's presence.

"Hey." The word comes out way too fucking whispery, so I clear my throat and try again.

"I, umm, didn't know you were coming to town.

" Even with a gig scheduled for this weekend, Simon doesn't usually show up until

the last minute.

That should have given me a few days to prepare.

Guess freaking not.

Simon ambles my way, my heart rate picking up speed with each step he takes. I swallow hard as my eyes trace a slow path down his long frame.

After spending a lifetime surrounded by men with pasty complexions, soft hands, and squishy middles, Simon is a shock to my system.

A wall of solid muscle and deeply tanned skin.

Rough hands that are usually covered in small injuries from his job as a welder, but are still so, so gentle.

Strong enough to carry me like I weighed nothing as we raced away from the misery of my past life, but his movements are still graceful and elegant when he sets the beat on stage.

He's unlike any man I've ever met. I've spent months trying to forget his scent. The sound of his voice. The slow way his lips lift when he smiles.

Now it's clear I didn't come close to forgetting. At best, I simply ignored—all those things and more.

But there's no way to ignore anything with him standing so close. Looking the way he does and smelling even better.

Reminding me how much I wish I could have him.

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SIMON

I've been home for two seconds and it's already clear I shouldn't have come back yet. I should have told Christian not to book a gig and found another job to fill the month I have free. Hell, I could have just stayed in Texas and fished until I'm scheduled to be in Florida.

But that's not what I did.

What I did was come up with every bullshit reason I could think of to make my way back here. Because, in addition to being a selfish asshole, I'm also a selfish asshole. One who knows what he should do, but never seems to follow the path of righteousness.

I pick damnation every fucking time.

And this morning is no exception. I haven't even parked my fifth wheel, and it's already evident how fucked I am. How painful this visit is going to be.

How many wrong choices I'm about to make.

Myra's going to be so close I can touch her, but might still be too far away to reach.

And I'm not strong enough to accept that.

Not when everyone around me is so damn happy.

Enjoying days with their kids and nights with their wives.

And not when her sadness is already reeling me in.

Making me want to prove how fucking happy I could make her.

Pulling in a deep breath, I do my best to seem relaxed as I walk toward the woman I've struggled to forget.

"I didn't know I was coming home either.

" My hands are curled into fists, clenched around the little restraint I possess.

Forcing my fingers to relax, I fight the urge to touch her.

To provide comfort I'm not sure she's ready to receive.

"The job I was supposed to be starting Monday got postponed until next month. Christian decided to take advantage and booked us a few gigs while I'm off. "

It sounds plausible. Technically, every word of it is true. Christian did book us gigs. I am off work.

But the blame for my appearance here in Memphis is all on me.

No one here needed to know I have a month of freedom.

I could have simply made one of the short appearances I'm known for and made myself scarce the same way I have for years.

Instead I made sure I was locked in. Let Christian schedule a month's worth of

excuses to keep me here.

Close to Myra.

Her full lips barely lift into a hint of a smile. “Yeah. I heard.”

My eyes move over her face, drinking in the soft lines of her smooth skin. It’s been so long since I’ve seen her, but I still know every curve and angle by heart. Would give anything to trace each one with my fingers.

With my tongue.

I clear my throat, forcing my thoughts from where they always manage to go.

“Does that mean you’ll be gracing us with your presence at The Cellar?”

” The eagerness I feel over Myra watching me perform bleeds into my voice, but I can’t undo it now.

All I can do is hope she doesn’t notice.

Hope she doesn’t see how much I want her to be there.

Looking out into the audience and seeing Myra’s face staring back at me is the most perfect torture I’ve ever known. Watching her watching me, wishing she was ready for the things I’m dying to give her.

Again, a whisper of a smile lifts her lips. “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

I was already looking forward to playing this weekend, but now the wait will be excruciating.

I do my best to stay away from Myra when I'm home—the last thing she needs is another man who wants something from her—so watching her from the stage is one of the few times I allow myself to indulge in the fantasy I've been holding onto since I carried her through the woods.

I've saved countless women in my life. Dragged them away from abusive husbands and boyfriends who beat them. For me, not a single one of them was anything but a woman in need of help.

Until Myra.

It figures she'd be the only one I couldn't walk away from.

“How are you doing?” The question is out of my mouth before I can stop it. The need to know she's okay is too strong. Too consuming.

I can usually ignore it. Go about my day pretending it doesn't matter. But not when she's in front of me. Not when I can clearly see how much she's still struggling.

She tries to hide it, but I can see the weariness in her eyes. The sadness slumping her shoulders. It fucking makes me crazy, and is one of the reasons I have to walk away from this place as often as I do.

Myra pulls in a deep breath, slowly releasing it in preparation to offer up the same lie she always does.

“I'm...” Her blue eyes meet mine, holding as she says, “Not as good as I thought I'd be by now.”

The air freezes in my lungs, catching at the open honesty she's offering me.

Her gaze drops to the ground as she continues. “I feel like I started so strong and then...”

I’m hanging onto every word so tight that I almost fall forward when she stops. “And then?”

Myra shakes her head, eyes still fused to my feet. “And then it just stopped.”

“It didn’t stop.” I manage to soften the edge of my words, but just barely.

“You got a great job. You bought a house. You helped get a whole group of women out of a bad situation.” I step closer, drawn in by the need to make her see how fucking amazing she is.

How strong. How brave. “Nothing has stopped, Myra.”

Slowly, her gaze lifts, making a path up my chest. It pauses, hanging on my mouth for the blink of an eye before raising higher. “Being a functioning adult and being happy are two different things.”

Her words jab into a sore spot. One I’ve carried for a long damn time.

I swallow hard, risking a question I hope to God she doesn’t ask me. “Why aren’t you happy?”

Myra huffs out a little laugh. “Lots of reasons.”

When she doesn’t elaborate, I push for more. “Give me one of them.”

Her lips purse, like she’s going to shut down on me. I’ve seen it happen enough I know the signs. Myra keeps her feelings close. It’s shocking she’s given me as much

as she has.

I still want more.

“Hmm. One reason.” She lifts her eyes to the sky like she’s thinking. “I guess one reason is that my job—while great—is really fucking exhausting. And I’m so tired when I get home that I don’t feel like tackling another renovation, so my house is a mess.”

“It can’t be that bad.” Being the greedy bastard I am, I’m pushing my luck.

Hoping she’ll let me a little closer. Give me just a few more crumbs to carry with me when I go.

And I will have to go. I know who I am and who I’m not.

What I will and won’t be able to do. I can’t stay here—close to her—and keep myself in line.

Myra snorts. “If I didn’t have to be at work in an hour, I’d show you just how bad it is.”

“Then show me after work.” I wince inwardly, wishing I could kick my own ass. I have good intentions—really—but they’re like a scream in the wind. Whipped away and muffled by a stronger force set on its own path.

Myra angles a brow at me. “The only people who get to come into my house after I get off work are the ones who bring food.”

That makes me pause. Makes me wonder if?—

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Tate comes storming out his front door, glaring at where my camper takes up the bulk of his driveway.

“You can’t park that thing here, man.” He stops right next to where I stand with Myra, taking in the full scope of my current housing situation. “Did you buy an even bigger camper?”

I love Tate. He’s one of my best friends. But right now I’m considering punching him in the face for interrupting the conversation. “I’m not leaving it here, dick. I just stopped to talk to—” I motion to where Myra stands beside me.

Except, she’s gone. Evaporated into thin air like I imagined the whole goddamned thing.

Maybe I did. Maybe I’ve thought of her so much my brain conjured up the interaction just to fuck with me.

I turn back to find Tate staring at me, one brow angled in question. “To talk to who?”

I shake my head. “No one.” Raking one hand through my hair, I survey the neighborhood, looking for a place my new camper will fit.

When we first found the place, it was nothing more than a block of run-down buildings and crumbling curbs.

Everything was overgrown and under maintained.

The nicest building—nice being used very loosely—on the dead-end street was an old firehouse.

Everything else was a mess of broken windows and sagging rooflines.

But it was an area we could be self-contained. A place we could feel safe back when safety was something most of us could only dream of.

Now, nearly every building on the block has been brought back to life. Thanks to Christian's profession—and many of us starting off working in construction—the large structures have been turned into the kind of homes we dreamed of those long years when we were fighting for survival.

But, while the neighborhood looks warm and welcoming, all the manicured lawns and fenced yards have left me without many options when it comes to parking my camper.

Looks like I might be parking at the warehouse. And honestly, having a little distance between me and Myra probably isn't a bad thing.

"You got here earlier than I expected." Tate braces both hands on his hips, looking over my new fifth wheel. "I was planning to clear out a spot behind my house for you to park, but this fucker won't fit back there."

"It's fine. I'm sure I'll find somewhere to set up." My eyes start to drift to the house beside Tate's. I can only see the roofline of it past my camper, but unless someone's built a garage behind it, I know there's plenty of room for my fifth wheel back there.

I also know it's the last fucking place I should park it.

I could park at the warehouse—should park at the warehouse—but I really don't want to. I spend most of my life alone, so when I'm home, it's nice to feel like I'm a part of something. Even if I'm the odd man out.

I also don't want to force myself on Myra. Being available if she wants someone to talk to is one thing. Sitting right outside her window is another.

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Tate thumbs over one shoulder in the direction of the only vacant house left on the block.

“You could park next to the empty place, but you’ll have to run electric somewhere else since it’s not turned on there.

” He grins. “And if you’re planning to use my bathroom, you’ll have to run across the street in a towel after you finish taking a shower. ”

Again, my eyes drift to the roof of Myra’s house, and this time I’m imagining finding my way into more than just her backyard. This time I’m wondering if the scent of her skin lingers in her shower long enough I’d be able to breathe it in while I fuck my fist under the spray.

“I’ll figure it out.” I give Tate a slap on the shoulder and force a subject change before I end up with a raging hard-on. “What about you? How’s fatherhood?”

He flashes me a wide grin. “It’s fucking fantastic.” Tate lifts his brows as he starts backing away. “You should probably get on that yourself. Don’t want to be an old man chasing around a two-year-old.”

The pain of loss jabs me from the inside. It’s nowhere near as sharp or biting as it once was, but that fucker lingers. Reminding me why I do what I do.

And why I can’t park behind Myra’s house. No matter how much I want to.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I tip my head toward my truck. “I’ll be out of your way in

just a sec.”

“You’ll have to come over and see the baby later on. And tell Piper how good she looks while you’re at it.” Tate gives me a wave before ducking into his house.

He can’t hear me scoff as I shake my head.

“Like fucking hell I will.” Tate’s wife Piper is a loose cannon, and I don’t want to be the one who pisses her off by dishing out manufactured compliments.

I’m sure she looks great, but I’m not the kind of guy who would ever point something like that out.

Not to a woman who wasn’t mine. If I came at her with that, Piper would immediately know something was up and she’d put both me and Tate on her shit list before either of us knew what happened.

And ending up on Piper’s shit list could very well get me shanked. Or tased. Or spray starched within an inch of my fucking life.

After climbing back behind the wheel of my diesel half-ton pickup truck, I go to work maneuvering my thirty-four-foot fifth wheel across the street.

I’ve pulled a camper of some type nonstop for the past six years, so I’m used to fitting it into tight places.

Luckily, it’s early enough none of the kids in the neighborhood are out running wild yet, so my backwards trip to the last remaining vacant building on the street is uneventful.

Just like the rest of my fucking life.

Once I have the fifth wheel in place, I go to work separating it from my truck.

Again, it's a process I've done countless times, so it's only a handful of minutes before my pickup is free.

After looking over my options, it's clear running electric from one of my brothers' houses isn't going to be an option.

I don't have an extension cord long enough.

Even if I did, I'm not sure anyone has the power to spare now that they all have wives and/or kids sucking it down, and I don't want to be tripping breakers all night.

"Fuck." I rake one hand through my hair then scrub my palm over my face, pulling in a deep breath of the crisp morning air.

It's not cool, but it's not warm either, and it drags me back to my earlier conversation with Myra.

It hadn't even occurred to me that she was probably cold standing there in a sleeveless shirt, and now I feel like even more of an asshole.

Not only did I selfishly press her for more than she may have wanted to share with me, but I also let her stand there fucking freezing, never once considering how the temperature might be affecting her.

I was too busy being focused on how she was affecting me.

I should fucking hitch my camper back up and drive away. Leave everyone here—including Myra—behind to live their happy lives.

Except Myra didn't seem all that happy. She seemed.

Sad. Like me.

I stand out in front of my fifth wheel, eyes finding their way to the building she calls home. The home she claims is a mess.

I could help her with that. I've got a month's worth of time to fill before I have to head out to my next job, and I can't think of a better use of those days than helping Myra find the happiness she deserves.

Rocking my head from side to side, I settle into the idea, and a plan starts to form. I should be talking myself out of it, but the longer I stand here, the better the idea—and the plan I now have to go with it—sounds.

Myra didn't seem totally against giving me a tour of her house. Actually, she made it seem like all I'd have to do to earn a ticket inside was bring dinner.

Swinging my eyes away from her place, I let them rest where my home sits. Powerless.

If I want to bring Myra dinner—home-cooked, not takeout—I'm going to have to get my ass in gear and come up with some solutions. Luckily, I love coming up with solutions almost as much as I love making plans.

Even if they're only going to create more problems.

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MYRA

Holy crap am I tired. I love my job, but some days it can be a lot.

Today was one of those days.

One of the sinks in the spa clogged up. A girl at the front desk called in sick at the last minute. And a client fell down the front steps after getting a massage that was clearly a little too relaxing. Since I'm the manager, I got to deal with all of it.

And I did. Before I left for the day, the sink was fixed, every ringing phone had been answered, and the client who fell was patched up and no worse for wear.

Me, on the other hand... I'm suffering. My feet hurt, my brain is fried, and I'm fucking starving because I skipped my lunch so all the receptionists could take theirs. At least I'm almost home and have a quiet house and a comfortable bed waiting for me.

And—as much as this shouldn't be important—Simon's home. For now.

But as I make the final turn, a frown tips my lips. Tate and Piper's driveway is vacant.

Simon's been leaving for longer and longer stretches, but his stays are still normally more than a few hours. Plus, he's supposed to be performing with Christian and Tate this weekend, so it wouldn't make sense that he's already gone. But that's sure how it looks.

As I drive past Piper and Tate's house, I lean to peer behind it at the spot where Simon normally parks his camper. Their backyard is also empty.

A sigh slides free. "Damn."

I shouldn't be disappointed. It's not like I can offer him what I'm sure he wants.

Unless he's the unicorn in a herd of horses, Simon most likely wants to settle down.

Find a wife—or at the very least a girlfriend—and build a life together.

After everything I've been through, I don't know that I'll ever be capable of being either of those things, which sucks.

Witnessing how Christian loves Lydia and Tate loves Piper makes my chest ache. I've never had that. Probably never will. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to trust a man or let him close enough to love me. But I could live with that.

What I am struggling with missing out on? Being a mother.

That hope was the only bright spot that ever existed in my adult life, and one of the few that never dimmed.

In hindsight, I'm glad I didn't get pregnant during my marriage, but part of me can't help but wish I had.

Then I wouldn't be alone. I would already have what I really want and maybe my life wouldn't feel so empty. So pointless.

And I wouldn't have to face the possibility it might be one more thing I can never have.

Blowing out a breath, hoping it takes all my sadness with it, I steer my car up the side of my house so I can park in the back.

After shutting off the engine of my secondhand sedan, I step out, lifting my eyes to the tree above me.

It's been dumping leaves for the past week, and somehow still doesn't seem any closer to being finished.

I eye Piper's garage with envy, wishing I'd found the time and motivation to build one of my own before the weather turned.

Too freaking late now.

Slamming the door of my car a little harder than I need to, I stalk up the cement steps and let myself in through the back door. Dropping my purse and work bag onto the small counter just inside the door, I flip on the light in the one room that's actually finished in my house.

It's all thanks to Christian. I didn't do anything to make it happen besides take him up on an offer I really couldn't refuse.

He'd been hired to demo the kitchen of a home with an almost identical footprint to mine, so he basically took the cabinets, counters, and appliances out of it, brought them here, and screwed it all back into place.

It was an insanely kind thing for him to do, but I'm not stupid enough to think the gesture was for me.

When you whittle all the loose bits of excuse and explanation off, it was all about my sister.

Doing something that would make her happy.

He loves her with a ferocity I can't comprehend.

And never will.

By the time I make it across the room to the fridge, my mood is foul and my attitude is shit.

So I'm feeling pretty normal.

Opening the door, I peruse the lackluster contents lining the shelves. I've got an excellent supply of pickles, including carrots and cauliflower. At least eight different types of dipping sauce. And Russian dressing—the superior way to top a salad.

But that's it.

So I'll be ordering food. Again.

I've got the delivery app open on my phone and I'm headed for the stairs when someone knocks at my front door. My stomach growls on the off chance it could be Felicity bringing me leftovers.

When I open the door, there is someone with an offering of food, but it's not Felicity.

Simon offers a grin that makes my knees weak. "You said something about buying my way into a house tour with food." He lifts one of the plates loaded with spaghetti and garlic bread balanced on his upturned palms, the savory rich scent of it making my mouth water. "I came to collect on that offer."

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. My eyes fall to the delicious looking—and

smelling—plate of food he’s holding.

I know men can cook. Christian cooks for Lydia all the time.

Tate does the same for Piper. Heck, Levi feeds almost the whole neighborhood weekly.

But a man has never cooked just for me .

And it’s a little shocking how impactful the gesture is.

“You made me dinner? All by yourself?” I squeeze my eyes shut, wincing at the belittling words. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Simon chuckles, the sound low and rumbling. “I know how you meant it.”

I open my eyes to find him studying me, expression thoughtful.

“You haven’t exactly seen the best the males of our species have to offer.” He lifts the plate higher, as if it wasn’t already tempting enough. “Maybe this can change that just a little.”

I’m not sure that’s possible, but I do know I’m about to inhale that plate full of spaghetti he’s holding out.

“In that case, entry granted.” I step back, watching him pass me before closing the door, sealing Simon into my space.

“I thought you were exaggerating.” He does a slow spin in the middle of my gutted entryway. “But you weren’t, were you?”

“I was not.” I grab one of the plates and pick up the fork stabbed into the pasta. “Hopefully you cook better than I remodel houses.” Twirling up a mouthful, I shovel it in, eyes rolling back as the flavor of rich, meaty sauce explodes on my tongue.

“I wish I could take credit for that sound you just made, but this is one of Levi’s recipes. I just duplicated it.” Simon looks around. “Where do you want to sit?”

I cringe. “The floor?”

An odd expression passes over Simon’s handsome features, but it’s gone so fast I can’t accurately identify it. He almost seemed upset. But I warned him, so if he’s disappointed in my lack of furniture, that’s on him.

“In that case, why don’t we go back to my place?” He flashes me an easy smile, all signs of his earlier weird emotion gone. “It’s nothing fancy, but I do have couches.”

That has my brows rising. “Couches ? Plural?”

“Couches plural.” Simon opens my front door, holding it for me before following me out onto the porch. When we reach the sidewalk, I scan the neighborhood. “And where is this magical, multiple couch containing camper you possess?”

Simon tips his head toward the vacant building across the street. “Not far.” He steps off the curb, watching as I do the same. “We’re practically neighbors.”

“I think this proximity might qualify as actual, not practical.” I follow down the broken driveway and, sure enough, there’s his camper, parked right behind the dilapidated building.

Simon goes to the large side door, bracing a foot on the steps to open it before dropping back to the ground and holding it wide. “Ladies first.”

Again, I'm caught off guard by how much Simon's action affects me. I've spent the majority of my life being treated like men were above me. That I was less. Less important. Less intelligent. Less capable. Never did I come first.

And in at least one way, I never came at all.

My smile is barely there as I pass him, carefully climbing the metal steps up into the fifth wheel as my brain swirls with the jarring emotions Simon always brings on.

He's affected me from the beginning. And I let it happen because he was safe.

I could adore him secretly from afar because he was always gone.

There was no fear he'd ever find out, and no fear he'd reciprocate and ask for something I couldn't give.

Now I'm thinking I should have nipped that in the bud because I'm for sure going to embarrass myself—likely by staring a little too hard or drooling down my face—before the night's over.

Once I'm inside, my feet slow. The space is way darker than I expected and I can't see where I'm going. "Umm..."

Simon comes in right behind me, squeezing past me. "Sorry. I forgot I turned the lights off." He flips a switch and the space illuminates in a soft glow.

And my mouth drops open.

"Holy crap." I don't know where to look first. Standing next to the camper earlier when Simon first arrived, it felt big, but I assumed most of that was whatever made up the shell of the thing. I didn't actually expect it to be big inside. But this thing is

huge.

Simon moves past the kitchen—which contains a freaking island — and plops onto one of the two sofas in the living room area. He angles a brow at me. “See? More than one sofa.”

Now that I’m seeing it firsthand, his home having more than one sofa is the least impressive thing about it.

The kitchen is shockingly big, sporting a full-size refrigerator along with a pantry tucked into one corner.

There are pendant lights hanging over the island, and the stove has plenty of room to craft a full meal.

Across from the kitchen is a dining area.

A set of four chairs flank the smooth wood surface, which is again surprisingly big.

Then there’s the living room. In addition to the two couches Simon promised, there’s a large television, end tables, and even what appears to be an electric fireplace.

“I had no clue campers could look like this.” I turn to peer down the darkened hallway behind me. There’s a door immediately on the left and then a small set of stairs. Stairs. In a flipping camper. “This place makes my house look like shit.”

“Just remember, your toilet goes into the sewer. Mine goes into a tank I have to empty.” Simon grins when I turn to face him. “So I’m going to say your house still wins.”

There it is again. Simon easily putting me in the front. Like he doesn’t give a shit

whether or not people think he's superior. The one in charge. In power. In control.

Still clutching my plate, I walk across the laminate flooring before lowering to the opposite end of the sofa Simon's sitting on. I don't really know how to deal with what's happened since he showed up on my doorstep. How to catalog all the information I now have.

Luckily, it doesn't matter. Simon is probably just being nice to me since we're the only two single people on the block.

I know what it's like to hang out with happy couples all the time, and I don't blame Simon if he's simply having dinner with me to avoid having what he's lacking dangled in front of his face.

"You better eat before it gets cold." Simon tips his eyes, one eye squinting as he reconsiders. "Actually, I don't think it matters. Cold spaghetti's pretty damn good too."

I scoot back a little, trying to look more comfortable than I am, as I twist a spool of pasta onto my fork. I've spent months fantasizing about the man who's now only a few feet away. It's surreal.

And awkward.

I force myself to relax, leaning back against the plush cushions in an attempt to get at least a little comfortable. "Does that mean you eat a lot of cold spaghetti?"

Simon finishes his mouthful, lips curving into a smile. "The amount of spaghetti I consume on a monthly basis is embarrassing." He shrugs. "But my job takes a lot of energy, so I can use all the carbs I can get."

I know a little about Simon. All of it gleaned from random conversations since I've made a point not to ask anyone about him. But part of the fantasy was he could be whatever I wanted him to be.

I do know he's a welder like Shelly's husband Shaun. One who travels around doing specialized jobs as an independent contractor. But that doesn't really explain his claim about the energy needs of his profession.

"What exactly do you weld?"

Simon's eyes move over me for a second before he answers. "I weld underwater."

I gasp. Loudly.

"Underwater?" Why do I feel like I can't breathe just thinking about that? "Why underwater?"

Again, Simon shrugs. Like his career choice is as uninteresting as it gets.

"I like the water. I know how to weld. It pays really fucking well." Something in his expression shifts again.

Sort of like it did earlier. But again, it's too fast for me to identify the difference.

"I was looking for a reason to leave town, and I can make more if I'm willing to travel."

"What happens when you want to get married and have kids?" The question is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

I don't even know why I ask it. Why it matters.

It doesn't. "I'm sorry. That was really invasive of me.

" I try to backtrack, hoping I haven't offended him with my probing questions that are probably more about me than him.

"You don't have anything to apologize for, Myra." Proving he's just as easy-going in real life as he is in my mind, Simon smooths over my blunder like it doesn't matter. "As far as marriage and kids? They've felt out of reach for a long time."

My fork freezes midair. Halted by feelings that are very similar to mine. I slowly lower the bite I prepared to my plate, drawn into a conversation I didn't expect to have. "Why do they feel out of reach?"

I hold my breath as I wait for his answer, wondering how close it might be to mine.

If maybe I'm not the only one with dreams that will never become reality because I can't get out of my own way.

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SIMON

I don't like the way Myra's looking at me. Like she can see the truth I work so hard to hide. The reality I crisscross the country to escape.

"Well..." I clear my throat, trying to buy myself time. The answer to her question is not an easy one, and I don't enjoy discussing the history surrounding it. But for some reason, I made a confession that would lead us right here. Take us to this exact spot.

"Crap. I don't know what's wrong with me tonight." Her eyes drop to her lap. "I don't like people asking me those sorts of questions. I don't know why I'm asking you."

I know why I want to think she's asking me these questions. I want to believe Myra would like to get to know me. Spend time with me. I don't for a second believe that's the case, but in a perfect world...

So, on the off chance my world has recently become a little more perfect, I take a deep breath, blowing it back out before starting the story I've been running from for years.

"I was with a woman a long time ago." I slide my plate onto the small table at my side, appetite lost to the bitterness in my gut. "She had a son."

I'd thought I finally found the family I'd been searching for. That my days of being discarded and alone were over.

I was very fucking wrong.

When I glance up, I could swear Myra is closer than she was a second ago, and it keeps my mouth moving in spite of the tightness in my chest.

“I got very attached to her son, so when she ended things, it was really hard for me.” I omit the majority of the story, focusing on the primary reason I’m not sure what my brothers have will ever grace my life.

“Near the end, I liked that little boy a million times more than I liked her.” I meet Myra’s gaze.

“And I would’ve stayed with her because of that.

” It’s a shameful truth, but it is what it is.

“I would have made both of us miserable to stay in that kid’s life. ”

I know what it feels like as a kid when someone walks away from you without looking back. How much it can fuck you up when the people who brought you into this world leave you to fend for yourself. And I never wanted to do that to my kids. Including the one I didn’t have a part in creating.

When it was forced on me, everything I thought I could be crashed down. It left me broken. Doubting myself. Questioning my ability to be the kind of parent I swore I’d be.

And positive I’d never put a kid—or myself—in that position again.

I’m so wrapped up in the loss and guilt and regret of that time, I don’t notice Myra’s right beside me until one hand comes to rest on my arm.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” Her words are simple, but filled with compassion.

I try to smile, hoping to ease the upset pinching her brows. Myra’s been through enough. She doesn’t need to wade through my shit too. “So am I.” I pull in a breath, trying to ease the weight on my chest. “But all I can do is learn from it and adjust my life accordingly.”

Myra’s brows weave closer. “Did you? Learn from it?”

I don’t know how to answer that. In some ways, yes. I learned I’m not cut out for anything except forever, especially when kids are involved. But have I figured out how to move forward with that knowledge?

No. In fact, I did the opposite of moving forward.

I ran the fuck away.

A bitter chuckle passes through my lips. “I did learn, but not sure how much good it did me.”

Myra’s eyes move over my face, tracing my features.

“Learning is supposed to be the whole point of life, but not everything we find out is good.” Myra’s lips press into a flat line as her eyes drop to where her hand rests on my arm.

One finger lightly traces the dark lines inked into my skin.

“I was so excited to be free. To get away from the oppression. But it’s not as easy to navigate as I expected. ”

I don't like the sadness in her voice. It makes me want to comfort her. To reassure her. "It takes time, Myra. It's only been a year."

Her blue eyes lift to my face. "How long has it been since that woman broke up with you?"

Fuck.

I shake my head. "What I went through and what you went through are two completely different things."

"Are they?" Myra almost sounds offended that I'm not comparing my little breakup with the complete dismantling of life as she knew it. "You lived your life one way, and in the blink of an eye, it changed."

"It was only my life for three years." I point out the huge timeline discrepancy, feeling like it's going to win this little difference of opinions we have.

Myra's eyes widen. "You were with her for three years?" Her expression softens. "In her son's life for three years? And then she just expected you to walk away?"

The outrage in Myra's tone settles a little bit of the pain I still feel over all that happened.

"That's not exactly what happened. She decided we were done—that I wasn't what she was looking for—and cut me off completely.

It was at a time when I was leaning a little more toward the wrong side of the law, and I knew if I tried to push things—to fight to keep seeing her son—she could make life very fucking hard for me.

” I knew this, because she flat out told me.

If I tried to maintain any contact with her son, she would call the cops and tell them what I—and my brothers—were doing.

At the time I was pissed. Hurt. Hated her for doing what she did.

Now, with the lens of time and distance to see through, I can see why she might have done what she did. It doesn’t make it any less painful. If anything, it made it worse. Shifted the weight of anger and blame from her shoulders and put it on mine.

Myra’s mouth drops open and she makes a weird squeaking sound.

After blinking twice, she sits straighter, the hand on my arm curling against my skin to grip me tight.

“Does she have any idea how fucking hard it is to find a man who wants to be a decent father? To find someone selfless enough to put kids first?”

Now it’s my turn to blink. I know Myra isn’t a shrinking violet. She’s got more spine than most men I know. I’m still a little surprised at the venom in her voice. The murderous intent in her expression. “I don’t know what she knows. This happened a long time ago.”

Myra runs her tongue across the white line of her teeth, snapping it free as her nostrils flare. “I hope she’s fucking miserable.”

I shake my head. “I don’t. If she’s miserable her son’s probably miserable, and he doesn’t deserve that.” I don’t really give a shit about Lenore or how she’s doing. Her happiness is irrelevant to me outside of how it will affect the little boy—now a teenager—I loved like my own.

Myra pulls in a slow breath, easing it out of her lungs. “She’s an idiot for letting you go.”

The compliment sits warm in my chest even though it doesn’t quite fit. I should tell Myra why Lenore leaving me probably wasn’t the wrong decision, but I’m sick of talking about it. Sick of thinking about it. Sick of circling to the past yet again.

Especially when I can’t leave it behind. When I can’t run from the ache it creates.

“You say that.” I motion to her forgotten spaghetti. “But considering you haven’t eaten much of your dinner, you must not be too impressed with me, either.”

My attempt to redirect the conversation works, because Myra’s eyes drift to where her abandoned plate sits on the end table at the other end of the couch. “I forgot we were eating.”

I study her as she picks up her plate and dutifully takes another bite. “You forget to eat a lot?”

I don’t like that Myra hasn’t figured out how to take care of herself. She deserves to focus on herself—what she wants and needs—after spending so many years taking care of a prick who wasn’t good enough to look at her face, let alone touch her skin.

Fucker. I hope he’s having a real nice time in prison. Making a lot of friends. With benefits.

Myra sighs. “It’s not really that I forget.” She takes a big bite of garlic bread. “I just get busy and distracted and before I know it, it’s seven or eight at night.”

I angle a brow at her. “You literally just described forgetting to eat.”

Her lips curve in a hint of a smile. “You weren’t supposed to point that out.”

“Is that how this is going to be? I made us dinner and I still can’t call you out on your bullshit?” I shake my head, letting a teasing smile work onto my lips. “That hardly seems fair.”

Myra rolls her eyes, but the smile on her face holds. “If you plan to call me out on my bullshit, you’re going to be very busy.”

“Good.”

Her eyes jump to where I sit. “Good?”

“Life’s too short to give up your bullshit.” I shrug. “Being easy never got anyone anywhere. So be as difficult and contradictory as you want.”

Myra’s head angles, eyes narrowing like she’s trying to figure me out. “Shouldn’t you be following your own advice?” Myra takes another bite of her dinner. “Because you’re about the most agreeable person I’ve ever met.”

“There’s some things I get wound up about and there are some things I don’t.” I shrug. “Again, life is short. Fight about what matters and let the rest go.”

Myra twirls her fork in the pasta remaining on her plate. “You’re full of wisdom tonight, are you?”

I huff out a laugh. “No one has ever called me wise, I can promise you that.”

“You’re clearly not unwise .” Myra pulls her fork free, using it to gesture around.

“I’m pretty sure this camper cost more than my house.

Add on your truck, and obviously you're not hurting financially.

You get to see all sorts of cool places instead of being stuck on a dead-end street all the time.

" She stabs her fork back into the pasta.

"And you remember to eat dinner every night, so you're definitely wiser than I am. "

She's given me an opportunity I should refuse. An opening I shouldn't take. Especially on the tail of the conversation we just had.

But I'm weak. Always have been when it comes to things like this.

When it comes to her .

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“Then maybe you should let me handle some shit for you while I’m here.” I try to gauge her reaction, but Myra’s expression doesn’t give much away. “I’ve got plenty of time to work on your house. It’ll give me something to do besides sitting around all day staring at the walls.”

Myra pinches her lower lip between her teeth, like she’s genuinely mulling over my offer. “That’s really nice of you, but...” She drifts off, like she doesn’t really want to turn me down.

And again, I jump at the opportunity. “But, what?” I flash her a grin. “You’d rather see what happens when I go stir crazy?”

Myra huffs out a little laugh. “It’s not that.”

“You’re worried about the quality of my craftsmanship then.

” I set down my plate because I just realized I didn’t bring either of us anything to drink since I assumed she’d have something at her place.

“Because I can give you references, and one of them is your brother-in-law.” Opening my fridge, I pull out two bottles of water and carry them back to the couch, passing one to Myra. “The other is your next-door neighbor.”

Myra shakes her head. “It’s not that either.”

I wait as she opens her bottle and swallows down a few long drinks. Once she’s done, I lift my brows. “What is it, then?”

Myra sighs, the sound long and loud as I wait for her to spill a little more of the insight I desperately want.

“A renovation is a big, messy, labor-intensive undertaking.” Her blue eyes meet mine before falling away. “And then there’s the cost...”

“I’m cheap labor, if that helps at all.” I open my own bottle of water. “And I know a guy who could help us get some pretty good deals on materials.”

Myra’s house being in the state it’s in is even more surprising considering Christian’s her brother-in-law. He would do anything for Lydia, and that includes making sure her sister is taken care of.

“I know. Christian actually got me all the stuff in my kitchen.” Myra’s expression turns downcast. “But I don’t want him to feel like I’m using him.” Her eyes come to me. “I don’t want you to feel that way either.”

“Awfully bold of you to assume I don’t like being used.

” The flirtatious remark slides out before I can stop it.

My mouth always gets me into trouble. It’s a fucking miracle I haven’t screwed up before now.

I have a habit of falling hard and fast, and I’m not the kind of guy who can play it cool.

I’m all-in right out of the gate, and that can be a lot.

It can also land me with a broken heart. Has once or twice.

But Myra doesn't seem phased by my suggestion. She's back to studying me, lower lip pinched between her teeth. "I'll keep that in mind."

Her eyes fall to her empty plate. "You're definitely a good influence on me." She gives me a shy sort of smile. "On my stomach anyway."

I take her plate, stacking it on mine. "Happy to be of service."

I would very much like to serve her in any way she wants or needs. Any time. Any place. Have been fighting that desire for the better part of six months.

Maybe a year.

I attempted to convince myself otherwise the entire drive here, but I'm not even twelve hours into being around her and I'm already bracing to jump in with both feet. Because I'm a fucking idiot. An idiot who fully intends to do one thing, but actually does another. Almost every fucking time.

Thankfully, I miraculously manage to seal my dumbass lips together, stopping myself from offering to pay for the renovation myself. Myra spent her whole life being controlled by overbearing men. The last thing she needs—or likely wants—is another one.

No matter how well-meaning.

"I should probably go." She wipes both palms down the black pants she wore to work, and I mentally kick myself for not even giving her the time to change into something comfortable. "I don't want to monopolize your whole evening."

Again, I miraculously keep my mouth shut. Stop myself from telling her she can monopolize as much of me as she wants. I think I deserve a pat on the back for that

accomplishment.

I follow her as she gets up and goes to the door, watching as she steps out into the night.

My feet start moving all on their own, taking me out into the darkness after her. “I’ll walk you home.” I close the door behind me and blink at the nearly complete blackness around us.

“Wow.” A hand lands on my shoulder. “I didn’t realize how dark it is back here at night.”

Every cell in my body focuses on where she’s touching me. “Neither did I.” Digging into my pocket, I pull out my phone and switch on the flashlight. “Better?”

“Much.” Myra lets out a little breath. “I guess it’s a good thing you decided to follow me home.”

I’m going to have to disagree with her on that. Nothing I’m doing where Myra is concerned is a good idea. In fact, it’s probably the worst fucking idea I’ve had. And I’ve had some bad fucking ideas.

But if this goes down in flames, I won’t just lose her. I’ll lose everything that matters.

“It’ll be better tomorrow after they turn on the power in this place.” I motion to the vacant house I’m parked behind.

Myra looks up at me. “You talked Jill into having the power turned on?”

“It wasn’t difficult. Jill’s got her fingers crossed I’ll move home permanently.

I think this gave her hope it could happen soon.

” I start to reach for her, hand hovering an inch from her lower back when I catch myself.

“And I’m sure Levi and Carly will be happy not to have my extension cord running across their backyard anymore. ”

It was the best temporary solution I could come up with. It involved buying the longest cord I could find and adjusting the location of my fifth-wheel. And all I have the power to run is the lights and fridge—stovetop is propane—but it made it possible for me to make Myra dinner.

And gave her somewhere comfortable to eat it.

“Oop—” Myra’s body lurches forward.

I drop my phone—I’d rather it hit the blacktop than Myra—and grab her, planting one boot against the ground as I attempt to stop her forward momentum.

I overshoot the needed force to counteract her trajectory and end up with her body against mine.

I should let her go.

I really should let her go.

I absolutely should let her go.

I don’t.

I breathe deep, pulling her sweet scent into my lungs as I savor a moment that shouldn't belong to me. "You okay?"

Myra blinks up at me, face shadowed in the dark. "Yeah. I think so."

I should let her go.

I really should let her go.

I absolutely should?—

Myra pushes up onto her toes, pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you for dinner." She steps out of my arms, backing toward her house. "And thank you for catching me."

I keep my feet where they are, watching as she moves away. "I'm not gonna let you fall." Because I'm an idiot, I take a step toward her, already hating the distance between us. "Promise."

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MYRA

Staring up at the ceiling, I try to talk myself into getting out of bed. Nothing good will come of opening the drawer beside me.

My eyes still roll that way, fixing on the handle, tempting me to reach for it. But I can't. I know exactly how this will play out, and it's only going to make my life more confusing.

More complicated.

Clamping one hand between my thighs, I put pressure on the throb there, trying to calm it down. Smother it out.

Wrong move.

Instead of easing the ache that's been building since I opened my eyes, the contact only inflames it. A quiet whimper slides free and I close my eyes, squeezing them tight as I try to reign in the surge of sensation.

But the second I close my eyes, all I see is Simon. The easy smile he offered so many times last night. The deep rumble of his voice. The broad expanse of his chest when he pulled me against it after saving me from taking a tumble.

The rough drag of his fingers across my skin as he held me tight.

What would they feel like in other places? Would they be gentle?

Or demanding.

Maybe both.

Before I can fully process what I'm doing, my hand is down the front of my sleep pants, fingers sliding to rub the spot I can imagine Simon touching. Stroking.

Possibly licking.

My breath catches as an orgasm slams into me, hard and fast, riding the mental image of Simon's tongue swiping against my most sensitive part.

It's one of many interactions I've never experienced. I've had sex more times than I care to consider, but every one of them was a whole lot like being jabbed with the blunt end of a stick—uncomfortable, but more annoying than anything.

I can't help but think it wouldn't be like that with Simon, but that's probably just my romance novel fueled brain feeding me what it knows I'm hungry for.

“Ugh.” I fling back the covers, hating myself for the lack of restraint I showed. “You're never going to be able to look him in the eye if you keep thinking of him when you masturbate.”

Trudging into the bathroom, I go through the morning motions. After peeing and washing my hands, I scrub my face and poke in my contacts.

I'm just finishing brushing my teeth when someone knocks on my door.

The only person who comes to my house this early is Lydia, and she lets herself in the back door, so my stomach flips at the sound. Not because of its unexpectedness, but because the possibility of who might be on my doorstep is pretty narrow.

After spitting the foam in my mouth down the drain and checking to make sure I don't look as guilty as I feel, I head out of my bedroom and down the unfinished steps, swallowing hard at the tall frame visible through the frosted glass.

Pressing my lips together to smother out the smile trying to work across them, I open the door, eyes bouncing around the sight before me.

As I expected, it's Simon. As I also sort of expected, he has food. What I wasn't expecting was for him to also be carrying two collapsible chairs.

He lifts the plates higher. "Hungry?"

I angle a brow at him. "Maybe."

Resisting the urge to feel my cheeks to gauge the blush creeping across them, I step back and open the door wider. I'm sure he won't be able to tell what I was just doing.

Well, pretty sure.

Struggling to meet his gaze, I motion at the food. "Is this your way of telling me you really do want a tour of my house?"

"Possibly." Simon steps inside, his eyes moving around the space a lot like they did last night. "It could also be my way of forcing you to keep me company so I don't have to eat alone."

"I was the best option you could come up with?" I close the door behind him then make my way down the hall toward the nicest part of my house. "You could have gone to Christian and Lydia's. They have furniture."

Simon grimaces. "I learned the hard way not to go over there in the morning."

I cringe. “Me too.” I reach my kitchen and go straight to the coffee maker. “Now I make sure I stay right by the back door and yell really loud so they know I’m there.”

“Smart.” Simon sets both plates on the counter then swings the chairs off his shoulder. While he takes off their carrying covers, I go to work making us each a cup of coffee.

It’s an odd sort of situation. One I’ve seen occur, but never really experienced firsthand.

My marriage wasn’t a team effort. Like so much else, it was divided along uneven lines.

I was raised to believe there are things men do and things women do, and the two don’t generally crossover.

So having a man cook for me, not only once, but twice now, is surreal.

Especially when the man also wants to converse with me.

Asks me questions and genuinely listens to my answers.

The first cup of coffee finishes brewing right as Simon gets both chairs situated. I turn to him, angling a brow. “How do you take yours?”

Ignoring the chairs and the food, he comes toward me. Tipping his head at the mug in my hand, he shakes his head. “That’s not mine. That’s yours.”

I huff out a little laugh, because I’m not sure how to react to that. Honestly, I’m not sure how to react to most of what Simon says and does. “You made breakfast. The least I can do is give you the first cup of coffee.”

Simon picks up the second mug I pulled out and loads it onto the machine.

“No. The least you can do is sit down and start eating.” After dropping in a coffee pod and setting it to run, he turns to me, leaning back against the counter, crossing both arms over his chest. “You have to work today. I don’t. ”

“I don’t have to be at work until eleven.” It’s a pretty decent argument, but it doesn’t get me anywhere.

Simon points to the chairs. “Sit and eat.” It’s the first time he’s demanded I do something, and I expect it to annoy me. Assume it will take the edge off the fascination I have with him and begin the process of popping the bubble I’ve put around him.

It doesn’t.

Unlike the men of my past, he’s not demanding I do something for him. He’s demanding I take care of myself. And I’m faced with a scenario that’s never been put in front of me before. Again.

Since I don’t really know what else to do, I find my feet moving to the chairs.

When I sit down, I lift my eyes to find Simon watching me, an almost pleased expression on his face. Like watching me take precedence brings him some sort of satisfaction.

I clear my throat, trying to move past the odd feelings brewing in my gut and tightening my chest. “Thank you for breakfast.” It’s what I always wished I’d heard, but not a single time did it happen. Why show appreciation for someone doing their duty?

But catering to someone else isn't a duty, no matter what controlling men claim.

"Don't thank me too soon." Simon pulls his coffee cup free and swallows down a mouthful of the scalding hot liquid. "It's actually a bribe."

I'm holding a piece of toast in front of my mouth, and I pause before taking a bite. "A bribe?"

Simon comes to sit next to me, slowly lowering his big body into the seat. "That's right. I figure if I butter you up with enough food, you'll let me talk to Christian and see what he's got on hand that I can use to putter around this place."

I stare at him, a little confused over why he would want to work when he's off work. "You really don't have to do that. I'll get around to it." Eventually.

"I know I don't have to do it, but I don't sit around well. Now that Tate's house is done, there's not really anything else to do around here." Simon gestures to my plate. "Eat."

Out of habit, I do as I'm told. The food is in my mouth and half-chewed before I realized what I've done, and it hits me like a bag of bricks. Makes me mad at myself and disappointed in my progress. But then Simon says something that changes the entire moment.

"Good girl." The approval in his tone makes me want to sit up straight. Preen a little.

Compliments were in short supply in my previous life. Nonexistent, really. Especially from men. And—like having Simon cook for me and listen when I talk—I'm shocked at how good it feels.

"If I promise to only use materials I can get from Christian for free, would you be

willing to give me a couple of rooms to work on so I don't go completely crazy while I'm here?"

I press my lips together, working my way through this little conundrum he's presented me with.

A big part of why I hadn't continued renovating my house was the expense.

I've already bought this building and a car.

Spending more of my limited savings stressed me all the way out.

Even if I could get the materials from Christian for free, I would never let him—or any of his employees—do the work without me being the one to foot the bill.

Man-hours add up quickly, and the scope of the job is pretty big, so I knew no matter what, the cost would be significant.

Part of me wanted to believe I would dig in and learn some new skills. Tackle a few of the projects on my own. But that hasn't happened. For a variety of reasons. Reasons that might be more excuses than anything.

"I can't let you do all that work without paying you." I dutifully take another bite of my eggs after Simon looks at them pointedly before fusing his dark eyes to my mouth and angling a brow.

As I chew, he makes a rumbling sound that might be indicative of his approval.

"You will be paying me. You're paying me in company.

" He tips his head toward the street outside.

“Keeping me from having to stare at everyone else going about their happy little lives while I’m sitting alone in a camper. ”

I wrinkle my nose. “It is kind of annoying.”

Simon’s gaze once again turns assessing. “Now you see why I’m never here.”

He’s offered a surprising amount of insight into who he is, and instead of quenching my thirst for information about him, it’s only left me wanting more. “Is that the only reason you stay gone?”

Simon’s expression is intent, all his focus on me when he says, “No. It’s not.”

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Before I can attempt to get him to elaborate, Simon is grabbing my coffee off the counter and handing it to me. “But I’m here for a month, so you might as well take advantage.”

I take a drink of coffee, earning another grunt of approval.

“That is exactly what I don’t want to do.

I don’t want to take advantage of everyone here any more than I already have.

” I sigh. “Jill sold me this place for next to nothing. Christian helped me get a good paying job.” I take a steadying breath.

“And that’s not counting all the work it took for you guys to get me out of Arkansas.”

I’ve replayed that night in my head a million times.

And not a single version has been the same.

Initially, I obsessed over the mistakes I made.

Thought of all I could have done to make it easier.

Faster. Less dangerous. Then there was a period where all I could be was angry.

Pissed that it came to that. Outraged that I was forced to run away from an entire life

because of a few assholes who didn't understand—or care about—the difference between right and wrong. Between good and evil.

Simon leans toward me, his collapsible chair groaning under the weight of his substantial bulk. “I feel like we’ve already discussed how I feel about you taking advantage of me, Myra.”

My belly flips at the deep softness of his voice.

There almost seems to be a hint of suggestion there, but I could simply be hearing what I want to hear.

Especially since I shouldn't want to hear that.

I'm not in a position to offer much of anything to anyone, let alone a gorgeous man who has his whole life together.

I don't even know who I am or what I want.

Well...

Technically, that's not entirely true. I do know I want to be a mom—more than just about anything. But that's not really relevant here.

It might not be relevant anywhere. How in the hell can I have a baby in a house that looks like mine does? What about when I'm at work? If spending money on a renovation stresses me out, dropping hundreds each month on childcare will send me in a spiral.

And if I don't think I have the capacity to be in a relationship, how in the hell do I think I have the capacity to be a mother?

I sigh, hating the truth I've been avoiding. Wishing so much things could be different. That I could be different. But stupid men with small minds and God complexes ruined me.

And I let them. Because it was easier than taking it all back.

And that's still what I'm doing. Letting stupid men with small minds continue to dictate my life because taking it back from them is hard.

But letting them keep it is turning out to be even harder.

"Okay." I pull in a breath, sitting up straighter in my seat. "My house can be your little craft project." Simon starts to smile, but I point my fork at him. "On one condition."

He angles a brow and waits. "What condition is that?"

"You let me help you. Teach me enough I can keep going after you leave." I'm guessing hands-on education will be way better than my plan to watch YouTube videos.

I choose to ignore that it also gives me an excuse to continue being around Simon. I can only tackle one issue at a time.

"That's the easiest deal I've ever made." Simon holds out one hand.

My eyes drop to it. I hesitate for just a second before sliding my palm against his. His fingers are as warm and strong and rough as they were in my mind not so long ago, and it has my insides heating.

"How mad will you be if I tell you I already told Christian to get me an inventory of

what he has on hand that might be useful?" Simon's lips quirk into a half smile.

A laugh jumps free, my head tipping back as a little of the tension bunching my shoulders slips loose. "You know, I'm not really surprised." My hand is still in his, and I find it difficult to change that. "You seem like the kind of man who doesn't give up easily."

"I'm pretty good at knowing what I want and doing what it takes to get it." Simon's thumb drags against my skin, the steady stroke soothing and arousing all at once. "And that's not always a good thing."

My brows lift, because I don't see how that's possible. "Why not?"

As someone who's struggled to figure out what they want but also how to get it, I can't see a scenario where follow-through would be bad.

Simon's hand slowly slips from mine. "Just because I want something doesn't mean I deserve to have it."

I curl my fingers inward, like I can hold onto the warmth he provided. The strength that just held me so gently. His words settle around me. As they sink into my skin, it starts to itch with irritation. Annoyance at a woman I never knew and will never know.

If she's lucky.

"Who gets to decide what you deserve?" I know it's not some chick who let a man act like her kid's dad for three years and then took them from each other. "Because from where I'm sitting, I don't think there's much you're not deserving of."

Simon is kind and hardworking and selfless. On the rare occasions he's not working,

he helps his friends—and my sister—get women like me out of bad situations.

And apparently then offers to renovate their houses for them.

Simon is back to studying me. Looking over my face like he's searching for something. "I want to believe you, but I'm not sure you've been given the opportunity to raise your bar as high as it should be."

I take a drink of my coffee, hoping I buy enough time for my mouth to understand it needs to stay shut. This man is doing so much for me—cooking, renovating, keeping me from being as isolated and alone as I normally am—I don't need to trauma dump on him too.

But that shit has a way of slipping through the cracks. Eking out your pores. And that's what it does now.

"Surprisingly, I've got the opposite problem." I poke at my food, appetite gone. "I'm pretty sure my bar is so far up there, no one's ever going to be able to touch it."

I lived my whole life surrounded by men who never saw me. They didn't care about me—certainly didn't love me. My entire existence was about control and manipulation. There was no connection and no conversation. No teamwork and sure as hell no partnership.

And the only way I'll ever let another man into my life is if he gives me all that and more. I want everything. Someone who talks to me. Someone who takes care of me the way I take care of them. Someone who listens to me and considers how I think and feel.

Someone who tells me how they feel.

When I first came to Memphis, I didn't think it was a tall order, but now...

Now I've seen enough of the world to know better. What Lydia has with Christian is the exception.

And I'm not an exceptional person.

"Your bar should be high." Simon's leaning close again, this time with his fork loaded full of fluffy, cheesy scrambled eggs.

He holds it in front of my mouth, angling a brow until I open it.

After shoveling it in, he reaches out to wipe a bit of loose egg from the corner of my mouth as he says, "If a man wants you bad enough, he'll climb as far as he has to."

SIMON

“I’m surprised you were able to talk Myra into this.” Christian looks over the main floor of his sister-in-law’s house with the critical eye of a man in his element. “I’ve tried for the past six months to get her to let me get this place done for her, but she wouldn’t fucking have it.”

Keeping my posture loose to hide how much it bothers me that Myra’s been living like this, I follow behind my friend as he moves through the space. “Yeah. She told me about that.”

I think I know why—one of the reasons at least—but I keep it to myself. I don’t want Christian to feel like Myra doesn’t think of him as family, and I don’t want Myra to feel like she can’t open up to me.

I know how hurt Christian would be to know Myra still feels like a visitor here. All of us went a long time without family, and now that we have it, we will do anything for each other. No questions asked. Hearing Myra doesn’t feel the same would be a gut punch.

And knowing Myra feels that way makes me want to protect her even more. Be the person she can trust. The one she can lean on.

The one she can ask for anything.

“You know how overwhelming starting over can be.” I tuck both hands in the pockets of my jeans. “It takes some time to wrap your head around things.”

Christian nods slowly. “I know. I just hate feeling like I can help and knowing I can’t .”

It’s one of many reasons Myra will eventually trust Christian. Think of him the way he’d like her to. He’s a good person. Has come far enough to understand sometimes you can’t do what you want to do because it’s not what’s best for the other person.

He’s a better man than I am.

“Now you don’t have to worry about it anymore.” I motion toward the two rooms Myra gave me to work on. “Not this area, anyway.”

After we had breakfast, Myra thought over which spots in the house she would allow me to tackle.

I wasn’t expecting to get anything important, so I was shocked when she gave me the family room and the front section next to it.

Shocked and pleased. I know it’s fucked-up, but the concept of being able to leave my mark on such a significant part of her life satisfied me on a deep—probably dark—level.

“What are you thinking?” Christian braces both hands on his hips as he surveys the task before me. “I’m sure you have ideas.”

I chuckle. “I guess you have known me long enough to assume I’ve got a plan in place before I start.”

Christian gives me the side eye, one corner of his mouth tipping up. “You usually have a plan before you even have a fucking idea.”

I shrug. “You can’t do shit without a plan.” For so long, plans were all I had. Some people would call them hopes and dreams, but that’s not how I saw it. For me, they were intentions. Goals and aspirations.

And I’ve accomplished most of them.

Not all, though.

“Fair enough.” Christian lifts his brows at me. “What’s the plan then?”

I spend the next hour going over some of what I’d like to do.

Listening to what he has available for me to work with and working it into my vision.

I’ve pushed Myra enough—and likely overstepped—so I want to stay within the parameters of only using materials Christian has laying around his warehouse.

Mostly.

By the time he leaves, we’ve figured out what I need from his stock, and he’s contacted his employees to start separating the materials out. This isn’t going to be as Christian-free of a project as Myra thinks it’ll be, but I know something she hasn’t yet come to terms with.

Having a family is all Christian—and the rest of us—ever wanted, so being a person your family can rely on is a dream come true. Allowing Christian to help her, even in the smallest of ways, gives him something he never believed he would have, And that makes it a win-win for both of them.

“I’ll head over later this afternoon to start grabbing things, if that’s okay.

” I have plans for my time before that. Like everything else I’m doing, they’re probably overstepping.

But now that I’ve seen the extent of Myra’s house—of how she’s living in general—I’m feeling less and less bothered by that.

I assumed she’d feel like she was part of our family because Lydia is part of our family, but that’s not turning out to be the case. And if Myra doesn’t think she’s part of our family, that means she’s not part of any family since the bulk of hers is currently in prison.

Not that they acted like her family before that.

“Come whenever you want. Someone will be there to help you load up.” Christian’s eyes drift across the front area that will serve as a basic sitting room until Myra decides what she really wants it to be.

“You know, if you put hardwood down in that room, it’ll make just as much sense to keep going into the entryway. ”

I give him a sly smile. “I know.”

Christian gives me a grin. “It’s a slippery slope. Everything connects. This project could bleed through to the whole house if you’re not careful.”

“I’m walking a fine line here, man.” I can’t bulldoze my way through Myra’s house. Not when it’s the first home that’s ever been hers.

Christian snorts. “Good fucking luck with that.” His eyes come to my face. “None of us are good at walking lines.”

He's not telling me anything I don't already know. "I'm gonna do my best."

Christian tips his head in a small nod. "I know."

He walks to the door, pausing to look back at me. "Did Myra tell you she's going to be singing with us at The Cellar Saturday night?"

That stops me in my tracks. "No."

"Yeah. Lydia told me she used to sing in church, but I figured they'd ruined it for her." He shoots me a look I can't quite decipher. "Guess not."

I watch him go, too stunned by this new information to do more than breathe.

I've been telling myself I need to leave Myra alone because she's not ready for everything I want. That she's not in a place for me to pursue her.

I haven't been listening to myself—I rarely do—but at least I was trying.

But now...

Now that I know she might be ready to take back a little of what was tainted by men who didn't deserve to breathe the same air she did?

Now I'm even more fucked than I was when I pulled in yesterday.

I'm just finishing laying out the last of the studs I'll use to build the walls separating the two rooms I'm creating, when I see Myra's headlights illuminate the backyard.

She doesn't have a garage—an issue that's only going to be more problematic as the weather cools—so she parks under the large tree dominating the outdoor space.

I'm not sure how she's going to react to me being in her house—even though she's aware I'm here—so I hold my breath a little as she climbs the steps and opens the door.

The first thing she does is scan the pile of materials taking up one side of the mostly open main floor. The second thing she does is take a deep breath.

A hint of a smile curves her lips. “Something smells good.”

I release the air locked in my lungs, relieved she doesn't seem to regret her decision to let me help her out. Looking down at my filthy shirt, I give her a grin. “I can promise it's not me.”

She laughs softly as she sets her purse and a larger bag on the counter just inside the door. “I figured you didn't wear cologne that smells like garlic and...” She takes another deep breath. “Seafood?”

“You have a good nose.” I cross to the kitchen, scrubbing my hands clean before turning to pull the foil pouches containing our dinner from the oven. “Hopefully you don't hate fish.”

Myra comes to stand on the opposite side of the granite island, watching as I peel open the first packet. “I don't hate much of anything.” Her eyes jump to my face before dropping again. “Food wise.”

I can imagine she has a pretty decent list of people she hates, and I don't blame her for that. I hate a decent number of people myself.

“That's good to know. But you won't be seeing any liver or lamb, so hopefully those aren't two of your favorites.” To be fair, I'll choke either of them down if she tells me they are. I won't be thrilled about it, but I've eaten worse.

Way worse.

Myra shrugs. “I can eat them, but I don’t love either one.”

She watches closely as I gently slide the contents of the first pouch onto a plate. After adding a couple wedges of the lemon I cut earlier, I pass it off. “It’s nothing fancy, but since you said you’d be home late, I figured it made more sense to keep things simple.”

Myra takes the plate. “It’s way fancier than what I would have made myself.”

“What would you have made yourself?” I’m curious to hear her answer, considering all that was in her fridge when she left for work was condiments and a pack of string cheese.

Myra gives me another little smile. “A delivery order through DoorDash.”

I’m struck by the mental image of Myra sitting here all alone, eating lukewarm take-out, while the rest of the neighborhood lives the lives they always dreamed of.

I may not be living the dream, but I’m also not surrounded by everyone who is day in and day out.

It’s too painful. Jabs at the sore spot I still carry, and I can’t fucking handle it.

It says a lot about Myra that she can.

“Does that mean your DoorDash driver is going to wonder what happened to you this month?” I’m trying to gauge how often she’s here alone. Eating dinner by herself.

I’m also trying to make it clear I’ll be handling her meals while I’m here.

“They might.” She goes to a drawer and pulls out two forks, passing one to me. “I’m sure I’ll make up for it next month when you go back to work.”

The reminder sits sour in my stomach. I usually can’t wait to get the fuck out of town, but I’m already dreading the day I have to leave. Hating that she’ll be here alone again.

Sure she’ll have a completed family room when I’m gone, but that doesn’t ease the sting of knowing she’ll be the only one enjoying it.

Myra pokes the tip of her fork tines into one of the shrimp from her plate and slides it into her mouth. As she chews, her eyes roll back and she lets out a soft sound that hits me in places it shouldn’t. “This is really good.”

“I’m glad.” What I’ve made her isn’t fucking fine dining, but the collection of potatoes, shrimp, fish, and asparagus is one of my favorite meals. I eat it at least once a week because it’s easy to put together and hard to fuck up.

Myra wanders around the piles I’ve made in her house, looking over the stacks of two-by-fours and reels of wire. “This doesn’t look like stuff Christian took out of houses.”

I was hoping she wouldn’t call me out so quickly on the stretching I’m doing with the parameters she gave me, but I can’t say I didn’t see it coming.

And I’m sure as hell prepared for it.

“It’s not.” I trail behind her, watching Myra’s expression as I offer up my explanation. “This is stuff left over from the renovations Christian and Tate did to their houses.” I let out a little breath when Myra takes another bite of her food.

She wouldn't keep eating it if she was pissed at me, right?

Myra peeks at me over one shoulder. "This is a lot of leftovers."

"It is. Christian was glad to get it all out of his way." That part isn't as accurate as the rest of it—Christian's warehouse is fucking huge. This stuff is a drop in the bucket to him. "If you're interested, I also saw the materials for a complete half bath while I was looking through stuff."

Myra sighs. "Yeah. Christian told me about that." She turns to face me but her eyes don't come to my face. "But he's already given me a whole kitchen and the bathroom off my bedroom. It didn't feel right to let him give me another bathroom."

Myra confirms my suspicion that she doesn't feel like part of the family my brothers and I created.

Honestly, I don't know how much I'm a part of it right now either.

Everyone—with the exception of one, but he's basically fallen off the face of the earth—is at a different place in their lives.

They've got wives and kids, and I don't.

But I'd still let Christian give me as much shit as he wanted to.

"I get what you're saying, but there's not much else he can do with it." I shrug, hoping she can't see how much I'm hoping she'll bite on this opportunity. "If you don't want it, he'll probably end up donating it to one of the places that sells used building materials."

I know damn well the only reason Christian still has it sitting there is because he's

hoping eventually Myra will take it. It matches the cabinets in her kitchen too well, and the quality is too high to ditch it. He's hanging onto it for a reason, and I'm staring right at her.

Myra presses her lips into a considering line and hope blooms in my gut. "But then I'm taking away from people in need."

"Christian sends so much stuff to that place, I promise they're not going to miss one little bathroom." I keep my tone light and easy. "And I'm positive they won't put in the effort to make the tiles usable. They'll just toss them in the dumpster."

Myra's lips twist to one side. "Putting in a bathroom is a lot of work."

Again, I'm ready to counter. "Not as much as you'd think."

"I move to the spot tucked off the entryway that would be a perfect location for a half bath."

"The water heater is right under here and the distance to a sewer line is minimal. The hardest part will be cleaning the tiles." I give her a grin. "And that can be your job."

She wants to help. I want to teach her. But Myra already puts in long hours at her job managing the day spa one of Christian's clients owns.

I've got no problem showing her how to do everything, but I'll be assigning her the least physical jobs.

And while cleaning off the tiles is tedious, it's not labor intensive.

Myra narrows her eyes at me. "I'll think about it."

It's not a yes, but I feel one coming. Maybe not tonight, but soon.

“Good.” Resting one hand on her lower back, I direct her toward the chairs currently serving as our dining area.

I know I should quit while I'm ahead, but that's never been my style.

“Now, sit down so I can also convince you to let me work on the entryway.”

MYRA

Swiping at the bit of hair that's fallen out of the messy bun I quickly crafted before rushing downstairs this morning, I carefully fold the omelet lining the non-stick pan in front of me.

It's been a long time since I've cooked, so I'm a little out of practice, but I think I've still managed to whip up a decent breakfast.

When I opened my fridge last night after Simon left—planning to get a bottle of water to take up to bed—I discovered the stacks of wood and wire weren't the only things he'd brought into my house while I was at work.

The once bare shelves were now filled with all sorts of grocery items. Vegetables, lunch meat, eggs, and cheese, packed the mostly unused appliance to the gills.

I stared at everything for a few seconds, shocked and not quite sure how I felt about it. I wanted to think Simon had crossed a line. Taken control I didn't give him.

But warmth bloomed through my insides, seeping into all the frozen corners that iced over the day I discovered my life wasn't my own.

No one has ever taken care of me before.

Not my parents when I was little—everything was always about my father—and certainly not my husband when I was an adult.

I recognize that's probably not Simon's primary motive here.

He's going to be spending a lot of time in my house, so he probably wants access to food. But still.

He did this all on his own. He saw a need and went out and took care of it. And he didn't even mention it. Didn't want me to tell him how good of a boy he was. Didn't need to hear how impressive it was he knew how to buy food at a food store.

That's why, this morning, I'm doing something nice for him back.

I told myself I would never take care of another man. Never bring him his food. Never lay out his clothes. Never lay back and count the passing seconds as he quenched his husbandly thirst.

But this doesn't feel anything like that. Simon isn't my husband, and the caretaking isn't one-sided.

That must be why I'm feeling a little excited as I finish plating up the food and head out my front door, hoping Simon can make at least halfway decent coffee in that ridiculous camper of his.

As I approach the door to his fifth wheel, I start to realize knocking on it isn't going to be simple with my hands full, and I start trying to shift everything around in my hands. But before I can free up a set of knuckles for knocking, the door swings open, and I nearly swallow my tongue.

Simon stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame, sinful lips pulled into a smile. Shirtless.

I knew he was attractive. Could tell he was well-built by the way a T-shirt stretched

across his broad shoulders. I still couldn't have come up with this. Not even in my wildest dreams.

And lately, my dreams have been pretty wild.

"Good morning." His voice is deep and low and it snakes down my spine, warming me up just as much as the sight of my filled fridge did last night.

Only this warmth keeps drifting lower. It's my own fault. Two mornings in a row now, my morning masturbation sessions have featured him. Front and center.

My body has apparently started associating him with getting off, which is going to be a problem. Because the throb in my clit as I take him in is more than a little distracting.

I clear my throat, but it doesn't help. "I brought breakfast."

Simon's lips slowly curve. "I see that."

"Well, someone went to all the trouble of filling my refrigerator, so I figured throwing a little of what I found together in a pan was the least I could do." I shift on my feet, feeling oddly vulnerable. This is a strange moment for me. One I have no precedent to compare to.

Actually, pretty much every interaction I have with Simon is unprecedented. He's not like anyone else I've ever known. That's probably why I feel so drawn to him. He's the opposite of the men in my past, and that's really flipping appealing.

"It looks amazing." Simon steps back, stretching one arm out, palms spread wide as he braces the door open so I can enter.

Since the camper door opens out, he's positioned on the stairs leading in.

It's not a big opening, so my body brushes against his as I pass, making every nerve ending that receives contact light up along with my rogue lady parts.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment. What nearly thirty-year-old woman reacts to nothing more than a bit of casual contact?

One who's never had a man touch her with the intention of bringing her any sort of pleasure, that's who.

I was married for years, and not a single time could Matthias have cared less about whether I enjoyed my marital duties .

If the man knew what a clitoris was, he sure as heck didn't show it.

I guess it's not surprising, considering any woman who did enjoy something like that would likely be considered wanton.

Less desirable for it. Anything that may have brought any sort of happiness was designated impure or uncouth or ungodly.

And right now I'm feeling very ungodly.

Without his shirt on, the scent of Simon's skin permeates the air, surrounding me with an oaky spiciness I wish I could bottle and spray everywhere.

By some miracle, I manage to sneak past him without dropping a plateful of a potato down the front of his well sculpted chest. Once I'm inside his camper, I go straight for the table and chairs, deciding they might be a better option than reclining on the sofa with a half-naked Simon only a few feet away.

At least this way there will be a big slab of wood between us.

I stop at the edge and carefully lower each of the plates to the surface. “It’s nothing fancy.” I peek over one shoulder, giving him a smile as I repeat the words he said to me about the dinner he made last night. “But it should keep us from starving to death while we work.”

“Fancy is overrated.”

I nearly jump out of my skin at the nearness of Simon’s voice.

The only thing that keeps it from happening is that the entirety of my body is in the process of melting at the rumble tone in my ear.

He’s so close I can feel the warmth of his body at my back.

We’re not touching, but all it would take is a slight shift on my feet and our bodies would be pressed together.

And that’s way more tempting than it should be.

“Sometimes fancy is nice.” I force my brain back to the conversation and away from half-naked Simon. “Champagne is pretty great. It’s also fun to dress up sometimes.”

Simon pulls out the chair closest to me, tipping his head toward it. “Do you go to many events where you get to dress up?”

“Not as many as I’d like. But the day spa where I work hosts two galas a year, and the next one is in a few weeks.

” The first one I attended was held right when I started—back when I was in training

and didn't really know anyone.

It was fun, but I think this one will be a totally different experience because now I have friends and don't feel so out of place.

"It's not black-tie, but it's close." I slide into the chair Simon is still holding onto, giving him a small smile.

"I probably need to start looking for a dress to wear, now that I'm thinking about it."

Simon settles into the seat across from me, picking up his fork. "Sounds like you have a lot on your plate."

Do I? I don't feel like I do. In fact, I purposefully shove things off of my plate because I don't quite know how to make them fit. There's plenty of room, I just can't wrap my head around the way they need to be served.

"Not really. All I do is work, honestly." My face is turned toward my plate, but I peek up at Simon through my lashes, feeling a little exposed when I admit, "I wish I had other things on my plate, but I guess we can't all have what we wish for."

Simon motions to my fork, lifting his brows until I pick it up and take a bite. Once I do, he finally digs into his own food, shoveling in a mouthful of fried potatoes before asking, "What do you wish was on your plate?"

I take a deep breath, realizing I've probably admitted too much.

I haven't confessed my deep desire to have children to anyone—not even Lydia—and it feels weird admitting it to Simon over a casual breakfast. I decide to keep my answer as neutral and uninteresting as possible.

“I’d like to get my house a little more livable for starters.

Probably look into building a garage or maybe a carport in the back. ”

Simon nods, listening intently to my half-assed aspirations. “Those are both really doable things.” He lifts one shoulder, letting it drop like it’s not a big deal. “All you need is a plan.”

“I’m not so great at planning.” I wish I was. It’s the discovery about myself that I found the most embarrassing and frustrating.

Matthias always acted like I wouldn’t be able to live without him.

And while I’ve proven that belief wrong, I haven’t really shown I’m capable of living well without him.

Life is hectic and loud and chaotic. Making decisions is stressful and confusing and hard.

It’s easier to just not do it. But then I end up stagnant.

Like I am now.

“I guess it’s your lucky day then, because I’m famous for my ability to make plans.” Simon shovels in another mouthful of the breakfast I made him, looking a little smug about his—admittedly enviable—talent for adulting.

“I feel like you’re rubbing that in.”

When he points at my plate, I take another bite, managing to enjoy my food while it’s hot because he keeps me focused.

That's another thing I'm not great at. Keeping my train of thought.

At work, I'm fine. Everything moves so fast I don't have the chance to lose track of where I'm at.

But at home? I've walked around for an embarrassingly long time wearing only one shoe because I kept forgetting to put the other one on.

I've almost peed my pants because every time I went to use the bathroom, I found something in need of my attention.

Almost all my clothes go through three fluff cycles before I manage to get them out of the dryer.

Then one more before they get folded.

Who I am now is such a stark contrast to who I had to be when I was married, that some days it's hard to believe past me even existed.

Maybe she didn't.

"That doesn't sound like me." Simon offers another grin. "I'm the humble sort."

My eyes wander, working their way over his shoulders and pecs. "You probably shouldn't be."

Even though I hear the words, it doesn't register I've said them out loud until Simon stops chewing, his gaze darkening where it rests on my face.

I can barely breathe as his eyes hold mine. No one's ever looked at me the way he is now, and I'm not sure how I feel about it.

That's a lie. I know exactly how I feel about it.

The fire licking over every inch of me is impossible to miss.

But I don't know how I should feel about it.

Just like the fridge full of groceries and the way he keeps gently ordering me to eat, this is another thing I feel like I should hate.

Another thing that should remind me of where I used to be.

But it doesn't. And I don't know how to unpack that.

Simon's intense gaze finally leaves mine, dropping away as he shifts in his seat. "I should go finish getting dressed so we can get started."

I nod. "Yeah. Okay."

I run my clammy palms down the front of my jeans as he disappears up the small staircase into the front of the camper. The last few minutes have been intense. Not only have I had to face down a few of my confusingly contradictory thoughts, but I also had to face down a half-naked Simon.

And I know damn well he's going to be making an appearance in my brain every morning from now until the end of time.

"Ready?" He comes back way before I'm ready, and damned if he doesn't look just as good in a worn T-shirt hugging his biceps and chest like a clingy girlfriend.

Not that I can blame it. If I was wrapped around his body I'd probably be pretty clingy too.

“Yup.” I stand, reaching for our empty plates, but Simon beats me to it.

“I’ll carry these.” He stacks them together before straightening, his dark eyes as soft as the smile curling his lips. “You make a damn good breakfast, My. I might have to sleep in a little more often.”

I can’t stop the way my shoulders straighten, spine stretching as his praise bolsters the broken bits of me.

I try to pretend I’ve fixed them, but I haven’t.

Not really. All I’ve managed to do is slap on a coat of paint.

Hiding the worst of the damage behind highlights, cute clothes, and a few liberating-looking tattoos.

But not a single bit of it did as much for me as Simon calling me a good girl and complimenting my cooking.

Simon balances the plates on one hand as he lets us out of his camper. Once the door is closed behind us, he moves in at my side, leaning into my ear. “Is it okay if I keep one hand on you in case you try to eat the sidewalk on me again?”

My eyes fall to his free hand, stomach flipping at the thought of it being on me. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

My breath stutters when his wide palm spreads over my lower back, searing into me like a brand. It’s warm and steady and there to keep me safe and has me all sorts of fluttery inside.

But it’s the way he asked before touching me—instead of acting like it was his

right—that has my belly twisting like a pretzel.

And my mind conjuring up all sorts of other places I'd like him to ask to touch me.

SIMON

“Thanks for helping me with this, man.” I pause to sink a screw into the stud, securing the final sheet of drywall into place. “It would’ve taken me forever to hang all this by myself.”

I would’ve figured it out, but a second set of hands makes the task infinitely easier. Helps almost as much as the lift Christian brought over for us to use on the ceiling sections.

He steps back, hands on his hips, as he surveys the work we’ve managed to get done while Myra works. “You really got these walls up quick.”

When Myra went to work yesterday—after making me breakfast—I dug into framing up the two rooms. I worked my ass off, managing to get finished right as she got home.

Like the day before, she wandered around, a plateful of dinner in one hand, looking over what I’d accomplished.

And, like the day before, I had to make her sit and relax even though she looked exhausted.

After sending the final screw home, I lay down the drywall screw gun. “Were you worried I’d lost my touch?”

I’ve done a little bit of everything over the years, and at one point worked on the

same construction crew Christian did. While he decided the industry was where he wanted to stay, I wanted something a little more...interesting.

I also wanted something that would give me an excuse to escape Memphis after the life I thought I was building crumbled under me.

Christian grinned. "I did. Figured you might be over here in a scuba suit trying to weld the place together."

"Welding in a scuba suit has made me a fuck ton of money, so I'm gonna say I made the right choice." It also gave me space I desperately needed. Time to try to wrap my head around where I'd gone wrong.

Unfortunately, I was never quite able to figure it out.

I still don't know what happened. Why Lenore did what she did.

The reasons she gave were so contradictory I could never line them up in a way that gave me any sort of clarity.

Was I too good for her or too overbearing?

Was it really the people around me? because I offered to give it all up and that wasn't enough.

Making me think it wasn't what was around me at all. It was just me she couldn't stand.

"But is it something you can do forever?" Christian's tone softens. "I know you're young and healthy now, but..."

The reminder dampens a little of the good mood completing the drywall brought on.
“I’m not that fucking young.”

I never thought I’d be staring down my mid-thirties as a single man. Like the rest of my brothers, I want what I’ve never had. The house, the wife, the kid. Stability, security.

Love. Acceptance. Understanding. It’s what I want to give and what I want to receive.

A decade ago I thought I had it. Believed I would be the first one in our hodgepodge of a family to prove we could stop the cycle.

Instead, I’m the last man standing alone.

“I know you well enough to know you’ve got a plan.” Christian angles a brow at me.
“Or five.”

I chuckle in spite of the seriousness and sadness the conversation carries.

“You’re not wrong.” I pick up the scraps of drywall strewn across the subfloor and begin tossing them into the large plastic can sitting in the center of the room.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while now, and when the time comes, I’ll probably do what you did and start my own business.

Train people to do what I do and contract them out across the country. ”

Like Christian guessed, I’ve planned for a handful of scenarios and a range of extremes.

I can keep the business small and simple, or expand.

Get to the point where I provide everything.

Equipment. Housing. The whole nine yards.

It would be a huge undertaking, but if I didn't have to tackle it alone. ..

“You got an ETA on that?” Christian picks up the shop broom and works it across the floor. “Because you know we'd love for you to be around more often.”

I wanted the ETA to be years ago, but it still hasn't happened. “Just waiting for a reason to settle down.”

I don't tell him that could have happened anywhere.

I love my brothers, but if I found what I was looking for on the other side of the country, that's where I would have put my future.

At one point I was hoping that was what would happen.

Memphis doesn't hold the best memories for me, and walking away from it entirely had a certain amount of appeal.

Especially in those first years after Lenore and I split.

And I would still do that. Still go wherever I need to.

But I'm no longer hoping it won't be Memphis.

It doesn't haunt me the way it used to. I don't get a pit in my stomach when I see the

exit on the highway, and I'm no longer in as much of a rush to race away when it's time to leave. This month is evidence of that.

Christian claps me on the shoulder, his hand resting firm as he gives it a gentle squeeze. "It'll happen. And when it does, everything that came before will have been worth it."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer. Knock the wind from my lungs with a discovery I haven't yet made. They take years of struggle and frustration and narrow them to a point so small it could fit on the tip of a pencil.

The reason I've been so desperate to find what I'm looking for is because I want everything to matter. For all I went through to make sense. To have a purpose. And right now, it doesn't. Right now it's just pointless pain. Suffering for the sake of suffering.

Part of me expects the realization to be painful. Another layer of hurt to add to the ache I always carry.

But it's motivating. Renews my determination to get what I'm after. To have what I want.

But what I want isn't going to be easy to obtain. It will take a particular set of skills. A level of understanding and patience most men don't have.

But I do. If everything I've been through has a purpose—which I want to believe it does—it's turned me into what I need to be for the person I'm meant to be with. And from where I'm standing, there's a person whose needs seem to align with all I bring to the table.

"I recognize that look on your face." Christian shakes his head. "You're planning

something.”

“I’m always planning something.” It’s a deflection. One I hope keeps him from thinking too hard or trying to assemble any of the clues I’ve inadvertently dropped.

I don’t want him to see what I’m thinking. What I’m planning. What I’m feeling.

Have been feeling.

These past six months have been different. They weren’t me running away from my past or myself. I was running away for someone else. Forcing myself to keep my distance because I knew I couldn’t be trusted. I knew I would overstep and overwhelm.

And I might still do that. It’s possible there will soon be a second woman saying I’m the problem. That what I have to offer is too much. That what I want in return isn’t something they’re willing to give.

And if that’s what happens, I’ll have to leave Memphis again. But this time it will be for good. I won’t be able to come back. And I’ll be okay with that. Myra needs the people here more than I do.

“That is a fair point.” Christian doesn’t seem suspicious, and I relax a little.

“It’s hard to get anywhere when you don’t have a plan.

” And I’ve always wanted to go places. Maybe not the same kinds of places as other people, but I’ve always wanted more than I was given.

It wasn’t difficult to do considering where I came from and that the little I did have was taken from me time and time again.

“That is a valid point, my friend.” Christian checks his phone. “Speaking of getting places, I need to go so I’ll be ready to get set up for tonight.” His eyes swing my way, looking over my dirty T-shirt and jeans. “And so do you.”

I follow him to the back door, holding it open as he descends the steps. Christian stops when he reaches the bottom, turning around to shoot me a serious expression. “And try to be on time for once.”

I scoff. “I’m never late when I’m already in town.” Yeah, I’ve cut it close a few times thanks to traffic, but that was always when I was arriving the day we were scheduled to play. “Now I’m going to be early just to fucking drive you crazy while we set up.”

I don’t tell him I’d already planned to be early. If things still go as planned, Myra’s going to sing with us tonight, and I want to be at the top of my game for that. For her.

This is a big step, and I want it to be as perfect as possible.

“I’ll fucking believe that when I see it.” Christian glances to one side, eyeing Myra’s car as it pulls into the back parking spot.

“I thought you were going home?” I lean against the door frame, trying to look relaxed even though I’m annoyed Christian is lingering.

I appreciate his help, but even though she knew it was happening, I know Myra is going to feel weird about it.

And it could make her go back on her agreement to let me put in the half bath if I have the time.

And I’ll make sure I have the time.

She already doesn't like accepting help from others—even people who consider themselves her family—and now she's gonna be staring it right in the face.

"I am." Christian gives Myra a wave as she parks, then turns away, heading across Tate's backyard and into his own.

I make my way down the steps, meeting Myra as she gets out of her car. As I expected, her eyes are on the back of Christian's house as he goes in his back door.

"Have a good day?" My question drags her attention to me, her blue eyes slowly finding their way to my face.

Myra gives me a little smile. "Not bad." Her gaze flicks to Christian's house before coming back to where I stand. "What about yours?"

I'm struck by how close this moment is to what I've been searching for, and it takes me a second to answer. "Productive." I take the bigger of her two bags, slinging it over my shoulder. "Want to come see what we got done?"

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Myra glances at Christian's house one more time, before giving me a small nod. "Sure."

I reach out to close her car door, then rest a hand on her back. I know it's daylight now, so the chances of her tripping over something she can't see are slim to none, but still. I like knowing I'm ready if she needs me.

I urge her up the stairs ahead of me, following close behind as she opens the door and steps into her house.

My eyes are locked on her face as she takes in what Christian and I accomplished while she was out.

Myra isn't easy to read, but I'm starting to figure her out, so I'm not offended when she doesn't immediately react.

It seems to take her a little bit to absorb things.

Then it takes another beat for her to react.

Her expression is relatively closed off as she steps into her future family room, blue eyes drifting over the newly added walls and ceiling.

I stay quiet as she steps from the family room into the front room.

I'm not sure what her plans are for it yet—Myra doesn't seem to plan the same way I do—but an odd wistfulness in her expression makes me think she might have more

ideas about it than she's shared with me.

When she finally turns to face me, I'm rewarded with a tentative smile. "It looks pretty great." Her smile dims a little. "Almost makes me regret not starting sooner."

I shrug, not wanting her to feel bad about the time it's taking her to acclimate to a new life.

"Everything happens exactly when it's supposed to.

" I move closer, drawn in by the hint of regret pinching her pretty features.

"And if you'd started sooner, I would've been left with nothing to do but listen to Christian and Tate talk about how fucking happy they are. "

Myra wrinkles her nose, as if that sounds as distasteful to her as it does to me. "It gets really old really fast."

"I can imagine." I don't like thinking about her being here facing the isolation that can come from being the only one not paired up. "They should be lucky you haven't throat punched all of them yet."

A bark of laughter jumps through her lips as her head tips back. "Can you imagine the look on Christian's face if I just randomly punched him in the throat?"

I chuckle. "Yes, I can. And I think I'm gonna keep imagining it, because it's pretty fantastic."

Myra dabs at the corner of one eye, letting out a sigh. "This looks really amazing in here." She sobers. "I know it might not seem like it, but I really appreciate you doing this for me."

“It does seem like it.” I don’t want her to think I believe she’s not grateful. “ I appreciate you letting me do this. I know you were on the fence, and if you hadn’t...” My words drift off, because I don’t know if I should admit what I would have done if she hadn’t.

But Myra doesn’t give me the choice. “If I hadn’t”—she lifts a brow—”then what?”

I press my lips together before admitting, “I probably would have left early and gone to my next job and waited for it to start.”

Myra’s blue eyes move over my face, brow furrowing slightly as she studies me. “Why don’t you like being here?”

It’s a question I’ve successfully avoided being asked up until now.

I don’t know what I would’ve told one of my brothers if they’d been the one to pose it, but I do know what I’ll give Myra.

I’ll give her the truth. Because she of all people will understand it, and it might make her feel less alone.

“It’s not that I don’t like being here, I do. It’s just...difficult.” I take a deep breath, steadying myself before sharing a little bit of what I hold close. “It’s hard seeing all of them with what I should have had.”

Myra’s quiet for a minute and I let her take a second to absorb what I’ve said. It’s a lot for me to admit, and probably carries weight for her as well.

“You know, I read something a few months ago, and I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

” She glances around before again meeting my eyes.

“It said, if something is meant for you, it won’t miss you.

” She swallows, the delicate line of her throat working with the action as her eyes fall.

“I want to think it’s true, but some days it’s hard. ”

I don’t mean to do it, but I step closer, my hands coming to the sides of her face, tipping it back until she’s looking up at me.

“It is true.” I can’t stand the despondent look on her face.

The almost hopeless edge to her words. “I just think sometimes shit takes way longer than necessary to hit us.”

As I hoped, Myra laughs, her mood lightening instantly. “I guess that could be it.”

I expect her to step away. To put space between us now that she no longer needs comfort. But Myra’s hands lift to grip my forearms, holding on as she smiles up at me. “Maybe we should put targets on our chests. See if that helps.”

I think back to her reaction to my half-dressed state yesterday morning when she showed up at my camper with the best breakfast I’ve ever eaten. “That’s not a bad idea.”

MYRA

I think I'm going to throw up. Might even do it right there on-stage, mid-song.

"You don't look so good." Lydia eyes me from where she sits between Piper and me at the high-top table tucked into the corner of the bar closest to the stage. "You sure you want to do this?"

In spite of the turmoil in my gut, I don't hesitate. "Positive."

I've reclaimed ownership of my body—even if that's gone a little off the rails lately—and now it's time to take back another piece of myself.

For a while, I felt like singing was something I'd never be able to extricate from who I was before—who I was made to be.

I thought it was something I'd never get back.

But fuck them. Fuck them for what they did to me.

They stole my childhood, and most of my twenties.

I'm not letting them take anything else.

Lydia scoots to the edge of her seat, eyes shining like she's excited to hear me sing again. "What song did you pick?"

“I gave Christian a few options and told him he could pick.” My knowledge of popular music is a little limited since I’ve only been listening to it for a year, but I do have somewhat of a preference.

It’s not what Christian and his band normally play, but I feel like it’s in the same vein, so hopefully the audience won’t mind too much. Because if I get booed...

Lydia leans one elbow on the table, propping her chin onto her hand, eyes wide. “Do you know when you’re singing? At the beginning? After the break?”

I shake my head. “I told Christian not to tell me. I think if I knew, I would work myself up in the minutes leading up to it, so having it sprung on me felt like a better option.” Now, I’m feeling a little different about that.

But the decision was already made, and I have to deal with my life choices.

At least they were mine to make, so I’m not complaining.

“It’s going to be crazy to hear you singing something besides religious music.” Lydia presses her lips together. “I kind of feel like I’m going to cry.”

“If you cry, I’m never talking to you again.” I’m already feeling emotional—about a lot of things. Looking out into the audience and seeing my sister with tears in her eyes will make what I’m about to do infinitely more difficult. And it’s already hard enough.

“Okay.” Lydia sucks in a deep breath through her nose, eyes closing as she blows it out. “I’m fine. I will be fine. I promise.” Her eyes open and she looks me over again, expression approving. “Did I tell you how amazing you look?”

“You did, but you can tell me again.”

I tend to dress a little edgier than Lydia.

I look for any opportunity to send a giant middle finger out into the universe whenever I can, and what I wear is an easy way to do that.

Tonight, I've got on my favorite pair of faded jeans and a pale blue shirt that's basically just a bunch of ruffles offering a peek at my belly and a full shot of my cleavage.

It covers my nipples, but leaves a large amount of skin exposed, along with a couple of the tattoos I've accumulated.

They're not nearly as impressive as the ones Simon sports, but the delicate line drawings covering my back and shoulders are meaningful.

They remind me of the weight that used to rest there, and how much of it I've managed to shed.

The way I've given up many of the burdens I was taught were mine.

The crowd around us starts to make noise, and Lydia's eyes leave me to snap toward the stage.

I take a deep breath, steadying my nerves and my heart before doing the same thing. I know more than just singing is going to test my limits this evening, so I down what's left of my bourbon and slowly turn to where the band is walking out.

And it's a good thing I've already cleared the drink from my mouth, because I probably would have choked on it when my eyes landed on Simon.

He always looks great when they perform.

He usually wears black jeans and a fitted tank top that leaves his sculpted arms on view as they flex and move while he plays the drums. But tonight—for some weird reason—he's omitted the tank top, instead striding onto stage shirtless.

My eyes are so wide they burn as I watch him make his way to the stool where he'll spend the evening.

I know I saw him just like this not long ago, but I still can't stop myself from drinking him in.

He really is ridiculously gorgeous. Dark wavy hair pushed back off his face.

Skin slightly tanned. Chiseled muscles that speak of use and strength. Hands that are warm and careful and?—

I nearly fall out of my chair when his eyes find mine. I tip back in my seat, a yelp of surprise sneaking out. Luckily no one can hear it over the droves of women surrounding me who are cheering and catcalling loud enough to smother it out.

But Simon still sees my reaction, and it has a slow smile pulling across his lips.

He gives me a wink as Christian addresses the crowd, and I can feel heat creeping over my skin.

Warming me from the inside out. And I know this view will be front and center in tomorrow morning's fantasy wake-up call.

The band starts to play, but I don't really hear any of it because I'm fighting nerves and an interest I don't know what to do with. How to manage.

I've never been attracted to someone. We were warned so far away from anything

like that when I was young, I was terrified of it growing up. And I sure as heck wasn't attracted to the controlling, manipulative, asshole of a man my father made me marry.

Rubbing my sweaty palms down my thighs, I turn to find our waitress beside me.

After ordering another drink, I focus on my breathing—pulling in enough to fill my lungs before slowly letting it back out.

As soon as my bourbon arrives, I down half of it, glad the burn is there to distract me.

I manage to make the rest last two more songs, before I'm once again staring at the bottom of my glass.

I want more, but I know I can't have it.

My tongue will start to get sloppy, and I really don't want to embarrass myself on stage.

In front of Simon.

And then, the moment I'm both dreading and anticipating arrives. Christian looks out over the crowd, his eyes landing on me. A wide smile spreads across his face as he announces there will be a guest singer tonight. The crowd doesn't seem sour about it, which is nice, but I still might puke.

Or pass out.

Taking a deep breath instead of hyperventilating like I want, I slide out of my chair, making my way through the crowd as he introduces me. When I reach the stage, he meets me at the edge, holding out a hand to help me up. Motioning to his

microphone, Christian steps back, giving me space.

I'm feeling a little lightheaded, so I pull in a deep breath, hoping the added oxygen will clear my mind.

I take the spot Christian left for me, feeling oddly comfortable as my lips hover in front of the mic.

As the music starts, I turn my head, peeking over one shoulder to where Simon sits behind me.

He meets my gaze immediately, tipping his head in a small nod that is oddly reassuring.

I glance to my left where Tate holds his base, then my right where Christian plays guitar. Seeing them around me settles my nerves even more.

I always felt alone when I sang before, but that's not how this feels. This time I have people beside me I trust. People who look out for me. People who want me to grow and be better and spread my wings.

Turning back to the mic, I look out over the crowd, ready to take what should have always been mine.

Until Christian's song choice registers. Then I'm way less ready.

I offered up suggestions, but because I wasn't sure what they would know how to play or what would fit their vibe, I kept things pretty general.

Not for a single second did I expect Christian would pick the song playing now.

It's a song I've only ever sung to myself while cleaning my house, listening to my voice echo around the empty—and surprisingly acoustic—space.

My next breath is shaky and my mouth starts to dry out, but there's no turning back now, so I close my eyes and start singing.

The first line of “Barracuda” by Heart comes out a little wobbly and soft as I get used to the mic and being in front of people I haven't known my whole life.

It doesn't sound great, but I keep going, determination building with each line of lyrics I sing.

Closing my eyes, I let the music wrap around me.

Let the words flow through me. How they sound.

What they mean. The way they make me feel.

I'm sure Christian picked the song because of the punch it packs, but it could have been picked for a different reason too.

The song was written as revenge on an asshole who screwed with the singer and her sister, and it feels apropos that it's the first song I perform outside of a church full of men who did the same.

My voice evens out. The edges smooth. What started as a stilted and emotionless performance grows and morphs into what it's supposed to be. A purge. Emptying my soul of what someone else decided it should hold so I can fill it myself. It's an act of defiance.

A reclaiming of something I once loved so much.

When the note that defines the song comes, I belt it out, hitting it spot on, arms wide, bared but not bleeding. And it feels so fucking freeing that I let go. No more holding back. No more holding in.

The song ends, but I'm still soaring, riding the wave of freedom I've been chasing.

Christian moves into my periphery and I prepare to step down.

Instead, he holds up a finger, his brows raised in a question as he mouths the words 'one more' since I can't hear anything over the crowd cheering for my performance.

I nod, head bobbing with an eagerness I thought was dead and gone. It feels so fucking good to be up here, and I'm not quite ready to give it up. Not yet.

I recognize the next song immediately and give Christian a wide smile. He returns it and steps back. I mean to turn to the mic, but my eyes find Simon, and my breath hitches at the way he's looking at me.

Like I'm the only other person here.

I'm forced to turn away when I have to start singing.

I only make it a few words into "Stronger" by Kelly Clarkson before the crowd of women packed into The Cellar are singing along with me.

Belting out the lyrics at the top of their lungs, arms in the air.

I can see the emotion in their faces as we take back what was stolen from us. Together.

The moment is so fucking powerful it threatens to tighten my throat. I fight through

it, proving the song right.

My past didn't kill me. It tried like hell, but failed.

Because I'm stronger than it was. Stronger than the people who tried to break me. Stronger than the men who wanted to control me.

When the song ends, Christian comes to my side, announcing my name again to the crowd as he wraps an arm around my shoulder, beaming like he's proud of me as they clap and cheer.

After telling them the band is going to take a brief intermission, he leads me off stage into the curtained-off portion where the band can relax unbothered.

Christian gives me a quick hug before holding me by the shoulders at arm's length. "You fucking killed it."

"Thanks." Excitement and happiness buzz across my skin. I feel fucking reborn. Capable of being who I want to be for the first time since leaving Arkansas behind. It's euphoric, and I don't really know how the feeling stays contained within the confines of my body.

Christian releases me. "I'm gonna go find your sister."

I nod, pulling in a deep breath. "I think I need a minute." I'm raw. Nothing but exposed nerves and barely restrained emotion. I don't want to risk how I might react to seeing her right now. I don't want to cry. I want to ride the high I'm on as long as possible.

"Take as much time as you need." Christian ducks out of the curtain, and Tate gives me a quick slap on the shoulder before he follows him out to go find Piper.

I press both hands to my head, trying to find something to ground me before I explode into a million pieces. It's not a bad feeling, just overwhelming.

I turn in place, trying to expel a little energy, and come face-to-face with Simon as he walks off stage toward me. I don't know what happens, but my feet start to move. I run right at him, jumping into his arms.

He catches me like he knew I was coming, swinging me around. "That was fucking unreal, My."

"Yeah?" I squeeze him tighter, because the feel of his arms around me is what I needed. Something to hold me together.

"Yeah. I was so fucking proud watching you. It was killing me that I couldn't see your face." His voice is deep and rumbling in my ear.

Now that I no longer feel like I'm about to explode in ten different directions, it registers that I'm pressed tight against him. That his arms are around me. That his bare chest is warm and wide and right against mine.

I lean back, because I should probably put a little distance between us. But that's not what I end up doing. Instead, my eyes meet his. That look from before is still there. The one that makes me feel like I'm all he sees. It makes my pulse race and my insides heat.

And because I'm still high on adrenaline and possibly still slightly inebriated thanks to bourbon, I do something stupid. Something rash. Something I should instantly regret.

I push up on my toes and bring my lips right to Simon's.

The kiss is short and disappointing, because a second later, he pulls back, breaking the contact.

“Shit.” Embarrassment heats my face. Am I so damn clueless that I read that whole moment wrong? Saw what I wanted to see instead of what was really there? “I’m sorry. I was just?—”

Simon’s hold on me shifts. I think he’s letting me go, but then one big hand comes to my face, thumb under my chin, fingers along my jaw as his mouth seals over mine.

SIMON

I need to stop this. Let Myra go and give us both a second to breathe.

And I will. In just a minute.

After I take a second to appreciate everything about the moment. The feel of her body against mine. The taste of her on my tongue. The sweet way she looked at me in surprise after pressing her lips to mine.

Like she didn't know what just happened. Didn't understand what she'd just started. The dam she'd broken.

I've been holding back— my version of holding back. Trying, at least inwardly, to do the things I know I should. Give Myra space. Keep things simple between us. Appropriate. Uncomplicated.

But truthfully, things have been complicated since I carried her away from the man who did nothing but use her.

So, instead of pushing her away, I pull her closer. Wrap one hand in her hair while the other keeps her body against mine. I take everything she's willing to give me. Drink in every move. Every sound. Every breath.

Dragging my mouth off hers, I press my lips to her neck, breathing in the scent of her skin as I run my lips along her jaw and up to her ear. I'm pushing things further than I first intended—shocker—but I'm still in control. Still aware of what I'm doing.

But then her hands leave where they've been laced around my neck, soft palms sliding over my bare skin as they slide down my chest. When the tips of her fingers drag across my nipples, I have to bite back a groan.

Forcing myself to push her away, I fight to keep my grip on the tiny shred of restraint I'm still in possession of. My chest heaves as I hold her at arm's length, my fingers digging into her hips.

Myra blinks up at me, gaze hooded, lips parted. All I want is to pull her back. Run with everything I'm feeling and never look back.

But I can't. Because this isn't about me. It's not about what I want or what I need.

Myra's pale brows pinch together in confusion. She tries to step closer to me, but I hold firm, keeping her where she is.

"We need to stop." I can't believe those words are coming out of my mouth. I'm shocked I manage to spit them out, but I do. They don't sound convincing, but they're there.

A flash of hurt moves across Myra's pretty face. "Oh." One hand lifts to her mouth, wiping across her lips. "I thought?—"

"No." I grab her hand, wrapping my fingers around her wrist as I pull it away before she can rid herself of any trace of me. "It's not like that."

Myra's eyes come to my face. "Like what?"

"I didn't say I wanted to stop. I said we needed to stop.

" My whole life I've chased down what I wanted.

Grabbed it with both hands, refusing to let go until I had no other option.

But I won't do that to Myra. She's gone her whole life not having choices.

I'll be damned if I try to take one more decision out of her hands.

"I don't understand." She tries to step toward me again, but I spread the hand that was holding her wrist across her belly, ensuring at least some distance stays between us.

"You've been drinking, and you just came off stage. Your mind is being affected in more than one way. When something happens between us, I want you to be thinking clearly."

Myra cocks her head. "When?"

I blink, unsure what she's asking me. "What do you mean, when?"

Her eyes drift down my body, hooded with desire as she takes in the chest I left bare thinking it might catch her attention. "You said when something happens between us." Her gaze slowly comes back to my face. "Not if."

Well. Fuck.

I open my mouth to reply, but the next second, the curtains blocking us off from the rest of the bar begin to move. Dropping my hands, I take a step back, putting even more distance between Myra and me.

"Oh my gosh. That was amazing." Lydia rushes into the small space, throwing her arms around her older sister's neck. "You sounded freaking insane." She leans back, smile faltering as she looks over Myra's face. "What's wrong? Did you not enjoy it?"

Myra's eyes come to me, hanging for just a split second before going back to her sister. "I enjoyed it. I think I'm just overwhelmed."

Lydia smooths back Myra's blonde hair, arranging the loose curls around her shoulders. "I can imagine. It was probably a pretty surreal experience to be singing what you were singing, where you were singing it."

Again, Myra's eyes come my way. It's only for a second, but if she keeps doing it, someone's bound to notice.

When her focus returns to Lydia, she smiles softly. "A lot about tonight is kind of surreal."

Lydia hooks one arm around Myra's shoulders, leading her through the curtain. "Piper and I cheered so loud. Could you hear us?"

I don't catch the rest of the conversation. It's lost to the drone of the crowd as the women make their way down the handful of steps leading off the stage and get lost in the sea of people here to watch us play.

My eyes stay fused to her until she's out of sight. I'm not ready for her to go yet. I don't like the way we left things. I don't want Myra thinking she did anything wrong. That I was rejecting her.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Did you have any idea she could sing like that?" Christian's voice startles me. I've been so focused on Myra, I didn't even notice he'd come in with Lydia. Which is stupid, because, generally speaking, the man follows his wife wherever she goes. And I hate him a little for having that opportunity.

Forcing my attention away from the crowd, I turn to my friend. “No. Did you?”

Christian chuckles, shaking his head. “Lydia told me Myra sang in church all the time, but she didn’t come close to preparing me for what we saw tonight.” He braces his hands on his hips the way he does when he’s thinking something over. “The crowd fucking loved her.”

I nod. “They did.”

Myra’s voice is unreal. Powerful. Soulful. Just a little textured around the edges. Enough to give her a unique sound, but not so much her tone is raspy.

I could listen to her sing all day. Would do unholy things to find a way for her voice to be the one that sings my children to sleep.

Closing my eyes, I pull in a breath, scrubbing one hand over my face. I’m getting fucking ahead of myself. I always do. The worst part is, I like it. I like planning for what’s coming. Thinking about what I want to have.

And then finding a way to get there.

But I can’t do that this time. Not with Myra.

“I might see if she wants to perform with us again. Maybe do a few more songs next time.” Apparently, Christian is working on a few plans of his own. “Tonight we muddled through, but we could probably come up with some pretty fucking cool options if we actually practice.”

I don’t disagree. Plus, practicing means spending even more time with Myra. Unfortunately, spending more time with Myra means the odds I’ll manage to behave myself—give her the space to decide what she wants—go down exponentially.

And after that kiss, they're already fucking underground.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow. See how she's feeling and what she's thinking." Christian seems to be just as excited about how the performance went as Myra is.

I can't blame him. We've been playing together for a long time. And while I love it—some of my best memories are centered on nights like tonight—there's a certain amount of stagnation creeping in. Adding a new voice to our lineup would bring in a freshness we probably need.

Tate slips through the curtain, carrying a drink for each of us. "Bottoms up, boys. We don't have much time."

I take the whiskey he brought me and tip it back, swallowing down a few mouthfuls even though I hate the idea of washing away Myra's taste.

I need something to take the sharp edge off my thoughts.

Calm them down before they pick up momentum and start slashing through the boundaries I need to keep in place.

While we take a breather, Christian and Tate fall into an easy conversation about running businesses, and I start to tune them out. I do work for myself—contracting pays better than working for someone else, so that's the route I take—but I don't run a whole-ass business.

Yet . It could happen soon. I could start looking into buildings to?—

"Fuck," I swear under my breath and drink down the rest of my liquor, letting the burn steal my attention away from plans I need to stop making.

Thankfully, our break is soon over and I throw myself into the performance.

At least, I try to.

Knowing where Myra sits makes it hard to look at anyone else. Impossible to keep my eyes from going to that spot anytime they can. And every time they go there, she's looking back at me. Watching me the same way I'm watching her.

By the time the show's over, my skin is itching with the need to get away. It's obvious that's the only option I have. I just need a night to get my head back in the game. To hit the brakes on the future my mind's trying to manifest.

One featuring blue-eyed little girls with their momma's serious nature and determination.

Once the show's over, I bust my ass helping break down our set. Packing up lights and speakers and instruments while Tate and Christian take their sweet time, splitting their attention between the task and their wives.

I'm shoving the last of the wire into the back of the box truck we use to haul our shit around, when a soft voice freezes me in place.

"Hey."

Bracing, I turn to find Myra standing right behind me. I've been staring at her all night, but I'm still struck by how pretty she is. What would it be like to wake up to her every morning?

To sleep beside her every night.

I clear my throat as my thoughts slide downhill fast. "Hey."

“Umm.” Myra glances to where her sister and Piper stand talking to Christian and Tate. “Can I ride with you? They want to go get food, but I’m really tired.”

“Of course,” I agree without thinking.

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Even if I did think, I'd still agree. I don't see any scenario where I'd refuse her anything.

Even backstage—if she'd pushed, told me she wanted more from me, I would have given it to her.

Thank God she didn't, because the last thing I need is Christian finding me with my hand down his sister-in-law's pants while she chants my name.

And just like that, my mind is right back in the spot I've tried to dig it out of all fucking night.

Only this time, it's taken my dick with it.

Myra gives me a relieved smile. "Thanks." She turns and yells over one shoulder. "Simon's going to take me home. You guys have fun."

I don't look at Christian. I don't want him to think I'm gauging his reaction... Even though I'd like to. "I've just got to close the back up and then we can go." I tip my head toward the cab. "Go ahead and get in. I'll be there in a sec."

Or a few.

It looks like I won't be getting the evening alone I desperately need, so every fucking second counts.

I take my time making sure everything's secured. Then I slowly lower the door and

lock it into place. Even my steps drag out as I walk up the side of the truck to the driver's door.

I can do this. I have to do this. For her.

Backing off—giving Myra room—goes against everything that I am. But I gotta do it. Not forever. Just for a month.

Then I can go to my job in Florida and wait her out there. Where I know I won't try to push. Won't try to sway her or rush her timeline.

But fuck if it's going to be hard to leave her now that I know what she tastes like. How sweetly her mouth fits against mine.

Having a plan—even if it's one I fucking hate—makes me feel a little better. More in control. Capable of handling whatever Myra throws at me.

Probably.

Opening the door, I climb in beside her with a renewed sense of determination. "Ready?"

Myra gives me a little nod. "Ready."

I pull out of the lot behind The Cellar, turning onto the road that will take us to the highway.

The bar where Lydia and Piper used to work—and where we frequently play—is downtown.

The neighborhood my family owns is on the outskirts of the industrial section of

Memphis.

The two are far enough apart, it's more than a couple minutes' drive.

And that's a long fucking time to keep myself in line.

Gripping the steering wheel, I start a conversation I hope might pass the time safely. "You did really well tonight, My. You've got one of the best voices I've ever heard."

I might be trying to keep my emotional and physical distance from her, but that doesn't mean I won't still give her other things. Support. Understanding. Appreciation.

Myra's smile lifts a second before she flattens it out. "Thanks."

It's frustrating Myra doesn't know how to take a compliment. Probably because she hasn't been given many of them. Her ex-husband was a giant piece of shit who probably didn't dish them out often.

"I was a little worried I wasn't as good as I thought." Myra reaches up to slide a bit of her wavy blonde hair behind one ear. "Singing in a church and singing in a bar are two completely different things, and I wasn't sure my voice would translate."

"It did." It's difficult for me to imagine Myra singing in a church. The way the words poured out of her—full of pain and anger and emotion— isn't easy to envision in a place populated by righteous men and oppressed women.

This time, Myra doesn't smother out her smile. "Do you sing?"

"A little." I lift a shoulder and let it drop. "But I'm not as good as Christian—and sure as shit not as good as you—so I leave it to the professionals."

Myra rubs her lips together, blue eyes watching me across the cab. “Maybe someday you could sing for me. I bet you’re better than you think you are.”

“I’ll sing for you.” I’m agreeing before I can think better of it. “But not until you don’t have Christian’s voice fresh in your mind.”

Myra laughs, the sound light and easy. It slowly dies down as her eyes move over me. “Was the stage hot tonight?”

Because I’m still stuck on the sound of her laughter, and the fact she wants to hear me sing, I shake my head, oblivious to where she’s headed. “Same as usual.”

“Oh.” Her head tilts, eyes fixed on my face. “I thought maybe that was why you took your shirt off.”

Shit.

Me and my dumbass ideas. Thinking I could tempt her but still keep this thing between us reined in was fucking stupid. Especially since Myra might not be as hesitant as I expected. If I’d known she’d have the balls to kiss me, I would have?—

Only tried to make it happen sooner.

Scrubbing one hand over my face, I scratch at the stubble on my jaw as I try to come up with a believable excuse for my state of dress—or undress, as the case may be—during the performance. “I spilled whiskey on it and didn’t want to sit there in a wet shirt.”

I give myself a mental pat on the back. My excuse sounds completely plausible, and explains why I now have my not wet shirt on. There was plenty of time for it to dry while we were performing, and I’m sure I do smell like whiskey, even though I

haven't had any since our little intermission.

Myra smiles again, but this time it's almost coy. Teasing. Tempting.

Terrifying.

Her eyes dip down my covered chest, then she peeks up at me through her lashes and says, "You should spill whiskey more often."

MYRA

I press my lips together before I threaten to douse the man next to me in whiskey every time I see him.

It's tempting though.

Being forward isn't something I've ever done. Mostly because there was nothing I wanted to initiate. Being touched by my ex-husband turned my stomach and left me disgusted with him.

With myself.

I assumed I might always feel like that. That physical intimacy was something that would sound good in theory but be unbearable in practice.

I assumed incorrectly.

I've barely scratched the surface of being close like that with Simon, and I'm already craving more. Already feeling all the things I thought weren't meant to be mine.

Desire. Lust. The need to be touched. Held.

My momentary lapse of judgment initially seemed like a mistake, but it brought me more clarity than anything else I've done this past year. It was instant and profound. Shifted the foundation I believed was under me.

And now that I haven't had a drink since before I sang, hopefully Simon will trust that my thoughts and decisions are unhindered enough to explore this new footing I've got.

"My, I..." Simon seems to struggle for words as he shifts in his seat. "Are you sure you're not hungry? I could pick something up on the way back."

An amused smile curves my lips at his attempt to change the subject. To move away from the evening's events. It's cute. Endearing, even. And one of the many reasons I've decided I want Simon to be the first man I ask to touch me.

Even when I basically threw myself at him, he didn't take advantage. He was the one to hit the brakes. Because he'll only touch me if I'm sure I want it.

And—after thinking it over the second half of the show—I definitely want that.

"I'm not hungry." For food. My body is humming with another sort of need, but I'm not really sure how to go about asking him to assist me with that problem.

Do I just put it out there? Excuse me, Simon, would you please stick your hand in my pants?

Possibly put your tongue between my thighs the way I've fantasized?

Pretty sure that's not the correct method.

Simon grips the wheel, quickly glancing my way before looking back out the windshield. "I guess if you change your mind, at least now your refrigerator is full."

Yet another reason why I want Simon to touch me. He's already shown a willingness to take care of me, and that gives me hope that maybe he'll be interested in taking

care of me in other ways.

Ways no one ever has. I didn't even know what an orgasm felt like until I came to Memphis. Had no clue something like that was possible. But once I figured it out, I had a lot of years to make up for.

I turn, angling my body, hoping his expression might give me some clue about how to get what I want. "Thank you for that, by the way. It was very sweet of you to take care of me."

Simon's jaw flexes, the tension building in his shoulders making them crawl closer to his ears. "You don't have to thank me for that, Myra." Another glance my direction. "Based on the lack of food in your house, you could probably use a little taking care of."

The landscape outside shifts from residential to industrial as we get closer to the isolated, dead-end street I call home.

Time's running out. If I don't make my move soon, I'll be alone, untouched, and filled with an ache I've never faced.

"You're right. No one's ever taken care of me before.

" I lower my voice, hoping it sounds suggestive instead of whispery, as I lay out my best attempt at seduction. "In any way."

If I didn't know Simon better, I'd think the shift in his features was due to anger.

But I do know Simon. Have probably watched him a little too closely anytime he came home.

And he wouldn't get mad at me for saying something like that.

It's possible he could be mad at the way my ex-husband treated me, but that's not what I think has tightened his jaw and squinted his eyes.

I'm more inclined to think the stiff way he's sitting is more about controlling his reaction to my words. More specifically—their implication. And based on his initial reaction to my kiss, I think things might be looking good for my libido.

After turning onto our street, Simon whips the box truck right to the edge of the road. He turns again, parking it sideways in front of the fence that identifies the end of our neighborhood before shutting off the engine. "We're home." He practically jumps out of the truck, fleeing.

"Dammit." I fling my door open and slide out, feet connecting a little harder with the asphalt than I expected thanks to my rush. The impact jars my joints and has me wobbling in the tan heels strapped at my ankles, making me yelp.

"Myra ." There's a hint of panic in Simon's voice. A second later he's there, hands on me as his dark eyes move up and down my body. "What happened?"

I reach out, grabbing the front of the shirt he claims he spilled whiskey on, holding tight.

"I'm okay. I just slid out of the seat a little speedier than I thought I would.

" Taking full advantage of the situation, I shift my weight, leaning forward against him. "Thank you for making sure I was okay."

Simon's hands flex where they grip my hips, but he doesn't let go. "You're welcome."

I gaze up at him, my heart beating wildly in my chest. “It seems like you’re always taking care of me lately.”

My eyes drop to his mouth, zeroing in on lips that were on mine not long ago.

It was the single best kiss I’ve ever experienced in my life.

Technically, there’s not a lot of competition for that spot, but still.

I’m pretty sure it would have landed the honor even if I hadn’t only ever kissed my flabby-lipped ex-husband.

The reminder digs up memories I’d rather not revisit. I don’t like thinking about where I’ve been. It wasn’t a great place. And going back there is my least favorite thing to do, even if it’s only in my head.

But the thoughts linger, and I want to wipe them away. Eradicate every second of them from my memory forever. I know that’s not possible, but I can force them out for now. And I know exactly how to accomplish it.

Reaching up, I hook one hand around the back of Simon’s neck, pulling him toward me. Bringing his face close to mine, I push up onto my toes until our lips are less than an inch apart. “You should kiss me again.”

I think he wants this as much as I do, but I’ve already made the first move once—plus tossed out more than one suggestive comment in the past ten minutes—and if I keep having to do it, I’m gonna start to question our alignment.

“I shouldn’t kiss you, Myra.” Simon’s hands slide over my body, tracing the curve of my hips and thighs. “You need time to breathe. Space to decide what you want.”

That has my brows pulling together. “I don’t remember saying that.” I’ve had time and space, and all I did was sit in one spot like a lump. I couldn’t move forward, and I sure as hell didn’t want to go back. More time and space are the last things I need.

What I do need is someone who’ll push me a little. Someone who’ll urge me forward when I start to drag my feet. Not because they want to control me, but because they have faith in me. Want the best for me.

Care about me.

“I carried you out of the woods while your father and ex-husband hunted you like an animal.” Simon’s voice is rough with an emotion that warms my insides. “You went through hell. The last thing you need is another asshole expecting shit from you.”

“You’re not an asshole,” I defend him immediately. “And you don’t expect anything from me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, My.” Simon’s big hands grip my thighs, hauling me up his body until we’re face-to-face. “And that is exactly why I should be giving you space and time. Because my expectations for you are already through the fucking roof.”

The way he says it makes every part of me clench, but primarily the part of me that’s now pressed right against the sizable bulge in the front of his pants.

I’m not going to point it out, but while Simon says he wants to give me time and space, my current position implies something entirely different.

Instead of pushing me away, he hefted me up and pulled me closer.

Has my back pressed against the side of the box truck and my legs wrapped around

his waist, my body held in place with his.

Simon leans in, but instead of giving me the kiss I'm desperate for, he traces his lips up the side of my neck, sending goosebumps breaking out across my skin. I'm not sure how I expected this to go, but being pinned midair in the dark definitely wasn't on my bingo card.

I think I need to update that freaking card.

I understand how sex works. And not just the missionary 'stick it in and pound away' sort I've experienced. I know there's way more to the act than I've been privy to, and now my brain is swirling with possibilities.

I didn't expect I would ever want to have sex again. Because—like so much else in my life—I was stuck. Caught in an unsatisfying and depressing sort of limbo between what was and what could be.

I'm not in limbo anymore.

Simon breathes deep, the drag of his inhale cooling the skin just beneath my ear. He groans. "You smell so fucking good."

My head is already spinning, and the lustful sound of Simon's voice adds momentum. Ramps up the dizzying pace epically. Because in just two tiny interactions, he's made me feel sexy and safe and wanted. It has me feeling almost drugged. A little giddy.

And powerful. Very, very powerful.

"I don't think you understand how hard it's been for me to stay away from you." Simon leans back to look at me, his lids low with lust and arousal. "To walk away when I know I can give you every fucking thing you need."

The spinning in my head amps up as I fight to pull air into my lungs. “Why do you walk away then?”

“Because you’re not ready for me.” He shifts, the hard line of his dick teasing against me in a way that sends more sensation racing through me than my vibrator ever could. “For everything I want to give you.” He leans in, his lips hovering just above mine. “For everything I want from you.”

I swore I would never give anything of myself to a man again, but I can’t stop myself from asking, “What do you want from me?”

“Everything.” The deep rumble of that single word ripples through me, hot as it drops through my body, warming my nipples and making my pussy clench.

Simon’s nose traces alongside mine as he rocks against me again, mimicking an act I’ve had done to me, but never participated in.

“I’m not patient, My.” His hands tighten where they grip my ass.

“And I’m not good at doing what I know I should.

” He rocks against me again, and I gasp, already deliciously close to experiencing my first orgasm initiated by another person.

Simon’s eyes align with mine as he continues dry fucking me against the side of the truck. “Just like now. I shouldn’t be doing this, but I can’t fucking stop myself.”

My fingers dig into his back as my head tips back against the metal wall of the truck behind me. I’ve got no leverage. No ability to even accomplish so much as a wiggle. All I can do is trust him to give me what I want.

And it's fucking liberating.

"You're fucking irresistible, My." Simon's breath mingles with mine, his voice rough and ragged as he continues. "I try, but all I want in this world is as much of you as I can get."

I'm not sure what's doing the most for me right now.

It could be the friction of his cock dragging between my thighs.

Could be the insanely sexy way he's got me pinned against the truck.

Or it could be the ragged words coming out of his mouth.

Whatever it is, Simon's got me on the edge faster than even modern mechanics has managed.

The only thing stopping me from toppling over is fear. Worry of what he'll think of me if I do. It's ingrained into the fiber of my being. Drilled into my head that this isn't something I should want or crave.

"Simon ." I choke out his name. Needing reassurance. Needing to know I'm as safe with him as I think I am.

His lips drag to my ear, his breath warm as encouragement spills between them. "That's it, baby. Come for me. Give me just a little bit of what I want tonight."

Hearing my pleasure isn't simply an acceptable byproduct of what's happening, but something he's actively pursuing, is more than I expected, but exactly what I need. The next time he grinds against me, I cry out, pleasure unlike anything I've ever experienced washing over me. Through me.

“That’s my girl.” Simon continues working his body against mine, his broad chest expanding with heavy breaths as the world spins out around me.

I cling to him. Not because I’m afraid he’ll drop me, but because I think he might be the only thing anchoring me to this world.

To this moment. And I don’t want to leave it.

Don’t want to let it go. Don’t want to lose what it’s giving me.

Because as high as I felt after singing on stage, it was nothing compared to how I feel right now.

For the first time ever, I feel alive.

Simon’s head lifts, his hooded eyes moving over my flushed face. “Fucking beautiful.” After brushing a kiss across my forehead, he slowly lowers my legs, holding me tight as my feet hit the ground.

I’m still dazed and a little out of it when movement catches my eye. I blink hard, thinking I’m simply still fogged by the cloud of release. But then I hear rustling coming from the same area.

Simon must hear it too, because his whole body stiffens, going on alert.

Slowly, his head turns in the direction of the fence behind him.

I don’t know who the wooded area at the other side of it belongs to, but they sure don’t do much to maintain it.

The overgrowth obscures anything—or anyone—who might be lingering in the

shadows.

Never once have I worried about it, but right now, a chill snakes down my spine as my eyes follow the line of the fence as it runs right up alongside my house.

Because I'm pretty sure someone on the other side of that fence just watched me get off.

SIMON

My blood goes from fire to ice in a split second.

Someone is out there. Watching Myra come. Taking what belongs to me.

And when I find them—and I will fucking find them—I’m going to kill them. I’ll show them the kind of man I used to be. Make them regret the day they put their eyes anywhere near her.

Keeping Myra close by my side—making sure to block her body with mine—I start to move. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you inside.”

I lead her away from the fence, following the most direct path to her front porch.

I scan the area around us as she unlocks the door and lets us inside.

Urging her across the threshold, I give the overgrowth one more look before following behind her.

After making sure the door is locked tight, I use the hand I have on her lower back to direct her toward the stairs. “Go get ready for bed.”

Up until now, I’ve done everything in my power to hide my somewhat bossy nature from her. But—like my tendency to make plans and my inability to do the things I should—it comes out on occasion whether I like it or not.

And this is one of those occasions.

But if Myra's bothered, she doesn't show it. Thank God, because I would feel like an asshole if she did, and right now I have more important things to worry about than if I'm reminding her of her ex.

Once she's upstairs and out of sight, I head for the back door, pulling out my phone as I check the lock.

After dialing Christian's number, I move to the windows, checking each one as the line rings in my ear.

It takes him forever to answer, and when he does, he sounds like he's having a great fucking time at his midnight dinner.

Too bad, because I'm about to ruin everyone's night.

"Someone was in the woods next to Myra's house." I finish inspecting the windows in the kitchen and family room area, and move onto the front portion of the house. "It was too dark to make out anything about them, but they were definitely watching us."

I don't elaborate. It's no one's business but mine and Myra's what we were doing, and it doesn't matter anyway. All that matters is someone—whose days are numbered—put their eyes where they don't belong. I'm going to find out who, and I'm going to find out why.

Then I'm going to make sure they never look at anything again.

"Shit." Christian relays what I just told him to Lydia, Tate, and Piper. Then he asks me, "Does Myra have any cameras on her house at all?"

I'm a little surprised he doesn't know the answer to that. Surprised and annoyed.

"She doesn't have shit here. Not even a security system." I try to bite my tongue, but I'm too fucking pissed to come close to being successful. "And why in the hell is that? That should have been the first thing you did after she bought the place."

"How was I supposed to do that? Barge in and take over?" Christian scoffs. "No fucking way. Myra's just started to live her own life. I'm not going to be the one to take that from her."

Is that what I'm doing? Taking Myra's life from her?

I look at the renovations I've started. The refrigerator I stocked. Listen as the shower switches on after I told her to get ready for bed.

"Is she okay? Did she know they were there?" Christian's rapid-fire questions drag my attention away from my own failings.

"She knew they were there. She seems rattled, but she's not hurt." I rake one hand through my hair. "What the fuck are we gonna do?"

"We can start by you talking her into putting in a security system. You're the only one she seems to listen to." Christian puts the burden squarely on me.

I know I should try to send that responsibility back at him—or more likely his wife—but I can't make myself do it.

Imagine that.

"I'll handle it." I don't want to push Myra. Genuinely. But I won't let her get hurt. She might hate me for what I'm about to do, but there's no fucking way I'm going to

let her be in any sort of danger.

Which brings me to another issue.

“I don’t feel comfortable leaving her here alone tonight.” I’m not sure why I admit that to Christian. Maybe I need reassurance that I’m not the only one who feels this way. It will spread out the blame so it’s not only on my shoulders.

Proving he is just as protective as I am, Christian says, “Agreed. You should stay with her until we figure out what’s going on.”

I turn, resigned to the fact that I’m going to have to control a little more of Myra’s life. “I’ll get started on a security system first thing in the morning.”

“I’ll have everyone check their feeds to see if their cameras caught anyone lurking around,” Christian assures me, promising to check back in with me in the morning before ending our call.

I stand in the hall for I don’t know how fucking long, trying to tamp down my own desires and wants. Trying to get myself into a better frame of mind.

It’s not easy. Possibly more difficult than it’s ever been.

And I’m no closer to accomplishing it when soft footsteps come down the stairs. I clench my jaw, pulling in a deep breath as I attempt to steel myself against the sight I know is about to greet me.

Again, I fail.

Seeing Myra with her hair pulled up at the top of her head in a messy bun, a set of pale blue pajamas clinging to her frame, reignites the heat I’d hoped was successfully

doused.

I shouldn't have done what I did outside. It was yet another mistake in a long line, but I'm a big enough asshole that there's no way in hell I'll take it back. After hearing Myra admit no one had ever gotten her off, I knew I wouldn't let anyone else claim the privilege of being first but me.

And, based on the desire coursing through me, I'm probably going to be second and third before the sun comes up.

Myra gives me a tentative smile, a hint of pink tinting her cheeks. She's thinking about what happened between us outside. What I gave her. And it sends all the blood in my body running south.

"Hey." She smooths back a loose bit of blonde hair, tucking it behind one ear. "Is everything okay?"

"I guess that depends on how you look at things." She might have liked me getting her off, but I'm not so sure how Myra's going to react to the news that I'll be staying here with her tonight.

And possibly for the foreseeable future.

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to be here alone tonight.

"I've already taken over so much of her life, so it would be great if I could get her to come to the same conclusion I've already come to.

"You don't have a security system and your house butts right up against that tree line.

It wouldn't be hard for someone to scale the fence, and they'd have plenty of privacy

to break in. ”

Myra’s skin pales and the column of her throat works on a swallow. “Should I get a security system?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t help us now.” I wait, holding my breath. Hoping she gets where I need her to go.

Myra shifts on her feet, blue eyes darting around. “Should I go to a hotel or something?”

“You could, but you’re already in your pajamas.” I fight to keep my tone even instead of demanding. “Or I could stay here.”

Myra’s eyes lift to my face, dipping to my mouth before meeting my gaze again. “Okay.”

Her breathy agreement eases the tension that had been bunching my shoulders.

I roll them out, helping a little more dissipate.

“I need to go grab a change of clothes and my toothbrush.” I move toward the door, the need to get this done so I can be back quickening my steps.

“It’ll take me five minutes.” I flip the deadbolt and open the door, turning to face her.

“Lock this behind me. I’ll be right back. ”

I step out into the darkness, glaring up at the spot where a porch light should be.

There’s an old fixture mounted to the wall, but the bulb inside it is long dead.

Myra closes the door behind me, and as I wait for her to lock it, I add outdoor lighting to the list of tasks I'm going to tackle tomorrow.

Once I hear the deadbolt click into place, I hurry down the stairs, listening for any sign I'm not alone out here as I scan the block for movement.

Everything is quiet enough I feel comfortable continuing on, but I pick up the pace, rushing to my camper where I grab a few items of clothing, my toothbrush, and a charger for my phone.

After locking up, I jog back to Myra's house.

Giving the door a sharp rap with my knuckles, I let her know it's me.

Myra opens the door, stepping back to let me inside, and I suck in a deep breath, trying to calm my excitement at the opportunity to be so close to her.

This isn't a good thing—I know it's not—but the part of me that's so fucking lonely it aches didn't get that memo.

Knowing she'll be close, even if it's just in the next room, is already soothing the part of me still hurting from an old loss.

Pulling in another breath, hoping to calm the warring emotions inside me, I pause. The scent of Myra's body wash tints the air, but it's not the only thing that tickles my nose as I breathe in. My eyes move down the hall toward the kitchen. "Are you cooking?"

Myra presses her lips together, lifting one shoulder in a half-assed shrug. "I guess I was a little hungry after all."

I go still, taking apart the evening's events. I want to think she asked me to take her home for a reason other than being tired. That she preferred my company over everyone else's.

That maybe she was hoping for what happened against that truck.

I know it's just the part of me that has already decided she's mine conjuring up what it wants to see, but still.

Anything's possible.

"I thought maybe you'd be hungry too." Myra pinches her lower lip between her teeth. "It probably burns a lot of energy playing the drums all night."

I'm torn. Desperate to let myself believe all the things I want are within my grasp, but self-aware enough to know I'm probably reaching. "You don't have to cook for me, Myra."

The hint of a smile on her mouth lifts. "I know." She points to the items in my arms. "You can put all that upstairs. Our food should be ready soon." Then she pushes up on her toes and presses a kiss to my lips.

I don't even kiss her back because I'm stunned by the casual way she does it. Like it's a normal thing we do all the time.

I'm still staring in shock when she disappears around the corner, leaving me standing alone in the entryway as she goes into the kitchen.

To finish cooking. For me. Because I burned a lot of energy playing drums.

Again, it would be easy for me to read into this. To think it's more than it is. The kiss.

The food. Her immediate agreement to have me stay with her.

But I have a habit of looking down a tunnel of my own creation. Of thinking I can make whatever I want happen.

And the last time I did that, it took me years to get over.

Turning away from the temptation of everything I want, I march up the steps, going in search of Myra's guest room.

I reach the landing and pace down the hall, peering into one empty room after another.

Myra's home used to be an office building, and the drywall partitioning most of the second floor into rooms is still intact, but none of them look particularly good.

There are holes knocked in the walls, wires dangling from the ceiling, missing outlets, and busted baseboards.

It makes me wish I had more than a month to give her.

Maybe I could find someone to take my place for the job in Louisia?—

I reach the last doorway and skid to a stop on the subfloor, realization dawning.

Myra doesn't have a guest room.

I slowly back up the way I came, looking over each room to confirm the room at the end of the hall is the only one even close to being habitable.

It's still not completely finished—there's no flooring over the subfloor—but the

bedroom where Myra sleeps and the bathroom attached to it are clean and painted a pretty teal.

The queen-size bed is covered in a dark, almost black, comforter and piled with pillows.

A set of nightstands sits at either side, each with a lamp and stack of romance novels piled on the surface.

A slow smile works its way onto my lips.

I might not have known I was agreeing to share a bed with her, but Myra definitely did. I can explain away a lot of her actions. Tell myself she's not thinking the same way I am. But this is blatant. A clear sign Myra doesn't need space as much as I've been thinking she did.

Because that queen-size bed won't leave much space between us.

Striding into the bedroom we'll be sharing tonight—longer if I can make it happen—I set my clothes on the smooth surface of her dresser—right next to another stack of second hand romance novels—before carrying my toiletries into the bathroom.

After lining my items up alongside hers, I take a minute to enjoy the sight.

Seeing even this tiny bit of my life and hers co-mingling satisfies me on a visceral level.

Not because I've been aching for someone at my side—though I have—but because it's Myra inching into the spot.

Ever since I carried her out of the woods the night she escaped her ex-husband, I've

struggled to keep my thoughts away from her. Sometimes more successfully than others. I went to great lengths—literally—to keep my distance from her.

But after being back in town for only a handful of days, I've already managed to feel her lips under mine and the quake of her body as she came against my dick.

And neither one happened because I was the one pushing.

Now I'll be sleeping beside her. Showering where she stands naked every day. Making sure she's safe and fed and happy.

In every fucking way she'll let me.

Flipping off the bathroom light, I cross the bedroom, eyes lingering on the spot I'll soon be lying next to Myra as I make my way out the door.

When I reach the kitchen, I find her plating up two toasted subs layered with the deli meat I bought so she'd have food to pack for lunch when she works. It doesn't seem like she's dipped into it until now, making me suspicious she doesn't eat when she's at work.

Another thing I'll be able to rectify if I'm staying here.

Myra slides a plate my way before picking up her sandwich and taking a huge bite, eyes rolling closed as she chews. "I was starving."

I try to keep the smile off my face, but fail. "I thought you didn't go with your sister because you weren't hungry."

Myra's blue eyes open, sliding down my body as her cheeks pink up again. A hint of a smile curves her lips as her gaze comes back to meet mine. "I must have worked up

an appetite outside.”

MYRA

Taking back my voice felt more amazing than I could have hoped for. It was what will likely be a defining moment in my life.

And it was immediately followed by another defining moment.

And then another.

And I'm about to stack up one more.

I should be freaking out. Panicked over a stranger watching me in the woods. Spiraling about what happened while that man was watching me in the woods. Hyperventilating because I'm about to be sleeping in a bed with Simon.

Instead, I'm struggling to keep the smile off my face.

"Thank you for this." Simon lifts up the last bite of his sandwich then pops it in his mouth. "But you know you don't ever have to feed me."

The smile I'm working so hard to stifle manages to make an appearance. "I know." I shrug, hoping he doesn't figure out what a big deal this is. "I wanted to."

Yet another defining moment slaps me in the face. I wanted to feed Simon. Wanted to take care of him the way he takes care of me.

I was determined my days of caring for men were over. So standing here, watching

him fill his belly with something I made for him, is a surreal moment. Not just because of the actions themselves, but because of the emotions trailing behind them.

I never would have thought a mundane task like making a sandwich would have me feeling just as good as cutting my hair and piercing my nose and buying a house, but it does.

So much of what I've done since leaving Arkansas has been a knee-jerk reaction. Me throwing out as many fuck yous as I can. That's not what this is. This is me doing something in spite of how I was raised. Not because of it.

Simon looks me over before collecting his empty plate and mine. "As long as you know."

I watch as he racks our dishes in the washer, adding the cutting board and knife I used, before dropping in a soap pack and setting it to run.

He doesn't act like it's a chore. Doesn't groan or piss and moan about having to do something he feels is beneath him.

It's simply a task. One he doesn't mind doing.

And I really like that about him. I really like a lot of things about him.

Pressing my lips together, trying to hide the anticipation curling through me, I ask, "Are you ready for bed?"

Simon turns to me, his big body close. "Do you have any extra pillows and blankets? I can sleep down here."

I'm not surprised at his offer. Especially after the confessions he made while...

Whew.

I give him a little poke in the stomach I just filled. “Is that your way of telling me you snore?”

Simon shakes his head. “I don’t snore.”

“You’re a bed hog, then.” A little thing sparks through my insides at the thought of Simon crowding close to me all night long.

“It’s possible.” Simon flips off the kitchen light. “I haven’t slept with anyone else in a long time, so you might end up regretting your decision.”

I really doubt that.

I turn, making my way down the hall. “As far as you know, I do snore and I’m a bed hog who steals all the covers.” I’m feeling a little flirty. Confident in a way I’ve never been. It’s exciting. Fun. Addicting. “So you might be the one regretting your decisions.”

“I don’t think so.” Simon’s words are low enough I’m not sure I was meant to hear them.

But I do, and it has those butterflies taking up residence in my belly flapping around like crazy. I’m starting to get a little worried I won’t be able to sleep because of it, but I guess I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.

Simon’s footsteps trail behind me as I head upstairs, flipping off lights as I go. I finally reach my bedroom, peeking over one shoulder as he steps in behind me. “I’ll brush my teeth and then the bathroom’s yours.”

I make quick work of flossing and scrubbing the remnants of my midnight snack off my teeth. After popping out my contacts, I pad out into the bedroom. Simon is standing exactly where I left him, so I give him a smile. “All yours.”

His posture is stiffer than normal as he goes into one of the few finished spaces of my home, closing the door behind him.

I stare at it for way too long, wishing it was at least a little transparent.

I was surprised at the... amount of material Simon had to work with when we were grinding against the truck, and it has me curious.

I’ve seen one penis in real life, and it didn’t take up nearly as much space in the world as the one that just rubbed between my legs.

It was impossible to tell exactly what I’m facing, but I witnessed enough that intimidation is most certainly settling in.

Especially since I’m thinking I would like to become better acquainted with all the parts of Simon’s body.

Toeing off the slippers I wear around my house since the floors are primarily plywood, I slide under the covers and switch on the bedside lamp.

I like to watch television before I fall asleep, so I turn it on, picking the series I started a few days ago and setting it to play as the shower begins to run.

I’m ten minutes into the episode—and haven’t absorbed a single second of it—when Simon comes out of the bathroom.

“Holy shit.” The words slide between my lips all on their own.

His dark hair is wet and slicked back away from his face, the moisture from it dripping onto his broad shoulders. The sheen of his damp skin gives him a Greek god-like quality the white terry cloth towel slung low on his hips only amplifies.

My mouth goes dry when he gives me a lopsided smile, holding the front of the towel with one hand as he goes to the stack of clothes piled on top of my dresser. My eyes stay locked on him as he pauses to look over the items he brought, his lips tipping down in a frown.

I sit up straighter. “What’s wrong?”

“I, uhh...” he huffs out a laugh “...don’t actually have any pajamas.”

Well... that’s an interesting development. “What do you normally sleep in?”

“Normally?” He plucks out a pair of black boxer briefs. “These.” His eyes come to where I’m all tucked in and waiting for his mostly naked body to join me. “I can’t imagine you want?—”

“It’s fine.” I bark out the words like the eager beaver I am. “We’re both adults.” My face heats along with most of the rest of me. “And we did just...” I’m not sure how to identify the act we just committed against the unsuspecting box truck.

Simon’s gaze darkens as it coasts over me. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

I shake my head, the movement jerky enough to give me away a second time. “I don’t mind.”

I sound breathless because I am. Anticipation and excitement have my lungs struggling to function.

“ Okay .” Simon drags the word out, like he’s not convinced.

That’s probably my fault. I haven’t exactly done a great job of showing him I’m in a good place and ready to break out of the box I accidentally put myself in.

I start to fidget as he disappears back into the bathroom. I know—despite what happened earlier—this isn’t a romantic sort of sleeping together. Not even a sexual one. Simon is only here out of necessity.

Tonight.

But would it be so bad if he continued staying here for other—more sexual—reasons? I’m going to give it a solid no. It wouldn’t be bad at all.

I’m so caught up in thoughts of having Simon in my bed for more than just protective reasons, that I jump a little when the door to the bathroom opens again.

For a second time, I take in all his glory.

There’s not much more of him exposed now than there was in the towel, but the thick terry cloth went a long way at disguising what was beneath it.

His fitted, cotton boxer briefs do not. My eyes zero in on the substantial bulge in the front of his underwear. The dark fabric clings enough that I can make out the full scope of what I’m dealing with.

And it is for sure way more than I’m used to negotiating.

My pussy clenches at the thought of what all that girth and length would feel like filling me up. The way it would stretch me.

The way it could obliterate any trace of previous visitors to the area.

“Lights off?” Simon lifts his brows at me, but the hint of a smirk on his lips makes me think he knows exactly where I’m looking and exactly what I’m thinking.

“Yeah. Yup.” I grip the blankets tight as he flips off the overhead, rounds the bed, and slides into place next to me.

I invested a decent amount of money in my mattress, so it barely shifts under his weight as he gets comfortable. I almost bought the next size up—because I’m the freaking king of this castle—but I’m so glad I didn’t. Because the limited amount of space means there’s not much room between us.

Wiggling my way down until my head hits the pillow, I roll to face Simon. “Comfortable?”

“I am.” His eyes come my way. “You?”

I nod, head shifting against the soft cotton beneath my cheek. Rubbing my lips together, I resist the urge to shift closer. “Thank you for staying here with me. I probably would have a hard time sleeping otherwise.”

Simon’s full focus comes to my face, his expression calm but deadly serious. “I won’t let anyone else hurt you, My.” His gaze dips to my mouth before coming back to meet mine. “No one.”

Even though I got off less than an hour ago, all the nerve endings in my body light up, firing direct shots to my clit at the deep, rough sound of his voice. At the honesty in his words.

Simon has always protected me. It was literally the first thing he ever did. It’s what

started my whole infatuation with him. He was the first man who genuinely wanted to keep me safe. Put his own life on the line to protect me and asked nothing in return.

If that doesn't make a girl want to drop her panties, I don't know what would.

He reaches for me, the rough fingers of one hand moving my hair out of my face. "Close your eyes and go to sleep. You've had a long day."

I nod, and as I'm becoming in the habit of doing, I follow his directions. Let my lids slide closed even though I'm positive it's going to be difficult for me to...

I jolt awake, eyes flying open. The room is still dark around me, and it takes me a few seconds to orient myself. Not with where I am, but with what's going on.

And who's right next to me.

"Shh." Simon's voice is soft, but his whole body is strung tight and alert. "Stay put."

I nod, swallowing hard when Simon slides out of bed, his steps silent as he leaves the room. Pulling the blankets higher, I burrow into them. They won't protect me from much of anything, but the added coverage makes me feel better.

So does the scent of Simon clinging to the cotton. I breathe deep, nerves biting at my insides as I strain to hear any sign of what's going on. Of what it was that woke us both up.

I'm listening so closely that when a deep grunt echoes up the stairs, I yelp, scrambling up the mattress.

That sounded like Simon.

“Shit,” I whisper as I fly out of bed, panic sending my eyes bouncing around my room in search of something I can use as a weapon. Nothing jumps out at me. All I see is pillows and a clock and a stack of romance novels. Nothing capable of causing damage to whoever might be down there.

I start freaking out as another muffled, masculine sound of impact reaches my ears. Every second that passes is one more second Simon might be hurt downstairs, and the fear that he might need me sends adrenaline dumping into my veins.

And reminds me of a scene in John Wick where the bad guy talks about John killing a dude with a pencil. I don’t have any pencils, but that’s not important. The lesson from that scene isn’t that I need a pencil. It’s that anything can be a weapon if you’re motivated enough.

My frantic gaze settles on my nightstand.

Bingo.

I drag the drawer of it free and dump the contents onto my comforter. Once it’s empty, I grip it by the handle, letting the weight of the solid wood dangle by my side, and stalk out into the hall.

Over the course of my childhood and marriage, I wished there was someone to come save me more times than I can count. Facing a threat alone is terrifying and isolating and traumatizing.

I’ll be damned if I let Simon feel that way.

I quickly creep down the stairs, avoiding all the creaky spots with my bare feet, the sound of a struggle getting louder with each step I take.

Moving faster, I close in on the shadowy forms fighting in my kitchen.

Hoping to take the intruder by surprise, I raise one hand to the light switch, adjusting my grip on the drawer handle before flipping it on.

Simon stumbles back, his eyes widening on the asshole in front of him. “What the fu?—”

I don’t give the guy who broke into my house the chance to acclimate to the change in brightness before I swing the heavy weight of the wood drawer, aiming it right for the side of his head. He’s got his back to me, so I’m pretty sure he won’t see it coming.

But Simon does. In a surprising move, he lunges forward, catching the drawer before it can take out the dark-haired man I’m fully intending to concuss.

Simon’s hand wraps around one side, the sudden stop of my momentum jolting all the way up my arm and making me yelp. “Hey.” I try to yank it from him, already planning a second attack.

It won’t be a sneak attack though, because the other man turns to me, gaze narrowing on where I stand.

I blink, thinking my own eyes are struggling with the brightness, because he almost looks like...

“Butch?” I let go of the drawer. “Why in the hell are you breaking into my house?”

I’ve only seen the guy a handful of times. He’s a lot like Simon in that he only comes around every few months, then makes himself scarce in a hurry. But now that I’m thinking about it, it’s been more than a few months since I’ve seen him. Way more

than a few months.

And now he's breaking into my house.

It's kinda weird. Maybe even a little suspicious.

Simon must be thinking the same thing, because his eyes narrow on the man he considers his brother, as he asks, "Where the fuck have you been?"

Butch—who up until this point has looked formidable as fuck—slumps, his shoulders dropping. "It's a long fucking story." He closes his eyes, scrubbing one hand over his face. "And you aren't gonna like it."

SIMON

“I can tell you I don’t fucking like you breaking into Myra’s house.” I stare down the man I was once close to. Once considered my brother.

I’m not sure I even know him anymore.

“I didn’t know anyone lived here.” Butch flings both arms out, motioning around the space. “Last I knew, Jill owned it and it was sitting empty.”

I scoff. “You didn’t know because you fucking disappeared. No one’s heard from you for months and now you’re acting like you can just show back up like nothing happened.”

Butch angles a brow at me. “That’s awful fucking funny coming from you, considering you disappear just as much as I do.”

I’m gonna end up punching him. I can feel it. And it’s gonna happen sooner rather than later. “I don’t disappear.” I step closer, squaring up. “Everyone knows where I am and what I’m doing.”

And I have good fucking reasons for leaving. I stay gone to protect people. To spare them the worst of me. Butch’s reasons for leaving are as unknown as his whereabouts and actions while he’s gone.

“How about we all calm down?” Myra steps between us, putting her soft body too close to Butch.

I loop an arm around her waist, pulling her back against me. “I am calm.”

Myra tips her head back, brows lifting as she looks over my face.

“I’m gonna have to call bullshit on that one.

” She turns back to Butch, but doesn’t try to get out of my hold, layering her arm across mine instead.

“I get how you might assume this place was still empty, but that doesn’t explain why you were trying to break into it. ”

“I wasn’t trying. I did break into it.” Butch acts offended at Myra’s minimization of his recent actions.

A threatening noise I would almost call a growl resonates through my chest as I stare him down. “Watch how you talk to her.”

I don’t even try to temper myself. I couldn’t anyway. I was pissed when I thought some unknown stranger dared to invade Myra’s home. Now that I know it’s someone I considered family? I’m fucking livid.

Butch sighs, raking one hand through his hair. “Can you just tell me which of these places is vacant?”

“What the fuck for?” Is this prick serious right now? Ten minutes ago I was sleeping with Myra’s perfect body next to mine and this fucker?—

Myra hooks her free arm around mine, fingers spreading across my bicep. “I think Butch was going to explain that to us before you started yelling.” She sounds way too calm right now and it grates over my skin.

I don't like thinking about why all the yelling I'm doing doesn't faze her, but it does calm me down. Forces me to lower my voice. "Fine." I flex the hand at her waist, curling her closer as I maintain the glare I'm shooting Butch's way. "Start explaining."

Looking like he's seriously regretting his life choices, Butch drops his head, letting it hang between his shoulders. "Fuck." His head tips back, eyes going to the ceiling as he repeats, louder this time, "Fuck."

"You know what?" I huff out a bitter laugh. "I don't even care why you're here." I gesture across the street. "My camper's parked behind the only building Jill still owns on this block. The electric's even on, so make yourself at home." I tug Myra away from him. "We're going back to bed."

"I'm not trying to be a dick, Simon. I've just got a lot on my fucking plate right now and?—"

I hold up a hand, cutting off Butch's explanation.

"I said I don't care." I probably should, but right now I don't.

All that matters is getting Myra away from this situation and tucked safely into her bed.

"You do you, man. Just shut off the lights as you leave." I turn toward the stairs, pausing to look over one shoulder.

"And you're going to pay to fix anything you fucked up getting in here."

Butch gives me a single nod, mouth pressed into a flat line.

Pushing Myra ahead of me, I urge her up the stairs and into her bedroom, closing the door behind us because I want to add another barrier between her and the man downstairs.

As pissed as I am at him, I don't believe Butch is here to hurt her.

But I still don't fucking like him breaking into Myra's house. Especially not at night.

What if I hadn't been here? She would have been scared to death. On her own with nothing but?—

My eyes land on the pile of items dumped out onto the bed, and a slow smile works onto my lips. Because Myra would have probably been just fine if I wasn't here. Butch would have had his head split open, but Myra would have been okay.

And that's all I care about.

"Sorry." She rushes to the mess, trying to collect all of it into her arms at once. "I was in a hurry."

I appreciate the quick thinking and bravery she showed, but I don't like her walking into an unknown situation the way she did. "I feel like I told you to stay up here."

"I thought you were hurt." Myra doesn't look my way as she drags both arms across the blankets, frantically working everything toward her body. "Turn off the light."

"You won't be able to see what you're doing if I turn off the light." I step toward her. "Let me help."

"No ."

The word jumps out of her mouth. It's loud and clipped and stops me in my tracks.

It also drops my eyes to the bed and the items on it.

The bulk of them are benign. Uninteresting and expected. Hand lotion. A couple more books. Chapstick. A spare phone charger. Nothing that explains Myra's panicked expression and flailing movements.

Well, except for the lavender vibrator right smack dab in the middle of everything.

My eyes fix on the device, fusing to the item I know has been pressed against parts of her I'm desperate to touch myself.

"Myra." I say her name gently. I don't want her to be embarrassed around me. Not about anything. When she doesn't react, I move closer, reaching out to encircle her wrist with my fingers, stalling her movements. "Sweetheart, look at me."

I don't know if it's the accidental endearment or my closeness that has her head snapping my way, but Myra looks ten times more terrified now than she did closing in on an unknown attacker with nothing but a nightstand drawer for a weapon.

And it makes my heart hurt. Makes me want to find a way to break her ex-husband out of jail just so I can put him in the ground.

I shake my head, lifting my other hand to cup her cheek. "There's nothing to be ashamed of on that bed."

Myra's chin lifts, her shoulders straightening, a little of her panic slipping away under the weight of defiance. "I'm not ashamed."

"Good." I don't know what has caused this sudden shift in her emotions, but I'll take her aggravation over shame any day. I still want to know what caused her immediate reaction, though. "Why are you trying to hide it then?"

“Because it’s private.” She snatches the vibrator off the bed and shoves it into the hole where her drawer used to be. “You’re not supposed to see things like that.”

“Why not?” A smile teases my lips at the memory of what happened earlier.

“We’re not exactly strangers anymore.” I lean in, loving that she doesn’t step away from me as my lips brush against hers.

“Don’t forget, you came against my dick not long ago.

I don’t see any reason I shouldn’t see what else you’ve come against.”

Myra sucks in a breath, one hand coming to spread flat over my stomach.

I was planning to eventually convince myself I couldn’t repeat that indiscretion again, but it never would have actually happened. Now that I know how sweet she sounds when she comes undone, there’s not a thing in this world that could stop me from chasing another climax through her lips.

Not even myself.

“How often do you and your little friend hang out?” I can’t even begin to guess where Myra is when it comes to sex and physicality. I know she’s had it. I’m also pretty confident she didn’t enjoy it.

But I’m positive she enjoyed what happened between us earlier. And finding out how easy it is to make her come has only made me bolder. The question I just asked is proof of that.

“Why does that matter?” She doesn’t answer me, and that’s okay. I’m happy to give her more motivation to offer the information I’m after.

“I was just thinking I’d be happy to offer my services.” I run the tip of one finger over her mouth. “If you ever decide you’d like a more manual type of application.”

Again, Myra inhales sharply. At first I think it’s a gasp of surprise, but then her eyes lift to mine, pupils completely blown, and I become suspicious it’s actually arousal controlling her lungs.

“What do you mean, manual ?” Her question is breathless. Soft and sweet and it nearly makes me groan because she didn’t immediately shoot me down.

“I mean whatever you want me to mean.” I’ve worked hard to make sure Myra knows the ball is always in her court.

Even when I was the primary party pushing things forward, she was always the one to make the first move.

Backstage when she kissed me. Against the side of the truck after she told me to kiss her again.

In each instance, Myra was the initiator.

I was just the one who followed through.

“I’m at your disposal.” My dick is coming alive, and there’s no way for me to hide it. Not standing here in nothing but my underwear. But there’s no going back now. “Any time. Any place. I’m more than happy to provide any service you require.”

“Oh.” The tip of Myra’s tongue skims across her lower lip and my dick flexes as my eyes track the slow path it makes across her plush, pink skin.

I don’t think she understands how fucking desperate I am to touch her.

Honestly, I didn't feel the full force of it until tonight when she kissed me.

I worked so hard—stayed away so long—to tamp it all down.

But once I felt her soft lips against mine, she sealed her own fate.

There would be no going back. No slowing the train barreling down the tracks. I tried, and I failed.

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I genuinely wanted to take a step back after our kiss backstage. I had good reasons for it. She'd been drinking—I could taste the bourbon on her tongue. She'd also just performed for the first time in front of a crowd, and that had her in a euphoric frame of mind.

But both the alcohol and the euphoria had worn off by the time she told me no man had ever gotten her off, and that knowledge was more than I'm capable of corralling.

I thought maybe being the first man to watch her come undone would satisfy me. At least for a little while.

Guess not.

"I..." Myra pulls in a quick breath before admitting, "I usually use it every morning before I get out of bed."

Fuck . Every damn morning? I was just hoping for once a week, but once a day? I've died and for sure gone to heaven. In spite of all the shit I've done in my life.

"Look at the clock, Myra." I move closer as she turns to glance over one shoulder, bringing my hands to her hips. "Tell me what time it is."

She sways a little in my hold. "It's four o'clock."

"That sounds like morning to me." I wrap one arm around her back. "The only problem is, you're already out of bed, so we might have to bend the rules a little bit."

Myra's hands slide up, coming to grip my biceps. "I'm okay with bending the rules."

"That's good, because I think we might be doing a lot of that in the very near future." I slide the hand still at her hip across her belly, tracing the waistband of her pajama pants. "But if you ever decide you're done, you just say the word and everything stops. Always."

I don't know the full specifics of what happened to Myra during her marriage—it's probably best if it stays that way—but I know enough to assume she's been touched against her will. I want her to know that will never happen with me.

I tease the tip of my nose against hers. "Can I touch you now?"

Myra's head barely moves in a nod. "Okay."

I groan at her quick agreement. "Thank fuck."

Stepping in, bringing my body flush against hers, I work my hand under the elastic and into the soft cotton of her panties. I'm not expecting her to be as wet as she is, and the slickness of her hot flesh under my fingers has me groaning again. "You're soaked for me, Sweetheart."

Myra whimpers as I tease alongside the hard nub of her clit, her fingers digging into my skin as her legs wobble.

"I've got you." I tighten the arm I have around her back, supporting her weight as I gently strum the tiny bit of flesh I plan to use to my full and complete advantage anytime she lets me.

"I won't let you fall." I rest my forehead against hers, breathing in the air from her lungs as I soak up the feel of her against me.

The scent of her skin. The sounds she makes.

I want to stretch the moment out. Bring her to the edge over and over. When I finally let her fall, I plan to leave her wrung out and spent. But as I'm not sure she's ready for that yet, I let her move as fast as she wants. Let her set the pace.

And my Myra is a bit of a speed demon.

Before I'm ready, she cries out, body shuddering against me as she comes for me for the second time.

When she slumps against me, pride swells my chest. This woman has every reason not to trust men. Not to put her safety and well-being in their hands. But she trusted me when I told her I wouldn't let her fall. Believed the promise I made her without question or concern.

And it might be the best fucking thing that's ever happened to me.

Carefully, I shift her toward the bed, laying her onto the mattress as she pulls in deep gulps of air, her flushed cheeks puffing just a little as she blows them back out.

After lifting her feet into place, I lean down and press a kiss to the slightly sweaty skin of her forehead.

"Don't move." I straighten, giving her a stern look.

"And I expect you to listen this time." Taking in the boneless state of her, I don't imagine I've got anything to worry about, but I'm making a point.

I appreciate her trying to come to my rescue earlier, but if it had been an actual intruder, and she'd gotten hurt, I would have never forgiven myself.

Myra blinks up at me, the lift of her lids slow, expression dazed. “Kay.”

Satisfied she’s going to listen, I duck into the bathroom, retrieving two washcloths from under the sink and soaking one with warm water. After wringing it out, I carry both the damp rag and the dry one out to where Myra’s still splayed across the blankets.

Her eyes follow my movements, brows pinching together. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning up the mess I made.” I hook a finger under the waistband of her pants, also catching her panties in the process, and hold the layers away from her body.

“I want you to be comfortable while you sleep.” I carefully work the warm cloth between her thighs, gently swiping away the slickness collected there before patting it dry.

After righting her pajamas, I straighten, pulling the covers over her before tossing both rags into the hamper and sliding into bed beside her.

This time I don’t hesitate or worry about what I should or shouldn’t do.

I curl onto my side and pull her body close to mine, resting my head on the pillow as the soft strands of her blonde hair tickle my face.

“Now go to sleep. I’m pretty sure the shit’s going to hit the fan when I tell everyone Butch showed up, and we’re going to need our rest to deal with it.”

MYRA

“He’s not over there. Doesn’t look like he even went in that place.

” Christian looks more pissed off than I’ve ever seen him as he strides into the kitchen of his home with Simon and Tate at his side.

He goes straight to where Lydia sits beside me on one of the stools along the island and pulls her close, like he needs reassurance she’s safe.

I sort of thought Simon’s reaction to Butch being in my house was a little over the top. Based on Christian’s scowl and Tate’s clenched jaw, maybe it wasn’t.

And Lydia seems as confused by that as I am.

She peers up at her husband, pale brows pinched together, as his hand spreads across her expanded belly. “Did something happen? I don’t get why you guys are so upset about Butch being here.”

A series of shifty looks move between the three men, confirming my sister’s voiced suspicion. Something has most certainly happened.

My eyes go to Simon as I sit a little straighter in my seat. “What?” I ask him directly. “What did he do?”

“You mean besides breaking into your house in the middle of the night?” Simon’s nostrils flare as he tips his head in a barely perceptible nod. “Yeah. He did

something.”

“We think he did something,” Christian elaborates, his tone carrying a hint of warning. Like even though he’s pissed at Butch, he still doesn’t want anyone saying something bad about him.

And that’s going to make it hard for me to get the full story out of Simon with Christian around.

“We should go.” I tip back the last of the coffee Lydia made me when Simon and I first showed up here after Christian called way too early, waking us up.

I was sleeping real freaking great too.

Simon deftly takes the empty coffee cup from my hand, rinsing it in the sink before racking it into the dishwasher. Once he’s cleaned up my mess, he tips his head to the back door. “After you.”

I don’t look at my sister as I walk across the kitchen. I can feel her eyes on me, and I know she’s wondering what in the hell just happened. Why Simon took care of me the way he did.

And I’m not quite ready to fess up to anything just yet. I haven’t wrapped my own head around what it is and what it might be. The last thing I want is my sister grilling me about it and demanding answers I can’t give her.

I pull the door open and step out, flashing a quick smile at the group still inside before waving and descending the steps. Simon follows behind me, waiting until we’re out of sight before resting one palm on my back.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I just knew Christian wasn’t going to tell the whole truth with my sister there, and it was annoying me.” I sigh. “I get it. Lydia’s ten years pregnant and he doesn’t want to stress her out. But I’m not, and I want to know what the fuck’s going on.”

Simon’s lips twitch. “Shocker.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Smart-ass.”

Simon chuckles, the hand at my back wrapping around my waist as we cross the uneven terrain of Piper and Tate’s backyard.

“It’s not a bad thing.” His finger’s flex against my hip.

“You spent a long time being in the dark about what was going on in your own life. It’s not surprising you’d want to know everything happening now. ”

I gaze up at Simon, trusting him to guide me home safely. I knew he’d tell me what was going on, but I didn’t expect him to understand my reasons for wanting to know quite so well. “I’m not trying to be difficult.”

Simon’s head snaps my way, his brows low. “Nothing about you is difficult, Myra.” His hold on me tightens. “Wanting to be informed about things that affect your life is perfectly fucking normal.”

His fierce defense of my motives has a smile sliding onto my face. “I’m not sure I’d call myself perfectly normal.”

Normal was never an option for me, and I used to hate it. When I came to Memphis, normal was all I wanted. But as time went on, I fell shorter and shorter of normalcy. It made me feel like I was failing. Like once again I was in a place I didn’t belong.

Like I was never going to fit in anywhere in this world.

I'm not sweet and kind and warm like Lydia. I'm not friendly and outgoing like Felicity. I'm not even mouthy and full of fire like Piper.

I'm standoffish. I'm untrusting. I'm skittish and dry. Not most people's idea of a great time.

"Normal's relative." Simon steps behind me, his free hand bracketing the other side of my hips as he keeps me moving, directing me up the stairs leading to my house. "So is perfect."

I scale the steps, mentally chewing on his words.

He makes it sound so easy to come to terms with the reality I've been trying to change. The state of being I thought was eluding me.

It's been holding me back. Keeping me from chasing down all the things I want—finishing my house. Singing.

Becoming a mom.

But if he's right, and perfectly normal isn't the goal, then what's stopping me from reaching out and grabbing all those things?

Not much.

Technically, I've already started. Thanks to Simon, my house is further along than it would have been if it had been left to me to make additional progress on it.

Since my vibrator got boring, I was forced to tackle singing.

I've even scaled the wall blocking me from seeking out the physical connection I've been craving.

That only leaves me with one goal left. Probably the most important one of all.

I don't dig into it too much though, because as soon as we step in my house, Simon starts explaining what he couldn't with Lydia around.

"Back when Christian, Tate, and I were younger, we did some really bad shit." He bluntly lays out the truth without trying to hide from it.

"All of us did. Cody. Levi. Shawn. Damien and Niko and Evan. Everyone was a part of what we were into." He goes to the fridge and starts pulling out items, lining them down the counter.

"For the most part, we've stopped. There've been a few hiccups here and there, but all in all, we're staying on the right side of the law. "

"Hiccups?" I step to the island, resting my hands on the counter as I watch his movements, managing to follow the conversation even though my brain is somewhere else. "What kind of hiccups?"

"Christian killed someone we used to deal with because the guy threatened Lydia." Simon's eyes lift to me. "Our extractions occasionally require more force than yours did, so sometimes we still dabble in assault and breaking and entering."

"I figured out the breaking and entering part when Butch came into my house last night." I tap one finger against the counter, taking in the competent way Simon puts together our breakfast. "What does all that have to do with why everyone is pissed at Butch?"

After cracking a few eggs into a bowl, Simon begins whipping them up.

“Butch was the last one to join our ranks. By then, we were pretty much at our worst, and he jumped in with both feet. Took off running like he’d been doing that kind of shit forever.

” Simon frowns down at the eggs. “But when we stopped, everyone assumed he would stop too.”

“But he didn’t stop.” It’s a statement, not a question. Because since he broke into my house last night, Butch obviously didn’t stop.

“That’s part of what we’re pissed about.

” Simon pours the eggs into a nonstick pan.

“No one knows what the fuck Butch has been doing. When we got on the straight and narrow, he became a ghost. We don’t know where he lives.

What he’s doing. Who he’s associating with. It’s like he was fucking done with us.”

I tip my head, a little confused. “But I’ve met Butch, so he was still around sometimes.” Not a lot, granted, but he didn’t go totally AWOL.

“He would show up every now and then, but never for long, and then he would disappear.” Simon pivots from the stove to drop a few pieces of bread into the toaster. “We asked around, trying to figure out if he was okay, but nobody seemed to know shit about him.”

I circle the island, collecting the jar of strawberry jelly and butter Simon stocked in my fridge. “You mean no one else knew where he was either?”

Simon shakes his head. “No. I mean no one had ever fucking heard of him.” There’s a sharp edge to his tone. Like Butch’s unknownness is the smoking gun of guilt.

But I’m not so sure.

“Nobody knows who I am.” I twist the lid off the jelly. “I was completely unknown by anyone outside of my immediate family for my whole life.”

“That’s different. People should have known who Butch was.” Simon stirs the eggs. “Just one person would have been enough, but the only way people had heard of him was his affiliation with us. It was like his existence stopped outside of our circle.”

I pinch my lower lip between my teeth, nibbling on it as I pull the toasted bread free and slather on a layer of butter. “So what do you think that means?”

I’ve learned a lot in the past year, but there’s still so much I don’t know or understand about this world. I’m clearly missing the knowledge required to understand why Christian, Simon, and everyone else in their family would be upset over what’s going on with Butch.

Well... outside of him breaking into my house, anyway. I understand why everyone’s upset about that. He didn’t break anything though, and he didn’t intend me any harm when he entered my property, so I’m somewhat indifferent about the whole breaking and entering thing.

I would like to know if it was him watching from the treeline when Simon and I?—

Stabbing a knife into the jiggly jelly, I scoop out a healthy dose, trying to calm the heat racing through my veins at the memory—memories—of what Simon and I have done. I’m so busy redirecting my brain, it startles me when he starts talking again, and I nearly fumble everything I’m holding.

“For a while, we thought he’d changed sides.” Simon shrugs, but the emotion—the betrayal—in his voice contrasts the gesture. “That he was happy living the way we had been and wanted to continue, so he found a new group to join.”

I turn to Simon, balancing a slice of toast on my palm as I smooth around the thick layer of processed strawberry spread I’ve added. “By group , do you mean gang?” A whole lot of information clicks together and has my brows climbing up my forehead. “ Were you and your brothers a gang ?”

His eyes drift off to one side as he considers the question. “I’m sure some people would probably say yes.”

That’s cool, but I’m not super interested in some people. I’m interested in him. “What would you say?”

“I would say, probably.” His eyes come my way. “I’ve never claimed to be an upstanding citizen, My. I’ve done a lot of bad shit in my life.”

I don’t like the way he’s talking about himself. “But you’ve done a lot of good shit, too.”

He saved me, and countless other women. Pulled us from places where we were in danger. Being abused and manipulated. Often by men who did claim to be upstanding citizens.

“I’ve done some good shit.” Simon lifts the pan off the burner and slides half the eggs onto each of the plates he laid out. “But nowhere near enough to undo all the bad I’ve put into the universe.”

I try to imagine the man taking such good care of me doing bad things.

I can't.

"Bad is relative." I turn the words he offered me earlier back his way.

"So is good." I slide the pieces of toast I topped onto the plates.

"I know a lot of men who think they've done nothing but good in their life.

" I meet Simon's gaze. "And I'm willing to bet they've done more bad than you and your brothers could ever dream of. "

I've always known good and bad weren't black and white. That the people who are the loudest about their goodness are often the worst. The craziest part is they don't see it. They're so blinded by judgment and righteousness, the only view they have is of their own pious perfection.

Simon's dark gaze moves over me. "I think you greatly underestimate the things I've done."

Maybe I do. Maybe the sheltered life I've lived has made it difficult for me to really grasp what he's trying to tell me.

But I don't think so. I don't need a list of his indiscretions to know Simon's wrong.

He's not bad. Probably never was.

I know he likely came from the same fucked-up sort of childhood as everyone else on this block. For most of them—possibly all—survival was their only goal, and they'd attain it by any means necessary.

I would have too.

The night Lydia brought Simon, Christian, and Tate to save me, I was prepared to end a life.

I was going to do whatever it took to survive.

If that meant taking out my ex-husband or father, that's what I would have done.

At least tried to do. I might not have been successful, but I was going to give it one hell of a go.

So, while I might not get the full scope of Simon's past, I do understand it better than he thinks I do.

And that's why I step in close, wrapping my arms around his waist and holding tight. Offering reassurance. Acceptance.

Simon stiffens for just a second—probably from surprise—then his arms come around me, warm and strong and solid. I turn my head, resting my ear against his chest as I close my eyes.

He's such a good man, and he doesn't even know it. He's kind and caring and warm and giving. He talks about how he feels and listens when I do the same.

I wish I knew the name of the woman who hurt him. She was an idiot to give him up. He would have been so good to her. He loved her son deeply. Probably still does. The pain on his face was clear when he spoke about the little boy. The longing. The regret. He would have been such a good dad.

My eyes open.

Simon would be an amazing dad . The kind who would always put his kids first. The

kind who would work hard to give them a good life, both in material aspects and emotional ones.

The kind I want my own children to have.

I thought having a baby was out of reach for me, but maybe it's not. Maybe Simon would be interested in an arrangement that could benefit both of us.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see Simon's lonely. The longing in his eyes when he watches his brothers with their kids is obvious. He thinks no one notices how he tracks Christian's movements when he spreads his hand over Lydia's belly.

But I do. And I could give him what he's wanting. What he thought he lost.

I can put what he thinks is out of reach close enough he can grab it with both hands.

SIMON

I turn away from my own task to watch Myra working on hers. She's been really fucking quiet all damn day. Even when we stopped for lunch, conversation was limited, and I'm not sure what to make of it. She's not normally a super talkative person, but this goes beyond that.

And it's starting to get to me.

"How's it going?" I check on her for the hundredth time, hoping she'll clue me in on what has her so quiet today. My mind has been running through the possibilities for hours, and it won't be long before I start trying to fix imagined problems.

Starting with hunting Butch down and kicking his ass.

Myra didn't seem too affected by his intrusion last night, but maybe now that it's started to sink in, she's starting to feel violated. As if the safety she finally found was nothing more than a smoke screen of wishful thinking.

If that's the case, that bastard better run when he sees me coming.

Myra uses the scraper I gave her to smear a thin layer of drywall compound over one of the many screw holes embedded into the wall of her future family room. "It's not the least fun I've ever had." She gives me a hint of a smile as a blush tints her cheeks. "But it's also not the most fun either."

Fucking hell.

I clear my throat, doing my best to pretend I don't know what she's thinking about right now. Pretend I'm not thinking about the same thing. That I'm not considering how I might be able to convince her to let me take her upstairs and see how far that blush reaches.

Refocusing on the task we've been working on most of the day, I settle back into the rhythm, hoping this conversation lasts, even if it's already got me trying to work with a half-hard dick.

"I know it's not the most exciting way to spend a Sunday afternoon, but it'll be worth it when we have somewhere to hang out and relax. "

And I need us to have somewhere to hang out besides her bedroom, because I already know I can't be trusted lying next to Myra.

If Christian hadn't dragged us out of bed and straight to his house, I'm not sure how our morning would have played out.

Myra might be okay letting me touch her—letting me please her—but I doubt she's as prepared to jump all-in as I am.

I also doubt my ability to stay the course when she's warm and willing under me. I don't want to influence any decision she makes, and if I'm not careful, I'll try.

"I know. And that's the only thing keeping me going right now, because this is so boring." Myra returns her focus to the line of screw holes in front of her. "I can't believe you think this is better than spending a month off relaxing."

She's not the first person to question my need for accomplishment. But she might be the first person I want to explain it to.

Moving to the seam closest to her, I put down a line of compound as I lay out the circumstances of my unfortunate upbringing.

“I don’t like sitting around. Don’t like feeling lazy.

” Never taking my eyes off my task, I carefully layer the paper strip of tape on top of the compound, and using my spatula to keep it in place as I work my way down the wall, I offer her the quick and dirty reality.

“I grew up with parents who were neglectful at best and abusive at worst. They drank. Partied. Did drugs of all sorts. And left me to fend for myself.”

I don’t revisit that time often. Not because it’s too painful, but because it doesn’t matter to me so much anymore. The days of them dictating my choices and actions are long gone.

With one exception.

“My mom pretty much ignored me, but my dad was just a mean piece of shit.” Tearing the paper at the bottom of the wall, I hook the roll to my toolbelt and move on to smoothing another layer of compound on top.

“As I got older, it drove him nuts to think I might be better than he was. That I would succeed where he failed. So he cut me down at every opportunity. Tried to make me think I’d never amount to anything. ”

Myra has stopped what she’s doing, and her attention is fully on me now. Listening intently as I go on.

“But even as a kid, I knew I didn’t want to be anything like him.

He was a lazy bastard who expected my mom to work for the money to feed their habits, so the second I could start making money, I did.

” I give her a sidelong glance. “Granted, it wasn’t always the most legitimate income.

But at that point in my life, I didn’t know there were other options out there.

” I smooth down the line of compound, widening it enough so the seam will be invisible.

“I wasn’t one of those kids who was raised believing he could be whatever he wanted to be.

I didn’t hear how I should be a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant.

I honestly thought the best I could do was graduate high school and hustle my way through life. ”

No one came to my graduation, but it was still one of the proudest moments of my life. Thanks to the hell I was living in, my GPA was barely above the threshold required, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was the diploma in my hand.

“By then I’d already met Tate and Christian, and we were doing our thing. I’d left my house the second I could get away and was just doing everything I could to figure out how to beat my old man at life.”

Myra’s full lips press into a frown. “It doesn’t sound like that was very difficult.”

I chuckle, shaking my head as I finish up the seam I’m working on. “It wasn’t. But when I got there, I started to look around and see how much was still wrong with where I was.”

I was one of the first to point out to my brothers that what we were doing was wrong. The first to make noise about changing who we were. The first to figure out a legitimate way to make the kind of money we all hoped for.

“I did some research. Figured out what else I could do. That led to me working for a guy who owned a construction company. I didn’t hate it, but after a couple years, I realized construction wasn’t how I wanted to spend all my days, and I decided to try out some other options.

Shawn taught me how to weld, and the rest is history. ”

I move to the next seam and start filling it in. “I liked the work, and it gave me the opportunity to see all the places I’d never been before.”

Myra’s head tips, watching me as she asks, “I thought you left because of what happened with your ex?”

“At the beginning, what happened with Lenore was the main reason, yes. But as time went on, I started to enjoy the travel. Getting to explore new places and meet new people.” Deep down, I hoped eventually I’d find the person I was looking for in one of the cities I went to.

Now I’m wondering if I traveled all those miles just to circle back to where I started.

Myra’s eyes linger on me a few seconds before she faces the wall and slowly returns to scraping across screw holes. “Where are you going next?”

“Florida.” I’m normally champing at the bit to get out of town. This time? The very thought of leaving turns my stomach. “I’ve been contracted to help repair a bridge down there.”

Myra nods. “Will you be gone for a long time?”

“Hopefully not. They’re prepping everything now, so I should be able to get there, do my part, and get out.” The sound of my blade echoes through the space as I slide it down the wall a little harder than I need to.

Myra falls quiet, and again I’m left wondering what she’s thinking. What’s percolating around that pretty head of hers. I keep working, trying to keep myself from digging into that unknown. It’s not in my nature, though. If she’s upset, I want to fix it.

It’s not long before I’m turning to her again, intending to get to the bottom of what’s got her so quiet today. But I don’t get the chance, because the alarm on my phone starts going off, signaling the end of our time alone together.

Sunday evenings in town are always a conflicting time for me, but this one has me struggling even more than usual.

I don’t want to go. Not only because the sight of all the happy families digs my own lacks deeper, but also because I’ve got to make it seem like the connection Myra and I are building doesn’t exist.

I don’t know how Chrisitan and Lydia will react when they find out, and the tether between us might still be too new—too fragile—to withstand their disapproval. It might push Myra away from me, and I’m not sure how I’d react to that.

Likely, not well.

Myra presses her lips together, watching as I scrape our extra mud back into the bucket. Once the lid is securely in place, I rinse our tools, collect the case of beer we’re taking with us, and lead Myra out her front door into the warm afternoon sun

streaking across her front porch.

Fall is definitely here, but there are still moments of warmth throughout the day, and the nights aren't yet fully cool. It won't be long before the chill is in full swing, but for now the temperature is pretty fucking tolerable.

Still. It might be cooler when we leave the firehouse, so I pause, setting down the beer.

"Hang tight. I'll be right back." I race up the stairs, taking them two at a time so I don't leave Myra waiting any longer than I have to.

After grabbing the flannel I brought over last night, I toss it over one shoulder and rush back out onto the porch.

Myra angles a brow at me, her eyes moving to the flannel. "Worried you'll get cold?"

"No." Resting my palm on Myra's back, I keep her at my side as we cross the road and follow the low wall leading to the firehouse. "I'm worried you might."

As uneasy as I am about the evening ahead of us, I can't deny a part of me is glad I won't be alone tonight. Not the way I normally would be. Myra's not mine, but she is at my side as we go, and she'll be at my side when we leave. And while it might not be all I want, it's also not nothing.

I still brace as we reach the biggest building on the street, preparing myself for the sting it will bring.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am

I lived in the firehouse off and on over the years, even after Cody and Felicity first took it over. Hope and Niko called it home for a little while, but ultimately Felicity and Cody are the ones who ended up there permanently.

Because they're the ones who won't stop breeding.

They're also—as much as I hate to admit it—a big part of the reason I continued skipping town as much as I could. I'm happy for my brother. Glad he's got the dream we all chased.

But fuck if it's not hard to see when it's so far from my grasp.

Opening the door, I let Myra go inside ahead of me, but I stick close as she moves into the large open area.

The second I cross the threshold, the volume amps up exponentially.

It's fucking chaos inside, with kids running around like maniacs while their parents attempt to keep them somewhat under control.

Little squealing voices bounce off the walls and high ceilings, with the noise of Levi cooking and Jill setting up adding to the assault.

I've been alone a long time, and I wish the scene before me was enough to make me appreciate my status and lifestyle.

It's not. It only amplifies my loneliness.

These nights have been the worst kind of torture for me, so I usually go out of my way to miss them.

To make sure I leave town before I have to face the reminder of all I don't have.

Myra's eyes move over the crowd, taking it all in as her steps slow to a stop.

At first I think she's regretting her decision to come here, but then I see the toddler crawling across the floor in front of her.

Slowly, Myra crouches down, scooping up Damien and Josie's little boy.

She cradles him close and I can't tear my eyes off her.

She looks so natural holding him. So happy.

"Hey, man." Evan slaps me on the shoulder, dragging my attention away from the only spot it wants to be. "How's it going?"

Evan is the only one of my brothers—besides Butch and me—who doesn't live here on the block. He and his wife Kerri live out in the suburbs with Kerri's mom, Jill, but they're here every Sunday night for family dinner.

"Good." I lean in for a back-slapping hug, eyes darting to Myra holding the little boy before going back to the man in front of me. "What about you guys?"

"We're awesome." Evan was the first of us to settle down, and it still looks as good on him as it did all those years ago. "Jill said you turned on the power in the house at the end of the road. You thinking about moving back full-time?"

I can feel Myra's eyes on me and it has me admitting something I've been tossing

around since she fell into my life. “Maybe. I’ve got a job scheduled in Florida I’ve got to take care of, but who knows what’ll happen after that.”

Evan’s brows lift, his smile widening. “That’s fucking great to hear.

” He slaps me on the back again as people start working their way toward the large open kitchen.

“You know Jill’s got that house earmarked for you.

” His smile slips a little. “And it doesn’t seem like Butch is going to be interested in it, so you won’t have any competition. ”

I school my features when Evan brings Butch up.

Christian, Tate, and I decided not to share his unexpected appearance with everyone else until we know what’s going on.

Butch is a touchy fucking subject—especially for Evan—and there’s no reason to dredge up all those emotions—and suspicions—if he’s going to disappear again.

And since he never went into the house across from Myra’s, it seems like he might.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I inadvertently look for Myra again, the need to make sure she’s okay taking precedence over just about everything.

And while she’s fine, I might not be. Because now she’s holding Piper and Tate’s baby. The bliss on her face is unmissable, and it builds an ache in my chest. I want to make her that happy. I want to give her whatever will make her feel like that every day.

“Come get something to eat.” Jill’s voice cuts through the noise and my own thoughts.

The parents of the group migrate to the large island covered in pasta, salad, and garlic bread, helping little hands fill plates. Using their shift as an excuse to get out of the way, I deposit the beer in the fridge and then go in search of Myra.

Again, she’s got a baby—this time Felicity and Cody’s newest. And again, the happiness on her face is unlike I’ve ever seen it. She turns her smile my way as I approach. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I reach out to smooth one finger over the baby’s soft head. “You on babysitting duty?”

Myra’s eyes move over my face. “For now.”

I step closer, wanting more of this moment. To pretend—just for a second—this isn’t Cody’s baby. That I finally have everything I’ve always wanted.

And I want Myra.

“Thank you so much.” Felicity slices the moment in half as she reaches out to scoop away the baby. “I had to pee so bad.”

Myra’s smile slips a little. “Any time.”

“You’re an angel.” Felicity gives Myra a quick kiss on the cheek before joining Cody and their other kids at the huge table running up one side of the space.

Myra crosses her now empty arms over her chest, a hint of sadness pinching her expression. I hate it, because I know exactly how she feels.

Even if you don't grieve the loss of a relationship, you can still miss parts of it. The loss of what might have been. And I think that's what Myra's feeling right now. The loss of what she could have had if things had been different.

I know exactly how she feels.

"Come on." I press a hand to her back. "Let's go get you some food."

The rest of the evening is a blur of eating, catching up, and entertaining kids. By the time it's wrapping up, I'm more than ready to have Myra to myself again, so I don't waste any time getting her out the door and into the dark quiet of the evening.

I wait until we're outside before wrapping the flannel I brought around her shoulders. She might not need it, but I like the sight of her wearing something that's mine. It shows who's taking care of her. Who makes sure she's warm and safe.

Makes it look like she's mine.

As I lead her across the street, Myra peeks over one shoulder before looking up at me, voice low. "You guys didn't tell everyone else Butch broke in." Her lips press together. "Or that he asked about the house across the street."

I shake my head. "We decided there was too much we didn't know. Something's going on with him, and it doesn't feel right giving him up right now. We've done a lot wrong, and I can't expect forgiveness if we won't give it to him."

Myra continues watching me instead of where we're going, letting me guide her along.

"I know you think you've still got a lot to make up for, but I don't think you do."

” She picks her way up the steps, one hand holding my T-shirt for added support as we go.

“You’re one of the best men I’ve ever met. ”

Her compliment makes me pause. “Is that what you were so busy thinking about while you were filling all those screw holes?”

“No.” Myra shakes her head, stopping on the stoop of her house to turn to me. Her blue eyes are wide as they meet mine. She lifts her chin a little, standing taller as she says, “I was thinking about how we should have a baby together.”

MYRA

I've heard how Simon talks about the little boy he once took care of like his own, and I just witnessed firsthand the way he looks at all the babies and kids filling the firehouse. I saw how he focused on them. The way his eyes lingered over the dads playing with their kids.

I know he wants that too.

Which is why I'm sort of surprised he doesn't immediately jump on my suggestion.

"I think I'm going to need you to repeat that." Simon says the words slowly. Like he's trying to make sense of mine and it's inhibiting his ability to form his own.

But I feel like I was pretty clear.

"We should have a baby together." I decide to explain a little more this round. "I want to be a mom. It's pretty obvious you want to be a dad. Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

I've been thinking about it all day, and it just makes sense. We make a good team. Between my house project and the way we tag-teamed Butch last night, it's obvious we work well together. Isn't that what having a kid is? Work?

Simon must not be following, because he still doesn't react the way I'm expecting.

His eyes barely narrow on me. "You're proposing we make a baby?" His head barely

cocks. “Together?”

I nod as a spear of heat stabs through my belly, shooting like a lightning bolt straight to my clit. Every inch of me throbs at the deepness of his voice. The low way he says together .

Because now all I’m thinking about is what we’d have to do— together —to fulfill my suggestion.

And maybe I thought about that all day too.

I’m not sure where I stand on a relationship, but I do know beyond a shadow of a doubt I want to be a mom. I thought it might be another dream lost to me, but maybe it doesn’t have to be.

Maybe Simon and I can make each other’s dreams come true.

He’s already pushed me into tackling one of the main issues I’ve been avoiding—my house.

Simon’s well into finishing off the main part of my first floor, and has plans to take care of the remaining half bath and dining room.

I’m sure it wouldn’t be a tough sell to get him to help me with the upstairs.

Honestly, all we’d need would be flooring and to finish one of the other bedrooms. The rest could wait until our baby was on the move.

Our baby.

I press a hand to my stomach, trying to soothe the butterflies that only seem to take

flight when Simon's around.

The motion drags his dark gaze down my front to rest on where my hand is spread across my belly. Right where a baby would grow. He stares, hard, as he steps closer, closing the gap between us.

“Why do you want to have a baby with me, My?” His question is soft and rumbling between us, and I feel it all the way to my toes.

“Lots of reasons.” I lick my lips, trying to find a little moisture in my suddenly dry mouth.

I thought I was prepared for this conversation, but it's not going the way I expected.

I foolishly believed Simon would just agree.

I wasn't expecting questions. Didn't think I'd have to dig into—admit—the bits and pieces of the equation I've been holding close.

So close I won't notice they're there.

“Give them to me.” His tone is gentle and demanding at the same time. A contradiction that he embodies perfectly.

“Well...” There are so many things I've never experienced, many of them centered around what Simon's asking of me now—communication.

I don't have much practice at it since, until recently, my thoughts and opinions were irrelevant and unwanted.

But I want to do my best for him. Show him I can be as good of a partner in this

venture as I know he will be.

“You’re kind and caring.” It’s not lost on me that I’m about to show just how much attention I’ve been paying to him, but I’ve already started, so I continue on. “Thoughtful and a good listener.” Pressing my lips together, I switch gears. “You’re a hard worker and motivated and determined.”

I thought those last few would sound better. Less like a list I might have for a romantic interest and more like the criteria I have for a potential father to my children. It still comes out feeling oddly personal. But picking a parenting partner should be personal, right?

Simon is silent for a very long time, and the excitement I felt over what I thought would be an easy yes starts to dissipate, leaving an aching sadness and dread in its wake.

He’s going to say no. Shut me down. Close off the only viable pathway I see to motherhood.

And now I’ve made it weird between us. Strange enough he might not even want to be my friend anymore, let alone the father of my children.

Shit.

I start to shrink, anticipating the rejection I know is coming. Preparing to be told—yet again—how foolish I am. How silly and stupid I can be.

I never wanted to hear those things again, and expecting them to come from Simon makes the dread digging through my guts even worse.

“It was a stupid idea. Pretend I never brought it up.” I can’t look at him anymore.

Can't believe I came all this way—figuratively and literally—to end up right back where I started.

Asking a man for what I want.

Dropping my eyes, I start to take a step back, needing space.

But my body barely shifts before a wide palm spreads across my spine, stopping my retreat. Simon's free hand comes up to pinch my chin, his touch firm but careful as he tips my head back until our eyes meet again.

"It's not a stupid idea, My." The pressure on my back increases, bringing my body closer to his. "It's just a lot to take in." His thumb slides across my skin, smoothing over the spot just beneath my lower lip. "And I want to be sure you understand what you're asking me."

"I'm asking you to have a baby with me." I thought I made that pretty clear.

"You're asking me to fuck you." Simon's words are blunt.

And they stoke the flames doused by my worry he was about to shut me down. "That would probably be part of the equation."

"That might be all of the equation." Simon's thumb continues tracing along my lower lip. "There's no guarantees, My. We could do everything right and still might not get what you're wanting out of this."

"I know." Of course I know it's possible I might not get pregnant. I didn't get pregnant the whole time I was married, so I recognize it might not be an easy or simple process. "But we could still try."

Do I sound desperate? I think I sound a little desperate. And I'm not sure which part of the conversation is causing it.

I understand there's no guarantees. That I might never get pregnant. But having sex with Simon was a given in my mind. After our two heated interactions, I assumed the physicality would be the least of the things making him pause.

After a few of the longest seconds of my life, Simon pulls in a breath and says the single word I've been waiting for. "Okay."

A mixture of excitement and anticipation melts through me. "Okay." I breathe out the word as a smile curves my lips.

But my smile slips when Simon keeps talking.

"But I have conditions."

"Oh." Another thing I wasn't expecting. "What are they?"

Simon's hand finally moves away from my chin. He holds it to the side, lifting one finger. "I'm not interested in clinical sex. If you think I'm just gonna stick it in there and get the job done, you need to back out now."

"Umm." I clear my throat, trying to prepare it to form words. "That's not what I thought." I fight for air. "What are your other conditions?"

Simon lifts a second finger. "I want you to spend six months with me before you decide this is really what you want."

"Six months?" I don't mean to shout, but it happens anyway.

Simon continues on like I didn't just interrupt him. The hand on my back comes around to squeeze my hip in a possessive grip. "And I don't just want a baby, My." He leans in to ghost his lips across mine as his third finger lifts. "I want you."

My eyes widen. "Me?"

"That's right." Another slow pass of his lips.

"You. If we're going to do this, I want you to be mine.

"The hand he's been holding up beside us slides into my hair, fingers winding through the strands.

They pull tight, tilting my head back as his mouth coasts along the line of my jaw, sending goosebumps racing along my skin.

He pauses when he reaches my ear, voice low.

"I want all of you, My. Not just your body."

My tongue slides out, tracing across my lips as uncertainty and doubt creep in. It's not that I don't want to make this deal. The problem I'm having is, I'm not sure I can deliver what he's asking for. "I don't know if I have anything else to give you."

"I know, baby." Simon nips at the lobe of my ear. "Just try. Six months. See if this is what you want." His teeth scrape the tender spot where my jaw meets my neck. "See if I'm what you want."

That's not really up for debate. Any woman in her right mind would want Simon. "What if I'm not what you want?"

Simon's hand leaves my hip to palm the curve of my ass, pulling my body against his. Close enough I can't miss the hard—and intimidating—length straining against the front of his jeans. "Does it seem like you're not what I want?"

My eyes dip, head pulling against the grip he has on my hair as I look between our bodies to where he's pressed against me. My gaze stays locked onto the ridge that's surely being amplified by the layer of fabric covering it. It can't be as big as it seems. Hopefully. "I mean as a person."

"That's what the six months is for." Simon leans back, his brows pinching as he takes in my concerned expression. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"I just..." My eyes widen more when his dick seems to get even bigger the longer I stare at it. "Does the six months start now?"

That sounded way more eager than I wanted it to, but there's no taking it back now.

"The six months starts whenever you want it to." Simon's hand flexes on my ass. "However you want it to."

"We should probably figure out if we're compatible before we get too far into this."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am

I neglected to consider a lot of factors when I came up with this proposition, and one of them was the size of Simon's cock. I'm not sure that thing will fit inside me. I'm not sure that thing could fit inside anyone.

Obviously it does, because I doubt he's a virgin.

Thinking of Simon with another woman sends a bitter slice of jealousy cutting through me. Has my hands fisting in his shirt. Especially since I know one of the women he's touched is the one who nearly broke him.

"Why don't we start with something easy?" Simon's hand leaves my hair, sliding down to grip my other ass cheek. "Spend a little time getting to know each other?"

I open my mouth to point out that we already know each other, but a yelp comes out instead as he hefts me up off the ground, the big hands spread across my ass supporting my weight as he starts walking up the stairs.

I hold onto him for dear life—legs at his waist, arms at his neck—because without the truck at my back, I feel unstable and at risk like this. I don't think Simon would drop me...

On purpose.

He might not be the eager beaver I expected, but he does seem interested. So letting me somersault down the stairs seems unlikely.

But still.

He strides straight into my bedroom, but instead of going to the bed, he continues on, steps heavy as he takes us into the attached bathroom.

Leaving the door open, he drops my butt onto the counter between the double sinks.

Once his hold isn't required for my safety, he lets me go and grips the bottom of his shirt, peeling it off over his head.

Bringing me eye to chest with his naked upper half.

I'm not sure what possesses me—probably something delicious and evil—but I lean forward and lick right over one of his nipples.

I've never been sexually forward. I didn't want sex from my husband so I sure as hell wouldn't do anything that might have initiated it.

Plus he would have called me a whore.

I don't have those fears with Simon. He won't demean me or make me feel bad about who I am or what I want. And if I do something he doesn't like, he'll tell me. Nicely.

But Simon definitely likes what I did, because a groan works through his lips as his hands come to grip my thighs, fingers flexing against the extra flesh I've accumulated there since moving to Memphis.

It's another thing I would have been shamed for. Matthias expected me to be thin and pretty and quiet and obliging. Passive and accepting of whatever he wanted.

And when I wasn't, he took what he wanted anyway. By force.

Simon would never.

And that's why my fingers find their way to the front of his pants, in search of the button and zipper holding hostage the part of him I'm both dreading and anticipating.

Based on what I've learned over the past year, Matthias had a small dick. Shocker.

The list of differences between the man in front of me and the one at my back just keep stacking up, and I'm pretty sure this one might end up at the top of the deck.

I finish working the fly of his jeans open and spread the fabric wide, gripping it so I can shove his pants down his hips. It's not an easy task to accomplish from where I'm sitting, so I struggle to do much more than wiggle them around.

Simon presses one hand to my belly, keeping me balanced as he steps back, kicking away his boots before shoving down the jeans I was fighting. Instead of just the layer of denim, everything on his lower half drops, leaving him completely naked.

Holy.

Crap.

"I changed my mind." I lean back, trying to put more distance between me and the monster I've invited into my bed. "Six months won't be enough time to figure out how to get that thing inside me."

"Shhh." Simon steps close again, bringing the ridiculousness between his legs along with him. "Don't think about it."

"How can I not think about it?" I can't peel my eyes away as it sways with his movements. "It's taking up the whole bathroom."

"Eyes up here, My." Simon's finger presses under my chin, urging it up.

My head moves, but my gaze stays locked in place. “How do you even function with that thing in your way?”

Simon chuckles, his free hand coming to lift the weight of one of my boobs. “Do these get in your way?”

“Yup.” I’m still staring. I can’t stop. “All the time.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing they’re so fucking pretty.” He leans close as his thumb teases across my nipple through the fabric of my shirt.

I didn’t think anything could distract me from the heavyweight wiener now resting against my thigh, but Simon’s touch steals my attention within seconds.

“I bet all of you is pretty, isn’t it, My?” Simon palms my breast, his large hand working my soft flesh with expert precision. “Can I see?”

I’ve worked so hard to make my body my own, never thinking I’d share it with anyone again. It’s so different than it was. Thicker. Filled out and fed. Marked with ink and piercings.

And I’m glad.

Because it makes it easier to separate myself from what was so I can leap into what might be .

Pressing my lips together, I smother down the tiny bit of fear trying to keep me from moving forward. I give Simon a small nod as I pull in a deep breath and jump.

“I’ll show you anything you want.”

SIMON

I came into this room with a plan. Plus a few back-up options.

Right now I can't remember a single one of them.

Myra knocked me off the rails with her offer, sending my brain stumbling over the opportunity in front of me as it tries to rebalance and refocus on the goals that drive me.

The intentions that make sure I don't end up in places I don't want to be.

That the past I've worked hard to put behind me doesn't repeat itself.

And since I've already made so many mistakes when it comes to Myra, I give myself just a little space. Enough room to take a few breaths before I do something stupid.

Like fuck her raw right here on the bathroom counter.

Forcing my hands away from her body, I move them to grip the counter at each side of her hips, leaning my weight into the hold as I level my eyes on hers. "Then show me."

It sounds like a dare. Maybe a taunt. It's not. I'm trying to see how comfortable she is with the situation.

With me.

I saw the look on Myra's face when her eyes landed on my dick. Even if she hadn't said a word, I would have known it was more than she was expecting. Myra's not a virgin, but in many ways she's still naive. Innocent enough she can't fathom the kinds of things I want to do to her.

To do with her.

But I want—need—her completely on board. To be nothing less than a completely enthusiastic partner in anything and everything that happens between us. Be it focused on her goals...

Or mine.

Myra takes a deep breath, her chest rising and falling as she inhales and blows it out. Then, without any further hesitation, she grabs the hem of the T-shirt she's been wearing while we work, and drags the worn cotton up her body, revealing the creamy white skin of her belly, inch by inch.

Anticipation makes it impossible to breathe as my eyes track the slow drag of fabric, memorizing every inch she offers. Just in case Myra changes her mind. I would understand if she did, but I also want to take as much of this—of her—with me when I go.

And if Myra hits the brakes on this, I will have to go. There's no way I could see her and not touch her now that I know what it feels like.

Myra's arms lift higher, rising above her head as the inside-out garment passes over her face, collecting the waves of her blonde hair before releasing the strands as it tugs free.

I take a deep breath, similar to the one she took seconds ago, pulling in the warm,

sweet scent of her skin.

Its intensity has ramped up exponentially now that there's less separating her from me, and I want to bury my face between her tits and against her neck, smelling it directly from the source.

Miraculously, I manage to hold my ground and my position. I'm not sure the counter will survive tonight given how tightly I'm squeezing it, but I'm sure Christian can find me a replacement.

Myra rubs her lips together, watching me as I drink her in. "You can touch me if you want."

"It's not about what I want." If it was, my hands would have been all over her months ago.

Myra's throat works on a swallow, her blue eyes holding mine. I'm so focused on the invitation I'm praying will come, that I don't notice one hand has moved behind her back until the slide of her bra straps slipping off her shoulders draws my gaze down.

I barely notice the sensation of the satiny fabric as it skims against my leg on its way to the floor. I'm too fixated on the sight in front of me.

The temptation she's just laid at my feet.

Myra's clothing choices have changed dramatically since she's been in Memphis.

She traded long skirts and flowing shirts for more fitted options that show off the soft curves she's developed since arriving.

I thought I'd seen enough of her to be prepared for this moment.

Obviously not, because being faced with so much smooth skin and soft flesh has me fighting a battle of epic proportions with myself.

And I'm pretty sure I'm losing.

One of Myra's hands plants at the center of my chest, pushing me back, forcing me to take the space I couldn't create on my own. Thank God one of us has the sense to?—

Sliding off the counter, her eyes lock on mine as she unbuttons her jeans and pushes them—and everything beneath them—down, kicking them away once they hit the floor. She lifts her chin, but there's a hint of vulnerability in her eyes.

Like she's daring me to find her lacking... But is also afraid I might.

Like that could ever be a possibility.

I have to clench my fists at my sides to keep from touching her. To keep from accidentally taking more than she's ready to give. That's the opposite of why we're here.

This moment is about calming her fears. Easing her into this deal she wants to make. Giving her a moment to comprehend the full extent of what she's asking for before deciding if it's what she really wants.

I tip my head toward the shower. "Start the water." It takes everything I have to get the words out, so I know they're lacking the gentleness I try to have with her. But I'm teetering on the edge right now, so it's the best I can do.

Instead of being upset by my clipped command, Myra's lips tease into a smile.

"Are you sure you want me in charge of the temperature?" She lifts one hand, resting

it against my chest. “Because I’m not sure your delicate skin can handle that.

” Her fingers trace over my pec with a feathery touch.

“You should probably be the one to turn on the water.”

I get that she’s trying to be considerate right now, but it’s taking every brain cell I possess to rein in the desire to reach for her. And I’m afraid the second I let my hands go somewhere, the only place they are going to end up is on Myra’s bare body.

“I’m sure I’ll survive.”

Myra lifts one shoulder, letting it drop.

“Suit yourself.” The hand on my body drops away, but the path it takes drags right over my nipple, making me hiss.

I’ve never been this over-sensitized, and it’s turning out to be a worst case fucking scenario, because my Myra might be a little bit of a closet temptress.

Instead of going to the faucet like I told her to, she lingers in front of me, blue eyes fixed on the puckered bit of flesh that just caused me to react. If she wasn’t already suspicious of its sensitivity after that sneaky little lick she gave it earlier, Myra has more than figured it out now.

Proving she plans to use it against me, she lifts the hand that just dropped away, tracing the tightened edge with a fingertip.

Eyes lifting to my face, her torturing digit continues its path, circling closer and closer until it reaches the pebbled bud at the center.

I watch in terror as she gives it the tiniest of flicks, eliciting another sharp inhale from me.

When her thumb starts to move, I know I have to regain control of the situation, and I have to do it quickly.

Before she can do any more damage to my already fraying restraint, I hook an arm around her waist, pulling the soft lines of Myra's body to the front of mine as I drag us both into the shower.

Once we're behind the curtain, I twist the faucet, putting my back directly in the line of fire so I'm the one hit by the icy cold spray.

God knows I need it.

Unfortunately, it's no match for the fire licking across my skin and the heat blazing through my veins. The edge to my desire is barely dulled before the feel of Myra's wet body rubbing against mine hones it to a razor's edge.

And I'm pretty sure she's doing it on purpose.

Since the water is mostly warmed up, I grab her by the hips, holding tight so she doesn't slip as I switch our places.

She makes a little bit of a yelping noise when the water hits her, but I think she could use cooling down too.

Otherwise, this whole thing is going to get real out of hand, real fast.

Giving myself something to focus on besides the sight of the water streaming over her bare tits, I reach for her body wash and dump a dose into my palm.

After rubbing both hands together, I quickly and efficiently scrub her down, washing away all the grit from our day of drywall work.

Somehow, I even manage to give her pussy a quick clean without nutting all over her belly.

I'm sure my trophy is in the mail.

Once she's clean, I reach for her head, cradling it in my hands as I tip her hair back into the stream of now hot water.

Myra's eyes slip closed and her lips part as I work my fingers over her scalp, ensuring every strand is saturated.

After gently straightening her head, I pour on a little shampoo and clean the soft blonde mass, taking a little more time now that we both seem to be on our best behavior.

I tend to be a little overbearing—I know that.

I've heard it more than a couple times from women in my past. And while it wasn't what they wanted, it's actually one of the elements that makes Myra so perfect for me.

She's never had anyone take care of her, and even though I can tell she's not sure if she should, she eats the attention up.

Like she is right now.

The expression on her face is pure bliss, but her grip on my forearms is tight. As if she's considering stopping me.

I get it. She was used. Taken advantage of. Expected to cater to her ex-husband in just about every way. It would be a little bit of a mind fuck to be on the receiving end of care, compassion, and catering.

She's going to have to get used to it.

Once I get her hair washed, I rinse it clean and add in a little conditioner. By the time I'm finished, Myra no longer seems ready to stop me. Her movements are slow and languid and relaxed, making me think this familiarization session I started will work out the way I planned after all.

I'm not what she's used to, and I know it's going to take her a little bit to wrap her mind—and her body—around what that's going to mean. Taking a shower together is a safe, expectation free way to accomplish that.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am

I carefully step Myra out of the water. I'm squeezing the excess from her hair when, yet again, Myra takes my plans, and throws them right out the fucking window.

Instead of preparing to get out and dry off, she leans into me, pupils dilated. "Now it's my turn, right?"

"Your turn to, wha—" I don't get the last word out, because her slick palm grips the length of my dick tight.

It's unexpected and encompassing, and I'm forced to slam one hand against the tile wall to maintain my upright position as she gives me a long stroke, fisting tight from root to tip.

As if that isn't bad enough, when she gets to the tip, she gives it a little flick of her wrist, making sure to hit every god damn nerve ending at the head before sliding back to the base.

"My turn to make sure you're all clean." Myra shifts, and the next pass of her palm against my skin is smoother. It pulls a groan from my chest and has my free hand flexing where it grips her hip.

"I'm clean enough." I fight the words out and try to push her away, but my hips chase her grip, making the move pointless.

"Maybe." Myra's tone is soft as she continues pumping my dick, pace and grip steady. "But I feel like I should make sure."

I don't know what in the hell she's doing down there. Whether it's that fucking wrist flip she's got happening, or the way she's using her body wash to rub the scent of her all over my cock, but my balls are pulling tight and my spine's tingling in an embarrassingly short period of time.

"Myra." I drop my forehead to hers. "You've gotta stop, baby."

"I don't think so." Myra doesn't slow down and she doesn't back off. "I want to be sure I get everything."

I'm afraid I know what she means when she says everything . And when she leans in and flicks her tongue against my nipple, the everything she's getting hits the soft curve of her belly, splattering against her smooth skin as I groan against her wet hair, coming for what feels like fucking forever.

When I look down, sucking in as much air as I can get, the sight of my cum on her body makes my dick flex again, painting a final spurt right onto her cute little belly button.

Before my brain has the chance to come back online, my hand is on her skin, spreading my cum over the slick softness of her body.

I know I should stop—I always do—but I don't. I keep going, letting the slickness guide my way as I palm the weight of one breast, thumbing across her nipple.

The glisten of my spend across her is like a fucking drug. One that steals any sense I've ever had and has me acting like a fucking Neanderthal, marking my territory like I have the right.

Reaching behind me, I twist off the water, unable to make myself rinse away the mess I made. I want to know it's there.

I want her to know it's there.

Flinging back the shower curtain, I grab a towel from the rack and wrap it around her body. Once it's tucked into place, I scoop her up, ignoring the water trailing down my body as I carry her into the bedroom.

I doubt she wants our wet bodies soaking into the blankets, so I set her right at the edge, legs dangling over one side.

Then I drop to my knees, finally getting back to the original plan I had.

Myra's brows pinch together as she scoots back, thinking she needs more room to sit. "What are you?—"

I grab the towel and flip it up out of my way before hooking my arms behind her knees to drag her back to the edge.

Back within reach.

"Simon?" Myra seems genuinely confused, and I fucking love it.

And hate it.

I love that it seems like I'll be the first one to do it. Hate that she's never had it before.

She deserves to be worshiped. Adored. Pleasured.

Fucking consumed.

When my mouth fixes to her pussy, she gasps, the sound startled and shocked.

But she's not shocked for long.

"Oh my Go—" The word abruptly cuts off as one hand fumbles around my shoulder, looking for something to hang onto as her head falls back. " Simon ."

Hearing my name fall from her lips as my tongue is against her clit has my dick hardening again.

It's going to have to get over it. I obviously can't act right, so no more coming until I know I won't try to mark every damn inch of her.

And that's probably a good thing, because I'm positive if Myra asked me to fuck her right now, I would. And she's not ready for that. Not only because I know once I fuck her there won't be any going back, but also because she's obviously intimidated by my size.

And I'll be damned if I ever hurt her.

Releasing one leg, I use the shoulder still wedged under her thigh to keep her balanced while I ease my middle and ring fingers into her body. She's so fucking hot. So tight. So soft and so tempting.

The feel of her clenching around my fingers makes me groan as I curve them upward and slowly finger fuck her in time with the flick of my tongue against her clit.

"Ahh—" Myra's hips flex, and I can't tell if she's working with me or against me as she grips the blankets beneath her with one hand and my wet hair with the other.

" Simm-onn ." My name is a wail as her cunt suddenly clamps down, her inner muscles flexing as once again her orgasm hits out of nowhere.

I drag it out, tonguing her clit and stroking into her until she sucks in a sharp breath and shoves my head away.

And I must still be a fucking flat-foot, mouth-breathing caveman, because I pull my fingers from her body and grip her thighs, spreading them wide so I can lick up the drenched line of her slit, claiming every drop.

I created it. It's mine.

Just like she is.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am

MYRA

“Wow.” I walk in the back door of my house, shocked yet again at how much Simon’s accomplished while I was at work.

He’s spent nearly every waking minute here—finishing the drywall, priming and painting, adding trim to the windows and thick crown molding around the ceilings.

His plan for today was to start laying down the reclaimed hardwood Christian took out of an old Victorian some dingbat with more money than sense wanted to modernize.

I assumed it would be a multi-day project, but Simon’s basically got the front room and family room finished.

And it appears a little has even crept into the entryway.

He straightens, looking sexy as hell with sawdust clinging to his jeans, messy hair, and a T-shirt with a hole at the hem. “What do you think? Still like the color? Because we can sand it down and refinish it if you want something different.”

A pang of something vicious stabs through my insides.

A violent penchant I didn’t know I was capable of until I started getting to know Simon and learned about the people who’d hurt him in his past. He’s the most giving, kind, selfless person I think I’ve ever known, and I can imagine how easily he could be taken advantage of. Unappreciated.

Used.

I'd very much like the opportunity to meet with everyone who's done any of those things, starting—and maybe ending—with his dad and Lenore.

"I love it." I'm being truthful, but I'm also hoping to show him my appreciation. It's not one of my strengths. Not because I don't want to do it, but because I haven't had much of an opportunity.

Not until Simon. Now I'm getting a crash course.

"Yeah?" The smile he gives me is wide and has a hopeful edge. "You sure?"

"I'm positive." I slide my bags onto the counter before walking to where he stands so I can look over everything he's accomplished. "I can't believe you got so much done." I smile up at him. "You must have been going non-stop today."

Simon shrugs one shoulder, like it's no big deal that he's been working his ass off on my house every day.

And dishing out mind-numbing orgasms every night.

The man works hard at everything he does. Laying flooring, making us dinner, playing on stage—Simon gives it his all. And that for sure carries over into the bedroom.

At least in all the ways I'm aware of.

Unfortunately, even after sharing my bed for nearly a week, Simon hasn't come close to fully sealing this deal between us. And I've been too chicken to ask for it.

That's likely why I haven't been given the opportunity to take on that monster of his. I appreciate that consent and enthusiastic participation is a non-negotiable for him, but it makes things tricky when you don't really know how to ask for what you want.

When you've been taught that asking makes you bad.

I make a show of looking over everything he's done, taking in the pretty pale blue paint we picked out, and the slightly elevated design of the crown molding.

"It all flows together perfectly." I turn to the man beside me—the one I'm starting to realize might have a little bit of a praise kink he'd likely never admit to.

"I'm surprised Christian doesn't try to get you to come work with him when you're home visiting. "

My compliment has the desired effect, and Simon's shoulders push back just the tiniest bit. "He knows there's no way in hell I would ever work for him."

I laugh as I step a little closer. Normally by Saturday evening, I'm exhausted from working all week.

Knowing I have someone to come home to—even if it's just for a little while—has really taken the edge off that a surprising amount.

"Then I am extra appreciative you're willing to do all this work for me. "

Simon's expression is soft as he looks down at me. One hand comes up to smooth back my work-frizzed hair. "I will do anything you ask me to, My."

I pinch my lower lip between my teeth, hoping he really means that. Because what I want from him is a big ask. I know that.

To be fair, what he wants from me might be even bigger.

And while an actual relationship with Simon was terrifying to me when he first proposed it, I'm starting to come around to the idea.

But coming around to the idea and genuinely being able to open up and trust another person enough to be together are two totally different things.

And I'm scared I've been through too much to be able to let that happen.

Closing the last bit of space between us, I wrap my arms around Simon's waist, resting my cheek against the center of his chest. It's weird that he's sort of the one stressing me out, but also the one I go to for comfort when worry and fear starts making me spiral.

I can't explain why it happens, just that it does.

"Thank you for working so hard to get all of this finished." It's important to me that Simon understands how much I appreciate him, because I know that hasn't been the case for him throughout most of his life.

I also know what it's like to do so much and get so little, and I never want him to feel like things are unbalanced between us.

Even though I'm pretty sure they are, and the ding of my oven timer proves it.

I lean my head back, peering up at him. "You don't have to make dinner every night."

Simon gives me a grin. "You've been around me enough to know patience isn't high on my list of qualities."

I have zero interest in waiting for some stranger to bring me food when I'm starving.

"He leans down, pressing a kiss to the center of my forehead.

"I'm going to take a quick shower, and then we can eat. "

"You're a stubborn man, you know that?" I unwind my arms from his body, missing his warmth as I step back. "But you're also a really good cook, so I don't hate your stubbornness as much as I should."

Again, my sneaky compliment lands exactly how I hope it will, and Simon's chin lifts.

"Good. You're going to have to learn to live with it, because I don't think it's going anywhere.

"Simon backs down the hall toward the entryway.

"Give me five minutes." He turns when he reaches the stairs, disappearing from view as his heavy footsteps echo through my house.

I've spent the past six months living in near silence, and I thought having someone else here would be jarring. But I didn't realize how lonely I was feeling until I was no longer alone.

During my marriage, being by myself was the goal. I looked for any opportunity I could find to get away from Matthias and the demands he was constantly putting on me.

But being alone when there's someone like Simon who could be keeping me company is way less appealing.

Since I want Simon to enjoy our time together as much as I do—agree to my end of this bargain we’ve made—I go to the kitchen to figure out what he’s made for dinner and what I can do to finish getting it ready.

Opening the oven, I discover a casserole dish filled with something that looks an awful lot like enchiladas.

They’re bubbly and cheesy and they smell so freaking delicious, my stomach growls the whole time I’m assembling the toppings I find in the fridge.

Again, Simon made a trip to the grocery store while I was at work this week, so I dig out the container of sour cream, a leafy bunch of cilantro, and a container of fresh salsa.

After chopping up the cilantro, I pull the lid off the salsa and fish out a bag of tortilla chips.

I’m just pouring him a tall glass of the sweet tea I’ve discovered he loves, when Simon rushes into the room. His dark eyes scan the spread I’ve laid out and he immediately angles a brow my way. “I was going to do all that.”

I give him a sweet smile. “And now you don’t have to.” I pick up his plate and scoop out a healthy serving of beef-filled tortillas and sauce. “You worked really hard today. The least I can do is put the finishing touches on the dinner you also made.”

Simon’s lips flatten out, but I don’t miss the hint of a smile that tries to sneak in before he stops it. He’s an acts-of-service guy—anyone with eyes could see that. I’m not sure what I am, but I’m definitely not a person who would ever take advantage of someone they care about.

After piling up his enchiladas, I sprinkle on some cilantro, add a dollop of sour

cream, and hand the plate over.

I go through the same process for my own serving, then round the island to slide onto one of the stools Simon claims Christian removed from a house he'd been hired to demo.

They look suspiciously unused, so I'm not convinced he's telling the truth, but Simon's done so much for me that it felt asshole-ish to argue over something so trivial.

Especially since I still want more from him. And a baby is a big more .

Like usual, Simon waits for me to take the first bite, his dark eyes watching my reaction as I scoop in a mouthful of deliciousness. I don't have to fake or embellish my reaction at all. I never do when it comes to the meals he makes for us. "This is so freaking good."

"Better than ordering?" Simon is still watching me, like it makes him happy to witness my enjoyment.

"Way better." I work on severing another bite with the side of my fork. "I just feel bad that you're working on my house all day and going to the grocery and making dinner."

That's the most frustrating part about all of this. Simon has only really asked me for one thing, and it's the one thing I'm not sure I can give him. I've tried to find other avenues to return all the favors he's doing me, but I keep coming up empty.

And that includes our time in the bedroom.

I've still only gotten Simon off once, and it was that night in the shower almost a

week ago.

If I didn't already know what I was fed growing up was bullshit, his behavior would have absolutely convinced me men are significantly more in control of their bodies and needs than I was led to believe.

Never once has Simon pressured me into anything.

Not a single time did he act like he was dying due to an unmitigated erection.

If anything, his reassurances that he doesn't need to get off have made me a little. ..

Insecure.

I know I'm not as thin as I once was, and I like that.

I like the idea of having a body that is nourished and loved and appreciated just as it is.

But after so long of being so ashamed of so many parts of it, that's a tough point to get to.

Simon's ability to resist his baser urges only digs those insecurities deeper. Which is stupid.

And a little sad.

"What's wrong?" Simon asks.

He already knows me well enough he can sense the shifts in my mood. Can tell when I start getting caught in a spiral of self-doubt. Or overthinking.

Unfortunately, he also knows me well enough to identify when I try to feed him a fib about the reasons.

And maybe tonight that's not such a bad thing. Maybe I need to tackle this struggle I've got head on. Because if Simon doesn't want me—sexually speaking—it's going to be real difficult for me to get the baby I want.

Setting down my fork, I turn, twisting the pivoting seat until I'm facing his side. "Do you want me?"

Simon stops chewing the mouthful of food he just shoveled in and quickly swallows it down. "What?"

Having to clarify what I mean makes my stomach twist with nerves, so it takes me a second. When I do manage to get words out, I start by repeating myself. "Do you want me?" After taking in a quick breath, I specify, "sexually."

Simon stares at me, looking a little like a deer caught in the headlights. Like I just said the last thing he expected, and he has no clue how to respond.

Running my slightly sweaty palms down the front of the black jeans I wore to work, I slide my tongue over my lips, trying to remedy the sudden dryness of my mouth.

"It's just been a few days in a row of you taking care of me, and not letting me take care of you, and I'm starting to worry that maybe you don't want me taking care of you because.

.." Somehow I manage to put my eyes on his. "Because you don't want me."

Simon's dark gaze stays on mine for a few seconds before slowly drifting down my body. "I don't think you're prepared to hear how much I want you, My."

The twist in my belly shatters, splitting off into a thousand butterflies. I swallow hard, trying to calm them down. “Then why won’t you let me touch you back?”

After setting down his own fork, Simon slowly turns to me, his chair swiveling until our knees touch, his bracketing the outside of mine. “Because I know where you’ve been.”

I get what he’s saying, but I’m so tired of my past. I know it will probably always control my thoughts and my actions on some level, but I don’t want it to have a featuring role in my life. Not anymore.

“What about where I’m going?” I manage another shaky breath.

“You’re always making plans and thinking about the future.

What you want and how to get there.” I rest my hands on his thighs, leaning forward, hoping he hears how truthful I am when I say, “That’s what I want to do.

I’m tired of living in the past. I want to plan for my future.

” When Simon’s eyes drop, I try to regain his focus, leaning forward more as I slide my hands higher so I can maintain my balance.

“And I may not know exactly what I can offer you yet, but I do know whatever it is can’t be one-sided.

Even if it’s to my benefit.” I hold my breath, waiting for his reply.

When Simon remains silent, my hope dips. I don’t want to be in another skewed sexual situation. I don’t want?—

I look a little more closely at Simon's eyes and notice he's not simply avoiding mine. He's looking somewhere very specific.

He's looking at my hands. Staring at where they rest right at his upper thighs. Very, very close to the part of him he's worked hard to keep away from me outside of the little meet-and-greet I had with it in the shower.

And it is well beyond time for another get together.

I watch Simon, excitement amping up as his gaze stays fused while I move my hands higher, slowly bringing them to the front of his jeans. I flip the button free and pinch the zipper tab between my fingers, slowly raking it down.

“My .” There's a hint of warning in his tone, but I don't think it's for me.

If it is, he's going to have to get over it. Because I might not know what I am, but I know what I'm not.

And I'm not the kind of girl who is okay with only taking.

I want to give too.

SIMON

I can't tear my eyes away from where Myra's hands grip the front of my jeans. Can't do much more than hold my breath as she spreads the well-worn fabric wide, revealing the jut of my rock-hard cock straining against the cotton of my black boxer briefs.

She doesn't even hesitate as she reaches for the waistband, her fingers skimming over my skin as they slip under the elastic.

I've spent the past week being very careful.

Ensuring we didn't have a repeat performance of the shower debacle.

It's obvious I can't be trusted when it comes to having Myra's hands on me, so I've done everything in my power to keep her distracted and boneless enough she'd fall asleep easily, saving me from facing another test I knew I would fail.

Until now.

Myra gives my underwear a little tug, freeing the solid line of my dick. Her eyes widen, snapping me out of the haze of desire keeping me frozen in place.

"My." I'm so fucking conflicted right now. Giving her what she wants goes against all the plans I have to show her how good I can be to her. How different I am from what she had before. "You don't have to?—"

“I know.” One finger lifts to slowly drag down the side of my dick. “And that makes all the difference.”

There’s no time to brace. No time to prepare. Not even a spare second to find something to hold onto. Myra’s leaned so far forward that all it takes is a little shift and her lips are wrapped around me, soft and smooth and fucking perfect.

“Fuck.” I can’t move my eyes from where she’s swallowing me down. When her hair falls, hiding my view, I automatically glide one hand through the strands, pinning them between my palm and the back of her head. She looks so fucking pretty right now. Mouth stretched wide, lips glistening and wet.

Getting head has never been one of my favorite things—coming from it has always been nearly impossible—but its rank is climbing higher with each move Myra makes. And when her eyes lift to my face, locking onto mine as she takes me as deep as she can, I nearly come right down her throat.

“That’s enough.” My fingers tighten in her hair, firm but careful not to pull too much as I drag her mouth free. “No more.”

Myra’s lips are swollen and slick, pupils dilated. “But you’re not finished.”

My eyes dip to her mouth, fixing there. “It’s fine.”

Myra’s lower lip pushes out. “But you get to finish me with your mouth all the time.”

“It’s not the same, Sweetheart.” Shifting my hold to her chin, I use the pad of my thumb to wipe away a little of the wetness clinging to her skin “When you come, its fucking beautiful. When I do, it’s a fucking mess.”

Myra’s lips slowly curve into a wicked smile I didn’t know she was capable of. “The

mess didn't bother me last time." She gives my still throbbing cock a stroke with her hand, the spit lingering on my skin making the pass sound obscenely loud and wet. "It won't bother me this time either."

Again, I've got no time to prepare before her mouth is on me again, now with more purpose. More confidence.

And it's already quite clear she's figured out what I like, because her eyes are on mine from the start, watching me as she stubbornly drags me right back to the edge with the heat of her mouth and the grip of her fist.

My balls pull tight as she takes me deep enough I bump the back of her throat. When it flexes around my tip, I try to shift away, once again attempting to save her from what I know is imminent.

But Myra holds tight, one hand on my dick, the other still gripping my underwear, making it impossible to escape as my cock flexes against her tongue, jerking as the first wave hits me.

The tightening of her throat muscles as she swallows amplifies the pleasure making my ears ring and my spine tingle.

Another jet of cum follows the first, spilling free as I groan her name.

The second I'm finished, I pull her off me, hand in her hair as I bring her mouth to mine. Licking into her mouth, my cock jerks at the taste of me on her tongue. At the evidence proving a part of me is now a part of her.

Dragging her onto my lap, legs straddling my thighs, I turn us to face the counter and shove my plate out of the way, fully intending to make her my meal instead.

Until the alert on my phone pings, telling me something's moving outside Myra's house.

Or someone.

Myra's arms tighten around my neck, her eyes moving to where my cell sits on the counter I just planned to spread her across. "Maybe it's one of your brothers."

I pick up the device and thumb across the screen, opening the app to find which camera was activated and what it recorded. What I see confirms Myra's suspicions. "You're right. It is one of my brothers."

Unfortunately, it's the one I'm currently pissed as hell at.

I carefully shift her off my lap, letting her feet hit the floor before I tuck my spent dick into my pants and stand.

"And he brought a friend."

"Thanks for not breaking in this time." I stand at Myra's back door, staring out at a man I'm starting to think I might not know at all. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

In all the years I've known Butch, I've never seen him in anything but jeans. Tonight he looks like some sort of fucking mercenary or something, dressed head to toe in black. Black tactical pants. Black boots. Black T-shirt. Black?—

"Is that a fucking bulletproof vest?"

"Do you just want me to stand out here while I answer all your questions, or can we at least come inside?" Butch's eyes shift from side to side and he crowds closer to the small woman with him. "Because I'd really love to get her inside."

If it had just been Butch, I probably would've let him stand his ass out there, but it's not just him.

And while the woman with him doesn't look afraid, she does look uncertain, and that has me feeling uneasy as hell.

Stepping back, I sweep one arm out. "Fine. But fair warning, Myra might come downstairs with her nightstand drawer again, and this time I'm not so sure I'll stop her if she tries to hit you. "

I've known something was up with him since Butch stopped coming around, but seeing what he's wearing, and the slightly hesitant demeanor of the woman with him, absolutely confirms it.

And it's time to get to the bottom of shit.

Closing the door, I lock it behind him. When I turn around, I focus only on the woman. "You want something to drink?"

Her eyes narrow behind the thick rims of her glasses as she looks me up and down. "I'm fine."

Her snapped refusal has me feeling a little better about seeing her here with Butch. This woman might be small, but she doesn't strike me as the type who would be easily kidnapped, so it's looking like she might be here of her own free will.

"This is Becca." Butch tips his head at the dark-haired woman beside him. "I need somewhere safe for her to stay."

My brows lift as I cross both arms over my chest and lean back against the island. "So you came here for a favor." I keep my glare on his face. "After breaking in and

then fucking disappearing again.”

“She’s in real fucking danger, and this is the only place I know I can bring her where I won’t have to worry.” Butch lays out his reasoning.

And honestly, it only pisses me off more.

“So you brought someone being threatened by God knows who to our neighborhood where our families live?” I shake my head, releasing a bitter chuckle.

“You really don’t give a shit about us, do you?”

” I straighten, dropping my arms. “I wanted to believe you weren’t a piece of shit, but I guess I should have seen the signs. ”

Becca’s eyes bounce from Butch to me and then back to Butch. Her forehead furrows in confusion. “Why would he think you’re a piece of shit?”

Butch pulls in a deep breath, his eyes closing as he lets it back out again. “Because he thinks I left everyone here behind to go join a crime syndicate.”

Becca’s eyes continue moving back and forth, like she is watching every move Butch and I make. Analyzing each one and filing it away. “Interesting.”

That has me laughing again. “Interesting isn’t the word I would use.” I spread my arms out wide. “So what happened? Did you fuck around with your new friends and find out they were way too ready to stab you in the back at the first opportunity?”

A little of my anger is shoved to one side by the bite of hurt, and it bleeds into my words. I can’t stop it. Didn’t know what was even coming.

And this Becca chick—whoever she is—doesn't miss it.

Up until now, her expression has been a little on the chilly side, but it softens as she studies my face. After a few seconds her gaze snaps to Butch. “You have to tell him the truth.”

I'm laughing yet again because this keeps getting fucking better and better. “So she knows the truth?”

I don't even know who this woman is—have never seen her before in my life—but she knows more about the man I lived shoulder-to-shoulder with for years than I do? A man I treated like my brother. A man we all considered family.

Myra comes into the kitchen, thankfully no longer looking like she just sucked my dick, because I would probably gouge Butch's eyes out of his head for seeing her like that.

Her blue gaze sweeps the room before coming to rest on me. “What's going on?”

I sent her upstairs as soon as I saw Butch and Becca on the camera, knowing how I'd react to anyone seeing her in the state she was just in. Especially when she and I haven't firmed up the agreement between us and I can't say she's officially mine.

By some stroke of luck, Myra seems to have spent her time upstairs getting out of her work clothes and into something more comfortable.

Now, instead of wearing jeans and a fancy shirt, she's sporting a pair of my sweatpants and one of my T-shirts.

So even if she's not officially mine, it sure as hell looks like she is, and that has my hackles coming down just a little.

I still reach for her, pulling her close just in case there's still any confusion over who takes care of her and who will cut any man that tries to steal her away. "Butch brought Becca here so we could keep her safe."

Myra's gaze zeroes in on Becca, her brows pinching together as she looks the smaller woman over. "Are you safe?" Her eyes jump to Butch before going back to Becca. "With him?"

Instead of answering Myra, Becca lifts her eyebrows and widens her eyes at Butch. "Well?"

Butch's gaze lifts to the ceiling as he scrubs one hand over his face. "She's safe with me." His jaw sets as he barely shakes his head. Finally he turns to me. "She's safe with me because up until about twenty-four hours ago, I was with the Memphis PD."

I'm not sure I heard him right. "You're a cop?"

"I was a cop." Butch's head drops, eyes refusing to come my way. "I've been undercover with them for about the last decade."

I thought Butch leaving us to continue down the path we were all once on was the worst thing I could imagine. Believed him still being a criminal was what would break Jill's heart.

Looks like I was real goddamn wrong.

My reaction is swift and brutal. I step into the punch as soon as I start to swing. It connects with Butch's jaw hard, likely hurting me as much as it hurts him. He stumbles back, caught off guard by my immediate attack.

But while Butch didn't see it coming, someone else did.

“What’s wrong with you?” Becca steps right into my path, the top of her head barely reaching my sternum as she shoves me as hard as she can. “He left everything because of you guys.”

I don’t know if she’s trying to calm me down or smooth this over, and I don’t care. I’m too busy preparing another hit. My knuckles are already going to be bruised and swollen, might as well make it worth it.

But before I can fire the next one off, something slaps me right across the face. It’s not a hand, and the smooth if flat surface stings like hell, stunning me enough to stop me in my tracks.

I look down to find Becca with one of her shoes off, holding it up like she’s ready to hit me with it again.

Before she can get in a second hit of her own, Myra jumps into the middle of the chaos, grabbing Becca by the hair and yanking her away from me.

Becca yelps, shoe dropping to the floor as both hands go to her head, trying to loosen the hold Myra has on her.

“Fucking hell.” Butch grabs for Becca, looping one arm around her waist at the same time I get my hands on Myra.

I lean into her ear as I lace my fingers alongside hers. “Let her go, Sweetheart.”

“She hurt you.” Myra grits the words out between clenched teeth. “I’m not letting anyone hurt you again.”

I don’t know how a moment like this could be one of the best of my life, but Myra just managed to make it happen. No one’s ever fought for me. Not like this.

“I’m okay.” I work a little of Becca’s hair out of her grip. “She was just looking out for Butch the same way you’re looking out for me.” I don’t fault Becca for what she did. Especially if Butch is the only person currently keeping her safe. “Let her go, baby.”

Myra’s blue eyes are blazing as they come to mine, but she slowly loosens the tight wind she has on Becca, releasing her.

Butch immediately whisks her away, keeping Becca’s back pinned to his front. I shove Myra behind me, uncertain what he might do next.

Surprising me, a slow smile works over Butch’s rapidly bruising jaw. “Nice to see you finally found a woman who’s as crazy over you as you are over her.”

MYRA

I don't love how Butch keeps screwing up my fun time.

I'm also not a huge fan of his life choices, but it's only because they've upset Simon. Otherwise, I couldn't care less about what the man has done in his life.

Everyone else though? They're super freaking pissed, and that means I'm in for a long damn night. One I don't even get to spend in the comfort of my own house. Mainly because my house isn't comfortable.

Yet.

Simon's got my family room mostly completed, but there's still no furniture for everyone to sit on, so we ended up taking Butch and Becca to Christian and Lydia's. They have plenty of space to sit plus it keeps Lydia from having to drag her pregnant belly all over the neighborhood.

But now, instead of being in bed with Simon—probably having one heck of a good time—I'm sitting beside him on the sofa while he and his brothers yell at Butch while the undercover cop who deceived everyone stoically stares back at them.

Becca—shoe secured safely on her foot—stands at his side, studying everyone in the room with a scrutinizing gaze.

I'm not sure how I feel about her. I understand what it's like to be hiding out.

I also understand what it's like when you feel like the only person you trust is being threatened.

I don't really blame her for going after Simon the way she did.

But I'm still pissed off about it.

Lydia leans in at my side, whispering low in my ear. "Are you okay?"

That is a very good question. "I think so." I look over the strained faces of the men around me. "Way better than everyone else."

I don't really know Butch. My feelings aren't hurt that he was an undercover cop. It's clear I'm in the vast minority though, so I'm just going to sit here and keep my mouth shut and ride this whole meeting out as best I can.

Or at least, that was my plan until Simon's large hand comes to rest high on my thigh. I'm pretty sure it's an unconscious move. He's likely simply looking for reassurance that I'm all right.

But my sister doesn't miss it.

Lydia's attention lands right on where he gives my flesh a little squeeze. Her blue eyes stick, widening incrementally with each passing second before finally lifting to my face. Then they drop back to Simon's hand and bounce back to my face, her brows crawling up her forehead.

Well. Shit.

Simon asked for six months. Room for me to learn who he was and try to figure out the same about myself. But it seems like my time might have run out way faster than

I expected, because my sister isn't going to give me the same luxury.

Lydia grabs my hand, getting her pregnant butt up off the couch way faster than should be physically possible as she drags me along with her.

"We'll be right back." She announces as she drags me through the room full of people and out into the hall.

Her cute little waddle doesn't slow as we pass through the entryway and into Christian's office.

After closing the door, she spins to face me. "What was that?"

I have very few options right now and none of them are great. I decide to go with the one that's truthful but also ommissive. "I don't know."

Lydia's chin juts. "You don't know why Simon just put his hand on your thigh?"

Part of me assumed Lydia had suspicions about us already, but the shock on her face is making me reconsider. "Did you really think we wouldn't get closer while Simon was staying with me?"

The same freaking thing happened with her and Christian. She went to stay in his house so he could make sure she was safe, and bingo bango.

They became romantically intertwined.

Not that I think that's what's happening with me and Simon. This isn't about romance. This is about figuring out if we're compatible enough to raise children together. Be connected. Have some semblance of a relationship.

“Yeah. I really thought Simon was a good enough guy he would be able to stay with you without trying to get into your pants.” Lydia’s tone is accusatory. A little aggressive.

And I’m already feeling defensive about Simon, so it makes me careless with my next words.

“By your calculations, if Simon’s not a good guy then neither is Christian.

” I step closer, knowing what I’m saying is a little mean, but unable to help myself.

“And you were a virgin, so that makes it even worse.”

My sister’s mouth drops open, like she can’t believe I would dare turn her words back and point them at Christian. She loves him—I get that—but if she really thinks Simon’s bad for getting close to me, I’m going to look at her husband through the same lens.

Lydia stands taller, lifting her chin. “I’m the one who pursued Christian.”

I angle a brow at her. “What makes you think I’m not in the same boat?”

Oop.

I purse my lips, getting slammed a little too hard by my own truthful words. I didn’t mean to think them, let alone say them out loud. But there’s no taking the admission back now.

I have pursued Simon. I pretended like I wasn’t.

Gave myself all sorts of excuses why things between us could never be all I’d want or

what he deserved.

Tried to convince myself I didn't have enough to give.

Couldn't meet whatever expectations I set for my own behaviors.

That I was too broken to be able to have someone like him.

And maybe I am. Maybe I've been through too much. Maybe I'm too jaded and cynical.

But what if I'm not?

"I've got to go." I step around my sister, pausing when I have one hand on the doorknob.

Turning back, I give her an apologetic smile.

"Sorry I was shitty about Christian." Flinging the door open, I start to step out, but turn back again.

"It's true though. If Simon's an asshole, so is Christian.

" I finally walk away, hurrying through the entryway and down the hall, back to where Simon sits on the sofa.

I recognize what he's dealing with right now is big. That Butch's betrayal is life changing and earth shattering. But so is what I need to tell him, and I know Simon well enough to guess which of the two he'd deem more important.

Going straight to where he is, I grab his hand, pulling hard. "We need to go."

Levi stops in the middle of the tirade he's currently dishing out, expression befuddled as I manage to drag Simon to his feet. "What's wrong?"

I smile even though it's sort of misplaced in the room. "Nothing." I tug Simon's arm, moving him toward the back door. "Something just came up and we need to go."

Simon's dark brows pinch together in concern, but he doesn't ask me any questions. His hand comes to my back, resting warm and solid and grounding as he turns to his brothers. "I'll get with you guys later."

I go straight for the back door and he follows me out. Doesn't ask me what's wrong. Doesn't question my motives. Doesn't hesitate. Because when it comes down to it, I'm important to him. Maybe more important than anything else.

And that brings on a few questions. I might be smack dab in the middle of my own epiphany, but now I'm also thinking through Simon's behaviors over the past year.

There's no way I've taken such an important spot in his life in just a week. Simon's a nice man, but his family means more to him than some woman he's just kind enough to look out for. Some woman who asked to have his baby.

I move a little faster, hiking across Piper and Tate's backyard with purpose as my brain spins faster and faster.

By the time we walk in my back door, I know where this conversation needs to start.

I step into the space he's worked so hard to make for me and turn to face him. "How long have you wanted me?"

Simon goes completely still, big body freezing in place as his eyes meet mine.

I wait, unable to breathe or blink as the seconds drag out. Will he lie? Will he tell me the truth? Will either option be what I'm expecting? What I'm hoping for?

Simon pulls in a deep breath, continuing to hold my gaze. "Since I carried you through the woods."

My already racing heart picks up speed, beating so fast I'm a little concerned for its well-being. "Why?"

This past year I've felt so bad in so many ways. I've felt like a failure. Like I was overcompensating one day and undercompensating the next. I've struggled to find purpose. Passion. Happiness. Thought I was falling short in just about every expectation I had for how things would all go.

In short, I thought I was a mess. But Simon wouldn't want a mess, so I want to know what he saw.

"Because you're brave. Stronger than anyone I've ever known." He takes a step toward me. "Determined to find a way through all the devastation and manipulation."

I barely shake my head, not wanting to admit the truth, but needing him to see it. "But I didn't. I'm still lost."

Simon's lips curve in a slow smile. "You were never lost, My. Sometimes it just takes time when you go through instead of around." He stops in front of me, reaching out to curve a warm, calloused hand along my cheek.

"You didn't hide from the pain or the sadness or the frustration.

You stood right there in the middle of it and faced it down.

” He shakes his head. “Most people don’t do that.

They’re too afraid to really look at what’s there.

” The brush of his thumb across my cheek is as soft as his voice. “But not you.”

I don’t know what to say to all that. I’ve spent the last six months caught in a cycle I couldn’t seem to stop. It felt like my past was quicksand and as long as I held still, I wouldn’t sink any deeper.

“I know you thought you were stuck, My, but you weren’t. You were just waiting for the right time to make your next move.” His dark eyes move over my face. “Running as fast as you can just to keep from stopping isn’t always the right answer.”

I gaze up at him, digesting his words. “Is that what you did? Ran so you wouldn’t have to stop?”

Simon tips his head in a small nod. “For a while.” This time his thumb slides across my lower lip. “But then I started running for a different reason.”

My stomach flips. “What was the reason?”

“You.” His eyes drop to where he strokes my mouth with a careful touch. “To give you the time you needed to be ready for me.” His voice lowers to a whisper. “Are you ready for me, My?”

I think long and hard before giving him my answer. I know it’s not what he’s expecting to hear, but Simon makes me feel safe enough to offer the truth. “No.” I meet his eyes, hoping he understands. That he can see what I’m trying to say. “But I want you anyway.”

I don't know if I will ever feel ready for what's between us. I do know my readiness won't stop it from being there. I also know I won't let Simon get away from me. I might not be perfectly prepared to jump into what he wants from me, but I'm entirely confident he won't let me fall.

I hold my breath, waiting for his response. Terrified what I can give him won't be enough.

But instead of giving me some sort of answer or agreement, he surprises me with something else.

“Why?”

A smile spreads across my lips, because I don't think he believes I'm prepared to answer the same question I asked him.

I am. I could've answered it months ago.

“Because I trust you. Because I want to take care of you. Because I miss you when you're not around. Because you make me laugh.” I take a shuddering breath. “Because I know you'll never hurt me or take advantage of me or treat me like I'm beneath you.”

I could continue, but Simon stops me, the seal of his mouth against mine halting the rest of the reasons I want him.

Probably love him.

The kiss is sweet and soft and careful. The way he's always been with me. But I don't feel sweet or soft or careful right now. I feel cleansed. Purged. Free of the ties I allowed to restrain me.

And ready to take off running.

I thought I lacked direction, but I think Simon's right. I've known where to go. What I wanted. I just had to be sure I was finished with where I'd been. That I'd faced it. Learned from it. It might not be completely behind me, but it's no longer breathing down my neck.

I loop both arms around Simon's neck, pulling him closer. The kiss between us turns on a dime. Like he can feel the change in me.

It wouldn't surprise me if he did. I've spent months watching Simon. Cataloging everything about him. And it seems like he's been doing the same. Waiting for the day I might want all the things he's been ready to give.

And that day has finally come.

Pulling back, I manage to get my lips off his for just a second. "I want all of you." I grab at his shirt, shoving it up his chest. "Now."

SIMON

I really wish the couch I ordered for Myra's living room was here because her bed is way too fucking far away right now.

But there's no way in hell the first time I'm inside her is going to be on a countertop or a floor, and those are the only two options down here, so that means we've gotta change locations.

I lean forward, bending enough I can grip the cheeks of her ass.

"Hold on tight." It's all the warning I give before picking Myra up, bringing her legs around my waist as I stomp through the house.

Past the family room I've almost finished.

Past the front room she still hasn't decided a purpose for.

Past the front porch that now has a light bulb illuminating the space and a camera doorbell to identify anyone who might come knocking.

All things I've done. Ways I've worked to make Myra's life better in case I had to leave her on her own again. Had to walk away because she wasn't ready for this.

For me.

Myra's legs cinch tight at my waist as I start up the stairs, struggling to keep moving

as her lips move over the side of my neck. I don't know that anyone has ever kissed me there, and holy hell is it a sensitive spot.

Almost as sensitive as the damn nipple she seems to be obsessed with.

Stumbling into her bedroom, I fumble around as I kick off my boots, glad I grabbed the pull-on pair instead of the ones with laces.

Myra's got her hands in my hair and her teeth pinched on my earlobe when we tumble onto the bed. A tangle of flailing limbs and grabbing hands.

She wasn't exaggerating when she said she was ready now, and Myra wastes no time peeling my T-shirt up and fighting it over my head.

The sweatpants and T-shirt she changed into when I sent her upstairs so I could deal with Butch are too big for her, making them easy to divest her of. In a few quick motions, Myra is naked beneath me.

It's happened before. Many times over the past week, but I've never been naked with her. I've kept my dick on a tight leash, knowing how quickly things would spiral out of control the second my skin was on hers.

And I wasn't wrong.

The second my pants and underwear are off, Myra's small hands are grabbing at me, her long fingernails digging into my skin as she pulls me up her body. One leg hooks at my hip as her blue eyes fuse to mine. "Get inside me."

There's not a hint of fear in her gaze. Zero hesitation in her demand.

And it is a demand. One I obviously don't follow quickly enough, because her hand

snakes between us, soft palm gripping my length and positioning it so all it will take to give her what she wants is a flex of my hips.

And that's what I want to do. More than anything. To sink into her warm, wet, willing body and lose myself in the pleasure of making her mine.

I can't. Not this time.

Straightening away, I fight her hold as she tries to pull me back down. When it doesn't work, Myra wiggles around, attempting to do work her way over me. To accomplish what I haven't.

Yet.

"Patience, My." I hook my hands behind her knees and open her legs wide. "I don't want to hurt you."

I know Myra's not a virgin, but based on her reaction to my dick, I'm fairly confident this first time might not be all I want it to be for her. That she might not come.

I'm still going to do my damndest to try to make it happen anyway.

Releasing one leg, I lean to the side, yanking open her nightstand to retrieve the vibrator she hasn't touched since I've been here.

I press the tiny button inlaid on the smooth surface, crossing my fingers it hasn't lost its charge.

A low hum fills the bedroom and a triumphant smile works onto my lips.

I glance down to find Myra staring up at me, eyes wide. For the first time she looks

uncertain, and I don't like it.

“What's wrong, Sweetheart? Talk to me.” I smooth a hand up and down her thigh as my dick throbs with need, aching to be inside her.

Myra's gaze follows the pale purple toy. “What's that for?”

“It's to help make sure you enjoy this as much as I do.” I move the vibrating device down her thigh, teasing it across her pubic bone. “Sometimes we all need a little help from our friends.”

Myra blinks at me for a second.

Then she starts laughing, the sound light and easy and fucking music to my ears. This is what I've always wanted. Someone who can roll with whatever life throws at us. Someone who can handle anything we have to face. Someone I can talk to. Care for. Laugh with.

And while Myra might have a more serious temperament, she doesn't take things seriously. She's easily handled her whole life being turned upside down yet again. From me showing up, to Butch and Becca knocking on her back door, Myra has remained pretty much unfazed.

And now, instead of being uncomfortable or awkward, our first time together is turning out to be just as easy as the rest of our time together.

“You're laughing now.” I nudge her entrance a little with the head of my dick. “But you're going to be thanking me really soon.” Shifting the tip of her vibrator to rest right beside her clit, I press a little deeper. “You might even be calling me a genius.”

Myra's laughter dies, but a hint of a smile remains on her face, slipping away as I

continue working my way into her body.

Her eyes roll closed, a much different sort of expression tightening her pretty features.

“Fair warning, Mr. Genius. If you’re not careful with that thing, I’ll finish before you’re even all the way inside me. ”

I’m not sure how that’s a warning. “Good. Then we can start working our way up to the second one while I fuck you.”

Myra sucks in a breath at my words, her eyes flying open as I sink in a little deeper.

I look down between our bodies, watching as I slowly inch my way in, being as careful as I can. When I’m finally fully seated, I pause, giving her time to acclimate. “Okay?”

Myra gives me a jerky nod. “It’s not as bad as I expected.”

I chuckle. “I’m gonna tell you, it hurts my pride a little that you expected it to be bad.” I slowly pull back before pushing my way in again, watching for any sign of discomfort or distress.

“You know that’s not what I meant.” Myra’s brows pinch together as one hand comes between us. I think she’s going to tell me to stop, but instead she grabs the vibrator and yanks it away from her body, tossing it off to one side before hooking a leg at my back. “Why are you so far away?”

My choice of positioning was twofold. First, it gave me better control over my movements. Second, it gave me a little distance. Room to breathe so I wouldn’t be as likely to end up cutting our experience short.

But—as with so many other things—I can’t tell her no. Wouldn’t even if I could.

I let her drag me down, bracing my arms against the mattress so I don’t crush her with my weight.

Myra smiles up at me. “That’s better.” She runs both hands up my chest, curving them around my neck. “You’ve been so far away for so long and I thought it was for the best. Now that I know I was wrong, I want you close to me all the time.”

I tease my nose against hers. “We’re about as close as we can get.”

“That’s true.” Myra’s fingers trace along my ears. Over my jaw. Across my lips. Her touch is slow and reverent. Like she’s trying to commit every second of this to memory the same way I am. “But you’re holding awfully still for a guy who just said he was going to fuck me.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Brat.” I rock my hips against her, thinking the friction against her clit will help redirect Myra’s focus.

But the sound she makes ends up redirecting mine. Straight to my dick. A dick that is currently buried to the hilt in the woman I’ve wanted for a year. The woman I’ve left town to escape more times than I can count.

The woman who might soon be carrying my baby.

“My.” I drop my forehead to hers, rocking into her in slow, steady thrusts. “We need to talk about the rest of our deal.”

Myra sucks in a sharp breath as I grind my pelvis against her clit. “Now? We’re pretty busy.”

“That’s the reason we need to talk about it.” I grit my teeth against the urge already building in my balls. “We need to take precautions if we aren’t ready to fully move forward.”

I understand that technically what we’ve already done could lead to pregnancy. It’s not likely, but it is possible. I know where I stand on this matter, but Myra is the one who makes the call.

Always.

“You mean a baby?” There’s so much hope in her voice. A yearning I know well.

“Yeah, My.” I hook one hand behind her knee, lifting that leg up and out so she can feel all of me. “I mean a baby.”

All the air rushes from Myra’s lungs as her hands splay across my chest. “I want a baby whenever you’re willing to try to have one.”

Deep down I knew that would be her answer. Just like deep down I knew I’d never be able to tell her no. Even if Myra hadn’t picked me. Even if she didn’t want to be mine, I still would have given her what she wanted. Because at the end of the day, I don’t think I could deny her anything.

Especially when it’s what I desperately want too.

The downside to all this is I apparently find fucking with the intent of procreation to be very, very hot. And— as if I’ve never had sex before—I accidentally do something I haven’t done since I was a teenager.

I come before getting the woman under me off.

I try to stop it. Do my best to halt the climax that pretty much started the second my brain did the math on what was happening.

As soon as I recognized that tonight I could be putting a baby—my baby—in Myra's belly, it was over.

There was no going back. I didn't pass go and I sure as hell didn't collect my two hundred dollars.

Myra stares at me, lips barely parted, brows furrowed as she tries to figure out what in the hell just happened. "Did you just?—"

"Yeah." I don't want to admit it, but there's no way she's not going to figure it out. "I got a little excited over the second part of our deal."

Myra's lips curve into a soft smile as her hands smooth over my shoulders. "It's okay. It's kind of sweet actually." She shifts, focus moving to the bathroom.

Does she think...

Pushing my body up, I meet her pretty blue eyes. "You're acting like we're done here."

"I mean..." Myra looks from side to side. "Aren't we?"

I hate where she's been, but sometimes it makes my job too fucking easy.

Going to my knees, I slowly shake my head at her. "No. We're not." I look down, watching as I pull my body from hers, nostrils flaring as a part of me dribbles free with the retreat.

Don't fucking like that.

Reaching down, I work it back into her body with two fingers as I shift to the end of the mattress.

Myra figures out my plan just as my mouth descends on her clit. She tries to sit up and attempts to shove a hand between me and her. "You don't want to do that. It's all..."

I use my free hand to grab her wrist, keeping her from stopping me as I seal my lips against her, tongue sliding against the hard bead of her clit. Just like earlier, I can taste myself on her and I fucking love it. Love knowing I've filled her twice tonight.

Thanks to the past week's worth of practice, I have Myra coming in under a minute, adding her cum to mine, making the sound of my fingers fucking her obscene.

Obscene enough my dick's raging back to life.

I rise up, scrubbing one hand across my mouth as I pull the other from her body. Myra's dazed eyes drop to my cock, widening at the sight of it back at attention.

I crawl over her, pausing to suck one nipple between my lips, licking against the tight tip before letting it pop free.

Lifting my eyes to her face, I lay out my newest plan.

"I'm gonna fuck you again now." I brush my lips across hers as I sink into her, the wet slick of us easing the way.

"And this time you're going to come on my dick. "

Myra nods, head bobbing in jerky motions. “Yeah. I can do that.”

I smile against her lips. “I know you can.”

Myra’s eyes stay on mine as I grip one cheek of her ass, angling her hips up a little so I can hit the spot I’m aiming for. She sucks in a breath and I know I found my mark.

Her thighs start to shake almost immediately, full lips rounded into a silent oh as I exploit the place I’m committing to memory with each thrust of my hips.

“That’s it, My,” I encourage her as I chase her climax. “Give me what I want, Sweetheart.” I drink in the sight of her under me, savoring it the way I couldn’t before. That’s the only reason I see her unraveling. The only way I have any warning she’s about to come undone for me.

On me.

Myra’s eyes open wide, spine arching, nails digging into my skin as her pussy clenches. The sight, the sound, the feel, it’s so fucking perfect and I follow right behind her, spilling into her body once more.

And because I’m a little fucked up, I keep rocking into her body as long as I can, pushing my cum as far in as I can make it go until I’m forced to finally pull free. When she gets up to pee, I watch a trickle of it glisten on her skin as it runs down the inside of her thigh, frowning at the loss.

While she’s gone, I lay in her bed—our bed—and make a plan to replace it as soon as possible.

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MYRA

“Give it to me, Myra. Give me what I want.” Simon’s voice is harsh. Demanding.

And more than enough to have my head falling back and my body shuddering. I come so hard my vision blurs and my ears ring.

Both things I didn’t even know were possible a few weeks ago. Now I get to experience them every day.

Sometimes twice.

Simon pulls me closer, bringing my bare ass to the edge of the counter as he pounds into me, the dick I was once worried wouldn’t fit hitting every nerve ending in a way that drags out my orgasm and pulls the most unholy sounds through my lips.

I can feel when he comes. The heat of it as he fills me to the brim, his continuing thrusts sounding wetter and wetter as he plunges into me over and over. Simon doesn’t stop until he physically can’t go anymore. Only then does his cock slide free, leaving me feeling empty but so, so satisfied.

And messy.

“I’m scared to move.” I press my lips together as I look down. “I’m afraid I’m going to get stuff everywhere.”

“Here.” Simon grabs the shirt he discarded two seconds after I got home from work

and tucks it between my thighs, his wide palm positioning the worn cotton right where it will catch anything that jumps ship.

“We should probably try to keep our activities on the second floor to avoid this.” I slide off the island in my kitchen, legs a little wobbly as I find my footing.

“Or I can start putting in the half-bath you said I could install.” Simon walks with me, holding his T-shirt in place during the weirdest trip I’ve ever taken up my stairs. “I finished up the trim in the family room and front room today, so I can get that project rolling tomorrow.”

“Let’s make a deal.” I waddle my way to the second floor, naked lower half on full display.

“You can start working on the bathroom if you promise that we never do whatever it is we’re doing right now again.

” It feels ridiculous, so I can only imagine how it looks.

When I do picture myself scaling the stairs with Simon’s T-shirt turned cum catcher wedged between my legs, I start to laugh.

It’s only half a heartbeat before Simon is laughing with me, the hand that’s not holding his T-shirt coming to grip the back of my neck, pulling me in for a kiss as we reach the top of the stairs. He leans back, shaking his head. “God, I love you.”

I was already having a tough enough time putting one foot in front of the other, and his unexpected words have my brain tripping over itself, causing the rest of me to do the same.

Simon easily catches me, oblivious to the way he’s just rocked my world. Not just

with what he said, but with how he said it. The way it was so natural to him it hasn't even registered the words passed through his lips.

He didn't think them through or plan them out or try to strategize how best to use them. They were simply stated. Like a fun fact he wanted to share with me.

I'm still turning those three words over in my head when we reach my bathroom.

I go inside, closing the door on him. I might be okay letting him serve as the jizz juggler, but I'm not quite prepared for him to listen to me pee or watch me wipe.

Once I'm closed in, I drop to the toilet, staring at the wall in front of me.

Simon loves me.

It's not the revelation it should be.

And that has me laughing again. At how freaking ridiculous I was to think I could avoid wanting to make Simon mine. That I thought I'd be able to have a baby with him and not want more.

I'm an idiot.

Finishing up, I flush the toilet and wash my hands, peeling away the remainder of my work clothes before wrapping on the robe hooked at the back of the door.

When I step out, Simon is standing on the other side, looking confused. Maybe a little worried. "What were you laughing about?"

"Me being dumb." I go to my dresser and pull out the comfy garments I spend my evenings in.

After slipping on a fresh pair of panties since I'm not sure where the pair I had on is now, I layer over leggings and a tunic style sweatshirt.

Once everything's in place, I turn to Simon and find him still frowning at me.

"You're not dumb."

I roll my eyes because he's so freaking cute. He's also freaking wrong.

I walk over to where he stands, looking grumpy that I would ever consider myself anything but perfect.

Lacing my arms around his neck, I pull him down and press a kiss to his lips.

"Maybe I'm not dumb anymore, but I definitely was.

"I kiss him again. "Dumb enough to think I wouldn't fall in love with you the second I stopped pretending it couldn't happen. "

Simon's expression shifts, turning serious. "You love me?"

"Of course I love you." I lift one shoulder in a shrug. "There was never really any other option if I'm being honest."

Simon's arms wrap around me, pulling me closer. "I love you too."

Yeah. He definitely doesn't realize he already said it, which is my favorite part of the whole thing. "I know."

It's there in everything he does. The way he treats me. The way he speaks to me. The way he tries to make my life easier and listens when I talk. The man is so freaking in

love with me it's not even funny.

Actually, it's a little funny. Funny that I didn't see it until just now. Just like so many other things.

"We should get—" Simon's words are cut short by my doorbell.

A doorbell he put in because he wants me to feel safe. One more way I should have known he loves me.

He backs us up out of our room, keeping his hold on me as he leans to peer down into the entryway. "Fucking Butch."

"Ugh." My head falls back. "I kinda hate that guy." I don't really hate him. He just has the worst timing in the world.

I guess not the worst. Technically he could have rung the doorbell ten minutes ago. That would have been the worst.

Simon sighs, the sound long and loud as he turns. His arms drop from my body, but he immediately catches one of my hands in his. We go downstairs together, standing side-by-side as he opens the door.

That's when I see it's not just Butch on my porch.

Becca gives me a cautious smile, lifting one hand in a little wave. "Hi."

After talking with Felicity, I feel kind of bad for trying to snatch Becca bald the other night.

It didn't realize she wasn't a stranger.

That many of the people in town already knew her.

Not only had she once worked with Felicity, but she'd also lived with Shawn's wife Shelly for a period of time years ago.

It's still super strange that she and Butch ended up crossing paths in a completely unrelated way, but I guess everything happens for a reason.

That whole six-degrees of separation must only apply to Kevin Bacon.

"Hey." I step back making room for them to pass. "You guys want to come in?"

"Just me." Becca offers another tentative smile. "I'm the one who wants to come in." She shoots Butch a glare. "But someone didn't think I was capable of crossing the street on my own."

Butch's head drops back, like he's dealt with this from Becca before. "I'm trying to make sure you stay safe."

"I thought I was here because this place is safe." She lifts her brows. "I bet Shelley and Felicity will just love to hear you're worried someone's going to come abduct me off the street where their kids play."

I get where she's coming from, but honestly, so does Butch. I know from personal experience. "It's happened before."

Becca scoffs. "So why am I even here?"

"That was a totally different situation." Butch seems to know the details about my ex, brother, and father taking Lydia, Piper, and me off the sidewalk outside.

Piper was so amazing that day. She fought like crazy to survive. Even when she was broken and bloodied, the woman never gave up. Never stopped being a pain in the ass. She found ways to cause destruction and pain and handed it out like free samples at Costco.

I wish I'd been more like her. Then maybe it would have ended before they even got us out of the neighborhood.

“We’ve increased security here since then, but you never know what’s going to happen.

We can’t be too careful until we understand the full extent of what we’re dealing with.

” Butch’s dark eyes fix on Becca’s face.

“What they’re willing to do to shut you up.

” His voice gentles. “I know you hate this, but you’ve just got to deal with it a little longer. My sources?—”

“Your sources don’t seem to know shit about what’s happening.” Becca snaps at him, her voice a little raw and raspy. “And what I’m dealing with, is living in a building with no running water and a hole in the roof while my sister is out there suffering way worse than I am.”

Plenty of people offered up their spare bedrooms for Becca to stay in, but she refused every one of them. Claimed she was a person who enjoyed her personal space, and didn’t want to inconvenience anyone.

I think I just got a hint at the real reason she turned everyone down, and it’s kind of a

revelation. I didn't even know Becca had a sister, let alone that she was suffering somewhere.

Becca turns from Butch, obviously done with the conversation. She steps into my house, striding past me. "I'll text you when I'm done."

Simon looks at me, then at where Becca's moving into the back portion of my house. "I think I'll give you girls a little privacy."

"That might be good." I'm not sure what has brought Becca here, but it's weird she didn't take whatever it is to Felicity or Shelly since she's known them for years. It has me curious.

And maybe a little worried.

Simon presses a quick kiss to my lips before turning to wrap an arm around Butch's shoulders. "Come on. Let's go check out the house situation you're dealing with."

I close the door behind them, flipping the lock into place before going to join Becca in the kitchen. When I get there, she's perched on one of my barstools, head in her hands.

"Is everything okay?" I take in her appearance, looking a little closer than I did a few seconds ago.

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She looks like shit.

Her hair's messy. Her clothes don't fit right, and there are bags under her eyes.

"No." Becca takes off her glasses, setting them onto the counter before rubbing her eyes.

"Everything is awful." She sniffs and I can't tell if it's because she's about to cry or because she's having an allergic reaction to all the mold in the place where she's staying.

"I came to tell you I'm sorry about the other night.

" Her lips press together. "And that I didn't tell you guys the full story of why I'm here. "

I slide onto the barstool next to her. "What is the full story?"

My understanding is she was being stalked by some guy she tried to turn into the police—the reason she's with Butch now.

Except the Memphis PD didn't do shit about it, because most of the department is as crooked as my grandma's pointer finger—the reason Butch is no longer a cop.

The explanation did feel a little bare bones when they gave it. But at some point—after dealing with something terrible—you get tired of explaining all your trauma over and over again, so you start offering a simplified version.

Becca's shoulders slump. "There's a human trafficking ring here in Memphis." Her lower lip trembles. "They have my sister."

My jaw drops. Now I feel really freaking bad for pulling her hair. "What?"

"Yeah." She scrubs at one eye, making the reddened edges even more inflamed. "I feel like I haven't slept since I found out she was gone."

"It's probably not helping that you're sleeping in a derelict house." I scrunch my nose. "I understand you feel bad being comfortable when you know your sister's not, but being miserable won't help her."

"It won't hurt her either." Becca sucks in a deep breath, blinking fast. "And I feel bad enough being here. If anyone does come after me, I sure as heck don't want them breaking into one of your houses to get me."

Okay. So I might like Becca. "Why are you telling me all this?"

She shrugs. "You're the only one here who doesn't know me." She gives me a half smile. "And I know you won't just try to feed me bullshit about how everything will be okay because we're friends."

I look over the woman next to me and wonder if this was how Lydia felt. If she struggled to sleep when Matthias cut off my communication with the outside world and she didn't know where I was or if I was okay. "You know, my sister had to rescue me."

I know my situation isn't nearly the same as Becca and her sister's, but there are some similarities. And I know she doesn't want to be fed bullshit, but maybe it will help to know I'm okay. That even when things were at their worst, I found ways to push through.

To survive.

Becca's bloodshot eyes fix on me. "From?"

"My ex-husband." I take a breath, waiting for the tightness that always squeezes my chest when I talk about the man my father made me marry.

"He was abusive in a lot of ways." My breathing is still okay, so I continue.

"He hurt me physically. Broke me down mentally. Assaulted and raped me." It's weird how far away those days seem right now. "For years."

Becca's head tips, her eyes narrowing in a scrutinizing gaze. "Why didn't you leave?"

"I was raised in a fundamentalist church that worked very hard to suppress women. To make sure we had few options. I didn't have a driver's license.

A bank account. Credit card. Nothing. My husband kept all my documents locked up tight.

" I shrug, feeling oddly disconnected from everything.

"And when he figured out I was going to try to leave him anyway, he took me out into the middle of nowhere and locked me in a cabin where he thought no one could find me." I lean closer to Becca.

"But Lydia found me anyway. She and Christian and Simon and Tate came for me. Saved me when I couldn't save myself. "

Becca's dark eyes are watery as they meet mine. "How did she find you?"

“I managed to sneak out and ran like hell.” For the first time emotion creeps in, but it’s not sadness over all the time I lost or regret over not finding a way out sooner.

It’s not even disgust at the men who tried to ruin me.

It’s pride. “I found a spot where Lydia and I played when we were kids and she was able to meet me there.” It’s a super simplified version of the events—just like Beca’s—but hopefully it’s enough to make the task of finding her sister seem possible. Something to give her hope.

She pulls in a deep breath. “I just wish I knew she was okay. That I could tell her I’m looking for her.” Her expression hardens. “And that I’m going to murder every person who did this to her.”

I’m not sure how much murdering goes on around here anymore, but sure. Murder sounds fun. I know a few people I’d be plotting against if they weren’t already behind bars. I like that they can’t get to me, but it also means I can’t get to them.

“I’ll help.” I might as well get it out of my system any way I can. “I’ve got a lot of feminine rage to get rid of.”

Becca gives me a small smile. “I’d like that.”

We both jump when my front door flies open and heavy footsteps come thudding our way. Simon races into the kitchen, looking a little wild.

I sit up straighter. “What’s wrong?”

“Where’s your phone?” His dark eyes snap around the kitchen.

“I don’t know.” I pat my pockets. “Upstairs maybe?” I lose the damn thing almost as

much as I lose my coffee cup. “Why?”

He comes toward me, moving fast. “We’ve got to go.”

I stand, letting him direct me toward the back door. “Where are we going?”

“The hospital.” He leads me straight out into the chilly autumn air. “Lydia’s having the baby.”

SIMON

“She’s so pretty.” Myra sits next to her sister on the hospital bed, eyes fused to the tiny baby tucked in Lydia’s arms.

I’ve seen plenty of babies over the years—my brothers are in the habit of making as many of them as they can—but I’m always struck by how fucking small they are. How helpless and fragile and delicate.

It’s a little terrifying.

Lydia turns to Myra. “You want to hold her?”

Myra’s gaze jumps to where I stand next to Christian, lingering just a second before going back to her sister. She bobs her head in a small nod.

I watch, unable to breathe as Lydia settles the baby into Myra’s embrace. It’s not hard to imagine this moment as a very different scenario. One where it’s not Christian’s baby my Myra’s holding.

“It fucking sucks.” Christian’s voice is low in my ear.

My head snaps his way. “What?”

He tips his head at his wife. “Having to watch them suffer. Knowing it’s your fault. That there’s not shit you can do to stop it. It fucking sucks.”

That's an angle I hadn't considered. But now it's going to haunt me at night. "Thanks for the tip."

"No problem." Christian shrugs. "I figured, based on the way you're looking at her, it wouldn't be long before it was Myra in that bed."

I haven't told anyone about the deal I made with Myra. The agreement we negotiated. It didn't feel like it was their business. And I didn't want one of my brothers to try to talk me out of it.

Or kick my ass over it.

"She wants kids." I can't pull my eyes away as Myra gazes down at her niece. "So do I."

Christian snorts. "You've wanted kids since we were eighteen." His eyes slide my way. "It's probably about time you got some."

I drink in the sight of Myra holding a baby, the smile on her face making my chest ache. Everything I've gone through—all the pain-and-suffering and loss—led to this moment.

This woman.

"I don't disagree." I keep my response short and simple.

I'm not sure what Myra's told Lydia about us. How much of our situation she's explained. And until I figure that out, I'm not offering any of it to Christian. He's my brother, but he's also a husband, and I know for a fact he will tell Lydia every single bit of anything I might confess.

Reluctantly, Myra gives the baby one last look before passing her back to Lydia. “She’s perfect.”

I hold my position as Myra and Lydia say their goodbyes, letting her lead this whole experience. She’s the only reason I’m here, witnessing this private moment. It’s about Myra meeting her niece, not me getting a peek at my future.

Even if both happened.

After a few more minutes, Myra turns to me, smile wide and hopeful. “Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready whenever you are.” I manage to stop myself from calling her Sweetheart or Baby . But just barely.

Myra comes straight to me, surprising me by sliding her hand into mine in a blatant show of connection and affection I’m not prepared for.

But I’m going to take it and hold on tight.

I don’t miss the way Lydia’s eyes track us and our intertwined fingers as we cross to the door. Myra gives her one last smile before we cross through the door and out into the quiet hall. We’re barely a few doors down before Myra’s gaze comes to me. “What did Christian say to you?”

“He said it was awful having to watch Lydia go through labor.” I don’t even consider holding back. It’s how I know Christian would tell Lydia anything I told him. Because I’ll do the same with Myra.

Myra’s brow furrows as she studies me. “Does that make you want to change your mind?”

I pull her closer as we get in the elevator, tucking her body tight against my side as a group of doctors in scrubs files in behind us.

Leaning in her ear so they don't get to participate in our conversation, I ask, "Do you mean, have I decided I don't want a baby because you'll have to suffer to make it happen? "

Myra nods up at me, eyes wide. "Yeah."

I shake my head, sliding a bit of her blonde hair behind one ear. "No. I haven't changed my mind." Brushing my thumb across her cheek, I add on, "But I can't make any promises I won't act like a complete fucking fool when you're suffering."

I've waited so long for her. Shown patience I didn't think I possessed. I can't fathom my reaction to seeing her in pain.

But I don't expect it will be remotely reasonable.

"Maybe they can give you an epidural too." Myra pokes me in the stomach. "Or maybe just a sedative."

I chuckle, her joke easing just a little of the pressure already building in my chest over the prospect of watching Myra suffer through childbirth. "Luckily I have a while to prepare for it."

"I guess that depends on how long you consider a while." Myra gives me a sweet smile before pointing out a truth that sends my stomach dropping to my boots. "Technically, I could already be pregnant."

"I really appreciate you letting us use this place." Butch tosses his bag and Becca's onto one of the sofas in my fifth-wheel.

“It’s a limited time offer. I’ll be leaving in a few weeks for a job in Florida, but it gives you a little time to come up with another option.

” I feel sick just talking about leaving.

Would back out of the Florida job in a heartbeat if I could.

But they’d never find a replacement in time and the whole project would be fucked sideways.

I don’t want to leave Myra, but I’m not going to screw over a whole team of people because of it.

“Hopefully this will all be over before then and it won’t matter.” Butch drops down to sit beside the bags, catching his head in his hands. “I’m not sure how much more of this Becca can handle. She’s fucking wasting away right in front of me and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

I understand his struggle. More than he knows.

But I also understand something he doesn’t.

“I don’t know if you saw, but that little woman fearlessly smacked me across the face with her flip-flop.” I chuckle a little at the memory. “She might be struggling, but she’s not going to break.”

Butch pulls in a deep breath, straightening to lean back.

“It’s not that I’m worried she’ll break.

Becca’s just different. She analyzes everything.

Picks it apart to the point she's driving herself crazy.

She doesn't eat. She doesn't sleep. Her brain won't shut off, and it's going to push her over the edge. ”

I go to sit on the other couch, lowering to the cushions. “Has she found anything?”

Butch doesn't respond.

“Fuck, man.” I scoff. “You still want to keep secrets?”

Butch scrubs a hand over his face, scratching at the shadow of growth lining his jaw.

“I don't want you guys to be any more tangled up in this than you already are.

” His hand goes to his hair, raking through the dark waves.

“I thought I could just break into one of the vacant houses, hunker down knowing there were cameras everywhere, and you wouldn't even suspect we were here.

I didn't plan for you guys to ever know what was really happening. ”

“So why didn't you? I told you which place was empty. You could have just gone in there and laid low.” Even as I say it I know it's not true. Someone was checking that house every day to see if Butch was back. He would've never gone unnoticed.

It's the same conclusion he must've also come to.

Butch laughs, the sound a little bitter. “Are you trying to tell me you guys didn't have eyes on that house twenty-four-seven after I accidentally broke into Myra's place?”

“Then why come back here at all? This can’t be the only place you have to go.” We obviously weren’t a huge part of Butch’s life. Not the way we all thought anyway. Surely he had friends and family—real friends and family—who could have helped him out.

Butch looks me over, hesitating just a second before admitting, “It wasn’t all a lie, Simon.

Most of what I told you guys about myself was true.

” His head drops. “You were my first undercover assignment. The department was trying to take King down, so I assumed when he went to prison I’d be reassigned.

Instead they kept me in place because they wanted me to start investigating all of you.

” Butch shakes his head. “I couldn’t do it.

I understood how you all ended up where you were, and there was no way I could let them—” He sucks in a breath, straightening.

“I tried to turn their focus to The Horsemen, and for a while that worked. When King got involved with them, I thought I was in the clear. That you were in the clear.” He runs his tongue across his teeth.

“But then King was killed and they pushed me right back on you. I kept telling them there was nothing. That you guys were all clean.” He stands abruptly and begins pacing in the small space.

“I would manage to get moved to another assignment, but they always dragged me back here. Kept trying to make me give them a reason to take you all down.”

“But we haven’t done anything in years.” I reconsider. “Well...”

“It didn’t matter. My boss had a fucking hard-on for you guys and he wouldn’t let it go.

” Butch shakes his head. “It never made sense.” He stalks past the kitchen.

“I stayed in the department as long as I could, but then shit started going sideways and I—” He turns to me.

“I don’t know who they might try to send in to take my place.

” He walks toward me. “Don’t fucking trust anyone.

Not a single fucking person, understand? ”

I swallow hard. “You think they’ll still try to take us down?”

“I don’t know what they’re capable of.” His eyes drift in the direction of Myra’s house where she and Becca are hanging the curtains Myra and I bought on our way back from the hospital yesterday.

“I never would have thought they’d be caught up in something like what’s going on with Becca and her sister, but here we fucking are. ”

I shake my head at him. “You can’t take this on by yourself.

I’m sure you’re capable of shit I don’t even know about, but one man is still only one man.

” I lean forward, trying to catch his attention as he continues pacing.

“And if this group has connections in the police department, they’ve got them other places too. You need help. Let us help y?—”

“No.” His rejection is sharp and immediate. “You guys aren’t getting in the middle of this.”

“Okay.” I drag the word out slowly. “What about Christian’s friend? Zeke. The one who works for that security company. We could call him and?—”

Butch comes straight at me, grabbing me by the front of my shirt and hauling me upright. “Don’t you fucking dare call them about this.”

I grip his wrist, holding it as tight as he holds me. “Calm the fuck down, man. Zeke’s a good guy.” Good is relative, but still. “He can help us figure this?—”

Butch gives me a little shake, expression teetering on the edge of unhinged. “I said no .” His eyes drop to where he holds me, widening like he hadn’t even realized it. Letting go, Butch steps back, putting space between us. “I think they might be a part of all this.”

“You’re kidding.” I can’t imagine any of the men I met when Zeke and his team came here to Memphis needing help from Christian, would have anything to do with a human trafficking ring, let alone one kidnapping underage girls like Becca’s sister.

“I meant it when I said don’t trust anyone.” Butch snaps.

“Fuck.” I blow out a breath. “Is that why you were out in the woods that night? You were trying to figure out what we were up to and if you could still trust us?”

Butch’s brows pinch together. “The woods?”

“The night you broke into Myra’s place. You were in the woods earlier. We both saw you.” It was what brought me into Myra’s home.

Into her bed.

Butch barely shakes his head. “I didn’t come through the woods. I hopped the fence behind her house.” His skin pales. “And that was the first time I’d been here.” His eyes hold mine. “If someone was in the woods, it wasn’t me.”

My whole body goes cold, the chill sinking straight into my bones. “I’ll be right back.”

Butch is right behind me as I turn for the door. “I’ll come with you.”

It’s the middle of the day. Even if someone was watching in the woods, no way would they be?—

A woman’s scream cuts through the air and my already fast pace breaks into a run.

Because I recognize that voice. It’s the one that’s going to be singing my babies to sleep.

And I’ll gut anyone who tries to stop that from happening.

MYRA

“How do they look?” I lean back, trying to get a full view of the floor-to-ceiling velvet drapes Becca helped me hang and I spent a stupid amount of time steaming. “Did I get all the wrinkles out?”

Becca’s brows pinch together, expression thoughtful. “Should I have hung curtains in my house?”

I turn, a little surprised. “You have a house?” I haven’t really thought about Becca’s life outside of what’s going on with her sister, which is probably kind of stupid. Of course she has a life besides what I’m seeing now. One that’s intertwined with Felicity and Shelly’s.

At least it used to be.

“Yeah. But who knows when I’ll ever be able to go back there.” She blows out a long sigh. “It’s probably full of dead guys anyway.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out because I don’t know how to respond to that.

Becca gives me a wry little smile. “I was just kidding.” She shrugs. “They already got all the dead guys out.”

Yesterday morning before I had to suddenly leave for the hospital, Becca filled me in on a little bit of what’s really happening, but I didn’t know it included dead guys in

her house. “Who pulled the dead guys out of your house?”

She rolls her eyes, lids closing. “It’s a long story and it makes my head hurt.” One hand lifts to rest against her temple. “I’m just glad Butch found somewhere we can lay low for a minute.” She opens her eyes. “Thank you for letting us stay here.”

“Of course.” I back down the stepstool I’ve been using to steam the creases from the deep green fabric, setting the handheld unit down on the top step. “You guys can stay here as long as you want.”

“I don’t want to stay here at all. I want to find my sister and go back to my life.

” Becca slumps a little, looking defeated.

“But I don’t think I’ll have much of a life to go back to at this point.

I’m pretty sure I no longer have a job, and I don’t know how I’ll feel about sleeping in a house where I had to jump out of a window to escape being murdered. ”

Holy cow. There is way more to the story than I realized. “You jumped out of the window?”

Becca snorts. “It’s actually really surprising how easy it is when you’re in danger. It’s shocking the lengths you’ll go to in order to survive.” She stands a little taller. “And how creative you can be when you don’t have any actual weapons.”

The more I learn about Becca, the more I realize she might be a girl after my own heart. “I tried to bash Butch’s head open with my nightstand drawer.”

Becca’s brows lift behind her glasses. “Impressive.” This time her smile is a little more genuine. “I attempted to take out a mercenary with an economy sized jug of

laundry detergent.”

I purse my lips. “You win. I’m not sure how I would handle facing down a mercenary.”

Becca flicks her wrist, waving off my comments. “That word makes them sound way scarier than they are.” Her expression turns a little sad. “Actually, some of the guys were really nice. I hate that they ended up being —”

My doorbell rings, cutting our conversation short.

I point at her. “Put a pin in that.” I wiggle my brows. “It sounds like my new sofa is here.” I head for my front door. “Now we’ll have somewhere to sit while we talk.”

I reach the front door and pull it open, smiling out at the two men on my stoop. The bright red box truck emblazoned with the furniture store’s logo is pulled right up to the curb in front of my house. “Hey. I bet you have a couch for me.”

I’m kind of stupidly excited about this. Not just so I’ll have somewhere to sit—and a spot to snuggle with Simon—but because I think furniture will really make my house start to feel like a home.

And I want Simon to feel like he has a home to come back to.

Florida is going to be his last job as an independent contractor, but at this point we don’t know how long that job is going to take. And I’m going to do everything possible to encourage him to get through the process as quickly as he can.

One of the men lifts the clipboard in his hand, looking across the names. “Are you Myra Parks?”

I cringe inwardly at the last name. I didn't want to keep Matthias's name, but I'm not sure going back to my father's was any better.

Hopefully I'll be able to replace it with a new one—one I choose myself—soon.

"That's me." I step back, motioning toward the family room. "Do you want to see where you're bringing everything?"

The men follow me in and I leave the door open since they're just going to be headed back out. As I walk down the hall, I open the app for the camera on the front porch and switch it off. Hearing the alarm go off a million times while they bring in my couch will drive me crazy.

When I look up, I nearly bump into one of their backs. I fumble my phone, but manage to regain my grip on it as I lean to see what has them stopping so abruptly.

Unsurprisingly, it's Becca.

Last night after Simon and I got home from the hospital, he made enough dinner for us to invite Becca and Butch over.

I think it might be the first real meal she's eaten, and from what she said this morning, the heavy weight of the carbs in the pasta pretty much made her comatose, so she also got a full night's sleep.

Add-on that she took an extra extended shower upstairs in my bathroom, and she's looking pretty darn cute.

She's got this innocent, nerdy vibe that is probably catnip to most men.

My movers included.

Stepping around them, I move into the family room, gesturing to the blank wall in front of me. “I’d like the long end of the sectional right here, with the shorter portion angling over there.” Continuing to flail around, I make a rough L-shaped with my swinging arm.

I’m so wrapped up in laying out the foundation of my family’s future that it takes a second for the strange noise behind me to register.

Even when it does, I don’t immediately recognize where it came from.

So when I turn and find one of the movers gripping Becca, with one hand plastered across her mouth, I’m surprised.

Pretty sure the guys bringing me a sofa shouldn’t be grabbing my friend that way.

Time seems to slow down as I take in the gravity of the situation I’ve found myself in. The full extent of the threat Becca and I are facing. I wasn’t sure who exactly was after her, but I have a feeling I’ve got my eyes on them right now.

And I’ll be damned if I let them take her the same way they took her sister.

My brain quickly falls back onto its anything can be a weapon belief. My eyes dart around in search of an option. It doesn’t have to be anything great, it just has to be capable of inflicting pain.

Luckily, a great option is well within my reach.

The empty-armed mover zeros in on me like a heat seeking missile. He’s about to find what he’s looking for.

As he lunges, I dodge, grabbing the handheld steamer still plugged into the wall.

In a quick movement, I twist the bubbling reservoir free of the flared plastic end and aim the opening right at his face.

Flicking my wrist, I fling every bit of the boiling water through the air.

The second it connects with his skin, I drop the empty tank and rip the cord from the outlet, carrying the rest of the unit with me as I race into the front room.

I know it's not much, but maybe I can beat him to death with it before the plastic break?—

A large body slams into me as soon as I make the turn into the foyer. The guy who had Becca must have decided his energy was better spent trying to chase me down, because now he's grabbing me instead of her.

I've got a split second to decide how best to use my weapon of choice.

What would Piper do? She would forget about blunt force trauma and go straight to strangulation.

Gripping the cord in both hands, leaving as much length as possible between the two, I fling them over the shoulder closest to his head, planting the cord against the front of his throat.

In a move so quick I can't believe I manage it, I shove my hands back, cross my wrists, then pull the remaining length of cord over his head and back to my front, effectively wrapping it around his neck.

The twist I added in the back, makes it easy for me to cinch.

And hard for him to loosen.

I drop low, putting all my weight into choking him out. I'm feeling like I might be getting somewhere when suddenly, his whole body lurches forward, taking me to the floor.

"Oh shit." Becca steps into my line of sight as one of the stools Simon bought for my island clatters to the floor. "I didn't expect him to go down so fast." Her head tilts. "Or for his neck to end up at that weird angle."

I slowly roll my eyes toward the pile of probably-not-a-real-mover pinning me to the floor. He stares back at me.

In a really dead sort of way.

Becca bends at the waist, nose wrinkling as she inspects her handy work. "Do you think I killed him?"

"I mean..." I try to wiggle free. "He sure feels like dead weight."

"Myra ." Simon's bellow carries in through the still open front door.

"He's not going to be happy." I shove at the probably dead guy on my back. "Help me get up so Simon doesn't have a coronary when he walks in."

Becca squats, grabbing the guy's shoulder as she leans back, managing to shift him just enough I can slip free. "Pretty sure there's no walking going on."

I get to my feet just as Simon races in, Butch hot on his heels. Both men skid to a stop, their eyes dropping to the pile at our feet.

Butch looks from me to Becca. "What the fuck just happened?"

Simon grabs me, pulling me against his chest. He holds me tight as Becca starts explaining.

“We thought these were the movers bringing Myra’s couch, but then this guy grabbed me and the other one tried to get?—”

“There’s another one?” Butch steps over the lump still sporting an extension cord necklace. “Did you kill him too?”

“Well...” Becca’s voice drifts off. “If I did, it wasn’t on purpose. Totally.”

Simon kicks the front door closed before dragging me down the hall behind Butch and Becca.

He stops in the doorway of the family room he worked so hard to finish, eyes caught on the red-faced man sprawled across the floor.

The collapsible step-stool I stood on to hang the curtains lay across him.

Like the guy at the front door, his neck looks a little...

Not right.

“You’re two for two, Bec.” I thought slapping Simon with her shoe was the worst the tiny woman standing next to me had to dish out. Guess I’m not the only one harboring a little extra feminine rage.

“I’m not fucking around.” She crouches down, digging into the pockets of the also probably dead man.

“These pricks have my sister. I meant it when I said I was going to kill them all.” She

pulls out his phone, waking it up before holding it in front of his face.

When the facial recognition does its job and the screen unlocks, she shakes her head.

“Idiot. Shoulda used a code instead.”

“I’m guessing he wasn’t expecting to be boiled alive before having his neck snapped.” Butch steps in close, looking over her shoulder as she swipes across the screen.

Becca goes still, eyes widening before lifting to me.

“What?” I pull out of Simon’s grip and shove Butch to one side so I can see what she’s looking at.

It’s a picture of me.

SIMON

“You still think we shouldn’t call Zeke and his friends?” I look over the bodies of the two dead men we pulled out of Myra’s house. “Because it’s not as easy as it used to be to get rid of these things.”

I don’t know what happened between Butch and the guys at Alaskan Security, but he immediately shoots me down.

“Absolutely not.” He scrubs one hand over his face and starts pacing across the warehouse floor. “ Fuck .” His voice echoes around the large space. “ Fuck .”

“We can’t help you if you aren’t honest with us.

” Tate stands beside me, looking just as perplexed as I am by Butch’s refusal.

“You said yourself, the cops are still watching us. You think they’re not going to get suspicious at some point?

We’re lucky we got these fuckers here without getting caught.

How in the hell do you think we’re going to dispose of them without attracting attention? ”

“I’ll figure something out.” Butch continues pacing.

I meet Tate’s eyes, guilt brewing in my gut over what I had to do.

What we all agreed had to be done.

At one point we all thought Butch was one of us. That he was our brother.

We were wrong.

He told me I couldn't trust anyone, and I believe him. Unfortunately, that includes him. But I still want to avoid betraying him entirely at all costs.

"It's not just these pricks. How in the hell do you think we're going to get rid of a big, bright red fucking box truck?

" I need him to see there's only one way out of this.

That our only option is to call in Christian's friend Zeke.

The company he works for—Alaskan Security— can make all of this go away.

They can help us track down the men responsible for those fuckers coming after Myra.

And that's who they were after. Not Becca. My Myra .

After digging through everything on their phones, we were able to piece together a little more of the corruption happening around us. It's not pretty.

It's also not only happening in Memphis.

From what we were able to discern, while all the power players are here in Memphis, they're abducting women from all across the country.

Women like Myra who stood up to awful men.

Women like Becca who tried to call out the corruption.

It's a modern-day witch-hunt, but this time it's not fire they're facing.

It's violation.

The men who came to Myra's house almost got lucky. They almost managed to collect two marks at once. Myra might have been their primary target, but Becca's name was also on the list hidden in their notes.

"We're not fucking calling Alaskan Security." Butch paces faster. "I can handle this. I just need a minute to think."

"We've had a minute to think. We know enough to understand this isn't something we can take on by ourselves.

" Tate tries to reason with him. "Men all throughout the prison system are using women like currency. They're giving them up to this group as punishment.

They're telling these people where to find them in retaliation for putting those fuckers behind bars. "

I fight against the rage bubbling through me. The anger at a man I still wish I could get my hands on.

The list of names I saw was long, and those were just the women they were targeting locally. The number of men like Matthias who are willing to sell these women into a sex trafficking ring to beef up their fucking commissary and dish out their personal vendettas is disgusting. It's sick.

And it has to end.

The heavy door of the warehouse opens behind me, and I know my time to sway Butch is up. I tried to make him understand, but if he won't, that's not my problem.

My problem is keeping Myra safe. At any cost.

Christian strides in, eyes fixed on Butch. "It's time."

Butch finally stops his erratic steps and looks between the three of us. The ones tasked with this job. "Time for what?"

Christian pulls in a deep breath. "I called Zeke. His team will be here in a few minutes."

Butch stares at Christian, open mouthed. After a few heartbeats, he advances on him. "You fucking?—"

Tate and I step in front of Christian. I hold one hand up. "We're not gonna do that."

Butch lifts his chin, glare cold as ice. "Fine. Becca and I will be gone when you get back."

I shake my head. "Becca's already with Zeke's team."

I expect Butch to be pissed about that, but I don't anticipate the level of rage that pours out of him.

"I'll fucking kill you." He swings at me, managing to return the shot I got in on him the other night.

It takes all three of us to get him under control, with most of us sustaining some sort of damage in the process. When we're finally able to shove him back, everyone's bruised, battered, and breathing hard.

The four of us stare each other down, years of deception wedged between us.

I only drag my attention away when the door Christian came through opens. Zeke and his team filter in, their sharp gazes snapping around the warehouse. Christian's friend stops, eyes narrowing. "Where's Butch?"

"He's—" I turn to where he was just seconds ago.

"Gone."

"You might want to be careful, because I'm pretty sure Becca is going to try to hit you with something way more dangerous than a shoe the next time she sees you." Myra delivers her warning before I'm even fully in the house.

"It will be worth it if it keeps her safe." Becca can hate me as much as she wants, as long as it keeps her from ending up abducted. Or worse.

Myra flops down on the sofa now gracing our family room, letting her head fall back against the cushions. "I just feel so bad. Butch is all she really feels like she has, and we just basically tricked her into ditching him."

I move to sit beside Myra, pulling her close.

"She didn't ditch him. Technically, he ditched her.

He could have stayed. He's the one who chose to take off.

” I smooth back her blonde hair, savoring the feel of her in my arms. “And maybe if he would’ve finally been fucking honest for once, we would have known why he didn’t want Alaskan Security involved.

” Disappointment joins the nausea I’ve been sporting since hearing Myra scream.

“But if he’s not willing to trust us, I’m not willing to trust him. ”

Myra leans closer, one hand coming out to grip the front of my shirt like she wants to make sure I’ll stay close. “Do you trust Zeke?”

“I trust Christian. And he trusts Zeke.” I shrug. “That’s good enough for me.”

Myra’s eyes drift to the window looking over her backyard, following the path of a flashlight as it shifts across the space. “It’s going to be weird having people follow me around again.”

“I know, Sweetheart.” I hated doing it to her, but there’s no fucking way I’m losing her. “It won’t be forever. Just until Zeke and his team can figure out what the fuck is going on.”

Myra gives me a little nod. “I hope they figure it out quickly. Not just for me, but for Becca too. And Lydia already went through this once. What if they take me and she has to face it again? What if my father tries to get them to take—” Her voice cracks.

“No one’s going to get you. No one’s going to get Lydia.” I run one hand down her arm, lacing our fingers together. “And we will get Becca’s sister back. We will get all of them back.”

I don’t know how many there are. Can’t even begin to guess. The number will probably shock me. Probably make me question humanity and the way we treat men

in power.

Myra gives me a soft smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "I know you will." She reaches up, running her hand across my jaw. "I love you."

"I love you." I lean down, brushing my lips across hers. "Are you sure you want to stay here? In this house?"

It's a question that's been nagging me since I dragged two dead bodies out the back door. I almost thought she wouldn't even want the couch in the house, but she did. I don't know if we'll keep it—that decision falls on Zeke's shoulders—but it's here for now.

And she doesn't seem bothered to be sitting on it.

Myra's eyes drift around the space, brows pinching as she considers. "I can't imagine leaving. This is my house. I bought it all by myself." Her eyes come to my face. "I don't want to let Matthias take that from me too."

I nod in understanding. "If you change your mind, just tell me. We'll buy the place across the street. I'll gut it. Make it whatever you want it to be."

A more genuine smile lights up her face. "I'm not sure Christian has enough random stuff in his warehouse to accomplish that."

I chuckle. "I feel like we've moved past the point of you forcing me to only use found items on renovations."

Myra rolls her eyes. "Don't act like you weren't sneaking in stuff you went out and bought." She pokes me in the chest. "I know what fresh two-by-fours look like."

“You only said I could only use items I found at Christian’s warehouse.” I shrug. “You never gave me specific instructions on how they had to get to Christian’s warehouse.”

“You’re a sneaky man.” Myra loops her arms around my neck, pulling me close. “Maybe you should sneak me upstairs. Sneak your big?—”

Myra’s back door flies open as one of Zeke’s men storms in. His head snaps from side to side as he looks around the kitchen and family room with narrowed eyes. “Is Becca here?”

Myra sits up. “No. She’s down at Shelley’s house. Why?”

“Fuck.” The guy—Owen I think—grabs the comm on his shoulder. “She’s not here.”

Myra gets to her feet as a voice carries through the mic. “She’s not here either.”

Three more men confirm Becca’s not where they are before everything goes quiet.

“What’s going on?” Myra’s question is wobbly and soft. Like she already knows what’s coming.

Owen turns to her, looking like he’s hating his fucking life for being the one stuck delivering the news. “Becca’s gone.”

MYRA

Simon scoots in closer at my side, his hand smoothing back my hair. “This was a terrible fucking idea.”

I manage a smile even though I’m exhausted. “Is it as bad as Christian told you it would be?”

“No.” Simon picks up my hand, lacing his fingers with mine. “It’s worse.”

I’ve been laying in the hospital for over twelve hours. Unfortunately, Simon’s son seems really happy where he is, and time is running out for the little stinker to make an appearance on his own terms.

My husband’s free hand slides down to splay across my giant belly. “Do you feel like anything’s changed?”

I really wish I did, but I don’t think it has. “I guess we’ll find out when they come in to check me again.”

As if my words manifested the nurse, she breezes in, looking fresh and focused and comfortable.

And I hate her a little for it.

“How’s it going?” She snaps a set of gloves free from the station beside the sink and pulls them on.

“Fine?” That’s about the best I can offer her. It’s a stretch, but if Simon finds out how I’m really feeling, he’ll probably lose his entire mind.

And most of it is already gone at this point.

“Let’s check things out and see what we’re looking at.” She comes to stand beside me and I automatically bend one leg out to the side the same way I’ve had to do every other time they’ve come in to check my uncooperative cervix.

I can tell by the look on her face it’s not good news.

Stepping away to toss her used gloves in the trash, she tells me what I already know. “You’re not progressing like we would hope.” She offers me a sympathetic smile. “You should probably start preparing yourself for the possibility of a cesarean.”

I nod because I’ve seen the writing on the wall for the past three hours. I’ve never had a baby before, but based on the stories I’ve heard Felicity and Lydia and Josie tell, what I’ve been feeling—and not feeling—didn’t seem... Right.

“When?” Simon’s one word question is hoarse.

“That will be up to her doctor, but if the decision is made to go ahead, things can usually move pretty quickly as long as we have an OR available.” She reaches out to pat me on the shoulder. “I had C-sections with all of my kids. I know it seems scary, but I promise it will be so worth it.”

I nod, a little confused because my body still isn’t reacting the way I would expect. Surgery should be terrifying—and it is. I just don’t feel like it’s terrifying. There’s no panic in my gut. No twist of nerves or fear. I feel mostly... Indifferent.

And very freaking hungry. And also very freaking tired.

“I’ll be right back. I’m going to go check in with your doctor and let her know what’s going on.” The nurse gives me another pat on the shoulder before leaving us alone.

I turn to Simon and almost laugh at how miserable he looks. I know I’m the one going through all of this, but he definitely seems to be suffering equally. Maybe not in a painful sort of way, but the man is clearly riding the struggle bus.

“It’s okay.” I try to offer a reassuring smile. “This way I won’t have to go through all the pushing and I’ll get a cool scar.”

Simon’s eyes widen in horror and I know I’ve made a mistake.

“They’re going to cut you open.” The hand on my belly slides down, cupping the spot just above where my pubic bone might be. It’s hard to tell where anything is at right now. Half my parts disappeared and I’m pretty sure the rest are shoved up into my chest cavity.

I’ve still loved being pregnant. Enjoyed every second of every minute of our baby growing inside me. But I’m ready to be unpregnant. Ten minutes ago. And if a C-section is how I have to accomplish that, I’m surprisingly okay with it.

In a few short minutes, my doctor comes bustling in with my nurse on her heels.

Again, I repeat the checking my cervix process, staring at the ceiling while yet another person shoves what feels like their entire forearm up my vaginal canal to see if there’s now enough space for a human to crawl out.

There’s not.

“I think we’re going to have to serve this little guy an eviction notice.

” My doctor is a super sweet woman who tells the worst dad jokes and wears the

most hilarious earrings I've ever seen.

Today she's got a pair of miniature roast chickens dangling from her lobes.

I love her. I trust her. I know if anyone is going to make this a pleasant experience, it's going to be her.

"It looks like they have space for us now, so let's get this ball rolling." She pats me on the thigh. "Then you can have something to eat and sleep on your belly." She tips her head. "As soon as your incision heals."

"Okay." I pull in a deep breath, blowing it back out. "I'm ready."

My doctor turns to Simon. "What about you, dad? Are you ready?"

Simon gives her a stiff nod. "Ready."

My doctor gives him an odd look before offering me another smile and explaining they'll be back to collect me shortly.

She leans into my nurse's ear as they leave the room, and for the first time I feel a little bite of nervousness.

Is something wrong and I just don't realize it? They would tell me, right?

I don't have long to worry about it. As promised I'm soon retrieved and wheeled out.

Everything is a blur from that point on.

My head is spinning a little bit from a disorienting concoction of adrenaline, excitement, and fear.

Even though I'm ready, it's impossible not to be a little worried when you're about to be strapped to a table with your head partitioned off while they pull your intestines out.

Probably shouldn't have done as much research into this process.

When I'm all situated, once again staring up at the ceiling, all my hair tucked into a blue stretchy cap, one of the nurses leads Simon in.

He's wearing a set of blue scrub looking pants and shirt.

His dark wavy hair is tucked under the same kind of hat on my head, and a set of covers hide his boots.

This is probably a strange time to notice how absolutely sexy my husband is, but I can't imagine anyone else filling out that awful outfit as well as he does.

The nurse brings him right to my side, moving him quickly into place. She shoves a stool behind him. "Sit down right here, dad."

Simon lowers into place, his movements stiff and slow.

Since I can't move anything besides my face and head, I pinch my brows together. "Are you okay?"

He shakes his head at me, reaching out to stroke down my cheek. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

He doesn't look fine. He looks awful, actually. A little like?—

My doctor calls out the time, announcing the start of the surgery. For a few seconds, I don't feel anything, but then there's an odd tugging sensation. It doesn't hurt, it's just

bizarre.

I wrinkle my nose. “That’s really weird?—

A sudden movement has me turning toward my husband, getting my eyes on him just in time to watch Simon’s roll back in his head.

I can’t do anything to help him so I’m forced to watch, helpless, as his big body starts to tip backward.

“No you don’t.” My nurse steps right behind him, shoving him upright.

“Called it.” My doctor’s voice is followed by a laugh. “You can always spot the ones who’ll pass out.” She peeks at me over the partition. “It’s usually the hot ones.”

“Is he okay?” I’m so distracted by what’s happening with Simon, I don’t pay much attention to the continued tugging happening behind the curtain.

“He’s fine.” The nurse waves something under his nose and Simon makes the most awful face. “Just a little overwhelmed.”

Simon blinks hard a few times, his dilated pupils finally finding me. “What happened?”

“You passed out, handsome.” My doctor pipes up. “And Nurse Melanie owes me five bucks.”

I fight a laugh, figuring it’s probably not a great idea to jostle around my middle while they’re extracting a baby from it.

“Hey there, cutie pie.” My doctor’s tone is sweet. “You might be stubborn, but you’re also adorable.”

A tiny, screaming body is held up for me to see then whisked away.

“We’ll get him to you in just a sec, mom and dad.” My doctor is still in place, finishing up, but I’ve already forgotten she exists.

Because I’m a mom.

I’ve wanted it for so long. Tried to bargain my way into it.

And ended up accidentally falling in love with the best man in the whole world.

Even if he’s a little passy-outie.

A new nurse—my original one is still positioned behind Simon—carries our son over, resting him close to my face so I can sort of cuddle him with my chin. She pulls up a stool and sits beside me, showing me all the parts of him she can considering he’s tucked tightly into a hospital issued blanket.

Tears streak down my face even though I don’t feel like I’m crying as I soak up the first few minutes of motherhood.

They’re not the way I imagined they’d be, but that’s okay.

Sometimes even the best plans go off the rails.

I’m super, super, SUPER sorry. I know this story ended on a little bit of a cliffhanger. I literally spent weeks trying to come up with an alternative, but every option I could think of would ruin some part of Butch and Becca’s book.

And you guys have waited for them too long for that to happen.

On the plus side, now you know why Butch and Becca were always going to be last.

Unfortunately, as this series progressed, I struggled to figure out how to make Butch's story fit. I knew from the beginning he was an undercover cop , but as I got closer and closer to his story, I just couldn't see how it would fit into the Lost Boys or Sinners and Saints.

But he did fit somewhere else. Really well, actually. Somewhere he can get everything he wants and be exactly who he's meant to be.

That's why Butch's book is part of my Alaskan Security-Team Shadow series. It's where he belongs. Where he deserves to be.

And who knows? Becca might discover she fits in there pretty well herself.

You can preorder your copy of Butch and Becca's story, Desired Perception, [here!](#)

Want to see the boys in Memphis meet Zeke and his team? That happens in Covert Operation.

Want to see when Butch and Becca first cross paths again (this will be covered in their book as well)?

That happens in Safe Haven.

And last, but not least, would you like a little more of Myra and Simon? (And maybe a peek at the first time Butch and Becca met?)