



Texting My Valentine

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Description: When my friends play Cupid and match me with a silver fox savior at a Valentine's texting night, they forget I swore off love a long time ago.

Maybe twenty-one is too young to be done with men, but Mom's string of ruined relationships has left a sour taste in my mouth. I've vowed to never ever to let anyone hurt me.

Then Alex Whitmore, a dashing surgeon with romance on his mind, saves me from my stalker and vows to make me his.

When I tell him it's impossible, this possessive, chiseled doctor sends steamy, emotional, heartfelt texts that leave me hungry for more. My defenses go back up when I suspect he's lied to me.

He won't take no for an answer, even if that means taking a bullet for me. Valentine's magic is in the air. No matter how hard I fight my desire, I just can't resist, but I'm terrified it will end in disaster.

* Texting My Valentine is an insta-everything, OTT, standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.

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CHAPTER 1

TORI

“I ’m deciding for you. You need to get laid.”

I roll my eyes at Cleo’s latest outrageous statement. You’d think I would’ve built a tolerance to her don’t-give-a-single-fuck attitude by now, but her brashness still shocks me sometimes.

She tosses her fiery red hair, puckering her lips. “Or shall we start slow?”

“That is so gross,” I mutter. “I’m going to pretend I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“You can pretend all you want.” Cleo grins, in her element. “But the fact is, you’re stressed. And there’s only one surefire way I know to deal with the ups and downs of life... you go down on a?—”

“Oh, please.”

I’m relieved when Lily cuts in. She’s the yin to Cleo’s yang. She met her man in high school, and they’ve been sweethearts ever since. They’re engaged to be married this summer. She’s sitting at my vanity unit, brushing her long blonde hair.

She’s like a princess, whereas Cleo has more of a sensual ‘party girl’ vibe going on. Me? I’m the in-between chick. I’d call myself artistic, but even my friends don’t

know about my secret hobby.

“No,” Lily continues, “She doesn’t need a string of one-night stands. She needs love.”

Cleo mimes puking. “Just because you found your Romeo doesn’t mean the same tactic will work for the rest of us. Some of us lowly women...”

Cleo pauses, wincing when there’s a crash in the next room: Mom’s bedroom. She raises her voice, yelling down the phone. “What do you mean we can’t move in?”

Cleo raises an eyebrow at me.

“Ignore it,” I say, my cheeks burning. “Go on with whatever you were going to say.”

“We have to content ourselves with... how shall I put it? Therapeutic bouncing on pogo sticks.”

I laugh. Now it’s Lily’s turn to mime a healthy dose of disgust.

“Don’t listen to her.” Lily spins in the chair, facing me. “You don’t need that. You need love.”

From the next room, Mom yells, “Maybe I will find somebody else! Somebody who appreciates me! Somebody who doesn’t have a secret wife!”

Lily lowers her voice. “Do you want to go and talk to her?”

“So we can discuss her latest disaster?”

I feel like a bitch when I say this. But jeez, what else am I supposed to say? We’re in

here discussing my love life—or lack thereof—while Mom goes through another dynamite breakup. It's the same routine, always has been, always will be, it seems.

She finds an inappropriate man, moves too fast, and then acts shocked when it ends in disaster.

My guilt twinges when I hear her crying loudly from the next room.

“I really think you should talk to her,” Lily says softly.

“It's fine.”

“Either way,” Cleo goes on. “Your boss is pretty cool, Tori, but this Valentine's texting night is the best thing she's ever come up with.”

She's talking about the Valentine's event at the bar where I work. The concept is simple. Men and women who are intent on a meeting with Cupid put their cellphone numbers into bowls, then text until love, apparently, blossoms.

“Did it ever occur to you that I got the night off so I didn't have to go to work?”

Cleo shrugs. “It's not our fault it's turned out to be the hottest event in the city. Anyway, we have to go somewhere .”

“It could be fun,” Lily mutters.

“So now you're ganging up on me?” I grumble.

Lily giggles, leaving my vanity unit, and pinches my cheeks. She shapes my mouth into a smile. “It should be illegal to be so grumpy on Valentine's night.”

Mom's crying grows louder.

"Tori..." Cleo presses.

"I know, I know."

I stand up, mentally noting that my reluctant tone won't win me any Daughter of the Year awards. Walking through our apartment, I try to turn myself into the sympathetic person Mom needs.

It's difficult. I won't lie.

Before Dad passed away, he and Mom were involved in a messy divorce. If I ever had any misconceptions about what love was or could be, they fixed that fast.

Mom is sitting on the edge of her bed, her face buried in her hands, her shoulders shuddering as she sobs.

"I'm fine," she whimpers.

She sounds like a child, as she often has throughout the years. The notion frequently occurs to me that I'm the one who has to parent her. Talk about a breeding ground for resentment. But I try to keep that at bay.

Whatever else is true about us, we're family.

I sit beside her and place my hand on her arm. "What happened?"

"It turns out my Prince Charming isn't so charming after all," she says bitterly. "The whole apartment bit was a lie..." She glances at her packed suitcase in the corner of the room, her eyes red and rimmed with tension. "It turns out he's married."

“Oh,” I mutter. I’m not sure what else to say.

She tilts her head at me. “Did you know?”

“No,” I answer truthfully.

“But you’re not surprised.”

“I just...”

I don’t know how to tell her that she always chooses the worst men without causing an argument.

“You don’t have to treat me with kid gloves like I’ll shatter if you’re honest.”

She can’t know how absurd that statement is.

“Spit it out, Tori.”

“I want you to be okay, Mom,” I tell her.

“ But ...”

“There’s not a but.”

She folds her arms, looking very much like a child. It annoys me, but I try not to let it show.

“There is, so why don’t you just spit it out,” she scoffs.

I sigh. “Let’s just say I didn’t pack my suitcase.”

Okay, that was a mistake.

She throws her arms up, letting out a warbling cry that could shatter glass. She's an accountant, but with this scream, she's in the running to be an opera singer.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she screeches.

"Mom, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just explain."

"Let's just say you're not exactly the best example of how to build a functioning relationship!" I tell her.

Crap. There goes my temper.

I wonder who I got it from...?

"And let me just say." Mom leaps to her feet, pointing her finger at me. "That it would be nice to have a daughter who supported me from time to time. God . I'm going to the store to buy a gallon of wine."

"Mom—"

"Just leave it, Tori."

She marches from the room, slicing her hand through the air.

The door slams loudly.

I return to the bedroom. "Let's get to this party before she comes home."

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CHAPTER 2

ALEX

“W h o a, the Death Star! ” Elliot beams as I give him his latest LEGO set. He looks so much like my little brother... well, how my brother looked before the crash.

He’s got the same mop of black hair and the same light green eyes.

“Can we build it now?” he asks.

“I’m heading out for the night, remember?” I say. “But another time, champ.”

He frowns. Deep down, there’s a little niggling ball of guilt. I try not to think about my brother, his wife, the crash, or any of it. Instead, I kiss my nephew on the head and then walk out onto the porch of my beachfront property.

I’m not surprised to see Julian has already knocked back two glasses of whiskey, his eyes glassy as he pours a third. Just like in prep school, Julian is the partier, always ready to take things to the next level.

He’s got a hungry look in his eyes like he’s on the hunt for his next romantic entanglement, which inevitably burns hot and then sizzles out just as fast.

“Care for a glass, my old, depressing friend?”

I chuckle wryly. “Who said anything about me being depressing?”

He looks out at the sea. “Alex, old buddy, old pal, you don’t have to say it.”

“I’ll have a glass. A small one.” I emphasize.

He grins. “Don’t worry. I know you well.” He pours the glass as I sit opposite him. “The kid all set up with the nanny?”

“Yeah, I think they’re going to build a LEGO set.”

“Did he ask you to build it with him?”

I grab the glass, taking a long sip. It’s entirely possible I’m delaying my response.

“How’d you guess that?”

“Because a blind man could see it’s not just LEGO the kid is interested in building.”

I’m not in the mood for his professional insights. I became Chief of Surgery. He went on to become a successful clinical psychologist. This means he’s always quick with an opinion, whether it’s welcome or not.

“What’s on the cards for tonight?” I say, changing the subject.

“It’s Valentine’s, so there’s only one reasonable course of action,” he replies. “We find two hotties and have our wild, wicked ways with them.”

“We’re forty, Julian,” I deadpan.

“Ah-ah. I’m thirty-nine. You’re the old one in this dynamic duo.”

I grin. “Fair enough. But don’t you think you’re getting a little old for this?”

“Are you going to give me the ‘settle down’ speech? It’d be a bit rich coming from you.”

“Just because I haven’t settled down doesn’t mean I want to sleep around.”

“You should try it sometime. You might realize that being an honorable man is wildly overrated. Anyway, it’s not as if you’ve been stubbornly searching for love, is it?”

I take another small sip of whiskey. Julian takes this as a challenge and drains his glass.

“Life doesn’t have to be so serious all the time,” he says. “Sometimes, it’s worth just taking each moment as it comes. Who knows how many we’ll have left?”

“It’s a little early in the night to be getting philosophical,” I mutter.

“Blame the bottle.”

“You’re annoying enough without the bottle,” I tease.

He smiles at the gentle ribbing. “Touché, my grumpy friend. Why don’t you do me a favor tonight?”

“I feel you’re going to ask even if I say no.”

“Put all the sullenness in that soul of yours into a box and pretend it doesn’t exist.”

“Is that your professional opinion?”

“No—God, no. If we were at work, I’d tell you to think long and hard about your

issues and find the best way to approach them. I'd tell you to meditate and write a list of all the different ways you could conquer your demons. But thankfully, we're not at work."

"I'm happy to come out with you," I tell him. "But the whole one-night-stand thing has just never been for me."

"How about you do me a favor and try?"

"Seriously?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"You always talk about how it's not for you. You want the real thing. Yada yada yada."

"When you put it like that, you make me sound like some wannabe hopeless romantic," I say dryly.

He grins as if to say, And what exactly did you think you were?

"You never know. Going out with the intent of having fun might have a positive effect on you. You may even be able to let go of some of this grumpiness. And who knows? Maybe having fun will put less pressure on the whole thing, and you'll meet your soulmate that way."

"For the record, I don't talk about finding my 'soulmate' that often at all. Just so you know."

"I wouldn't be the top clinical psychologist in the world if I couldn't read between the lines."

"That sounds like a slight exaggeration..."

He grins. “So, do we have a deal?”

He might have a point. Ever since all the stuff with Elliot’s mom... I don’t let my mind go there.

Damn.

Maybe his point is even more valid than I realized. We arranged this night to have some fun, but my mind won’t stop going to negative places. It’s like there’s something inside me hungry for darkness.

“I can practically hear the cogs in your mind turning.”

I laugh, playfully flipping him the bird. “Fine, just this once, I’ll be your wingman.”

He may call me dramatic, but he’s the one who punches the air.

Julian leans against the bar, gesturing to the end of it with a big grin on his face. “What about them?”

I look down the bar. The place is all decked out in red. A large inflatable Cupid sits above the bar, holding a bow and arrow with a heart on the end. Even the placemats have a Valentine’s theme.

“They seem a bit...”

“What?” Julian interrupts. “Fun?”

“Young?”

“Pfft, don’t give me that. You’re the one in your forties. We’re talking to them...”

As he drags me over, I remind myself of my promise. I agreed to be his wingman. Tonight is about having fun, after all, not getting lost in the implications of what could happen.

Sometimes, it's as if I think I can surgically dissect life, but that's just not how it works. I need to let go.

"Ladies, I'm so sorry for interrupting," Julian says, smoothly sliding his elbow onto the bar.

The two women turn to us, all smiles, looking as drunk as my friend. They look college-age, wearing outfits that don't leave much to the imagination. Not that I'm judging them. I'd just like my future partner to...

I stop myself. I'm not here to meet my future partner. Neither are these women, most likely. We're all here for the same reason. I refuse to look at the seediness of the situation.

"Could I be so bold as to ask your names?" Julian says.

The women giggle, apparently not finding this one of the cheesiest ways he could've made this request. I try to hide the fact that I'm cringing. Hard.

"You can call me Tinker," the tall brunette says.

"And you can call me Belle," the woman with pink hair says as they turn to each other and giggle.

Julian glares at me, which tells me my expression is probably not as inviting as it should be. I plaster a smile to my face—or my best approximation of one.

I have to remember. Tonight, no grumpiness.

“And what do you do, Belle?” Julian says, but he’s looking at me, making wild eye gestures toward Tinker.

“Oh, you know, a bit of this, a bit of that...”

When Julian loops his arm around her waist and leads her toward a table in the corner, that’s my cue to pick things up with Tinker.

“So, what’s your real name?” I ask.

She purses her lips at me. “Now, why would you want to ruin the fun, hmm? You should ask to buy me some shots. That would be more fun.”

Truth be told, I’m not interested in having fun with this woman. But I promised Julian I’d make an effort. I’m fairly certain this type of so-called fun will never appeal to me, but it’s Valentine’s. Maybe I need an open mind as well as an open heart.

“Sure, what are you drinking?”

“Sambuca.”

Disgusting. “Delicious,” I say.

I order a round of shots and carry them over to Julian’s table. He cheers and claps his hands together like I’ve just discovered the cure for cancer. I resist the almost overwhelming urge to roll my eyes at him.

“I saw that,” Belle says after we all drink our shots.

“Saw what?”

Julian chuckles. “She saw you toss it over your shoulder, smartass. Stop being so stubbornly sober. You’re going to make me order some more.”

“I don’t think I could handle another.”

Tinker giggles. “But you didn’t drink it.”

“What’s with the names?”

I mean for the question to come out in a joking tone, but judging from the look the girls exchange, I sound like an aggressive asshole.

“Well,” Belle says. “We made a pact tonight. No names. No connections. Just fun.”

“You’re kidding,” Julian says. “We made the same pact. But aren’t you here for the texting event?”

“Who needs to text when we’ve got the real thing, huh?” Belle puts her hand on Julian’s arm.

When Tinker tries to touch me, I lean away. It’s rude, maybe, but I don’t want to be touched. Julian frowns at me.

Dammit. What is he expecting? I’m not going to throw myself at her. The last thing I want to do is drag her into the bathroom and have some seedy, quick, meaningless sex, which is probably what he’s planning to do.

Sometimes, it’s difficult to know if I’m the crazy one or if everybody else is.

“What do you do?” Belle asks Julian.

As Julian talks about his work—something he always enjoys—I look across the bar.

Three women are approaching the bar. One is tall, blonde, and dressed modestly. The other is a redhead, dressed anything but. It’s the one in the middle who interests me, though.

Is interest a strong enough word?

She’s got soft, light brown hair, somewhat tamed but with a hint of wildness that immediately ignites my interest. Unlike most other women here, she doesn’t wear a dress. She wears a sparkly black top with tight hip-hugging jeans emphasizing her curvy figure.

There’s something about her smile. Small, almost judgmental. It’s as if she feels just as out of place as I do here. Her red-haired friend throws an arm around her, saying something in her ear over the loud noise in the bar.

“Hey.”

I flinch when Tinker puts her hand on my arm.

She looks upset. Irrationally, she reminds me of Elliot and the dejected look he sometimes gets when I tell him I’m too busy to build a LEGO set with him.

“What’s up?”

“I asked what your job is, but if you’re too busy ogling somebody else, maybe I won’t even bother trying to make conversation.”

Julian is giving me some serious stinkeye now.

“I’m a surgeon,” I mutter, trying not to stare across the bar at the woman with the tight jeans and the obvious attitude.

“That’s an understatement,” Julian says. “He’s the Chief of Surgery. Ladies, you’re in the presence of medical royalty.”

He’s laying it on thick. It’s true. I’ve worked hard to get where I am, but I’d never describe myself as royalty.

“Whoa, that’s like, really impressive.”

I smile tightly. “Thank you... Tinker.”

Already, I’m thinking of ways to end this conversation. I don’t want a one-night stand.

I want to talk to the woman leaning against the bar, looking around with an expression that says, What the hell am I doing here?

I know the feeling, stranger.

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CHAPTER 3

TORI

“The bartender said the event’s going to start soon,” Cleo says, swaying her hips from side to side as we walk across the bar.

She’s doing it on purpose and with more confidence than I ever could. It’s not that I hate my body or have any serious body-image issues or anything. Well, at least, that’s what I tell myself. But I’m still far from ever moving or behaving like that.

“Are you going to text all night?” Cleo teases Lily.

“Isn’t that the point of tonight?” Lily counters.

“Yes, but we’re supposed to be texting Casanovas with steamy promises and then meeting them on the beach for some rumble-tumble fun, which we may or may not regret in the morning... Somebody save me.” She makes this proclamation at the ceiling.

I giggle. “I never took you for a praying girl, Cleo.”

“It’s not bad enough that I’ve got Little Miss Engaged over here, but look at you, Tori. I mean, it’s sacrilegious.”

“What is?”

“You’re drinking a soda .”

“Leave her alone,” Lily says. “You know why.”

Cleo bites down, realizing her mistake. “I’m sorry, Tori. But would one drink hurt?”

“I’m no teetotaler, but...”

Neither of my friends needs me to finish. Mom does enough drinking for both of us. It’s not complicated, even if it is a cliché.

“Speak of the devil,” I mutter when my phone vibrates.

“Whoa, freaky,” Lily mutters.

Cleo rolls her eyes.

“Don’t start calling me superstitious,” Lily says.

“Don’t pout at me, chica,” Cleo replies with a grin. “What else am I supposed to call you when you believe in horoscopes and love at first sight, huh?”

“Well... you only believe in sex at first sight.”

“I would’ve said ‘fuck at first sight.’”

When Lily cringes, Cleo laughs again. I want to join the banter, but the vibrating phone and Mom’s name distract me.

“Are you going to get that?” Lily asks.

“I’d rather walk over hot coals, to be honest. But she’s my mom, as annoying as that is. I’ll take it outside.”

I leave by the rear exit, nodding to the chef and one of the busboys before slipping into the alleyway. The Miami night is warm for February, and the air feels stifling. Or maybe that’s just the prospect of the phone call.

“Tori?” Mom says. “I didn’t think you were going to answer.”

Surprise, surprise, she sounds drunk. Yet, I’m at a bar. But who am I to judge? She’s gone through a rough breakup. Just because it’s her second of the year, it doesn’t make it any easier.

Come on, Tori. Be a good daughter.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“I was devastated.”

“Was?” I ask hesitantly.

“But I’ve reinstalled Tinder, and now things are looking better.”

Is she serious?

“Oh.” It’s all I can say.

“I’ve matched with a man. Very polite, very charming. He’s a stockbroker, and he wants to meet tomorrow. Can you believe that?” She says, full of enthusiasm. Gone is the sullen, crying woman from not even a half hour ago.

“I’m not sure rushing into a relationship is the best idea.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” she snaps. “True love is out there. It’s just waiting for me to seize it. You, of all people, should know that.”

“Why? Because I’ve sworn to do my best to avoid romance for my entire freaking life?” I say sarcastically. “Is that why I should be an expert?”

“Relax, Tori. Jeez. I just meant because of where you are this evening.”

I feel like a jerk. “I hope it works out.”

“You do?” She sounds surprised.

“I always hope it works out, Mom.”

It just never does. I don’t add that part, though.

“Thank you. I know we had a little thing earlier. Can we put it behind us, please?”

“Just don’t rush into making moving plans with this one. And maybe check if he’s married.” She doesn’t reply, so I say, “I love you, Mom.” Sure, that statement probably has some guilt in it, but I mean it.

“I love you. Thanks for always supporting me.”

I return to the bar. Lily is texting with a grin on her face, which means she’s texting Clive, her fiancé, ‘one of the good ones,’ as I call him. Maybe he’s the only good one. Pre-vetted through my friend’s approval.

“Finally. I was about to send out a search party. They would’ve turned out to be

stripper-grams, but still,” Cleo says with a grin.

“Do you have to be so seedy all the time?” I sigh.

“No, but it’s Valentine’s. Cut me some slack.” She finishes her drink.

“Cleo, let me get these. I could use a drink. But just one. My tolerance for alcohol is about as low as my tolerance for all this schmaltzy crap.”

Cleo giggles. “I’m going to choose only to hear the first half of that statement.”

Damien serves me at the bar. He’s the sort of guy who stares a little too long. Tall, with sharp cheekbones and eyes that roam up and down my body. He gives me the creeps, to be honest.

“Hey, Victoria. What can I get you?”

“You can call me ‘Tori’, Damien. It’s what everybody else calls me.”

“But Victoria is such a beautiful name.”

Urgh. I’ve given him so many signals that I’m not interested, but he won’t take the hint. I’m relieved whenever I turn up to work and see he’s working a different shift. I knew we should’ve gone somewhere else tonight.

After ordering the drinks, I return to our table, sure I can feel his eyes on me.

“Somebody’s got an admirer,” Lily says.

“Don’t.” I take a sip of the vodka mixer, just a small one.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asks.

“I don’t know. He gives me bad vibes. Always calls me ‘Victoria’ and acts too nice.”

“Jeez,” Lily replies. “You need to lighten up. Sometimes, nice is just nice.”

“Screw that.” Cleo shakes her head. “I’m with Tori on this. The nice-guy act is always hiding something.”

“He looks like a fit, well-put-together young man.”

“Yeah, he does martial arts and goes to the gym. That doesn’t mean I have to throw myself at him,” I mutter.

“But please,” Cleo says, “throw yourself at somebody so I don’t feel like the odd one out.”

“Cleo, if there’s anything you’re comfortable being, it’s the odd one out,” I say.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Lily echos my thoughts.

Soon, it’s time for the main event to begin. The bar owner, Rowan, takes to the stage wearing an outlandish sparkling red dress, Jessica Rabbit-style. Several men whistle, and Rowan takes a short bow. She speaks into the mic.

“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight is our second annual Text Your Valentine Event. We all know that hiding behind our phones allows us to be, let’s say, more risqué than we would in person.”

“Speak for yourself!” Cleo yells, and the room erupts into laughter.

“To that end,” Rowan goes on. “We have two bowls marked ladies and gents . The concept is simple: put your number in the bowl and wait for the text-a-thon to commence. We will match the numbers and put them in envelopes to ensure there are no crossovers. One person for one number. If you want to arrange any group activities , do it on your own time.”

We all laugh, and Rowan steps off the stage.

Cleo grabs her purse, takes out a pen, then grabs a piece of paper from the middle of the table. “Who’s in?”

“Obviously not,” Lily says.

“Well, duh.” Cleo stares at me. “Come on, Tori. It’ll be fun. It’s just texting. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“What’s the best that could happen?”

“You could find a digital Prince Charming to finally break down all these emotional walls you’ve built around yourself. You could live happily ever after.”

“Now you know she’s desperate.” Lily giggles. “She’s turned into Cupid all of a sudden.”

“I know, right?” I tease. “Talk about laying it on thick.”

“Don’t make me beg,” Cleo says. “I’ll get down on my knees. Do you want to humiliate me?”

“Sort of. But fine. Why not? It’s not like I have to text them back.”

CHAPTER 4

ALEX

“Sulking is a bad look,” I tell Julian.

“I’m not sulking,” he says... while sulking.

“I didn’t know they were both going to leave,” I tell him. “I didn’t want to give her the wrong impression.”

“They were ready for a good time, and you basically told them to go to hell. And what for? So we could sit at the corner of the bar like two depressing old men and have no fun at all. Not everything has to be so serious all the time, Alex.”

“Look, if Tinker and Belle want to have a good time, they can find somebody else. I’m not interested in anything casual.”

“Or anything serious,” Julian points out. “What are you interested in, bro? Working eighteen-hour days so you don’t have to think about the rest of your life?” After a pause, he says, “I’m sorry. That was harsh. You’re right. I’m being an ass.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. This isn’t something to fight about. Call me an ass so I can feel better about it.”

“You’re an ass. Happy now?”

“Very.” He sips his beer. “Anyway, if I am sulking—and I’m not agreeing—maybe you could help me out. Let me put your number in the bowl.”

I look over to the line of people at the stage. Two lines, men and women. The woman with the wild hair and the magnetic smile sits at a table. Does that mean she’s not putting her number in?

“Come on,” Julian says. “It’ll be fun. Some harmless texting.”

Maybe he’s right. He apologized for his dig about me making work my life, but he has a point. Perhaps I need to let go from time to time. I can’t live with a vice grip on life just because some shitty things happened to me once upon a time.

“Fine, go on. Do it. You madman.”

“Yippee!” he practically squeals.

“Christ, Julian. You didn’t just say ‘yippee.’”

“Young at heart, old buddy,” he says, chuckling as he slides from the barstool.

I sip my drink—I’m still on my first—and try not to stare at the woman. I can’t lie.

I’m curious. I think that’s the right word. And there’s this rumbling deep down, my loins stirring, excitement tickling at the edges of my usually cold consciousness.

When she laughs, it has an edge to it, an attitude.

Julian returns. “I’m getting another drink while I wait for the love of my life to text

me.”

“If she doesn’t, I’m sure you’ll find one of your own.”

“Amen to that.” He laughs. “It’ll be time to collect the numbers soon... I wonder how sneaky they’re going to be with the envelopes. Think I’ll be able to spy my Juliet?”

“I’ve got everything crossed for you,” I say dryly.

I watch as a tall, fit man walks from behind the bar and approaches my stranger’s table. Julian busies himself chatting up one of the barmaids that just passed by. Is he her boyfriend? I’ve got no right to be jealous, but goddamn it, sue me. I don’t want her to have a boyfriend.

He says something to her, then she stands, walking around the bar with him. They linger at the very end. I’m no lip reader and too far away to hear what they’re saying.

Their body language is tense. The man takes a red envelope from his pocket and offers it to the woman. She shakes her head, her gorgeous waves bouncing around her shoulders. He shoves the envelope at her. She takes a step back.

Then he shoves the envelope at her again. I’m on my feet before I realize it.

“Where are you going?” Julian says as he looks my way.

I ignore him, my heart pounding as I rush past him. Who does this guy think he is? Not her boyfriend, clearly, if she won’t accept a red envelope on Valentine’s Day.

“You’re not getting the hint, buddy,” I growl as I step behind the bar.

My tone even shocks me. Protective instincts swell in me, especially when the

woman turns with gratitude on her face, but then her expression becomes guarded.

“No customers behind the bar.” The man is smiling, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I’m not just going to stand here as you lay your fucking hands on her.”

“I wasn’t...”

“I watched you shove that letter at her. She’s clearly got no interest. So. Back. The. Fuck. Off.” My hands clench into fists as if I’m twenty years old and not a Chief of Surgery, a man with a career, a nephew, and a reputation to protect. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Are you serious, old man?” he snaps. “You’re trying to play the tough guy routine with me?”

“Damien, be quiet,” the woman says. “He’s telling the truth. I’ve tried to be nice, but you’re making it impossible. You were getting pushy.”

“I was getting passionate .”

“I’m not interested in your passion,” she says through clenched teeth.

“Can’t a man do a nice thing anymore?”

“You heard her,” I say. “Leave her alone.”

“What’s it to you?”

She’s beautiful and interesting. And she’s the only woman I’ve looked twice at in a very long time. Not that I’m going to tell him any of this.

“Huh?” He gets in my face, prodding me in the chest. The little shit. “You obviously don’t know who I am, tough guy. I’ve had three cage fights. I’ve got... friends. You understand what that means in Miami? Well?”

He prods my chest again. My hand moves on reflex, gripping his hand and squeezing tightly. He makes an annoying yelping noise. “I don’t care about your so-called connections. Just leave her alone.”

He grabs my shirt with his other hand. “I will choke you, old ma?—”

“What’s going on here?”

The owner—the woman who announced the texting event—strides around the bar. “Damien? Tori?”

“Damien tried to give me a Valentine’s card,” Tori jumps in. Learning her name feels far better than such a simple thing should. “He got aggressive when I refused it. This guy stepped in, and Damien threatened him.”

“Don’t lie about me ,” Damien whines.

“Oh, Damien,” the owner says. “You need to leave. I won’t have this in my establishment. I’ve seen you looking at Tori before, and I’ve seen, far too clearly, that she is not interested. This has gone on for long enough.”

“But—”

“No. We’re done here.”

He slowly lets go of my shirt. I let go of his hand, though the urge to snap his fingers is there. The little prick. Making Tori feel threatened. He’s got no right.

“We’re far from done,” he grunts, walking quickly past me.

“Tori, I’m so sorry,” the owner says.

“It’s fine,” Tori replies. “Do you need me to work now that he’s gone?”

“No, we’ll manage. Just try to put that behind you.”

Tori shrugs. There’s an animal in me, hunger sparking when I notice her ample bust under her sparkling top, the way her breasts shift with the movement of her shrug. I need to relax, but it isn’t easy around her.

The owner slides behind the bar to serve customers. Tori raises her eyebrows at me. “Thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I couldn’t just sit there and watch him treat you like that. The prick had no right.”

“I could’ve handled him,” she says with a note of pride that has my lips tugging into a smile.

Whoa. That’s something new. Smiling with her feels easy. “I’m sure you could have. But you shouldn’t have to.”

“He’s been making hints for weeks, but this is the first time he’s actually gone full psycho mode. I was going to slap him before you rode in on your white horse.”

She’s trying to sass me like it’s no big deal, but I could tell she was secretly grateful when I first stepped in, but it’s almost like she won’t let herself feel it. Like she’s got her guard up. Am I reading too much into her?

“I saved you from an assault charge, then, which means you should be doubly

thankful.”

She tips her head back and lets out a laugh. It’s gorgeous. Her lips are lush and kissable. My body aches being so close to her. It’s like she’s casting some sort of Valentine’s spell on me, which is probably the craziest thought I’ve ever had.

“I am thankful, ” she murmurs, cutting off the laughter. “So... can I get by?” She gestures at me to move aside to let her pass.

I almost tell her no.

I almost tell her, You’re staying with me, you beautiful, curvy, sexy woman. The thought terrifies me: it comes out of nowhere and hits like a punch in the teeth.

Stepping aside, I say, “Try not to get into any more trouble.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t need saving again.”

I can’t stop myself from watching her as she walks away. Wide hips in tight jeans, the globes of her round ass making my mouth water.

“What was that about?” Julian asks when I return.

“Some douchebag was giving Tori trouble. He got rightfully fired.”

“Do you know her?”

“No. Why’d you ask that?”

“The way you said her name.”

I shake my head. “Nah, she’s a stranger.”

“Hey, Alex. Take a breath.”

It’s only when he says this that I realize I’m practically panting, my chest heaving, my body tense.

“You’re not the type that gets into fights,” Julian says sympathetically.

It has nothing to do with almost getting into a fight. I would’ve buckled his legs and shattered his jaw for putting his hands on her, but I don’t tell Julian that. This comes from something else.

I wanted to follow Tori to her table, laugh with her some more, and spend time with her—almost like I haven’t seen where something like this will end.

Some scars cut deep and leave a mark. It’s the crap with my brother, with the woman he stole from me, and with the kid they left behind.

I’ve got too much baggage. Maybe it’s for the best I’ll never see Tori again, even if that thought hurts far more than it has any goddamn right to.

CHAPTER 5

TORI

“Don’t you dare feel guilty,” Cleo snaps. “It sounds like he deserved to get fired... or worse, the sleazeball. What did he think he was going to do, force you to accept his little love letter? I wouldn’t be surprised if it had anthrax in it or something. The creep.”

“He took it too far this time,” I agree.

“Are you okay?” Lily touches my arm. “Do you want to stay?”

“We can’t leave now. What if she gets the silver fox hunk’s number? He’s the one who saved you, right?” Cleo points in my savior's direction.

My cheeks burn. “Don’t point.”

She lowers her hand. “Sorry. I was only messing around.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t mean to snap.”

It’s time to chillax, Tori. I was trying to play it casual back there, but when that man strode behind the bar, my body got all tingly. He was well over six feet tall, with a square, strong jaw, and his eyes were a shade of brown that could be Valentine-red in certain lights. His casual blue shirt, the top two buttons undone, showed his firmly muscled chest.

Mostly, the tingles came from the way he looked at me. It was protective, almost like he was telling me with his intense eyes that I never had to worry about anything ever again.

That's why I ran. My poetic side was trying to take the reins. I can't be like Mom, swept off my feet just because a man looks at me.

"Time for the numbers," Cleo says, interrupting my thoughts. "Want me to get yours, Tori?"

Before I can answer, she darts toward the line.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Lily asks, smiling softly.

"It'll take more than that douchebag to ruin my night. How about you? Surviving being away from Clive for the evening?"

She laughs, and my plan works. She starts talking enthusiastically about her and Clive's most recent romantic walk.

Cleo joins us a few minutes later, her voice loud even with the music humming in the background. "I tried to be sneaky to see who got our numbers from our envelopes, but they mixed them all up. Guess there's not a 'try before you buy policy.'"

"How did they mix them up?" Lily asks.

"They made me take a number, then shuffled the envelopes around so I couldn't see who took the other one. They said they matched numbers in pairs.

"So you have to give your number before you get yours?" Lily says.

Cleo nods. “Exactly, so they know which to give you. But why are you so interested, huh?”

Lily rolls her eyes. “Don’t take it there. I’m just curious.”

“Thanks,” I mutter when Cleo hands me my number.

“Hey – serious... uh, Sissy.”

“Sissy?”

“I’m not the bookworm. Cut me some slack.”

The mention of being a bookworm hits too closely at my secret hobby. Do I need to be ashamed about that? My friends would be supportive, but keeping it hidden somehow feels like the best option.

“I’m just saying,” Cleo goes on. “Not everything has to be serious all the time. Just try to have some fun with it. Hey...” Cleo puts her hand on my arm. “I know I seem like the most fun, not to mention funniest, most charismatic person you’ve ever met...”

“I’m sure there’s going to be a point in here somewhere,” I mutter playfully.

Cleo grins. “But I don’t always feel that way. Sometimes, you have to try. Or drink. Either, or.”

She knocks back her drink.

“That was almost moving,” I say sarcastically.

“Keep. It. Casual.” Cleo gestures as though painting the words in the air. “That’s the name of the game. Do me a favor. Call it a Valentine’s gift.”

“Okay, I’ll try. You’re probably right. I’m far too ‘doom and gloom’ sometimes. It can’t be healthy.”

“Sometimes, you act like you’re two hundred and one, not twenty-one,” Cleo says.

“She has her reasons,” Lily defends.

“She’s right, Lily,” I cut in with a sigh. “I’m at a bar on Valentine’s, and I was just...” I stop myself. I was about to say, Saved by a silver fox . “Just thinking I need to make more of an effort.”

“So, time to start texting.”

“Shouldn’t I wait for him to text me first?” I ask. Truthfully, I don’t want to text anybody. Maybe if it was the silver-fox stranger... I didn’t even get my savior’s name.

That thought annoys me. He’s not my savior. I don’t need saving.

But the point is valid. I shouldn’t—I don’t—need anybody else. Do I?

I replay Cleo’s words in my mind. Keep it casual.

“Oh my giddy gawd,” Cleo says, giggling. “Lily, are my eyes deceiving me? Is she really doing it? Is she texting?”

“Hush, you’ll break the spell,” Lily hisses.

I roll my eyes as I type a simple, purposefully casual message.

Tori: I hope you're not expecting heart emojis, stranger.

"Mine has texted me back already," Cleo says excitedly.

"What was your opening gambit?" Lily asks. "Wait, let me guess. It was some variation of 'Meet me around back in five minutes.'"

"Wow, Lily, I'm hurt."

"I'm sorry. I was kidd?—"

"I told him ten minutes." Cleo grins.

That gets us all laughing like hyenas. As I wait for a reply, I look around the bar. Some people are still dancing and talking, but many are staring at their phones, smiles on their faces, caught up in the Valentine's spirit.

The silver fox savior sits with his friend at the end of the bar, looking so dashing I can't look at him for long. Just the sight of him confuses me. It makes me feel like...

Face facts, Tori. It makes me feel like Mom.

"So, lay it on us," Lily says, drawing my attention. "What did you really say?"

"I asked him if he thought this was as lame as I do... you know, playing it cool," Cleo explains.

"But you don't think it's lame," Lily says. "You were the most excited out of any of us."

“Newsflash, Lily: being honest with your date from the get-go is a recipe for disaster.”

“I happen to disagree with that profoundly,” Lily retorted.

My phone vibrates. It’s my Valentine’s stranger.

Valentine Stranger: Don’t worry. I wasn’t expecting a damn thing. If you want the truth, I think this is a waste of time. I don’t want to spoil your evening, but you might be better off texting somebody else.

Wow, talk about grumpy. And here I was, thinking I was the most negative person in this joint.

Tori: I can’t do that since we’ve only got each other’s numbers.

Valentine Stranger: I don’t want to disappoint you.

It’s difficult to keep it casual when he’s being so stubbornly grumpy.

Tori: What’s your favorite color?

Valentine Stranger: Laugh out loud. Did you seriously just ask me that?

Tori: You just typed ‘laugh out loud’ instead of using LOL. Don’t try to take the moral high ground here.

Valentine Stranger: LOL makes me feel like an angsty teenager texting my crush.

Tori: Are you always this serious?

“Lily, is she smiling?” Cleo teases.

“Hush,” Lily says. “Don’t break the spell.”

Heck, they’re right. I’ve got an unabashed grin on my face, and no way to deny it.

It’s not my fault this guy is the grumpiest person in the universe.

Valentine Stranger: I’m not one for games.

Tori: Why? Been played before, huh?

“Hmm, I may have struck a sore point,” I mutter when he doesn’t reply for a few minutes.

“Can I see?” Cleo asks.

I overreact, holding the phone to my chest.

“Message received. Getting spicy already?” Cleo says, holding up her hands in surrender.

I shake my head. “No, but my texts are private, thank you very much.”

“Your silver fox has been on his phone, by the way,” Lily chimes.

I turn, casually glancing in his direction, but he’s leaning broodily against the bar. Several women are sneaking glances at him, probably hoping he’s their secret texter. It shouldn’t bother me, especially since I’ve solemnly vowed to be casual. But maybe it bothers me just a little—the teensy tiniest amount.

“He’s not now,” I say.

“Have you received any texts back?” Cleo asks.

“Nope.”

“I’ll sneakily watch him. When he’s on his phone, if you get a text, we’ll know it’s him,” she says conspiratorially.

“That would be fate,” Lily says confidently. I must make a face because she asks, “What?”

“I know you have your beliefs, but I don’t think fate has anything to do with this.”

“The guy who saved you happens to be your secret Valentine? Come on, Tori...”
Lily presses.

“There were like thirty people who joined the text-a-thon. Hardly lottery odds,” I grumble.

“He’s on his phone,” Cleo whisper-shouts.

A moment later, my phone vibrates.

“Fate,” Lily says, making a face at me.

Valentine Stranger: Let’s just say I’ve learned not to play games. That way, winning OR losing is out of the question.

Tori: Sometimes, stranger, you don’t have to take things so seriously. You can just go with the flow and be casual .

Valentine Stranger: Maybe I'm not interested in casual.

Tori: But you're not interested in anything serious, either?

"There's that smile again," Cleo comments and then looks down at her phone. "My guy is very interested. I wonder if he's hot. Silver fox is still on his phone, FYI."

Valentine Stranger: Life is easier if you focus on what you can control. You can't control love.

Tori: But you can control whether or not you have a good time.

"How's it going?" Cleo asks.

"Okay... I think. I'm channeling my inner Cleo, pretending to be casual. Thankfully, it's just texting. I don't think I could keep up this game if we met in person."

"Even if it was Mr Silver Fox? Any response? Because he put his phone down."

"Nothing."

Lily sings, "Faaate..."

I don't answer Cleo's first question. Thinking about the idea that my secret texter could be the silver fox has my belly doing flips. But I'm not going to let them see that.

"He's picked up his phone."

And, of course, I get a text.

Valentine Stranger: Give me your definition of fun when it comes to romance.

I imagine the silver fox saying this in his deep, commanding, rich voice, the same one he used when defending me against Damien. I don't have an answer to his question – or is it more of a demand?

“Something wrong?” Lily asks.

“He just asked me to define my definition of fun when it comes to romance. Or challenged me to, I guess. What should I say?”

“Be honest,” Lily advises. “Speak from the heart.”

“Screw that,” Cleo says. “Say you want to keep this the most casual relationship ever. Tell him if he even hints at anything serious, you'll leave a Tori-shaped hole in the wall.”

Her comment is lighthearted, but the reference to my ‘shape’ leaves me feeling annoyingly self-conscious for a moment. I beat the body-image demons away.

Tori: Taking it one step at a time. Not worrying about tomorrow or the implications. Living in the moment. Being happy. I guess that's my definition.

Valentine Stranger: I can't afford to live in the moment. I've got a career that demands a lot of my time. I've got family responsibilities. It's not just myself I have to worry about .

I want to ask more about him, but I'm getting too invested. It's like he's trying to force me to take an interest. And I am, which is bad. I'm not going to fall head over heels over the freaking phone.

“He’s mentioned his personal life,” I murmur.

“Ask him about it,” Lily counsels.

“Tell him to put a sock in it and hurry up with the dick pic.”

“Cleo!” Lily says, but she’s laughing.

“That’s less ‘casual’ and more ‘end up on a list,’ Cleo,” I say.

My phone vibrates again.

“Silver fox update,” Cleo says. “He just typed loads then put his phone down... right when your phone screen lit up.”

Butterflies swirl in my belly as I pick up my cell to read his next text. What if it is him ? I almost don’t want it to be. If it’s somebody else, I might have more chance of keeping things casual.

When he looked at me, I don’t know, I felt like... Ah, there it is—that nasty, defeatist, not-very-Cupid-like thought. I feel like Mom: a sucker waiting to be taken advantage of.

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CHAPTER 6

ALEX

“Why are you being so grumpy?” Julian asks in an exasperated tone. “How many times have you told me you want to find love? That’s why you didn’t want anything to happen with those chicks, right? Because you think it’d be cheap. Well, if you don’t try, you’ll never find the real deal.”

“You’re drunk,” I mutter, looking down at my phone.

My last text reads.

Alex: So there you have it. I can’t be casual. I can’t be fun. It’s the wrong holiday for it, so you can call me Scrooge.

“I know that look on your face. You should go and talk to her.”

“Who?”

Julian rolls his eyes. “What’d you mean, who? The woman you saved, the one you keep looking over at every couple of seconds.”

He’s right. I can’t help it. Sitting at the table with her friends, Tori is fascinating.

She makes me ache just by looking at her, imagining tearing her sparkly top away, revealing her tender mounds, her eager nipples, her eyes growing wide, but not with

fear this time—with the same hunger burning in me and making my pole stiff.

“I’m busy trying to make my secret Valentine texter understand I’m not who they want.”

Julian points his finger at me. From how it wobbles, he won’t win the ‘I’m not drunk’ argument anytime soon. “Listen, I can go along with it most of the time.”

“With what?”

He grinds his teeth. “With your you-don’t-give-a-damn act. But there have been many, many times, Alex. Maybe you were overworked, a little tipsy, or sleep-deprived when you made these admissions...”

“You’ve already forgotten what you were going to say,” I mumble.

He covers his mouth to hide a burp. “I haven’t.” He snaps his fingers. “You’ve told me many times you want something real. Well, this is your chance.”

“You’re being overdramatic.”

“You’re trying to hide how you really feel,” he snaps back.

Damn Julian and his perceptiveness.

I watch Tori across the busy bar. She furrows her eyebrows as she types, cute, interested. Who’s her Valentine? I want to find the jerk and tell him to back off even though I just said I’m not interested because clearly, that’s a lie when it comes to Tori.

She puts her phone down... and mine vibrates.

My heart pounds like it does when I put on the gloves and pick up the scalpel. It's the same mixture of fear and adrenaline. Only then do I have to become cold.

If my hunch is correct, I won't be able to remain cold. But I can't tell Julian. He'll lose it.

Valentine Stranger: It takes a special kind of man to come to a bar for a Valentine's event and be this stubbornly miserable .

She glances up at me and then looks back down at the table. Are her cheeks burning?

I should remember Robin and Lena, the betrayal, the heartache, the responsibility.

A memory of my little brother when he was a kid comes to me, a smile on his face. "I'm a robin, a bird, and I'm going to fly away..."

Poor kid didn't know how right he was.

She picks up her phone, types quickly, and sends a text. My phone vibrates again. There's no way this can be a coincidence. Luckily, Julian is absorbed in his phone, seemingly forgetting he was giving me a speech about seizing the moment and following my heart.

Valentine Stranger: Or maybe you just want to make sure I'm hot enough to deserve your attention.

My dick throbs. I try not to stare, but it isn't easy. What if it isn't her? I'll be a man twice her age, ogling her, imagining the sound of her moaning.

Alex: You don't know what my type is.

She types on her phone—I get a text.

Valentine Stranger: Why don't you tell me?

Julian looks up from his phone. "What the hell?"

"Huh?"

"What's happened between me sending a few messages and rejoining the physical world?"

I laugh. "What do you mean?"

"You don't look so miserable anymore. Have you finally realized I'm speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but?" he says enthusiastically.

"I may have said a few times," I admit, "that I want to find the real deal. But you're forgetting the second part, where I come to my senses and realize it's for the best if I keep my world simple. Surely you'd prefer if I stayed single so you'd have a wingman."

"Bro, no offense," he says, giving me a droll look, "but you're the worst wingman. I'd rather see you happy."

"Wow, Julian, that was actually quite moving."

"I'm not always a jerk. Duty calls..." He picks up his phone.

I do the same. She wants to know my type. I haven't really got one. Lena looked nothing like Tori. I don't even want to compare them.

Alex: I like brunettes with wavy, somewhat wild hair. And I like it when I can tell they've made an effort but still want to let some of their natural wildness show. I like women with full figures, curves in all the right places, and jeans that show off just how voluptuous they are. I like women who need saving but pretend they don't.

I hesitate before clicking send. If I've got this wrong and my texter isn't Tori, I'm going to look insane.

If it is her, though, maybe this could be it.

I don't want to get my hopes up. I've had my heart shattered before, a betrayal that still gives me twisted nightmares sometimes, dreams in which I scream to stop, but I can't make any noise. I can't change the past.

I'm trying to pretend there's no romance in me, but I felt something when I stood up for her. Screw it. I click send...

I watch as she picks up her phone. As she reads the text, a smile lifts her gorgeous lips. She touches her hair.

Then she looks right at me, raising an eyebrow. The confidence makes my steel throb, almost rigid. I need to control myself. I'm in public. But dammit, she's making it difficult.

Valentine Stranger: Aren't you going to ask me my type?

I look at her, a smirk on my lips.

Alex: That was going to be my next question.

Valentine Stranger: I like silver foxes who clearly go to the gym, but they're not all

showy about it. They don't feel the need to advertise their hunky bodies. They just ARE hunks. I like saviors, sure, but only if they know that the saving was a one-time deal and a girl can mostly take care of herself.

Alex: Ah, it seems we're not destined to be together after all. I like a woman who can admit she needs her knight in shining armor.

She laughs. I can't hear it over the music, but the flash of her teeth is a beautiful sight.

Deep in my mind, the grumpiness tries to take over. What about what Lena did? Look at Mom and Dad. They loved each other in the beginning, and it didn't help.

Somehow, while texting Tori, I believe I can fight through all this.

Valentine Stranger: Maybe you should be a little more understanding. Some women would happily slap certain kinds of men if given the chance.

Alex: That's what I'm for.

I stop texting without clicking Send. Then I feel Julian grinning at me. He's got a proud look on his face. Not just happy, but like he's personally accomplished something.

"Why do you look so pleased with yourself?"

He shrugs. "Maybe I'm considering a career change."

"Is there not enough money in psychology?"

"I've got a new calling... call me Cupid."

“What did you do, Julian?”

“Don’t get that tone. You look like a kid on Christmas morning. You should be thanking me. You’re happy; this is it. This is your night .” He’s speaking in the grandiose way of a cheerfully drunk man.

“Explain.”

“A certain bar owner may or may not have asked me for your cellphone number... because she may or may not have noticed a degree of chemistry between you and a certain lady... and now, a certain chief of surgery might be texting like a teenager falling in love...”

I let out a laugh, a mixture of relief and pure joy.

So it is Tori... I was almost certain already, but knowing for sure is good.

“Her friend was in on the game too. The spunky redhead. Why don’t we go and talk to them both?”

I realize I’m smiling. It feels good. I’m letting go.

Then my pager goes off.

Julian throws his hands up when he sees me take it from my pocket. “You brought that thing with you?”

“I bring it everywhere with me,” I say, instantly becoming colder, more robotic. “I’m needed for a surgery consultation.”

Dammit. I want to talk to Tori some more. It’s like fate is slapping me with a

reminder why my quest to find love—Julians' right, there's always been a quest even if I try to ignore it—is doomed.

“Sorry,” I say, standing. “I can’t ignore this. Obviously.”

“No, I get it.” Julian sighs. “God damn you, Alex. Now go and save somebody’s life.”

I look over at Tori one last time. She’s got her phone in one hand. With the other, she’s twisting her hair around her finger as I walk away.

CHAPTER 7

TORI

Keep it casual, Tori...

That means ignoring the pang of defeat I feel when the silver fox abruptly stands up and leaves the bar. He strides across the room quickly, like he wants to get out of here, away from me, as fast as he possibly can.

“Oh,” Cleo says.

“Oh, what?” I snap, full of anger. I’m aiming it at the wrong person.

Who am I annoyed with? Him for leaving, or myself for caring?

“I thought things were going well between you two,” she mutters.

“It might not have even been him,” I say.

But the idea feels foolish after how specific our texts got. Plus, he was smoldering at me across the bar like he wanted to tear my clothes off. Nobody’s ever looked at me like that before. It made his comments about being cold and unromantic seem silly.

“It was him,” Cleo replies. “Look, Rowan approached me and asked if I thought it was a good idea if she matched your number with his. She confirmed his number with his friend—the one with the cheekbones at the bar. The one who keeps eyeing me

up?” She raises her hand, waving at him.

He grins and snaps off a cocky salute.

“Why would Rowan do that?” I ask, not really wanting an answer.

“She must’ve sensed you were soulmates,” Lily says with a sigh.

“Nope. She smelled the sexual tension a mile off,” Cleo chimes in.

“So it definitely was him,” I say.

“Are you mad?” Cleo ask.

“No,” I admit. “Well – a little since he’s stormed off.”

“Maybe he has a good excuse. You should call him,” Cleo suggests.

“So much for keeping it casual, then...” I mutter.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Lily agrees. “Call him. Beg him to come back.”

“Beg him to come back?” Cleo repeats in disgust. “Somebody steal the girl’s sangria!”

“Okay, not beg , then,” Lily says.

“I’m not calling anyone. I’ll text him.”

“Tell him you want to go for a late-night walk on the beach,” Lily suggests.

“I’m going to be sick if she keeps being this bright and happy,” Cleo mutters sarcastically.

“It would be nice, Cleo. And please, don’t say something like ‘only if they have some rumpy bumpy in the sand’ or anything equally gross,” Lily pleads.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Liliana. There’s no danger of me ever saying ‘rumpy bumpy’ in my life.”

I chew my cheek for a moment, wondering.

It would kind of be nice to meet him for a walk, but he left. I don’t even know his name.

“Remember.” Cleo nudges me. “Tonight isn’t about overthinking or worrying about tomorrow. It’s about living in the moment. So live , Tori.”

Before I can text him, my phone goes off. The flood of excitement is similar to the wave that hits me when an audience applauds at one of my performances. Sure, it hasn’t happened loads of times, but that just makes the feeling more addictive.

Flirting with a man? That’s even rarer. I thought I’d lost him.

No, Tori, not lost him. This is casual. I was never going to have him.

Valentine Stranger: Sorry, I was called away for work, Tori. I’m the chief of surgery at Jackson South. They need me for a complex consultation.

Tori: Wow, that’s impressive. But we’re not supposed to know each other’s names.

Valentine Stranger: It turns out my buddy isn’t as averse to playing games as I am.

Julian arranged it so that we would have each other's numbers. I won't be able to text for long. I'm just waiting for a cab.

Tori: I know . Cleo was in on the game, too. I don't even know your name, stranger.

Valentine Stranger: It's Alex. And don't worry. I didn't leave because I was uninterested, if that's what you're thinking .

That's good because I was worried. But I'm not going to tell him that. That's the sort of thing Mom would admit, wearing her heart on her sleeve, apparently not caring if it slips and splats on the floor over and over.

Tori: I wasn't worried, Alex. Your job is very important. Far more important than some silly Valentine's texting.

Alex: I thought it was silly and pointless until I knew it was you.

I chew on my lip. Then, I quickly stop myself. I need to stop acting like some naive lovestruck chick in a rom-com.

Tori: Next, you'll tell me you were struck with a Cupid's arrow, Alex. Do you use this line on all the girls?

Alex: I don't use any lines on anybody, ever. How long do you think you'll be at the bar?

Tori: I'm not sure. Until Lily gets bored and wants to go home to her fiancée, and Cleo goes home either with your friend or her secret Valentine. Or both.

Alex: What about you? Are you planning on going home with anybody?

Okay, this is pushy, right? At least, I'm sure I should find it pushy. It's the sort of question Damien might ask, overstepping his boundaries.

Tori: What would you say if I said I was?

Alex: I'd tell you I'm going to leave work early to stop that from happening. You see, Tori, you've got a lot of responsibility here. You've basically become a surgeon yourself.

I laugh.

Tori: How'd you figure that?

Alex: Your reply is going to have a significant effect on the outcome.

Tori: So you're telling me a man who has worked hard to get where you are would give it all up for a stranger?

Alex: Not just any stranger. The girl with the wild hair and curves in all the right places.

I roll my eyes, trying to play it cool, but Lily and Cleo are watching me knowingly. They both remain quiet as if they don't want to break the spell.

Tori: What if I told the hunky, somewhat demanding silver fox that I wasn't planning on going home with anybody? What if I asked him when he would be done with work?

Alex: Then maybe this slightly obsessed man would ask— translation: demand—for you to meet him for a romantic midnight beach stroll.

I gasp.

“What?” Lily asks.

“Nothing,” I mutter.

She’ll start talking about destiny, sweet surrenders, and soulmates if I tell her.

“You can’t make that noise and then not tell us,” Lily demands.

“What noise?” I say, trying to play it cool.

Cleo throws her hands up like a heroine from a Regency drama, letting out the most over-the-top gasp, straining so that the veins on her neck bulge.

“Jeez, relax,” I say, wiping a tear from my eye, laughing. “You’re going to burst a blood vessel.”

“How was that?” Cleo says.

Lily grins mischievously. “Perfect.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, waving my hand at them to settle down. “He just suggested a beach walk, that’s all. But we’re in Miami. It’s not like it’s unusual to suggest going to the beach, is it?”

Right on cue, Lily says, “Duh. Fate.”

“There’s only one thing for it,” Cleo says. “Rush to the bathroom, whip off your top, show him some cleavage to keep him interested...”

“She doesn’t want to give the wrong impression,” Lily interjects.

“But this is the right impression!” Cleo exclaims excitedly. “She wants him to know it’s casual. What’s more casual than that?”

“I’m not doing that,” I say.

“But you want to,” Cleo teases.

She’s not entirely wrong, which is just plain crazy. There’s a part of me that wants to do it, especially because I’m a little stunned that he wants me.

I’ve had attention from guys before, but not a lot, and nobody like Alex. My body still tingles from when he stood up for me, his muscles straining, his intense eyes looking ready to fight for me.

I take a breath. I can do this. I can have some casual fun. I’m not an alien. I’m a twenty-one-year-old woman, just like Cleo, like any other girl in this place. I don’t have to be so serious all the time.

Dad’s death didn’t stain me. Mom’s irresponsible attitude toward relationships hasn’t ruined me.

I can be normal.

Tori: That sounds perfect, but don’t expect any rumpy bumpy.

Alex: You made fun of me for typing ‘laugh out loud’... I think you’ve got me beat with ‘rumpy bumpy,’ Tori.

I smile.

Tori: Maybe I'm just an old soul.

South Beach is still busy with people spilling out of the bars. A few joggers pass me by as I wait anxiously. My arms are wrapped across my middle, but not because of the weather. It's a relatively warm night, plus I've got this bubbling excitement-nerve hybrid to heat me up.

I keep thinking about backing out. Lily's at home with her man. Cleo is somewhere with her new man... at least for the night.

I could leave, walk to one of the bars, wait inside, and call a taxi. Two lovers walk by, arms wrapped around each other, so close it's like they want to sink into each other.

That's not what I want. I also don't want to be the man and woman on the beach towel, kissing loudly, their noises audible even over the lapping waves and music from the bars.

Alex: I shouldn't be more than five more minutes, Tori. I'm sorry for keeping you waiting.

Tori: It's fine. I like being near the sea. It's peaceful. How did the surgery go?

Alex: I offered my notes. Now it's up to my team. I'm confident they'll do a stellar job.

Tori: It must be difficult having all that responsibility . I don't send the message, instead taking a moment to study it.

What happened to keeping it casual? We should be joking about something lighthearted and breezy, like Valentine's Day's weather, music, or silliness.

Tori: You're doing a pretty great job at keeping me waiting. I send that instead, but then wonder if it comes across as bitchy. Perhaps the best thing would be to stop overthinking everything.

That's the kind of pretentious statement my poet's mind could never make out loud, but it's the truth. I enjoy looking deeply into things and feel a strange responsibility to try to find an emotional angle. More often than not, the emotion is anger, sadness, or resentment.

Alex: Patience, beautiful.

More tingles simmer over my skin. The night suddenly feels as if it could get very special very fast.

CHAPTER 8

ALEX

I know it's her by her silhouette.

I'm not usually the kind of guy who stops to drink in a moment. I function like a machine always set to go. It's easier that way. I work, spend some time with Elliot if I have the time – which probably isn't as often as it should be – hit the gym, sleep, repeat. That's how I've kept sane since the crash.

But now, I stop, staring at the shape of her outlined with the sea and the night sky in the background. Her hips stir the animal in me. I want to sink my hands into her, feel how full she is, pull the sweet round globes of her ass against me, and grind against her so she can understand just how savage she's turning me.

I breathe slowly, trying to calm myself down.

The surgery I was consulting on had life-and-death consequences. It's another reminder that life is short.

Julian was right. I've been looking for love while pretending that I'm not.

When I see her, a voice roars in my head: No more pretending.

Alex: Turn around.

She takes out her phone, turns, and laughs quietly. Her eyes light up as she approaches. “Just to warn you,” she says, “I’ve only had one drink, so if you were thinking of taking advantage...”

“I’d never take advantage of you,” I tell her, my tone firm. Yes, she makes my blood burn, but I would never do anything she didn’t want.

She laughs again, a captivating sound.

“What’s so funny?”

“You – you’re so serious. I was only kidding.”

“Maybe I need you to make me less serious,” I say, giving her a slight grin.

For a moment, her eyes get this almost tragic look. I’ve never looked as closely at anyone as I’m looking at her, studying every detail as if there’s a scalpel in my perception, and I’m dissecting her every tic.

She looks like what she called herself earlier—an old soul inside a perfect young woman’s body.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“What? No.” She laughs, but it sounds forced. “I’m up to the challenge. I can be unserious. Blah. See?” She makes a face. “Blah, blurgh.” She prods me in the arm. “Whoa, are you carved out of rock or something?”

I chuckle. Her touch burns hotly through my clothes, making the skin below tingle. “Working out is one of the only ways I can forget the hospital sometimes. Shall we walk?”

I take off my jacket.

“You don’t have to...” she begins as I drape it over her shoulders. “Do that.”

“Too late,” I say, then smirk and flex my arm. “Anyway, I only did it because you seem obsessed with my muscles.”

Her gaze flits over my body, then to my face. “I was being sarcastic.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

I want to put my arm around her, but that would mean moving too fast, wouldn’t it? It’s been a long time since I’ve dated or even thought about it. Sure, I’ve wanted love, a background hum to the chaos of my everyday life.

This is the first time I’m fighting for it.

“How was the rest of the party?” I ask.

“Very twenty-first century. Lily and Cleo were on their phones, and I was people-watching.”

“Sounds... fun?” I offer.

“Does it?”

“For most people, probably not. But if your starry eyes are any indication, it seems like you enjoyed it.”

Her smile lights up her face, but then she quickly pushes it away, almost like she feels guilty for smiling, and I wonder why that is. “I don’t have starry eyes , Alex.”

“If you say so. Still, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I like people watching. When I was a kid, I used to play this game. It was...” She pauses. “When I was going through a tough period.”

I clamp down on the urge to ask her what happened. If she wanted to talk about it, she wouldn’t have stopped herself.

“Tell me about the game.”

She stops walking, turning toward the lights of the bars and the clubs. “It’s a little weird.”

“I can do weird.”

“In the bedroom, you mean?” she says, forcing a laugh.

I smile in bemusement. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Pretending to be someone you’re not.”

“Okay, that’s creepy. We don’t even know each other, Alex.”

“Why don’t you say ‘that’s creepy’ like you really mean it?”

She grows flustered, which makes her all the more adorable. She’s got her guard up. The bedroom comment seems like a way for her to deflect. Or perhaps I need to take off my wannabe psychoanalysis hat.

“Tell me about this game,” I say when she seems at a loss for words.

“Look at those people.” She nods to the silhouette of the midnight partiers, a few of them smoking. “Now, imagine that your thoughts, your experiences, your memories – you – are an orb in your head.” She looks at me nervously, like she thinks I’m going to make fun of her.

“Okay...”

“I’d imagine just that, then I’d throw the orb, and then, I’d be in that person’s head. I’d try to imagine everything they might be thinking and feeling. I’d try to become them just for a little bit. Weird, huh?”

“I don’t know if it’s weird or not. I don’t really care. It’s creative and interesting. Are you a writer?”

“Uh... no.”

I chuckle. “Are you sure? Don’t worry. I won’t tell anybody.”

“It’s kind of weird,” she mutters hesitantly.

“There’s that word again. Whoever said you had to be normal, Tori?”

She shrugs, then keeps walking. I walk beside her for a moment, hesitating and wondering if I should do what I desperately want to, then stop overthinking and go for it. I slip my arm over her shoulder. She makes a soft moaning noise and falls against me. The experience is so natural. It’s like we’ve done it countless times before, yet it sizzles with the heat of newness.

My body begins to pulse, my instincts roaring. This hunger has to mean something.

It's an effort to keep my hand on her shoulder. So tempting to slide down over her hip, grab and massage her ass, slide my hand into her pants, and find her...

"This is nice," she murmurs.

"Yes," I reply. "It is." My voice is husky. I need to keep talking so I don't go 'full beast' and tear her clothes off. I say, "What's weird about not being a writer?"

"Promise not to tell?"

"Swear."

"I've been visiting open mic poetry slam nights for six months. I've always wanted to be a poet; when I was really little, I wanted to be an actor. I guess this combines the two."

"That's great," I say, hoping she will tell me more. I want to know everything about her.

"Is it?"

I give her a squeeze. "It sounds like it takes a lot of bravery to get up there when you're so nervous about it."

"Who said I was nervous?" she counters.

"You didn't have to."

"The performances don't make me nervous. I'm shocked by how calm I am when I go to the events. As long as nobody I know is there—which, so far, they haven't been—I'm able to handle it. But the idea of somebody I know seeing it? That freaks

me out.”

“Why?” I ask, genuinely curious to know why this makes her nervous. Having a friend to support her should lift her spirit instead of causing her discomfort.

“I don’t know. I guess I like to keep some stuff private.”

“Well, I’d love to see a performance.” When she laughs in disbelief, I squeeze her again, this time with a playful edge. “It’s true. And don’t forget, technically, we don’t know each other, so I’d be a stranger,” I say, with an eyebrow raised.

She looks up at me, her eyes bright and magnetic.

This is the perfect moment to kiss her. But if I do that, can I just kiss her? Will I take it further?

She turns away, and the moment passes. Damn.

“What sort of performances do you do?” I ask. “What are your poems about?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise. Forget Guardian Angel. You’re a Guarded Angel . You’ve always got your shield up.” I nudge her with a toothy grin. “See what I did there?”

She tries to hold back, squeezing her lips together, but then the laughter escapes.

“Okay, you got me, but only because it was so corny.”

“A laugh is a laugh,” I say with a shrug.

“My poems are... depressing. About something that happened when I was a kid, mostly. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Of course, you don’t,” she grumbles cutely.

“Am I missing something?”

“You’re Mr. Serious.”

“I don’t have to be serious all the time,” I say, passion burning in my voice as I give in to my desire, let my hand slip down her body and over her hip. I grab her fleshiness greedily, massaging her, staring into her eyes.

She gazes up at me, looking shocked and excited, like she can’t decide which mood to settle on, her poetic mind clashing, her lust tempting her.

She settles her hand on my chest and squeezes, her fingernails scraping against my shirt. “What do you think you’re doing, doctor?”

“You really don’t know how irresistible you are, do you? How beautiful you are?”

I grab her other hip, greedily holding her in both my hands.

“I...” She looks down as if suddenly afraid. “I...”

CHAPTER 9

TORI

A touch shouldn't be able to do this.

His hands press warmly through my shirt, burning against my skin, the sensation sizzling all over me as I try to tell myself this is exactly what I wanted—a casual hookup with a man who makes me wet with excitement.

When he tells me I'm perfect, though, suddenly, it's like I need to hit the brakes. I care too much. Well, not care . Come on, Tori. Be honest. Okay. I care. It means something, this dashing doctor telling me I'm irresistible. The meaning amplifies when he glides his hand around to the small of my back, inching toward my ass.

I squeeze my legs together as my sex aches, my clit throbbing like I'm going to, you know, right here, without him even touching me. I can't let somebody have this much power over me. Am I overthinking it? Probably.

My hand tightens against his chest. His muscles press against me like they're going to snap my fingernails.

"You're not going to tell me you don't want this." His voice is a husky drawl.

"Don't talk like you can read my mind," I snap.

"I don't need to read your mind when I can read your body."

He pulls me closer. I gasp, then shut my mouth. This is all becoming very ‘swept off my feet,’ and I can’t let that happen.

“I’m not going to sleep with you on this beach, smart guy.”

He leans down. As we stare into each other’s eyes, suddenly, Valentine’s Day doesn’t seem so silly. His lips brush close to mine, a tempting taste, but the feeling of powerlessness stops me again. He can’t be in charge.

I’ll be left a crumpled mess like Mom. Struggling to make sense of what happened, crippled with emotional whiplash.

I push myself away while I still can before the heat reaches a tipping point. In my head, Cleo is watching me judgmentally, annoyed that I wouldn’t just give myself to him.

My body feels pretty bothered by it, too. My heart is pounding hard; my inner thighs are aching, my lips tingling like some primal part of me is anticipating the kiss.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he whispers, taking my hands as I create some distance between us.

“I’m sure I’m not much more beautiful than your last girl.”

A tremble moves through his hulking body. For a tiny moment, I’m terrified—not that I think he’s going to hurt me. It’s how protective and intense he becomes. I want more of it. Badly.

I need to be careful.

“There wasn’t a last girl,” he snaps.

I smile and laugh. See? Keeping it casual is back on the menu. “You don’t really expect me to believe that.”

I let go of one of his hands, and turn, intent on walking again. He pauses for a moment, my right hand in his, like he’s not going to let me. Like instead, he’ll pull me toward him, crush our bodies together, and let me feel those hulking muscles again.

Stubbornly, I pull away and walk on, ignoring my desires. Why? Cleo challenges in my head. Just throw yourself at him!

“Do you?” I go on. “You can’t expect me to believe you’re some chaste monk who stays away from women.”

“I’ve been waiting for the right woman.” He looks at me meaningfully when I turn to look at him.

“So you believe in soulmates?” I put a heavy dose of sarcasm into my voice.

“Maybe not soulmates. But I believe in true love. Even if I’ve spent too damn long lying to myself and everybody around me about it, it might make me a fool for still believing in it, but I do.”

We stop near the lapping waves, the sound of the bars muted by distance.

His eyes are suddenly serious, starlight reflected in them. There’s something about his penetrating look that’s very not casual.

“Why does it make you a fool?” I ask.

“It’s depressing. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

I grin. “Touché.” It’s what I said about my poems. “But you want to tell me, so tell me.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Do I, Tori? You think you can read this stranger so easily, huh?”

He’s trying to make this into something it’s not, something it can never be. “It’s not that deep,” I tell him.

“Strange thing for a poet to say. Perhaps you’re just a woman of contradictions.”

“I want to know,” I admit. “Because suddenly, you looked...”

“Go on,” he whispers.

It’s like he knows I don’t want to say this, any of it, veer too close to anything real, and voice something I’ve pushed away my whole life. “Like you’re ready to take out your rage on the world. Like you’re almost done hoping. Like you didn’t believe...”

I stop just in time. I was going to say, Didn’t believe in happily ever afters before tonight. What. The. Heck. Is. Wrong. With. Me?

He smooths a hand through his glistening silver hair. It causes the fabric of his shirt to tighten on his biceps, his sculpted body so utterly tempting. “I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this but screw it. You should know what you’re getting into.”

I want to tell him that I’m not getting into anything. But I can’t force the words—the lie.

“I had a long-term girlfriend once. I thought we had a good relationship and the same goals. I was working my way through medical school, determined to make my way in

the world instead of working for the family company my parents left behind. I guess she wanted more, so she left me for my brother, and they had a kid together after. They both died in a car accident two years ago, leaving Elliot an orphan.”

He speaks mechanically, with no hint of heartache. It must be a defense mechanism. Annoyingly, I find myself wanting to peel back his layers to get to the pain beneath.

“Whoa,” I mutter.

“It’s heavy,” he says, nodding. “Too heavy for a night like this.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I mean—no, thanks for telling me. But...”

What am I doing ?

The poet in me cracks through to the surface as I grip his shoulders and pull myself close. The heat of our bodies collides and triggers another wave of hunger.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you, Alex. Nobody deserves to go through that. What happened to their kid?”

“He lives with me now,” Alex replies, his voice trembling. “I do my best, but it’s difficult. I work so often.”

“But you did the right thing despite the betrayal,” I say earnestly.

“I wasn’t going to take it out on the kid. He deserves a life.”

“You’re a good person.”

Oh, jeez. My voice shudders, and a sob threatens to take over. I’m thinking of my

dad, his death, and the pain of growing up without a parent. Being close to him makes me want to spill it all out.

“Tori?” he whispers.

“It’s nothing.”

“You can tell me,” he says, his tone eager to hear me out. Eager to get to know me.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

How did we get to this serious place? Is that just who we are?

“I should go,” I tell him, afraid to let him in even more than I inadvertently already have. “It’s late.”

“Let me call you a cab?—”

“I’ll get an Uber. Don’t worry about it.”

I turn away, meaning to run down the beach, my blood rushing in my ears. The panic is all too real.

Is this what it’s been like for Mom all those times, the quick connection, her mind filling with impossible dreams? I won’t make the same mistake of throwing myself into it. I have to remember that bad endings are far more common than happy ones.

He catches my arm and turns me to face him. I gasp as he turns feral and pulls me close.

His lips press against mine with a passion I’ve never felt or imagined. He sinks his

hands into my hips as though he's been waiting his entire life for me, as though no one else could ever compare—like I'm genuinely as perfect as he claims.

He grips my ass, our bodies so close I can feel his solid length pressing against my belly. He feels huge and starving for us to take this further. Our mouths open, and our tongues clash with more desperation than I even understand.

I pull back, intent on running away. "I'm sorry. I have to g?—"

Before I can say go , he growls and kisses me again. The sound he makes is so freaking tempting. It's like he's never been with a more beautiful woman than me. I didn't know it was possible for me to feel this wanted.

Our kiss grows more urgent. He stumbles forward like he's trying to take this to the sand. Part of me wants it, to fall, to let go, to open my legs and feel his solid thickness grind through my pants.

"Alex," I snap. "I'm going."

His eyes refocus. For a moment, I think he's going to argue. For a moment, I want him to.

Then he lets me go, letting out a shaky breath. "I need to see you again," he says, panting.

What he needs to do is chill. So do I.

"Text me," I snap, turning away, walking fast, almost sprinting, part of me wanting him to catch up.

At home, I find Mom passed out on the couch. Her cell phone is propped against a

half-empty glass of wine, the screen open on Tinder. She was swiping until she fell asleep.

I step into the bathroom and splash cold water on my face.

That got heated way too fast. I didn't want to leave, but I had to. I wouldn't have been able to stop him otherwise. His touch was instantly addictive. And the look in his eyes was like he thought he owned me.

I can't let myself feel this much. If my people-watching has taught me anything, it's that men like Alex are too good to be true.

Lying in bed, I search his hospital, getting his full name. Alex Whitmore.

I then search 'Whitmore crash', finding nothing. I search 'Whitmore crash, son, Elliot,' and still... there's nothing. I grind my teeth. Do I really think he'd lie about something like that?

I don't know him, so I have to assume yes. Men have lied to Mom about worse things to get her into bed.

Why can't I find anything about it online?

I close my eyes, walking through his mentality. He sees a woman he wants at a bar. He texts her, trying to figure out if he's going to get anywhere with her. Then, when they meet, he sees she's poetic and emotional, even if she's trying to hide it. He seizes on that with a sob story.

He got heavy toward the end, almost like he wasn't going to stop. Sure, I didn't want him to, but that's not the point. I'm not going to let myself be tricked.

I spend the next thirty minutes searching the internet, scouring for any mention of the crash, using every search term I can think of. Nothing.

Next, I go to the hospital's blog page. I'm torturing myself, but I don't care. I need a way to switch off this feeling that's growing too quickly and stubbornly inside me.

The media page shows countless snaps of Alex at fundraisers, standing with women who look like models. In a few of them, have a hand on his arm, or he's got his arm looped around their waist.

I'm not jealous. That's not what this is about.

It's just interesting, isn't it, that he'd act like he had nothing to do with women, neglected to mention all these hotties?

Finally, I go to his social media pages, cycling through the public posts and photos. There's not a kid in sight.

Other people might think I'm jumping to conclusions, but Mom's most recent boyfriend told her his ex-wife and children lived on the East Coast, used her for months, then finally dropped a bombshell, leaving her a shattered mess all over again.

Right now, Alex could be with another of his women, maybe even laughing about it as they talk about all that true love crap. Don't call me paranoid. It's entirely possible.

But if somebody's going to get hurt here, it sure as heck isn't me.

Finally, I fall asleep, my dreams a tangled mess of the kiss, the closeness, and the possible lies.

Mom is brewing coffee when I walk into the kitchen the next morning. "You have a

good night?” she asks.

“Uh, sort of,” I mutter.

“Sort of?”

I’ve already decided I’m not going to tell Cleo and Lily about my suspicions. Cleo would say that it doesn’t matter. All I should be worrying about is sleeping with Alex anyway. Lily would be disgusted at the idea that somebody would lie about something like that.

Mom pours me a mug of coffee. Things can get tense between us at times, but we’re still all each other has.

“It’s nothing, really,” I mutter. “It doesn’t even matter. But I sort of kissed a guy last night.”

Mom looks younger than her age when she smiles, which is exactly what she does when I tell her this. “How do you sort of kiss a guy?”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, we actually kissed.”

“That’s great, Tori,” she says, beaming.

“Is it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Mom, how are you still so optimistic about romance and love and all that crap after everything? I mean, it was just yesterday you split up wi?—”

She raises a hand. “I refuse to talk about him .”

“Well, I may be in a similar situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“This guy, he’s older, he’s hot, he’s... interesting.”

“So far, so good,” she says.

“But last night, he got super intense. Said he’s been looking for the right woman—looked at me as though I was the lucky girl. Then he told me about how his ex cheated on him with his brother, and how they died in a car crash, and now he takes care of their kid.”

“How awful,” Mom whispers.

“But I can’t find any record of it online. I’ve used his surname with the word ‘crash.’ Surely, that’d be enough? Plus, online, there are loads of photos of him with other women. So, what happened to not being interested in romance anymore? Plus, on his socials, there’s not a single snap of his nephew. Surely, if he were taking care of him, there would be.”

Mom frowns, her eyes glimmering.

“What?” I snap.

“Is this what I’ve done to you?”

“Mom, please, don’t make this about you.”

“Why would you assume he’s lying?” she questions.

“Men lie. It’s what they do.”

“Not all men,” she insists.

“Mom.”

I feel bad about raising my voice, but this is just ridiculous. How many times does she need to experience the same thing to get the point?

“How many boyfriends have you had since Dad passed away?”

“A few,” she says.

“Seven. How many of those have turned out to be liars? Five . Those aren’t exactly great odds, are they?”

“I thought you weren’t looking for a relationship, anyway,” Mom says, raising an eyebrow. “You’ve always said love isn’t for you.”

“It isn’t,” I say defensively.

“So why do you care if he lied or not? Why do you care if he’s in photos with other women? If you don’t want him, it shouldn’t matter.”

She’s got me there. I’ve got no good answer to that one.

My phone vibrates. It’s a text from the demanding doctor himself.

Alex: Good morning, beautiful.

CHAPTER 10

ALEX

In the break room, I sit on the couch and take out my phone. I've been waiting for a moment to see if Tori has texted me back all day. This morning, I shot off something simple.

Alex: Good morning, beautiful .

Things got heated last night. As we kissed, it was like I let out the beast inside me. I just couldn't stop.

I might not have if she hadn't looked so panicked. She stared at me as if she wanted to get as far away as quickly as possible. Suddenly, it was like she was terrified by what had happened between us.

Is it because she cares more than she wants to admit, more than she wants to, full stop?

She hasn't texted back. Dammit.

I feel like a lovestruck teenager waiting for his crush to reply. I'm a grown man with a hospital to run. Angrily shoving my cell phone into my locker, I get back to work.

I work my body hard in the home gym after my long shift. Elliot was asleep when I got home, the nanny telling me he'd had a good day at school and had completed all

his homework. To say that I sometimes feel like an absentee guardian would be an understatement.

I need to work on that, but my job is what keeps me sane. My job will make sure Elliot never has to want in life.

I'm not avoiding anything, anybody, because of the affair, dammit. Because of the betrayal.

When my cell rings, cutting through the metal music I use to block out my thoughts—or try to—I click the button on my headphones, which answers the call.

Julian sounds extremely pleased with himself. “Ask me how my night went.”

“Do I want to?” I say between heavy breaths.

“Whoa, you burying a body?”

The only thing I'm burying is any notion of a relationship with the only woman I've cared about since... no, there's no fucking since . This is an ever kind of deal.

“On the assault bike,” I growl.

“You sound very happy about that.”

“Get to the point.”

“Jesus.” He chuckles. “You sure you're interested?”

I settle myself down. “Sorry, Julian. I'm being rude.”

“No argument here.”

“So, what happened?”

“I met with my secret Valentine. We went back to her place—and get this—we’re going to have a second date.”

“That’s great,” I say, ignoring the petty voice whispering in my ear that I’m jealous. I refuse to let that brand of weakness twist me up. “What’s her name?”

“Cynthia. She’s a yoga instructor. We bonded over our shared love of the unusual shapes the body can make.”

“Ha ha.” The laughter is forced, but I’m not going to drag my buddy down with me.

“Your night didn’t go well?”

“I think I came on too strong. I hinted that she was the woman I’d been waiting for. We kissed, and she ran.”

“Ran?” he echos.

“She looked scared. At the time, I thought she was scared of her feelings. Like, hell, maybe she’d been waiting for me as much as I’d been waiting for her. Now, I wonder if I came across like an overbearing jerk.”

“Not everybody is looking for love,” Julian says. “Have you spoken since?”

“No,” I reply, not liking his answer at all.

If Tori isn’t looking for love, what does she want? Just mindless fun? If I can’t give

her that, will she get it from somebody else? Wild, hot jealousy pumps through me.

“When you talk again, maybe tone it back a bit. If you like her, you don’t want to scare her off.”

“I don’t want to mess around, either.”

“Messing around is half the fun. She’s younger than you, too.”

As if I hadn’t noticed that. Her youth was apparent when she backed off from the kiss, her eyes wide, gorgeous, innocent. She was looking at me like she’d never even kissed anyone before. A fucked-up part of me liked that.

Nobody else gets to claim her—just me.

Claim her. What am I even thinking?

“You’re right,” I admit reluctantly, letting my pedaling come to a stop. “I need to chill. Going forward, that’s what I’ll do. I’ll be the most casual man you can imagine. Slippers, a Sunday paper, and a mug of milky weak coffee, that’s me. I’m the man who takes a woman on a date a week for three months only to let it fizzle out.”

“That’s more like it,” Julian says. “Welcome to the twenty-first century way of doing things.”

We chat some more, and then I shower and check on Elliot. He’s sleeping on his side, breathing softly. In the dark, he looks just like Robin did at the same age.

As I try to sleep, I think about what Julian said. Maybe I don’t want to be part of the twenty-first century. Tori called herself an old soul. We match.

I'm drifting off when my phone buzzes.

Tori: Hey, Alex. Sorry for the late reply. I've been at the bar all day. I had to double as a waitress because one of the other waitresses called in sick. Anyway, I don't mean to bore you. How was your day? If you're asleep, I'll catch your reply tomorrow. Peace.

The message seems designed to be almost artfully casual. She wants to put the forwardness of last night behind us. I can't blame her for that. Sharing everything about Robin, Lena, and Elliot came so naturally.

If I were being modern, I wouldn't reply until the morning. I'd get involved in the texting games, not letting my eagerness show.

Fuck that.

Alex: Don't try to pretend we can be casual, Tori. All I've been thinking about is that kiss and taking it further. The memory of your hips...

I delete the message before I can send it. Julian's right—I need to chill out big time.

Alex: You don't have to apologize. I've been working all day, too. How was work? Did that asshole show his face again?

Tori: Work was... work. LOL (that's right, I'm still going to use this even if you insist on being a dork and typing it out). I had a side project to keep me busy. If you ask me nicely, I might even tell you what it was about.

I grin.

Alex: If I was there, I'm sure I could make you tell me.

Tori: Oh, really... How would you do that?

Alex: You got a small preview of it last night. I almost got carried away, remember?

Tori: How could I forget? I almost lost the ability to think, too. That's why I had to run away so quickly.

Alex: I thought maybe the big bad surgeon had scared you. Maybe I'd turned into a horror movie villain in your eyes.

Tori: Hahahaha. What, like you were going to dissect me or something?

I chuckle, sitting up, wishing she was here... but also not. The simplicity of texting allows me to keep my hunger at bay. For now, at least.

Alex: Go on then, Tori. Tell me about your side project.

Tori: Nuh-uh. How is that asking nicely?

Alex: I apologize. Please, from the bottom of my heart, with all the sincerity in my soul, deign to inform me about the project which made your time at work tolerable.

Tori: LOL. That's more like it.

Alex: LOL. See? For you, I'll even use the acronym. That's proof that I REALLY want to know.

Tori: There's an open mic coming up. I was working on a poem. This is going to sound like a cliché but screw it. Sometimes, it's like I'm not the one writing the poetry. Sometimes, it feels like it comes from somewhere inside me, and I have to be ready. That's my very pretentious way of saying I've been taking every chance I can

get to scrawl my notes between orders.

Alex: It's not pretentious. It's interesting.

My heart twitches as I think about her wild hair falling over her face, her teeth clasp her lower lip as the ideas spark through her excited mind.

Alex: What's the poem about?

Tori: It's depressing. I don't want to ruin the mood.

I laugh at the callback.

Alex: I've seen more darkness today than you could fathom, Tori. Don't hold back on my account.

Tori: If you want to know...

Alex: I do. I'm curious about everything about you.

I delete the last line, leaving just 'I do'. After I click send, I wonder if we'll ever say those two magical words. Then, I relegate the crazy thought to the back of my mind.

Tori: The performance is from the point of view of a girl after her mom's latest boyfriend walks out. She's watched these men lie to her mother over and over, and so she's venting her frustration while she wrestles with the core concept of whether or not love is real.

I swallow. She's wondering if love is real ?

Making her mine is going to be an uphill battle.

Again, I warn myself to calm down.

Alex: So this is from the point of view of a character?

Tori: Sure, you could call her that. Obviously, I'll be the one up there performing, but sometimes, I like to use a framing device: a way to distance myself. Or just create a new perspective.

She added the 'or,' but it's the first one. She wants to distance herself and pretend this isn't about her. But it is.

Alex: This character doesn't believe that love is real .

My hands are trembling as I type, the idea making me sick on a level I never had access to before I met Tori.

Tori: She's wrestling with the idea. She's not sure if it exists.

Alex: Which way is she leaning?

Tori: She's leaning toward the 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' mentality.

Alex: In what way?

I'm sending my replies fast, with no thought of seeming too eager holding me back. Once, Julian counted out the words in texts he was sending a woman. He refused to let his word count exceed hers. I can't play those games.

Tori: If she has functioned this long without love, relationships, or even having crushes, then why should she start now? Plenty of people are able to live productive lives alone. Surely, you can understand that.

She's got me there, but I don't want to admit it, not to her, not to the woman I'm starting to care about.

Alex: People can be productive. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're living their best lives or that they couldn't be happier.

Tori: You're really gung ho about this 'love' thing, aren't you?

Alex: No.

I lie. I can't let her know I've been secretly wanting and searching, convinced it would never work out until we began texting.

One walk on the beach with her means more than a full-fledged date with any other woman ever could.

Alex: You're too young to think there's no such thing as love, Tori.

Tori: We're not talking about me. We're talking about the character.

Alex: If I were there, I'd make you admit the truth: this is about you. You're the only one who thinks love is a lie.

Tori: You'd make me, huh? How would you persuade me?

My body stirs. My steel aches and grows hot. Is she trying to take this where I think she is?

I close my eyes and imagine her in bed. No, sitting on the bed so I can get a greedy look at her thick thighs in some PJ shorts. In the fantasy, she's wearing a tank top, no bra, her nipples poking through the material, tempting me to suck them, first through

the fabric until she's wriggling and begging, then I'll tear down her shirt, reveal her nakedness, suck until her toes are curling with a soul-searing orgasm.

Only then will I move on to the rest of her delectable body.

Alex: I'd bring you to the edge, Tori, and make you tell me before I let you topple over.

Tori: Hmm... What kind of edge are we talking about?

Alex: The edge you bring me to any time I think about your voluptuous, tempting legs. The edge you've brought me to right now as I imagine gliding my hands over your body.

Tori: Where on my body?

My balls throb, lust flooding into me, surging up my stiff pole.

Alex: Anywhere I damn well...

I stop typing when Elliot screams.

Leaping to my feet, I run through the house and burst into his bedroom. He's sitting upright, breathing heavily, sweat glistening on his forehead and cheeks.

"Daddy?" he says, staring at me. He shudders as he takes me in and realizes I'm not his father. "Uncle Alex. Sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry," I tell him, approaching the bed. "Bad dream?"

He nods, wiping his eyes. "It's okay. I'll go back to sleep."

I kneel next to the bed. It's been two years since the crash and far longer since the betrayal, and I'm nowhere near as close to my nephew as I should be. I realize that sometimes, and it hurts. I can blame work all I want, but I know other forces are at play, too.

"What do you want to do, Elliot? I can tell you don't want to go back to sleep."

"Can we maybe build a little of the Death Star?" he murmurs. "Just until I forget my dream?"

"Sure we can, buddy."

I stay with Elliot for the next hour, then return to the bedroom.

Alex: Sorry, Tori. Elliot had a nightmare.

Predictably, she doesn't reply.

CHAPTER 11

TORI

“That’s great that you’ve been texting,” Lily says on speaker the following afternoon as I get ready for work.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” I say.

“See?” Cleo pipes into the call, sounding giddy. “She’s taken my advice, sweet Lily flower. She’s turned into a stone-cold bitch.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far,” I mutter.

I try to join in on the fun, but it’s difficult when I’ve got this paranoid voice in the back of my head. Just when things were going to get steamy, Elliot had a nightmare.

I did something unhealthy after I received the text. I looked, again, online for any sign of this so-called nephew. Mom’s teary face has been living rent-free in my head. She’s right, I guess, though it pains me to admit it.

I probably wouldn’t be thinking about this if it weren’t for her terrible example.

“Let us know when he sends the coveted dick pic,” Cleo says.

“Eww.” Lily laughs.

“I agree, Lils. Eww, is right.”

As I brew my afternoon coffee, I look at my cell phone. I haven't texted back since we came close to dirty texting. Lying in bed, my body was heating up like crazy, the tingles shivering over my thighs and my sex.

Then, the excuse, the nightmare.

Was he with another woman, or am I just projecting?

Saying goodbye to my friends, I walk the short distance to the bar. The day is bright, but I'm paying more attention to my phone than the surroundings. He hasn't texted me again. Does that mean he's not interested?

Honestly, if I viewed my behavior objectively, I'd cut the cord here. I'd accept that I'm going too far and I need to relax big time. I've known him for less than a day. He's a bit of Valentine's fun, that's all.

In the end, I text him back. I don't want to be, as Cleo put it, a stone-cold bitch.

Tori: Aw, that's awful. I hope everything's okay with the little man. I'm heading into work now, so I won't be able to text. I'll talk to you later, maybe.

I add that 'maybe' like it's going to make a difference, like there's a chance we won't talk, when it's all I want to do. At least we're not seeing each other in person. That makes handling all this easier, just a tiny bit.

The bar begins to grow busy around eight. I rush up and down the bar, serving drinks, making small talk, remembering the regulars, and hopefully, lighting up their days with a little human interaction.

Whenever I get a chance, I scribble in my notebook, dancing around the topic of love.

“Tori?”

I look up with a customer-service smile, which quickly turns into something else when I see Alex looming over the bar. He’s wearing a shirt but no jacket, his firm body on full display, and the temptation is stronger than on the first night.

Now, I know how those muscles feel under his shirt. He’s got a smirk on his face. It looks, to me, relaxed, cool, chill. But what if it’s the sleazy smirk of a man who thinks he’s taking advantage of a younger and, in his view, naïve woman?

“I’m not stalking you,” he says, laughing.

I laugh with him. It feels so easy, so right somehow. “You’re not exactly designed for sneaking around, are you?”

“I had a meeting in the neighborhood, thought I’d swing by... and give you this.”

He hands me a small parcel across the bar. Our fingers brush, and electricity dances up my arm, making my heart beat quicker. “What is it?” I ask, curious.

“A gift,” he replies.

“Yeah, duh, but what?”

He laughs again. “Why don’t you open it and find out?”

The way he’s smiling at me makes me feel special. It makes me feel like the only woman in the world he cares about. Suddenly, I forget those photos of him with other women, and my mind playing tricks.

“I should probably serve...”

“Don’t worry about that.” Suddenly, Rowan appears with a knowing grin on her face. “In fact, Tori, you’re overdue a quick break. Take five.”

“Are you sure?”

Rowan glares at me. “Take five. It’s an order!”

I walk around the bar, noticing Alex’s eyes moving up and down my body before settling on my face.

Tori, keep your defenses up. I can’t end up as Mom 2.0.

We go to a booth in the corner. I’m aware of how close he stands to me as we walk. I’m pretty sure I can feel his heat, too, or maybe that’s just my overactive mind doing its work again.

Sitting down, he leans forward with a smile, his eyes sparkling, making him look somehow younger... not that he needs to look younger. He seems so interested in me. Or is ‘obsessed’ a better word, and is that a good thing?

I open the package, wrapped in brown paper, a smile lighting up my face when I see what’s inside—a leather-bound notebook with words inscribed on the front. Your imagination awaits... There’s a pen too.

“I recognize this brand name,” I mutter, picking the pen up.

He nods. “It’s a good pen. Hopefully, it’ll help your character come to the right conclusion.”

I flip the lid off and open the notebook. This is the most special and romantic thing anybody has ever done for me, which, weirdly, is why the need to play this cool is even more urgent than before. I draw a table and two columns, putting headings above each.

To Love.

Not To Love .

“That is the question,” he mutters when I show him.

“Thank you, Alex,” I say. “Seriously, it means a lot. It’s very nice of you.”

“What are Valentine’s for?” he replies.

Love bombing a younger woman? Messing with her head and heart? Or am I the one messing with myself by feeding this sick notion?

“How’s Elliot doing?” I ask.

He gets this strange look and turns his gaze away. Some might call that suspicious.

“He’s fine,” he says quietly.

“How old is he?”

“Ten.”

“And when did his parents... you know?”

“Two years ago. That was when he came to live with me.”

Sure, or maybe you had one too many drinks and thought a sob story would be the best way to get and keep my interest, hisses a voice in my head.

“What’s he like?”

“He’s... normal,” Alex says after a pause. “He likes LEGO and video games. And hanging out with his friends. He’s just a normal kid.”

Why does he sound like he’s getting defensive ?

“Do you have any photos?”

“No,” he replies. “People say he has my eyes. Robin—that’s my brother—used to say that before... But I don’t have any photos.”

He doesn’t have any photos of his nephew on his phone? Isn’t that a tiny bit suspicious?

“Maybe you could take a selfie sometime,” I say, trying to make it lighthearted. “I could compare the eyes; give my two cents.”

“I can do that,” he replies. “But only if you talk some sense into this character of yours, this, what did you call it? Framing device?”

I’m touched that he remembered. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“When’s the performance?” he asks.

“Nuh-uh, no way. This notebook is sweet, very sweet, but it doesn’t buy you a ticket to that crap show.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” he says fiercely, reaching across the table and taking my hand.

More tingles dance up my arm at the contact.

“I bet it’s not crap. The furthest thing from it.”

Thank you, I almost say. That means a lot. I get self-conscious, and your reassurance helps for some reason.

Instead, I laugh, not caring if it sounds forced. “Easy, I was only kidding.” Lie. “I need to get back to work.” That’s another lie, probably, because matchmaker Rowan would most likely let me sit here all day if it meant flirting and bonding with my Valentine Casanova.

“I’m going to have dinner here,” Alex says, his eyes locked on me as I stand up.

He’s staring in that captivating way again.

Nothing, nobody else matters. Just me. Just us. Whatever the heck this is.

“Okay,” I say, oh-so breezily. “That’s cool. I’ll send over a waiter.”

As I return to the bar, I resist the urge to clasp the notebook to my chest, which, if he’s the kind of manipulative guy the cynical part of me is painting, is probably exactly what he wants.

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CHAPTER 12

ALEX

Alex: You're so sweet with the customers . One elderly man walked past me, singing your praises. Apparently, you always go the extra mile to make the regulars feel welcome.

I know she won't get this until her shift is over, but it's the truth. As she rushes up and down the bar, where people also order food, she's got a gorgeous energy that captivates me. Her hair bounces on her shoulders, her cheeks are flushed, and her smile is magnetic.

She walks to the end of the bar during a lull, then, like magic, a text comes.

Tori: Some of them don't have anything else. It's sad. I consider it my job to make them feel welcome.

I grin when she looks over at me, playfully waving her phone.

Alex: What happened to not texting at work?

Tori: Rowan has mysteriously lifted that ban... but only for the duration of your stay here. It's almost like she's got a specific outcome in mind.

Alex: Any ideas?

Tori: I'm pretty sure she'd want me to ask you...

She puts her phone down to serve another customer, leaving the message unfinished but I know where she was going. I watch her with a smile, barely touching my food. I'm like a moth to the flame; I just can't help myself.

However, when she asked me about Elliot, that was awkward. I don't know why, exactly. Or maybe I do. Maybe I want to avoid it like I have for the last two years since the crash.

He's a good kid. It's not his fault he reminds me so much of Robin, who was not just my brother but also one of my best friends, a person I thought would never betray me.

I push the negativity away and type a message.

Alex: Tell her that the outcome is me spending as much time at her establishment as possible as long as it means I get to watch you with that gorgeous, magnetic smile on your face.

Another lull, and she walks to the end of the bar, smiling as she heads to the back.

Tori: You make taking out the trash much more interesting than usual.

Alex: I wish I could stay here all day. I need to get back to work soon.

Before I can send the message, she calls me. I quickly answer it.

A voice snarls, "Give me the fucking phone."

I leap from my chair, causing several people to turn and look at me. I don't give a damn. I know that voice, even crackling through the phone.

Running behind the bar, I dart through the kitchen, not caring when people yell at me that I can't be back here. Let them shout.

Nobody gets to threaten her. Not at work, not anywhere.

I burst out of the rear exit to find her boxed in against the wall, three wannabe tough guys standing around her. One of them is Damien, the jerk from Valentine's night.

"Get the fuck away from her," I growl. When they don't turn to face me quickly enough, I slam my hand against the trashcan. "Now!"

Damien turns, sneering at me. He looks mighty fucking pleased with himself. The other two are covered in tattoos on their faces, necks, and hands. They have a strung-out look that makes me think of what Damien said about having connections in Miami.

If Tori's safety weren't a concern, maybe I'd think about my job, my patients, and Elliot. What's he going to do without me?

Instead, I step forward, glaring at the men. "She turned you down, dumbass. What sad game is this?"

"You just said it," Damien snaps. "She turned me down. That's the issue right there, you old bastard. Nobody turns me down. That's the whole point."

"Damien, just stop," Tori says, her hands raised in a defensive position.

He turns to her, yelling in her face. "Quiet, bitch!"

I snap without thinking. No one talks to her like that.

My fist catches him across the mouth. He stumbles back. One of the tattooed men immediately takes out a gun and aims it at me.

I freeze, staring at the barrel. Tori has tears in her eyes. Damien wipes blood from his lip and then grabs the pistol from his buddy, pointing it at me. “That wasn’t very smart, was it?”

“Scaring Tori wasn’t very smart, you twisted fuck,” I growl, unable to control my rage. It boils up from something primal inside me: the urge to protect my woman.

Maybe that will seem crazy later. Or I’ll second guess it, but not now, not here. It feels like the most genuine thing I’ve ever experienced.

The other two scumbags exchange a look. When Tori steps forward, they move toward her, and she freezes. She seems annoyed with herself, her eyebrows furrowing almost like they did when she discussed her poetry.

“What if I just clipped you here, old man? Then what? Would you feel big and brave and fucking impressive then?”

“You need to take a breath and think about what you’re doing.”

He pushes the barrel of the gun against my head, the cold metal grinding into my skin. Perhaps there’s a world where I’d let fear dictate my actions here, but all I care about is that sobbing noise Tori is making. That’s the only thing that matters right now.

She is all that matters: her future, her poetry, her life.

“Maybe I’ll give you a choice,” the bastard says. “You can sacrifice your own life and take a bullet for this ungrateful bitch.”

The moment he turns as if to aim the gun at Tori—the second I feel some slack in his grip on the gun—I grab his wrist and wrench it violently. He roars as his bone makes a snap noise, and the gun clatters to the ground. The other men leap at me.

I black out for a moment. In the brief darkness, I see an image of Tori in a wedding dress, her cheeks glowing with pregnancy. Funny the things a man thinks in a life-or-death scenario.

When I ‘wake up,’ adrenaline rushing through me, I’ve cracked both of Damien’s goons across the jaw. They stumble away from me and take off. I spin the second they are gone and leap on Damien when he tries to pick up his gun. I thunder an elbow into the side of his head, running on pure instinct.

“Stop!” Tori yells when Damien tries to stand up.

I look at her. She’s got the pistol in her hand, aiming it at Damien, tears streaming down her cheeks. Despite the obvious stress, she looks strong, ready to pull the trigger if it comes to that.

“You heard the lady,” I grunt, grabbing the front of his shirt and shaking him.

Damien sneers, not seeming to care that his arm is twisted at an unnatural angle.

“Don’t fucking look at her,” I growl. “Who do you think you are, you sick bastard? Did you seriously think I was going to let you hurt her? I’ll never let anybody hurt her, understand me? Never.”

Tori gasps, fear flickering into her beautiful eyes for a moment. It’s like the fear is aimed at me, not Damien. She’s more afraid of my declaration than what Damien tried to do.

“Tori, call the cops,” I say. “And give me that.”

I offer a hand for the gun. As Tori motions to give it to me, the rat chooses his moment. He throws his broken hand at my face, causing me to duck, giving him just enough space to twist out of his shirt and dart down the street.

When I step forward as if to chase him, Tori lets out a sob. It’s enough to make me stop. I don’t want to abandon her. What if the other two return? What if I lose sight of Damien, and he doubles back?

I toss his shirt onto the ground, then take the gun from Tori’s hand. Pulling her into my arms feels natural. But I sense her holding back. It’s as if she doesn’t want me to think this experience has earned me too much affection in her eyes.

She wants me to know she’s still not in this for true love.

“Thank you,” she whispers, pushing against me, distancing herself.

“I wasn’t going to let him hurt you. I’d never let that happen.”

Her eyes glisten, then she turns away as if she can’t look at me when I make declarations like this.

“I need to call the cops,” she says, taking a step back.

I nod. “We’ll both need to give statements. I need to make a call, too.” I tuck the pistol into my waistband and walk to the other side of the alley, taking out my cell.

My nanny, Catelina, answers quickly. “Dr. Whitmore,” she says.

“Hey, Cat,” I reply. “I’m sorry to do this...”

“Would you like me to stay for the night?” she says.

I almost tell her no. A few hours will be fine, but can I really leave Tori now? If I did and those low lives returned, I’d never forgive myself. “Yes, if you don’t mind?”

“No, that’s okay with me, Dr. Whitmore.”

“Can I talk to him?” I ask, familiar guilt twisting in me.

“Who... Elliot, or LEGO-las?”

Despite the mayhem, I manage a slight grin. “Come again?”

“It’s his new name, apparently. He’s not Elliot anymore. He’s LEGO-las, like Lord of the Rings mixed with LEGOs.”

“Classic Elliot. Sorry. LEGO-las.”

“He’s playing a game with his friends. But I can get him.”

I think about Elliot sitting cross-legged in front of the TV, headset on, laughing and joking with his buddies as they shoot avatars on the screen. “No, let him have his fun. Just tell him I love him, and we’ll do something together soon.”

“Okay. Goodbye. Have a good night, sir.”

“And you. Thanks again.”

“The cops are on their way,” Tori says once I’ve hung up.

“Good.”

She chews on her lip and brushes a hand through her hair. She's clearly shaken up, but she's trying to be strong. When I open my arms to wrap them around her, she puts her hand on my chest. Her heat blazes against the skin under my shirt.

"We need to calm down," she says.

"I am calm."

"You're burning up. And your heart is beating like crazy. You went... berserk for me."

"I couldn't let him hurt you," I snap. "That was simply not on the table."

She turns away again, but I can't stop myself. She's trying to be numb, closed-off, and maybe I was too in the beginning. But I can't be a grump when I'm around her. She unlocks things in me no other woman has or could.

Caressing her shoulders, I pull her in for a kiss. She gasps and pushes against me. For a tantalizing moment, she lets her lust and affection burn, sinking into the kiss.

Then she pulls away.

"Alex," she whispers. "We've just had a life-or-death experience. We're not thinking straight."

"I haven't been thinking straight since I first laid eyes on you."

"Comments like that aren't making this any easier."

She half says this, half moans, and it feels like she's caught between being stern and letting her desire flare.

I'm about to kiss her again when the sound of sirens cuts through the moment.

CHAPTER 13

TORI

“ I certainly do not expect you to stay,” Rowan says when the police have come and gone. They took my statement, confiscated the gun and the shirt as evidence, and left with promises to investigate. “Are the police going to give you an escort, at least? Somebody to make sure that jerk doesn’t return?”

“They’re underfunded,” I reply, shrugging. “They said I should call them if I notice anything suspicious.”

“Oh, poor girl.” Rowan touches my arm. “This is just awful. I always knew Damien had problems... but this . It just seems extreme. All you did was say no to his advances.”

“Maybe that’s enough for some men. I don’t know.”

“Either way, you’re going home. That’s final.” Rowan nods across the bar. “I think I know someone who will give you a ride.”

I look across the bar at Alex sitting in the booth as if he’s a regular Joe—as if, when the time comes, his body won’t swell like it’s going to tear his clothes apart, and he won’t go into full protector mode.

When he saved me, I felt my heart melting like it was full of goo, but there’s still that cautious voice inside.

“I’m not going to let Damien dictate my life. The cops will find him soon, I’m sure. Then everything can go back to normal.”

“Still, he’s waiting for you.” Rowan nods over at Alex.

Grabbing my bag with his gift inside, I walk over to his booth. Alex stands, his chest rising and falling gently now. Before, he was the equivalent of a human volcano.

“I’m giving you a ride, Tori,” he says.

“Is that an order?”

“It’s a statement of fact. You’re not risking public transport or walking these streets alone. Come on.”

He puts his hand on my lower back, his touch making my body feel all warm and tingly.

He leads me onto the street, his gaze scanning up and down to make sure Damien isn’t hidden amid the growing crowds. I can put up all the defenses I want, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like this.

And all that stuff about him maybe making up a nephew. If he was lying to me because he wanted to get into my pants, would he stare down a bullet for me? Isn’t that just silly?

It’s only a short ride to my apartment.

“Thanks for the book,” I murmur, taking it out to look at it again.

“You’re welcome. I hope you fill it with beautiful poetry, Tori. I still want to see you

perform...”

“And I still think that would make me melt into a heap on the floor.”

He seems disappointed the ride is so short, his strong jaw tensing as we pull up to my apartment.

“So, I’ll see you?” I say.

“I have a feeling you will,” he replies.

“Why did you sound so mysterious when you said that?”

His eyes glimmer savagely. “I can’t shake the idea of that bastard returning.”

“Okay...”

I feel like I’m missing something. “Have a good night,” he says stiffly.

I don’t want to leave things like that. Even though I’m the one who pushed him away before, I touch the front of his shirt and pull him in for a kiss. His smile is pure and relieved, as if he thought I might not feel the same way.

I don’t, I assure myself, as we kiss. I can’t feel the same as he does. He’s looking for his one and only, and I’m not sure what I want anymore.

Our mouths open, our tongues hungrily find each other. I can feel his body blazing with desire. His hand rests on my leg; then he squeezes like he can’t simply hold it there. When he glides it up, I put my hand on his wrist.

“Not now,” I say. “Not here .”

“You’re right.” His voice shudders. “I’m...”

I think he’s going to say sorry , but he stops himself. Maybe he can’t say it because it’d be a lie. He’s not sorry for kissing and touching me. Do I even want him to be?

As I walk across the street, I feel him watching me. The truth? I freaking like it. I could get used to being his obsession if I could just let go of all this messy baggage Mom has left me with.

“Oh, my gosh,” Lily says when I tell the girls what happened a while later in a group call. “That’s just awful. Are you okay?”

“I’m pretty shaken up,” I murmur, idly making notes in the notebook Alex gave me.

“That absolute piece of shit,” Cleo says angrily. “If I could get my hands on him... Seriously, I’d break his face. And the cops haven’t even put a car outside your place or anything?”

“No, but Alex has been sitting outside ever since he dropped me off.”

“That’s nice,” Lily murmurs.

I go to my bedroom window and look at the hulking man sitting behind the wheel, his broad shoulders and thick build reassuring.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“But?” Cleo says.

She’s seen right through me. “But I think I might be a little crazy.”

“Well, that’s not news ,” Cleo teases.

“Hey, leave her alone,” Lily cuts in. “She’s had a rough night.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Tori.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s better to pretend like everything’s normal.”

“So why this sudden thought about you being crazy?” Cleo asks.

“I just think all the relationship stuff about Mom might’ve messed me up. I don’t know...”

“Why don’t you talk to us about it?” Lily says softly.

“Okay, but promise not to laugh.”

“After tonight, there’s no way we’d laugh at you.”

I take a breath. “Almost every guy Mom has been with has lied to her in some way, right? Sometimes, these have been little lies. But other times, they’ve been absolutely absurd, like not having families, or having a relative who’s dying, yada yada yada. Get it?”

“Yeah...” Cleo says.

“Well, Alex says he’s got this nephew he’s caring for after his brother passed away. Only, there are no photos of this nephew on his social media. And he hasn’t even got any photos of him on his phone. Isn’t that suspicious?” I rush ahead before they can respond, caught up in the possibly insane idea. “I mean, not even one photo. But if this is all just about getting me into bed, why the heck would he protect me like that,

you know?”

“I don’t know, babe,” Lily says quietly. “Maybe you’re overthinking it. Maybe he just doesn’t use his phone a lot.”

“Yeah, but...” Cleo sighs. “Men do lie. But why does this matter if it’s all casual anyway?”

“Cleo, he’s keeping guard outside her house after saving her life. This has already gone beyond casual,” Lily scolds.

It all makes my head spin.

“I’m going to try and get some sleep,” I say... well, lie. I won’t be sleeping much tonight.

“Call us if you need us,” Lily says.

“Yeah, any time,” Cleo adds.

“I will. Thanks for not calling me crazy.”

I end the call, then return to the window, typing a text.

Tori: You don’t have to stay out there all night.

Alex: I know I don’t have to, but I wouldn’t forgive myself if I left and something happened.

Tori: Don’t you have work?

Alex: Not until tomorrow morning. An eight-six shift.

Tori: You can't go without sleep all night and then work a shift like that!

Alex: Not to shatter your illusions about the healthcare industry, beautiful, but that's not exactly uncommon.

I smile, which feels like a miracle after the night I just had.

Tori: How are you feeling?

Alex: It isn't important.

Tori: Don't be silly. This has been a wild experience for you, too. It's not every day you face down a gunman.

Alex: The only thing I feel is a desire to make sure you're okay.

My heart grows warm with this Valentine's silliness. The heat with my silver fox savior was never supposed to burn this hot this fast.

Tori: I just want to forget about it all. I don't want to think about anything. But I don't think I'll be able to sleep, either.

Alex: Why don't you write some poetry?

Tori: Writing is thinking. In fact, it might be the worst thing because it means disappearing into my mind.

Alex: You're so... soulful, Tori.

Another smile.

Tori: Soulful, huh? That's a new one.

Alex: You are. You put up a shield. You want to pretend nothing bothers you. But you can't.

Tori: I just want some distraction. It's not that deep.

Alex: Don't tempt me to play that game, not when all this adrenaline is still surging through my body.

I sit on the edge of my bed, a shiver coursing through me. It feels dangerous, taboo in some way—we shouldn't go here so soon after what happened.

Tori: What game are we talking about, huh?

Alex: You know damn well. I think you're trying to get me to tell you.

I don't want to tell him how little experience I've got. But I'm texting the truth.

Forgetting about all of it—Damien, my doubts, my quest to keep this casual – is so much easier than thinking.

Tori: ...

Alex: Three dots have never meant so much. I could distract you, beautiful, but you'd probably think I was a psycho for getting so damn horny so damn fast after what happened tonight. But each kiss, each touch, it'd be a sign that I'm never going to let anyone hurt you.

Shivers dance all over me as I read his message, remembering the feel of his lips, his hands on my hips.

Tori: ...

Alex: I'd find you in bed, you perfect, curvy, sensual poet. Then, I'd tear your pants down to reveal your thick and delicious legs. I'd fall to my knees, getting ready to feast on you and worship you in equal measure.

Tori: ...

My one hand begins to stray up and down my thigh, almost like it's doing it on its own. My core aches, my underwear suddenly feels too tight, my clit throbbing as if needy for his attention.

So much for not getting swept away.

But it's just texting. I'm safe.

He continues, and for a blissful, brief moment, any body-image issues disappear in a puff of smoke.

Alex: You know how much I love to sink my hands into your fullness. I'd bury my hands in your delectable legs, kiss closer and closer to your sex, and trail my tongue around your hole until you're shivering and wet. The whole time, your clit would be aching, hungry for my attention. I'd know this but wouldn't push my tongue against it right away.

Tori: It's tingling. Aching now.

Alex: Are you touching yourself?

Tori: No.

Alex: But you want to.

The power he has over me is unreal. The events of tonight recede into the back of my mind. It's like he's cast a spell of forgetfulness on me. Like he's used some freaking magic.

Tori: Maybe...

Alex: That wasn't a question. You want to touch your horny, needy clit, but you're not going to until I let you.

Tori: When are you going to let me?

I'm stunned at the effect he's having on me.

Nobody's ever made me feel this way before. Sure, it's not like I've tried a bunch of times, but this is still majorly different. It's like I can feel his lust burning through each typed message.

Alex: That means you're desperate to caress your perfect soaked slit . That means you want to rub your eager folds, get yourself ready for my cock. But not yet.

Tori: Will I get to see you? You're not going to make me get naked all alone, are you?

My thumb trembles as I type.

Alex: Once I've teased your lips and your sweet center, I'll stand up and tear my clothes off, showing you my bare chest, showing you my dick, rock-solid with how

badly I want, NEED, you.

I linger on the word 'need,' knowing it should freak me out. My heart is pounding as I try to convince myself this can be casual.

Tori: Will you stroke yourself for me? Will you rub your precome all over your big cock? Will you make it glisten for me?

Alex: It seems like you've got this all figured out.

Tori: Yeah, right... I don't know what I'm doing.

That's even truer than I'm letting on, but I'm not going to share that with him.

Yet. Ever.

No, Tori. Don't think about the future. Or the past. Just now.

Alex: Once I'm naked, I'll finally touch your tight clit, he goes on. But I won't touch it with my hand. I'll bring the tip of my cock to your nub, press against it, sometimes slipping down your dripping folds toward your hole, giving you a preview of how it'll feel when I take you.

I type, hardly able to believe I'm doing this. It seems so much easier over text.

Tori: I'll rub my breasts for you. I've seen the way you look at me. I know I'll be able to drive you completely nuts.

Alex: You're doing that right now.

Tori: I'll push my breasts together and then...

I stop texting when I hear a knock on my door.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” Mom says. “Juliette texted and asked if you were okay after what happened.” Juliette is Cleo’s mom. “What happened, Tori?”

“You were passed out when I came in. I didn’t want to wake up.”

“Can I come in?”

“Uh, I’ll meet you in the living room.”

Tori: I’m sorry. My mom’s awake. I haven’t told her about Damien yet.

He doesn’t reply. Is he annoyed? Do I care?

I join Mom in the living room. She rises from the couch and cradles my face in her hands. It’s the most maternal thing she’s done in a long time, and it doesn’t seem to matter that she’s probably only doing it because she’s still a little drunk.

“What’s wrong? You look shell-shocked.”

“Sit down.”

Mom watches me closely as I explain about Damien. “I thought he was just a bit weird, but then he started talking about connections , and today...” I take a breath. “He lured me out back and tried to threaten me. My – uh, friend was there to help. Damien ended up pulling a gun.”

“Damien, with connections,” Mom murmurs.

“Yeah...”

“What’s Damien’s last name?”

“Kent. Why?”

“Oh, God.” Mom buries her face in her hands and starts sobbing.

I swallow a ball of annoyance. I don’t know why she’s crying, but she’s doing it in the way she sometimes has of making it all about herself. I’m not in the mood for this.

“Mom?” I say.

“There was a man I never told you about...”

I listen until I can’t take it anymore. Then I leap to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Mom yells.

“Away from you!”

CHAPTER 14

ALEX

When I see Tori rushing down the street with a small bag slung over her shoulder, I climb out of the car and jog after her. I catch her arm and turn her toward me. “Where are you going?”

“Away from here. To stay at a friend’s. I don’t care.”

“What happened?” I take her hand, consciously calming the savage inside me, the beast who wants to pick up in real life where we left off in our text exchange. “Come on, Tori. The night’s getting cold.”

She’s only wearing a strappy top and sweatpants, both of which outline her perfect shape temptingly, her round breasts making me want to touch her, take away her emotional pain with a physical release that will have her shivering all over... not from the cold this time.

In the car, she wraps her arms around her middle.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she whispers.

“Try me.”

“It’s Damien. He’s not a stranger. He’s got a connection to me. Sort of. It’s so messed up.”

I take her hand, careful not to let my touch wander anywhere else. “Explain.”

“Mom had an ex who was into some shady stuff. A ‘two-bit criminal,’ she called him. Anyway, she’s not proud of this, but she cheated on him. Twice. When he found out, he was angry. Apparently, he sent her threatening texts and even letters for a while. She hid all of this from me. He has a son. Guess what his name is.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Tori nods. “I know, right? My thoughts exactly.”

“I’m sorry, Tori.”

“Do you think that’s why Damien got the job in the first place? He started after me.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. More likely, he started working there, learned who you were later, and decided to get revenge for his dad. Or maybe he doesn’t even know.”

She tightens her grip on my hand. “So much for casual, huh? I’m pulling you into a freaking conspiracy .”

“You’re not pulling me into anything,” I tell her fervently. “I’m here; I’m involved because I want to be. Let me take you to my apartment.”

“Won’t Elliot be sleeping?” she asks.

Am I being paranoid, or is her tone strange? She sounds suspicious. I can’t figure out why she would be, though.

“I’ve got the beach house, where I live with Elliot, and an apartment I use when my shifts end at awkward times or if I’m on call.”

“Oh.” More suspicion, I think. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No. I don’t want to leave you alone. I’m here for you, Tori.”

“So this is your bachelor pad, huh?” she says, walking ahead of me and looking around the modern, bare apartment.

“That’s not how I’d describe it.”

She walks around the living room, looking at the pictures on the walls, watercolors of nature scenes that were hanging there when I moved in. As she studies the place, I imagine her sprucing it up, giving it some character. Through her eyes, it probably looks sort of depressing.

“There’s a spare room,” I tell her. “If you’re worried about me pouncing on you.”

She turns, pouting, so beautiful it hurts being close to her. All those years, I was cynical and alone, but deep down, wanting my one and only. As she stands in the semidarkness, her eyes glimmering with excitement, I can’t fight the truth.

I’ve found her. Tori is the one.

“Is that what you want?” she whispers.

“What I want is too damn savage for words.” My voice shudders.

She raises an eyebrow. “Try me,” she whispers.

I know she wants to forget, but can I give into my desire now, so soon after she’s had a fight with her mom?

Perhaps another man, a better man, would take the high ground here. But I can't resist the hunger blazing in me. I walk across the room and sink my hands greedily into her hips.

"What I want is to forget about everything. That rat with the gun. This conspiracy you've pulled me into. I want to forget about your stubborn promise to keep this casual. I want to forget about everything, Tori, except your desire." I slide my hands to the voluptuous round globes of her ass, eliciting a moan that goes right to the base of my dick, making my balls swell. "I want you to feel how hard you make me. I want to slip in your perfect pussy and show you how badly I need you..."

A look of nervousness flashes across her face, but then she sinks her touch into my shoulders. She pulls herself right up against me, standing on her tiptoes.

"Then take what you need."

Fuck .

She couldn't have said anything more captivating.

I kiss her passionately, claiming her lips as I lift her off her feet. She giggles adorably, wrapping her legs around my waist, letting me drive my solid length against her through the fabric of our clothes.

Carrying her through the apartment, I kick open the bedroom door and place her on the bed. She reaches up, clawing for me. There's a hint of hungry desperation in her movements. It's like she doesn't want us to be apart because then she might doubt herself.

I need to be the mature one if I'm noticing things like this.

Don't I?

But I can't.

I fall upon her, letting out a groan when my lips come to her neck. Her noises urge me on, her breath catching as she slides her arms down my back. She tears at my shirt.

"Are you trying to hint at something?" I tease.

Her cheeks flush gorgeously.

"I need you to say it," I growl.

"Take your shirt off," she whispers.

I lean back and tear my shirt off. Buttons pop, making her laugh. Then I grab her shirt and try to pull it over her head, but that same look of nerves flutters over her face. She places her hand on my wrist.

"What are you afraid of?" I ask, every muscle tense and throbbing.

"Are you sure you want to see me?"

"You're joking," I groan. "There's no damn way you're asking me that. You're the only woman I want to see."

"You shouldn't say things like that," she murmurs.

"Maybe I shouldn't," I snarl, pulling her shirt over her head, revealing her luscious tits hidden within her bra. "Maybe I should be good. Maybe I should try and pretend

that this Valentine's thing doesn't mean a damn thing. Maybe..."

But I can't resist her anymore. I kiss down her mounds, then unclip her bra at the front. When the material falls away, I let out a shudder of pure desire. Her breasts are round and large, the definition of curvaceous. I tenderly massage one while bringing my mouth to her other, sucking her nipple.

"Oh, Alex," she whimpers urgently. "Yes, yes..."

I slide my hand from her breast and over her stomach. When she cringes, I reluctantly release her nipple and lean back. "What the fuck was that about, gorgeous?"

"What?" she murmurs, but I can tell she knows what I mean. "It's just, when you touched my belly... But it's not a big deal."

"Your figure is perfect," I tell her, kissing her lips, then her breasts, then her stomach. She giggles. "Perfect, Tori, and don't you dare think otherwise, got it?"

I return to her lips, gliding my hand down her body as our kisses become more urgent. I slip into her waistband and into her underwear, my dick leaking as I get closer to her clit and her warm entrance.

Her heat gives me an aching preview of how she'll feel wrapped around my shaft. She moans, opening her mouth, our teeth clicking in the mayhem of lust.

Her eyes are wide with almost disbelief as if she's stunned by how right this feels. I smear her wetness over her sex, groaning as I rub her faster, captivated, no, hypnotized by the pleasure sizzling in her expression.

After a minute or two, she begins to move her hips in time with my hand. It makes her breasts shiver and shake, her body twitching. My cock has never been harder, my

tip pushing urgently against my pants, trying to escape, trying to claim her.

“Oh, oh,” she gasps, her mouth opening and closing like she’s struggling to stop from screaming. “Freaking... fucking... oh...”

I move to her entrance, slipping my finger inside as I press the heel of my palm against her clit at the same time. No matter what happens, I’ll never forget the way her moan changes when I apply pressure.

It goes from excitement flooded with desire to unstoppable. Nothing could prevent her curvy, flawless body from gifting me with an orgasm now. She closes her legs around my hand, trapping it there.

I rub her so hard, fingering her slit, my dick pulsing as I imagine pushing inside of her instead. She feels so tight; it’s easy to imagine her wrapped around my shaft, gliding up and down, coaxing wave after wave of come from me.

She turns her face to the side as she goes over the edge, biting on the sheets, her body trembling all over.

“Fuck,” I moan, grabbing her pants.

She touches my wrist again. “Alex...”

“I need you,” I tell her, the truest words I’ve ever spoken. “I need your body. I need to be inside you. I need to look into your eyes and see them flood with another orgasm, but this time, with me buried deep, all the way inside...”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

I know I should stop. There's something she wants to say, but there's another part of me that just wants to tear her pants off, reveal her thickness, kiss and lick her lips and her clit, and make her go wild again before I slide my throbbing dick into her.

"No – you're right. But I don't want to do anything else. I mean, I want to. But... it's just moving fast, okay?"

Somehow, I manage to drag my hand away from her. But with her being half naked, it's still difficult to focus.

"Maybe you should..." I chuckle savagely. "I can't even say it. That's how badly I want you."

Her smile breaks through her anxiety. "Maybe I should put my clothes on. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yeah... unfortunately."

She laughs, but the laughter stops when she has clipped her bra and pulled her shirt over her head. "I don't want to make a big deal out of this, especially after everything that's happened."

"Whatever it is, you can tell me."

She sits up and takes my hands, biting her lip.

Again, she looks nervous and scared even by what she's feeling, the connection growing between us. When she gets that look, I think she'd do anything to sever this bond.

She wanted to keep it casual, but we are way past that.

“Tori?”

CHAPTER 15

TORI

His lips are still wet from our kisses, his shirtless torso pumped up, his pecs bulging, and his abs a tight sheet of steel. I lay my hand on his chest and dig my fingernails into his solidness. “Maybe you should put your shirt on too...”

He turns, reaching for his shirt, showing his broad muscled back. I wonder what Cleo would do in this situation. Probably just jump on him.

He sits on the edge of the bed and takes my hand.

After a breath, I drop the bombshell. “I’m a virgin.”

His expression freezes, and then it shifts. Even searching for every poetic device known to me, exploring every descriptive possibility, I can’t decipher his expression.

Is it disgust? Is it hate? It looks like he’s annoyed with me.

“A virgin,” he repeats in a low tone.

“Yeah,” I murmur. “I know it’s not what you expected. It kind of goes against the whole casual thing.”

“I never said I wanted this to be casual.”

“But it’s a lot, isn’t it? To just drop on a person?”

“No,” he growls, but it sounds like he’s lying.

I avert my gaze. “Anyway, that’s why I don’t think I can do it. Not tonight. Maybe we could just go to sleep?”

“Sure, Tori... where are you going?” he asks when I stand up.

“To the spare room?”

“No. Come here. I can hold you without turning into an animal.”

I climb into his embrace, grateful for the warmth of his arms. But I can’t shake the feeling that he feels somehow more distant now. My mind starts spinning, thoughts clashing into dangerous territory. This is what I wanted, for the closeness to stop, but now I’m not so sure.

Mom’s mind never spins like this. She lies in a man’s arms after he’s spun her a tale and never questions it.

But I question. A lot. Too much?

For whatever reason, Alex was determined to get me to bed. Maybe he likes curvy girls. Maybe it’s the age gap. Whatever. He marks me as a prize he wants to claim, even going so far as to impress me with that thoughtful gift and by standing up to Damien. Then, finally, he thinks he’s going to get what he wants.

Only for me to ruin it with the whole virginity thing.

I imagine him thinking, All this work, and she’s not even going to be a good lay. I

even invented that sob story about my brother's kid.

I hate these thoughts. What if they're just evidence of my scarred psyche?

The fact that I'm lying here, thinking this, obsessing about it, is a problem. It means I care about this Valentine's grump more than I should. And he is in a grumpy mode again. The V-word had him looking downright freaking dark.

I wish my mind weren't always filled with taunting hate from Mom, her cries, her agony, her twisted pain slithering into my thoughts and making a sick home there. The connection between Damien and her ex only makes it worse. It's like the universe is taunting me.

I'm surprised when Alex manages to fall asleep. I roll over and watch him.

His expression is peaceful, different from how he looked when I told him I was a virgin. Then, he looked ready to get as far away from me as possible.

I try to convince myself I don't care about this man. Do you know what about him makes me want to spend more time together? It was the conversation on the beach about my poetry. He looked so accepting, so interested.

It was the same with my body. He sensed my discomfort, kissed my stomach, and even made me laugh. It's the kindness hiding behind his gruff exterior. If I didn't know better, I'd think that Rowan fired a Cupid's arrow at us.

It's early days, so I shouldn't let my thoughts rush ahead, but Lily is in my head, whispering unhelpful, crazy thoughts. When destiny strikes, you have to follow your heart.

I lean up on one elbow, enjoying the peaceful look on his face. He's been pretty open

about wanting to find something real. But what if it's all a lie?

Everything I'm thinking about—his acceptance, his kindness, our chemistry—vanished when I told him I was a virgin. Now, maybe he just wants to pass out so he can wake up and get this over with.

But he put his life at risk to save me. He stared down the barrel of a gun. Why would he go that far? Is he in cahoots with Damien?

Jeez, Tori. Cahoots? I need to slow down. If it looks like, smells like, tastes like, and freaking hurts like paranoia, then it's probably just paranoia.

His phone lights up from the bedside table. He's got a text from somebody named Catelina.

My blood turns cold when I read the message.

Catelina: 'Elliot' is asleep, and I am heading down for the night. Phone is on if you need me.

I stare at the text on the notification screen until it automatically clicks off. Why the heck would 'Elliot' be in quotation marks? Who is Catelina? I imagine him with some beautiful woman, tall, thin, and gorgeous in the most traditional sense, both of them laughing about this made-up nephew and sob story.

I should slow down and try to think clearly.

Instead, I quietly climb from the bed and tiptoe across the room. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to go home, but it's better than lying here like the punchline to a joke.

The next time I see Alex—if I even let there be a next time—I'll demand to know the truth about 'Elliot.' Or maybe I'll just let this Valentine's crush fade.

When I walk onto the street, the night is dark, the air cool. I wrap my arms around myself, constantly looking over my shoulder. For Damien, yes, but also to check if Alex is following me.

This stupidly romantic scene plays in my head: Alex rushing down the street, sweeping me into his arms, kissing me passionately, and declaring that he'd never betray me.

Yeah, right...

Yada yada yada.

Real life doesn't work like that, Tori.

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CHAPTER 16

ALEX

When I wake, and Tori is gone, panic sets in. I call her. She rejects the call and sends a text in response.

Tori: Can't talk right now. Having breakfast with Mom.

That seems remarkably blunt after what we shared last night.

When she told me she was a virgin, it took every shred of self-control I possessed not to leap on her, glide my hands all over her body, and tear her clothes off.

I had to make myself cold so that I didn't snap. I was so close to the edge it hurt. But later, falling asleep with her in my arms was something else. It was goddamn perfection. That was something I could quickly get used to.

Alex: Are you okay? Have you seen any sign of him?

Tori: No.

I look at the clock. It's six-thirty AM. She must've gotten up early to sneak out without saying goodbye. Maybe it had something to do with my response when she told me she was a virgin.

Alex: About last night, Tori... you know I haven't got a problem with what you told

me?

She doesn't reply. I quickly get dressed, waiting for my phone to ping the whole time, and then head home. Still no text...

Catelina is asleep when I walk into my beach house, but Elliot is sitting at the kitchen table. I look over his shoulder as he bites on his tongue, concentrating on drawing a picture of himself holding a bow.

"What do you think, Uncle Alex?"

I grin, grabbing his shoulder. "Very, very impressive. You're quite the artist."

"Are you taking me to school today?" The hope in his voice is heartbreaking.

"I can't, I'm afraid. Work."

He lowers his gaze quickly, but not before I catch the disappointed look on his face. "Okay. Yeah. That's cool."

Guilt stabs me in the gut. His tone is just like Robin's used to sound when he was disappointed about something. Before hopping in the shower, I check my phone again—still nothing.

Alex: Let's meet this evening, Tori. I'll book us a table somewhere. A proper date like you deserve.

Tori: I've got that thing late this evening, but I could meet earlier for a coffee or something casual.

I grind my teeth, staring at the last word. 'Casual.' That's been her goal from the

start. Perhaps that's why she left before I woke up. I wonder if my reaction to her virginity hinted too much at the fire inside me, making her uncomfortable.

This was never casual for me. The moment I laid eyes on her, any hope of that was gone. What if she wants to work up to losing her virginity and then end it? Can I live with that?

Alex: I finish at six. Are you free after that?

Tori: Sure. I'll text you later.

As I shower, I can't shake the feeling that things have become weirdly distant between us. But maybe that's how they're supposed to be. We haven't known each other very long.

Sure, I was willing to risk my life for her, and I'd do it again, but that doesn't mean I own her. Fuck. I feel like I do, though. That's the savage truth.

After showering and getting ready for work, I return to the kitchen. Elliot has changed into his school uniform now, and Catelina brews coffee. She offers me one for the road.

"Sure, thanks."

"Uncle Alex," Elliot says, with that heartbreaking hope in his voice. "You finish at six today, right?"

"Sure do."

"Do you think we could go to this archery place? It's only a couple of miles. We could even walk there. Or drive. I'm cool whatever you want to do. It's supposed to

be really good.”

He looks so hopeful. He always does. He’s reached out so many times since the crash. Have I been good enough? Have I been the father figure he deserves? Just because he looks like Robin doesn’t mean I should thrust the sins of the father upon the son.

I can’t say no.

“Sure we can,” I tell him. “We’ll go right there after work.”

He leaps up from his chair and throws his arms around me. I let my hands rest on his back.

“Thanks, Uncle Alex.”

“We’ll get some pictures, too,” I say, looking at the walls, which are mostly blank except for some stock art. “It’s time we livened this place up a bit.”

“Sure,” he beams.

Walking down the driveway, I suddenly realize this means I’ll have to rearrange with Tori. I don’t want to. But it’s not like I can cancel on the little man now.

Alex: Hey, Tori. Sorry. I just promised Elliot I’d take him to the archery range. I couldn’t tell the little man no. He looked so hopeful. Maybe we could meet once your performance is done?

Tori: We can call it a raincheck. Maybe tomorrow? I’m easy. It’s no big deal.

She’s firmly planted her flag in casual territory again, which means I’m going to have

to chill for now. I'm not sure I can do that, though.

Alex: Fair enough. Let me know if there are any problems with Damien. Call the cops first, but I also want to be kept informed. I want you to be safe.

Tori: I'll be fine. But thank you.

On the way to work, I call Julian on the hands-free. He sounds shocked and uncharacteristically not sarcastic when I give him the rundown about everything.

"You did what ?" he says. "Jesus, bro, that's like something out of a movie. What were you thinking?"

I look over at the beach, seeing couples walking hand in hand, a pang in my chest. "It was pretty damn simple. I'm not going to let anybody hurt her. If that means staring down the barrel of one gun, two, or twenty, I'll do it. Nobody gets to threaten her. End of story."

"And the cops haven't given her a squad car or anything?"

"No," I snap. "She's supposed to contact them if she notices anything strange. It's ridiculous. If I had my way, I wouldn't leave her side. But since last night, it's like she's determined to keep things casual again."

"She's young," Julian says. "Maybe she doesn't want to make commitments so fast. You've got to respect that."

"It's not like I'm going to propose to her. But I can't ignore the fact that I care about her. Hell, I cared about her the first moment I saw her."

"You didn't feel this way about Lena. Even after what Robin did."

“No,” I agree. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Truth be told, I never thought I could.”

“If you really want her, you’ll have to take it slow. Anyway, maybe the casual thing will be good.”

“How’s that?”

“Have some fun. Don’t take it too seriously. Then maybe this feeling will pass.”

“No,” I snap. “This isn’t going anywhere.”

It’s already a fire that won’t stop burning.

CHAPTER 17

TORI

“Why don’t you just ask him?” Lily says as I sit in front of the mirror the following evening, applying makeup for my poetry event.

“I don’t know...” Cleo sounds unsure.

“What don’t you know?” Lily snaps.

“Easy, Lils. No need to bite my head off.”

Cleo is right. It’s rare for Lily to sound angry, but when she does, it comes like thunder.

“You’re the one trying to stand between her and a man she cares about.”

“That’s why I think backing off might be for the best,” Cleo says. “Look, Lily, you found the man of your dreams. I get that. You’re the one-in-a-million case where it worked out perfectly. But not everybody is going to be as lucky as you. And, well, Tori... You already care a lot. Too much, honestly. This was supposed to be fun.”

“Who said I care too much?” I hiss.

“Babe, you don’t have to say it.”

She's right. I've known these girls for far too long to be able to hide my true feelings from them.

"Why would the name of his nephew be in quotes? Why wouldn't he have any texts?"

"Oh, gosh," Lily says. "Next, you're going to say you think he arranged to save you from that Damien freak?"

"Well..."

"Tori," Lily says firmly. "All that stuff with your mom has made you doubt every little thing that happens. I'm sorry, but that's a fact. I think you owe it to yourself to ask him."

"Maybe Cleo's right. Maybe I'm too young to care this fast," I whisper.

"You've always been an old soul," Lily says.

After our latest group call ends, I think about what Lily said. She's right. I even told Alex the same thing early on in our texting. I stand in front of the mirror, brushing down my denim overalls.

When I walk into the hallway, Mom is waiting for me, wringing her hands in front of her. We haven't spoken since last night when she dropped the bombshell. Damien's attention might not be organic. It might be a warped form of revenge for his dad, who my mom cheated on.

"Where are you going?" Mom asks.

"Out."

“Is that a good idea?”

When I try to push past her, she touches my arm. “Hey, Tori.”

I turn reluctantly.

“Can I say something?”

Her voice is so vulnerable, bordering on desperate, I can’t tell her no. When I nod, she goes on.

“I know I haven’t been the best mom since your dad passed away. I drank too much and had too many boyfriends. I know I’m not perfect. But I love you, and I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go to a busy poetry slam night on your own...”

I gasp. “How do you know about that?”

“I found a flyer a few months ago. It explains why you sometimes sneak out. At first, I thought you were going on dates. But then I found one of your notebooks, too. I’m right, aren’t I?”

My cheeks burn as I look at the floor. “Maybe.”

“Hey.” She touches my chin and guides my gaze to hers. “This is nothing to be embarrassed about. This is something to be proud of, in fact. Just let me come with you, please. When you’re at work, with all those people and Rowan watching you like a hawk, that’s one thing. But this is something else. Please let me come. Please .”

Her voice trembles. It’s as if she wants to make up for every missed opportunity that passed us by when I was a kid.

“Oh, Mom, come here.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my embrace. She hugs me tightly, desperately, making me feel like the world’s worst daughter. We’re the only family each other has got. We need to make an effort.

“I’ve never had someone I know watch one of my performances,” I mutter.

“Don’t worry. I’ll hide in the crowd.”

I swallow. “Okay. We should get going.”

“Let me call us a cab. My treat.”

Moving into the living room, I sit on the couch, taking out my phone. My nerves always sizzle before a show, but somehow, this is even worse. It’s not even the idea that Damien might appear—though the threat of that psycho is constantly looming—but the fact that Mom will hear my words.

I’ve been scrawling in my special notebook all day. Despite my tangled emotions regarding Alex, that notebook is special. And my body is still aching from what we did last night.

My phone vibrates.

Alex: Evening, gorgeous. I’ve just finished taking Elliot to the archery range. He loved it. He’s started calling himself ‘LEGO-las’ because he loves LEGOs and the Lord of the Rings character so much. Good luck tonight. I wish I could see it.

“Is something wrong?” Mom asks.

“Is it that obvious?”

“You look simultaneously angry and excited. It’s a very Tori expression.”

I chuckle. Things might be tense between Mom and me, but they’re never completely shattered. “Remember that guy I told you about? He wants to see my performance tonight.”

“This is the guy who saved you, right? But you think he might’ve lied about having a nephew.”

“It sounds nuts when you say it out loud.”

Mom’s expression softens. “No, Tori, it doesn’t. It sounds like the appropriate response to the example I’ve set. On that note, by the way, I ended things with my Tinder fling before they even began. This stuff about the Kents, Damien, and his dad—I think I need a cooling-off period.”

“That’s mature, Mom,” I say, shocked and pleased. “Really mature.”

She smiles. “Thanks. But that doesn’t mean the same needs to apply to you. Why not let him come to the performance?”

“Because he might be a liar, a manipulator.”

“I think you’re using this as a defense mechanism,” Mom says sagely. “I think I’ve shown you such a terrible, twisted example of dating that you refuse to believe that real love exists. So you’ve built this whole story up in your head so you don’t have to deal with how you feel.”

Mom’s speech reminds me that she was studying psychology before Dad passed. She

wasn't always this wild wine-drinking woman leaping from fling to fling.

"You could be right," I admit. " Could be."

"Invite him," Mom says. "Then tell him what's been on your mind."

"But what if you're right? If I'm wrong, and he's not a liar, I'll have to date him."

"Good. I want you to be happy," she says, smiling widely.

"Dating doesn't end happily, though, does it, Mom?"

That's petty, Tori. The thing is, it's also true .

"I started this thinking I could keep it casual," I say. "That was the whole point—some casual fun. I'm not looking for love. There's a reason I've never dated before. I don't care. I don't need it. I've got my work. I've got my poetry. I've got my friends. That's enough to keep me busy."

"But don't you want more from life, angel, than to keep busy? Don't you want to live?"

I bite my lip, looking down at my phone.

Tori: Are you sure you want to come? A lot of people find poetry slams lame and cringy. Obviously, I'm not one of them, but I know that the stigma is out there.

Alex: I'm positive. First, because I want to see you showcase your talent, and second, because I'm your Valentine's guardian angel, remember? I don't want you to go alone.

Tori: I'm not going to be alone now. Mom is coming with me.

Alex: That's great! I'm glad you two have reconciled.

Tori: I wouldn't go that far, but we're trying. My performance tonight... let's just say I find my greatest inspiration from my real life. Usually, this means talking about my dad, my hopes for the future, or even funny stories from the bar.

Alex: What about your dad?

I swallow. Here we go again, a voyage into the not-even-a-little-bit-casual.

Tori: He and Mom were in the middle of a nasty divorce when he got cancer and died shortly after. I guess you could say it left an impression on me.

Alex: Of course. That's awful. I'm sorry, Tori.

I swallow.

Tori: Listen, this is going to sound nuts, but can you send me a photo of your nephew to prove he's real?

I stare at the message and then delete it. I feel like a crazy person.

"Ride's here," Mom says.

Tori: You can come. I'll send you the address. But please don't expect fireworks.

Alex: All I expect is to see you doing something you love, beautiful. That's more than enough for me.

Despite my better judgment, I smile as warmth floods my body.

CHAPTER 18

ALEX

The venue has a hipster vibe, records on the walls, and prints of punk bands. The drinks are served in jars and the music which pounds from the speakers has a punky lilt to it. I grab a beer and look around the loft-style room across the sea of heads, looking for Tori.

I'm just glad she let me come. I tried my best to focus at the archery range with Elliot, but I couldn't stop thinking about Damien and his tatted goons. What if they returned? What if they hurt her?

"Alex?"

I turn at the sound of her voice. It cuts right through the music, tugging at my heart... and other parts of me, too. But tonight isn't about that.

When I face her, it's difficult to remember I'm supposed to be tame. She's wearing denim overalls and a flowy top, giving her a poetic and bohemian look, the overalls hugging her figure. I'm caught between being impressed by how badass she looks and wanting to tear off the clothes to reveal the womanly curves beneath.

"Tori," I say, smiling and leaning in for a kiss.

She hesitates momentarily, but when our lips touch, I feel her melt against me. She wraps her arms around me. I moan, can't help it, and squeeze her close. When my

manhood twitches, I force myself to push her away.

She looks up at me with red cheeks, flustered and gorgeous. “We should be good,” she yells over the music, her breath tickling my ear as she stands on her tiptoes and leans in. “My mom is here too. She’s in the bathroom. Do you mind sitting with her?”

“Not at all. It’s about time I met your parent.”

I nudge her playfully. Her old-soul eyes get this panicked look. Oh, yeah, we’re ‘keeping it casual,’ aren’t we? How could I forget?

She turns as her mom approaches, an elegant, kind-looking woman with her daughter’s nose and eyes. “Mom, this is Alex. Alex – Mom. Well, Monica.”

I offer her my hand. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” Monica laughs.

“I’ve always thought if I ever found a lady who could put up with me, I’d treat her mother with respect.”

Monica smiles, looking at her daughter. She points at me and then makes the okay sign. Tori’s cheeks grow even more beautifully red.

“I need to go backstage soon,” Tori says.

“Good luck.” Monica rubs her daughter’s arms.

I take her hands, squeezing them, looking at her meaningfully. “You’re going to do great.”

“Remember,” she yells. “It’s just poetry, okay?”

She brushes her hand along my arm before disappearing into the crowd.

“Shall we find some seats, Monica?”

When it’s time for the open mic to begin, the music is turned down, and the staff clear the dance floor and dot tables around the stage. People murmur quietly as they wait for the performances to begin.

“Are you excited?” Monica asks.

I nod. “Tori’s passionate about this. Well, maybe ‘passionate’ is an understatement. When she talked about her poetry, the night we met...”

“Valentine’s,” Monica says with a smile.

“Yes, Valentine’s, she lit up. It was as if she was hiding this precious, amazing part of herself, afraid people would think it was too strange or out there . I felt... privileged,” I continue, settling on the word, “to see it, to share that piece of her.”

“You really care about her,” Monica says.

“I do. I know we’re moving fast, and maybe she doesn’t want that. I’m trying to be normal, but it isn’t easy. I’ve wanted to find somebody for a long time. Until your daughter, I never thought I would.”

Monica’s eyes glimmer like she might cry, then she sips her drink. “I just hope she can get out of her own way.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Before she can answer, a spotlight illuminates the stage. A woman dressed in a multicolored, long, flowy dress walks out, a headdress on her auburn hair. “Ladies, gents, please allow me to welcome you to the three hundred and twenty-second poetry slam at Rafter’s.” Everybody applauds. “As you all know, poetry was my first love before I entered the seedy world of liquor supply...”

That gets some light laughter.

“It’s been my greatest joy to bring poetry to this city, giving up-and-coming performers a chance to showcase their talent. So, without further ado, let me welcome... Sphinx!”

The first performance is a tongue-in-cheek piece about a man who can’t stop obsessing about an unfinished sandcastle. The man leaps around the stage at one point, pretending to stamp on his half-constructed castle. It’s surprisingly engaging.

When he’s done, I look around the bar, making sure Damien hasn’t suddenly appeared. Is this paranoia, or just the natural result of having a gun aimed at somebody I care about... hell, and at me?

There are two more performances, and then Monica points to the edge of the stage. Tori shifts from foot to foot, fidgeting with her overalls. When her mom offers her a thumbs-up, that seems to make it worse.

At one point, she turns as if she’s going to flee the stage. The announcer glances over, then seemingly decides to announce the next act instead. Once the performer has taken to the stage, she walks over to Tori.

I stand, joining them. “Thanks,” Tori murmurs to the woman as I approach.

“What’s going on?” I whisper, rubbing her back.

“Oh, nothing,” she says, laughing humorlessly. “It’s just different with people I know in the crowd.”

I take her hands, holding her steady as she begins to tremble. “I know you want to do this, Tori. I felt your passion emanating from you when you talked about your poetry. When I gave you that notebook, I could see your soul shining. To other people, it’s just poetry. But not for you. It means more. It matters more.”

She takes a breath. “You’re right.”

I lean close, kissing her gently on the lips, then remain there, looking intensely into her eyes. “I got your hint in our texts. Don’t stress if your poem relates to me or your mom, okay? We can take it. Tonight is about your passion, your creativity. Tonight is about you . If you don’t want to do this, I’ll understand. But I need you to know something, you beautiful, perfect woman. You can do this.”

Her smile is the best gift a man could receive. She throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders, hugging me tightly.

“Thank you,” she whispers into my ear.

“You’ve got this.”

We share another kiss, then I return to my seat.

“I hope I didn’t overstep there, Monica.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, Alex, you did not. I’ve never seen Tori look so happy. Even if she’s trying to fight it.”

CHAPTER 19

TORI

My heart pounds like it's trying to break out of my chest.

I don't even hear the announcer. Fueled by Alex's words, I can walk onto the stage and into the bright lights. I thought surviving a freaking gun might make this easier, but right now, it doesn't seem to matter.

A silence stretches across the room. I'm almost glad that the spotlight pretty much blinds me.

I take the mic from the stand and start stamping my foot on the floor in a steady rhythm. I've visualized and practiced this, but it's different with the crowd looming in the semidarkness.

"Love," I say, my voice cracking... which was intentional. I sound like I could cry. That's good. "Is it a lie? In your eyes, I ask myself why—and how I can care this much and get scared this much when you're a stranger to me. Cascading through me and you is something that should be tame. But when I look into your eyes and into my heart, I see the same... Feeling I should let it die. In your eyes, I can't ask myself why I care or why I'm scared, because it all could be a lie..."

I put the mic to my foot and stamp even harder, mirroring the rhythm of my heart, my body flooding with emotion.

“Love!” I scream into the mic, causing people to jump. Good. I’m getting the reactions I wanted, at least. “Am I just your plaything? Your on-the-side surprise? If relations are a ship, are you ready to capsize? Are you spinning tall tales as we travel on small sails and tip these frail scales down false trails? Will it all end with a hurried collision of flesh? And then? And then? ”

Even I’m shocked by the emotion in my voice, the fact the mic is shaking in my hand.

“I was made a promise by Mama Bear’s isolation and her aspiration that love was real, and this... this is my deal: live alone, be happy loveless, and if you never kiss your one and only... At least you’ll never kiss devastation. Heartbreak, avoiding that pain, it’s my only, my only...”

When I rehearsed this, I knew getting teary and emotional at this part would help me. But I never planned on actually feeling this way, tears brimming in my eyes when I look down at Mom and Alex.

They both look rapt, completely fascinated as if they’re seeing a whole new side of me.

“Obligation,” I whisper into the mic. “But lately...” I smile away the pain, something else I rehearsed that feels far easier than anticipated. “There’s this guy who wants to date me. And when I think of my silver fox savior, I feel ever so faintly... Like love just might not, or just might...”

I lower my head, leaving it purposefully unfinished. My breath comes fast, and tears stream down my cheeks. I’ve never had a performance filled with so much genuine emotion. I didn’t have to fake anything about that. It came easily.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts into applause. I look up to see Alex and Mom on their

feet, competing to see who can clap the loudest. I brush tears from my cheeks and then take a short bow.

Patricia, the host, touches my arm as we pass each other on the stage. “Just excellent , dear,” she says effusively. “Stunning and moving. You should be so proud.”

Back at the table, Alex stands, sweeping me into his arms. I’m caught up in the moment, spinning around, laughing in delight, feeling like I could take off. The high from the performance mixes with the high of simply being close to him.

“That was incredible,” Mom says. “Really, Tori...”

We sit, and then Alex takes his phone from his pocket. I’m sure I see the name ‘Catelina’ flash on the screen. My stomach drops, my good mood vanishes, and my thoughts spiral.

“I’m sorry. I have to take this.”

Mom must see the way I’m watching him as he walks across the bar. She touches my hand and says in a low voice, “Don’t let your thoughts get the better of you. You’ve got no idea what that call is about.”

When Alex returns, all positivity has drained from his face. He looks much like he did in the alleyway when he went fully ferocious, ready to tear somebody apart.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Somebody threw a brick through the window of my beach house,” he growls. “No idea who, but it feels like too much of a damn coincidence.”

“You think it was Damien?”

“Like I said, I don’t like the coincidence. I need to go and check on Elliot. He must be terrified.”

I stand. “Let me come with you.”

Time seems to slow as I wait for him to say no, to invent some excuse, but then he nods. “I think you should come, too, Monica, since you’ve got a connection to the Kents. If this does have something to do with them, we don’t want to leave you unprotected.”

We leave the car and rush across the street. Alex pushes the door open and runs through the house. The beach house is beautiful, with incredible views of the ocean. The idyllic look of it and the events don’t seem to match.

Mom and I wait in the foyer. A woman approaches us, probably around fifty, with a kind smile and worry in her eyes. “Hello, hello,” she says anxiously. “I am Catelina, Elliot’s nanny. Sorry to disturb your evening.”

Elliot’s nanny...

Well, hell, Tori. See where paranoia gets you?

“Uh, nice to meet you,” I say, feeling like the world’s biggest idiot.

Mom gives me a ‘told you so’ look.

Alex returns, carrying a boy, arms wrapped tightly around him. Elliot looks around with an anxious expression. Alex puts him down. “Elliot, this is Tori and Monica, my... friends.”

“It’s great to meet you, Elliot,” I say, leaning down and smiling at him.

Elliot grins. “You’re pretty.”

“Elliot!” Catelina says in surprise.

“It’s okay, Cat,” Alex says. “I happen to agree. Why don’t you get them settled with something to drink? I’m going to call the cops.”

CHAPTER 20

ALEX

“ I think you should both stay here tonight,” I say. “I’ve got two spare rooms, so you’ll be comfortable.”

Catelina has taken Elliot back to bed, and now Tori, her mother, and I are in the living room. I’ve boarded up the window and given my statement to the police, who have promised to look into it. But one of them mentioned something about ‘kids in the neighborhood,’ which doesn’t sound promising.

“Are you sure that’s okay?” Monica asks.

“Positive,” I tell her. “Who knows what the freak has got planned? That’s why I’m beefing up security. I’ve already called an ex-patient of mine with links to law enforcement. He’s suggested a private security agency. By the morning, I’ll have full surveillance and security. For all of us.”

Tori gasps. “Isn’t that going to cost?—”

I sit down next to her, taking her hands. I know I should try to be more relaxed with her mother around, but her Valentine's poetry performance tugged at my heart, and now this vandalism has set my nerves ablaze.

“Don’t worry about the cost. Don’t even mention it. Your safety is all that matters. It’s the only thing, understand? I’m hiring three details: Elliot, you, Tori, and you,

Monica. Just until this is over.”

“Thank you,” Tori murmurs. “But what about you?” she exclaims after a moment.

“I can take care of myself.” When Monica yawns, I stand. “Let me show you to your room, Monica.”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Alex.”

“It’s no trouble.”

I lead her through the house. At the bedroom door, Monica says, “You’re the best Valentine my daughter could’ve asked for. Just be patient with her, please?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When I return to the living room, Tori is pacing.

“Hey, slow down,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around her. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“It’s not that. I mean, it is. But there’s something else, something I need to confess.”

“Okay...”

“It seems silly. It is silly.”

“Try me.”

“I’m just going to say it so we can move on. I mean, if you still want to after you learn how crazy I am.”

“You’re not?—”

“I thought Elliot was fake,” she blurts out.

“Huh?”

“There was a part of me – and not a small one – that thought you might’ve made up Elliot and what happened with his mom and your brother.” She says breathlessly. “I thought maybe you were tricking me. Trying to get me into bed. And then, last night, when I told you I was a virgin, you looked so mad...”

“Mad?” I say, dumbfounded. “I was trying to hold myself back.”

I grab her hips, feeling her curviness through the denim.

“I was trying to stop myself from tearing off your clothes, from kissing every voluptuous inch of your body. Do you think it made me want you less ? It made me want you more, baby because you’ll be my one. My only.”

When I kiss her, she sinks into it, wrapping her arms around me, her body grinding against mine. But then she stops herself.

“But what about my, you know...”

“Craziness?” I say teasingly.

“Yeah.”

“You’re a complex, tortured person... you’re a poet . I can’t blame you for that. And hell, you saw Elliot. You know he’s real. If anything, it just shows how much you care.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not so sure. Maybe it shows that there’s this broken thing inside me that knows I have to sabotage anything good because it scares the hell out of me.”

“You can be scared all you want,” I say earnestly. “That doesn’t mean I’m going anywhere.”

“What if I’m never as certain as you?” she whispers. “What if I’m always caught in the middle?”

That stings. But I’m not going to let it show. The last thing she needs is more pressure.

“It’s been a long night,” I say. “I think you should try to get some rest. Tomorrow, with the security, you’ll be safe, at least.”

She places her hand over my heart. “Why don’t you have pictures of Elliot on your phone or any photos on the walls here?”

“It’s... complicated,” I murmur. “And like I said, it’s been a long night.”

When I turn away, she grabs my hand and pulls me toward her. She pulls herself in for a kiss. I’m stunned by the sudden passion.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” she says.

“Don’t sweat it.”

She arches an eyebrow, magnificently sassy. “Now, who’s keeping it casual, huh?”

I take her hand, leading her to the second spare room. Even now, my body thrums

hotly, begging me to drag her into the bedroom, strip off her clothes, and reveal the gorgeous gradations of her sumptuous body.

In the bedroom, I slide my hand to the small of her back, feeling her tempting heat through her clothes. She smiles and looks around the room. “Simple, but it looks comfortable.”

I smirk, leaning in for a kiss. She makes a soft gasping noise that makes me wonder if I’m pushing things too hard after all the mayhem with Damien.

Plus, she thought I made up Elliot and the crash. Maybe I should be angry about that. I wonder if I should be, but holding a grudge against her feels as impossible as hunting down Cupid and confiscating his arrows.

She puts her hands on my chest. “If you don’t stop, I won’t be able to.”

I sink my hands into her waist. I’ll never get tired of greedily caressing her curviness, feeling her full body, her breasts pressing against me when I pull her close. She moans through the tightness of our mouths, sinking her fingernails into my neck, standing on her tiptoes so she can push against me with more firmness.

“Maybe I don’t want you to stop,” I groan, pushing her toward the bed.

“Alex, the door,” she whispers urgently.

I let her go with reluctance, then turn to close the door. But when I reach the threshold, she says, “Sorry. I think I just want to get some sleep. Is that okay?”

“You don’t have to ask,” I tell her, striding from the room and closing her door behind me.

I walk around the house, looking at the beach and the front of the property. So far, there's nothing strange, but I know I won't be getting much rest tonight. Some motherfucker attacked my home. Sure, it could be a coincidence, and some neighborhood kids are playing games like the cops suggested.

Or it could be Damien Kent and his father—criminals with a sick link to my woman and her family.

I sit on the front porch, scanning the road, getting ready for violence if it comes to that.

Tori: You didn't have to storm out, meanie.

I smirk at her text. It's always easier for us to communicate like this without the sexual simmering temptation of being face-to-face or body-to-body.

Alex: If I hadn't left quickly, I wouldn't have left at all. I would have turned into an animal, my virgin Valentine. Maybe you would've told me you don't want it. You want to slow down. But when I started touching you, your moans would've told a different story.

After sending the text, I glance at the street again then type some more.

Alex: But now that I've left you, I can think just a tiny bit clearer. I don't want you to feel your performance has been lost in tonight's mayhem. You were excellent, Tori. Powerful. Impactful.

I almost want Damien and his father or his goons to appear so I can end this now. I don't want to live with their shadow hanging over us. I want us to be free to begin.

Begin what, exactly? I'm being upfront about looking for my one. She's being

upfront about not being interested in anything serious. I'm fighting for a life I probably won't ever have.

Tori: Thank you. You don't know how much that means to me. I've been worried about people I know seeing my performances for so long. Also, I kind of like that nickname. 'Virgin Valentine.' You need to be careful. What if I like it so much that I never want it to change?

Alex: I could be a gentleman and say I'd wait for you. But the truth is, I'd make you tingle and moan in other ways. I'd caress your flawless body, obsess over your curves, kiss your neediness, and massage your wetness until you were sizzling and couldn't take it anymore. By then, my sweet virgin Valentine, you'd be begging to throw the nickname away.

Tori: You need to stop. I'm not saying I want you to, but getting any sleep at all is going to be impossible if you carry on.

Alex: Maybe you need to softly stroke your body for me to relieve some tension.

Tori: Or maybe I want to wait for the real thing.

My body thrums in response. Her words light me up. All these years I spent wondering if I'd ever meet a woman who would make me feel this alive, then fate threw us together.

Valentine's. Fate. Coincidence.

Whatever it was, I know one thing. She belongs to me, even if she doesn't want to accept it. Yet.

Tori: What I really want is to ask you something. But I don't think you want to talk

about it.

Alex: Try me.

She takes a while to respond. I pace the porch, feeling restless, opening and closing one hand into a fist. I want them to appear, the cowards. Bricks, knives, guns, whatever they want to bring. Do they seriously think I'll ever let anybody hurt my boy, my woman, my family?

My head rushes. I'm getting ahead of myself. We're a long way off being a family.

My phone buzzes.

Tori: I asked you earlier, but you seemed awkward about it. Please tell me to back off if I'm crossing the line, but why no photos of Elliot? On your phone, on your socials, on the walls?

I sigh, dropping back into the seat and tapping my foot.

Alex: I could say that I've been absentminded. I've been busy with work. I'm not somebody who takes a lot of photos anyway. That would all be true, but there's something else, and I hate myself for it.

Tori: You can tell me .

I'm not sure I can. It's not like I've been a bad guardian. It's not as if, after his parents passed, I abandoned Elliot. But there's still some complexity there.

Alex: Sometimes, when I look at that bright, intelligent, enthusiastic boy, I see my brother. I see my ex. I see what they did to me. And the fucked up thing about it is, beautiful; I didn't care half as much about Lena after three years as I cared about you

after three hours.

I keep typing, my breath coming fast, bottled-up emotions pulsing out of me.

Alex: I've tried my best to be close with Elliot, but sometimes, it's like I'm distancing myself from him as some warped defense mechanism. It feels automatic. I can't call it subconscious because I know I'm doing it. But it feels like instinct.

Tori: You're protecting yourself from being hurt again. You were burned before by your brother, by somebody Elliot reminds you of. You're afraid if you let yourself care about Elliot, he'll let you down, too.

Alex: But that's not fair to project onto a kid.

Tori: No, it's not.

My virgin texts with brutal honesty, challenging me to do better, be better.

Tori: You need to be there for him, Alex. You've already given him more than most kids could dream of with this wonderful home, a nanny, a bright future. But trust me. Even though my parents argued every night, I still wish my dad was here.

Alex: Maybe I need somebody with a poetic eye to take some photos.

Tori: I'd be happy to do that. Elliot seems like a good kid.

Alex: Even if he's imaginary?

Tori: LOL. I'm glad you can joke about that. I put myself through the wringer, thinking you made him up. I honestly believed it. But maybe my friends are right. Maybe I was just trying to avoid how I really feel.

Alex: And how do you really feel?

She doesn't reply straight away. I know how she feels. I experience it when we kiss and hold each other. I'm sure I can even feel it through her messages.

She feels exactly like I do—like Valentine's Day did something to us, changed us, even if it makes us crazy.

Tori: I feel like a girl who needs some sleep.

That's a cop-out, but I decide not to press the issue. I don't want to pressure her.

We're way past casual, but I could lose her forever if I push too hard.

CHAPTER 21

TORI

I wake early and go into the kitchen to make some coffee. I think I'll be the only one awake until I find Elliot sitting at the table, his tongue sticking out of his mouth as he leans over a notebook.

"Uh, hey," he says with a nervous smile.

I grin and join him at the table. "Hi, Elliot. What're you working on?"

"Sorry... you're Tori, yeah?"

"Good memory."

He smiles. "Thanks. It's just English homework. We have to talk about this poem, this love poem. What's it called?"

I give him a moment, then offer, "A sonnet?"

He lights up. "Yeah, that's it. A sonnet."

"What is the question?" I ask.

"They want us to decide if it's a good poem."

“Hmm. And how are they defining ‘good poem’?”

Elliot’s shoulders slump. “I don’t know. I like math. I know that’s silly because most people hate it, but I like it. I think I’m going to be an accountant. Or an architect. Uncle Alex says both are good jobs, jobs to be proud of, you know?”

“I agree,” I tell him. “When I was your age, I wanted to be a rocket scientist.”

“Whoa, that’s cool. What do you want to be now?”

He asks this with a child’s honest, blunt curiosity. “Happy,” I tell him with the same honesty.

He tilts his head. “Aren’t you happy now?”

The question cuts deep. Before Valentine’s Day, I would’ve told him that, yes, I was happy. I would’ve said I was content to go on with my life how I’d been going for years: work at the restaurant, work on my poetry, hang out with my friends, argue, and then make up with Mom.

But then Elliot’s uncle came along and changed everything.

Being here in this family environment makes me think dangerous yet tempting thoughts.

“I’m as happy as I can reasonably expect to be,” I say.

Elliot giggles. “That doesn’t sound very happy.”

“Do you want some help with your homework?” I ask.

His eyes widen. “Would you, really?”

“Sure. I’m a poet myself. My most recent poem was about love... sort of.”

“How can it be sort of about love, Tori?”

I look at his sonnet. “So, with Shakespeare, his sonnets were often quite clear in their messaging. He knew he was in love with his subject. He didn’t hold back. He enthusiastically and proudly painted his love with words.”

“Wait, hold up,” Elliot says, scrawling on his notebook, Enthusiastically and proudly painted his love with words...

I laugh. “Isn’t that called copying, young man?”

“Nuh-uh. It’s called inspiration .”

That gets another laugh out of me. This kid is precocious and hilarious.

“But that’s not what my poem was like. Mine was more about if love is a good idea.”

“Why would it be a bad idea?” he asks.

“Sometimes, love can lead down bad paths.”

He suddenly looks older, more serious. “Like with Mom and Dad?”

“I... uh, I don’t know.”

I don’t want to say the wrong thing.

“It’s okay, Tori. I know what happened. Dad was Uncle Alex’s brother. And Mom was Uncle Alex’s girlfriend. Mom and Dad weren’t supposed to be together, but then they had me.”

“What was that like?” I murmur.

“Huh?”

“Growing up knowing your uncle and your mom...”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Weird? It was like, Uncle Alex would come by and everybody would be really happy, like too happy, and make a big deal out of it. And Uncle Alex would have a big smile and be super happy, too, but I always thought there was a sad person behind his happy face. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” I tell him.

And I know the feeling.

“Anyway,” I go on, “let’s go through the poem line by line. I can teach you a little about close reading.”

He moves his face inches from the paper. “Like this?”

I chuckle. “Close reading means dissecting a text line by line, word by word, looking for the techniques the writer used to present the message.”

“Dissecting, sort of like a surgeon, like Uncle Alex?”

“Yes, but with words.”

“Whoa, that’s actually pretty cool. Maybe English isn’t so bad after all.”

“Let me make some coffee, and we’ll get cracking. Does that sound good?”

Elliot grins. “Sounds cracking.”

I stand up and turn to see Alex wearing shorts and a sleeveless shirt. He’s got a slight smile on his face, his eyes glimmering. For once, his muscles aren’t tense, though they’re still huge, round, and hard, and I might be drooling a little.

“Don’t let me stop you,” he says with emotion. “In fact...” He takes out his phone. “This could be a perfect time for some pictures.”

I smooth my hand through my hair. “I’m still wearing last night’s clothes, and I haven’t showered.”

He walks across the room and cradles my face in his hands. “You always look beautiful. You could spend years in a dungeon, no shower, no shaving, no nothing, and you’d still be the most gorgeous woman in this city.”

“The most gorgeous woman in Miami? Are you kidding?”

“Not even a little bit.”

I try not to listen to the warning signals in my brain and my heart and try to use logic to ignore all the times Mom was swept off her feet with words just like this. She gave in far too easily, but the obstacle I invented—the whole ‘Elliot is fake thing’—has come crashing down.

What’s stopping me now except my terror of an unhappily never after?

After helping Elliot with his homework, he goes to get ready for school. Alex, Mom, and I meet with Gray Hedges, the leader of the security team that Alex has hired. Gray is around fifty, on the skinnier side but fit, with an open-carry pistol on his hip. He wears a khaki T-shirt and cargo pants, giving him a military look.

“The Kents are well-known to be mid-range criminals,” he says, standing in the middle of the living room. “They’ve got their fingers in lots of pots. Dealing in off-brand merchandise, they own a garage where they take stolen cars for the parts. But this—targeting civilians for harassment—is new.”

“It’s my fault,” Mom says.

“Don’t say that,” I tell her.

“Let’s be honest about the situation,” Mom bristles. “I’m the one who cheated.”

“So you had a bad relationship,” I say. “That doesn’t give his son the right to stalk and harass us. It doesn’t give them the right to vandalize Alex’s home.”

“She’s right, ma’am,” Gray notes.

“Please, call me Monica.”

Gray smiles. “Okay, Monica...”

Mom smiles, too. The way they’re looking at each other conjures up countless memories. Is Mom smitten already? I bury my natural response, though. She could just be grateful for his support.

“I understand you want three teams,” Gray says to Alex. “The son is still at large, but Kent Senior hasn’t been seen for some time.”

Mom swallows audibly.

“Yes,” Alex says. “One for Monica, one for Elliot, and one for Tori. I want them to be able to live their lives as normally as possible while knowing they’re safe.”

“I still think you need a team,” I murmur.

Alex winks at me. “This is my way of getting us to spend more time together, remember?”

A natural smile spreads across my face, making my cheeks feel like they’re glowing. A moment later, though, it drops when a depressing thought hits me. Do I look how Mom just did, all smitten, all excited, all gullible ?

“We specialize in nonintrusive protection,” Gray explains. “We recommend saving our numbers to your cell phones. We have a system in which all you have to do is text us, and we will come running. It doesn’t matter what you send; it can be gibberish. We’ll come running if you call us and don’t say anything or if we hear anything suspicious. Our main goal is to keep you and your family safe.”

“Good,” Alex affirms.

“Excuse me for asking,” I say. “But how much do you cost per day?”

Gray glances at Alex.

“Tori, it doesn’t matter,” Alex says gruffly.

“It does ,” I tell him. “We brought this problem to your door. We don’t want to bankrupt you.”

Alex sighs heavily. “It’s costing five thousand per day.”

I gasp. “Alex!”

He stands up. Even wearing his work dress shirt and slacks, there’s something savage about him.

“You’re worth it,” he growls. “I’m not going to let anybody hurt you. Ever.”

Want to know how messed up I am? When he says this, there’s a pessimistic part of me that whispers he’s doing this, so I owe him, and I feel like I have to do what he wants, be the woman he wants.

Thanks, Mom.

Get it together, Tori.

“That’s it for now,” Gray says. “Otherwise, you’re free to get on with your lives. In situations like this, the perpetrators often lose interest. Once Damien realizes you’re willing to hire protection, I’m sure he’ll back off.”

“He’d better,” I grumble. “We can’t do this forever.”

“Does that mean I can go home and shower?” Mom asks.

“Yes, ma’am... Sorry, Monica.” Gray smiles tightly. “You can go about your day as you normally would.”

“I’ve got work at midday,” I mutter. “I need to shower and change too. I’ll grab my things, and we’ll go together, Mom?”

Alex follows me down the hallway, taking my hand and turning me toward him. The heat that burns between us is primal, confusing, tempting, unwanted, and the only thing I want all at once.

“I’m doing this because it’s the right thing to do,” he says, full of certainty. “Because I want to keep you, your mom, and my nephew safe.”

“I know, Alex...”

“I don’t think you do,” he says intensely. “I think a part of you thinks I’m trying to make it so you owe me. But you don’t. If you ended things now, my perfect Valentine, I’d be crushed, but I’d still keep you safe.”

How the heck can he read me as easily as a text?

He pulls me close to him, kissing me passionately.

“I’m taking you to dinner after work,” he says. “Your mom will be safe with the security watching her. Elliot will be safe. Let’s forget about this mess. It’s about time I took you on an actual date.”

“I’ve never been on an actual date before,” I admit.

“You deserve it, angel,” he says. “I want to walk into a restaurant with you on my arm and make everybody jealous.”

My cheeks heat up with his compliment. “I don’t think people will be jealous, Alex...”

“You seriously don’t know how perfect you are, do you?”

“I don’t think anybody else sees me like you do.”

“Good,” he says fiercely. “That means I get you all to myself.”

These possessive words should freak me out. Maybe they do. A little. But not as much as they would have just one day ago.

I throw my arms around his shoulders and pull him in for another kiss.

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CHAPTER 22

ALEX

After a long day of work, I'm glad to shower and change into a clean shirt, ready for my date. Elliot is at a friend's house, and security has told me so far, so good. I've got nothing to do this evening except spend time with my voluptuous Valentine.

I drive to her place, letting out a long breath as I mentally release the stress of the day. Three complicated surgeries, one life lost, a grieving family somberly thanking me for everything I did while their loved one was alive.

It puts everything in perspective.

Alex: I'm outside, my voluptuous, virgin Valentine.

Tori: You're getting good at this alliteration stuff, doctor.

I smirk. So, she's in a playful mood. Maybe she's as keen to forget about the Kent crap as I am.

Alex: You're my voluptuous, virgin, vivacious, valuable, virtuosic Valentine.

Tori: Okay, whoa, you've just impressed the poet in me big time. I won't be long. I'm just putting on my dress. It's sort of new. I bought it ages ago but didn't have a reason to wear it. I'm worried it might be too 'look at me.'

Alex: If that's your way of saying it enhances your natural beauty, I have to see it.

A few minutes later, she walks out of her building, the front light automatically switching on. Across the street, a car starts its engine: her security team is getting ready to follow us. But I register all this distantly, vaguely.

My gaze is glued to my Valentine.

She's wearing a hip-hugging dress that perfectly outlines her body. The cut isn't high, but it shows enough of her thick, delicious thighs to start hardening my cock. The modest neckline shows the shape of her swells but reveals no cleavage.

As she gets closer, I see that she's straightened her hair, making her look stylish and captivating. She wears a light layer of makeup, just enough to draw attention to her naturally enchanting features.

I sweep my arms around her waist and pull her close so she can feel my manhood thickening with tension. "You look perfect," I tell her.

"You like it?"

"I love it."

She flinches slightly at the L-word as though she thinks I'm aiming it at her and not the outfit. I ignore the slight thrum of discontent inside me, reminding myself... no pressure.

"Shall we?" I open the car door for her.

"Why, thank you, sir," she says, her face lighting up.

I take her to a rooftop restaurant; the clear sky gives us a view of the stars and the moon. She gazes up with interest, but I've only got eyes for her as I guide her with my hand on the small of her back.

We sit on the corner balcony, with views of the beach adding to the romantic atmosphere. I never thought about stuff like this before Cupid brought Tori into my life.

I squeeze her leg under the table. "I almost punched about ten guys just now."

She looks at me, shocked. "What? Why?"

"Everybody was checking you out."

She laughs, slapping my chest playfully. When the waitress comes, we order our drinks: iced tea for her, and club soda for me.

"I left something in the car," I say, standing.

"What is it?"

"A gift. I want to give it to you here."

Her smile is the only gift I'll ever need. I don't care if that makes me cheesy. "That is so romantic. But you don't have to."

"It won't take long."

I quickly run down to the car, annoyed that I'd forgotten it, and grab her gift from the back seat. When I return to the table, the waitress has brought our drinks. I sit down, kissing Tori on the cheek just to see her smile, then hand her the wrapped picture

frame.

“Is it a snap of you, shirtless, staring broodingly at the camera?” she teases.

I laugh. “Why do I feel like you’re giving me hints...”

Her expression turns to pure joy when she sees what it is—a framed photo of her from last night’s poetry performance. She’s got both hands thrown in the air, her face pure passion, her eyes glimmering, her entire body contoured to her poetic purpose.

“How?” she whispers, getting choked up.

“I had one of my interns contact the venue and ask if there were any photographers there last night. There were, so I selected this shot and then had it printed on canvas and framed. I was worried it wouldn’t be ready on time, but luckily, it wa?—”

She interrupts me with a kiss. I thought I knew passion before, but my valentine surprises me with her perfection. She squeezes my leg under the table, then lets go with a gasp, her chest rising and falling dramatically.

“I need to chill.”

“I was about to say the opposite...”

She rolls her eyes. “This is so sweet, Alex. You didn’t have to do this. Especially when you were at work.”

“I want you to remember last night. It was a big milestone. You performed in front of your mom and your man.”

She bites down when I call myself her man, but I don’t apologize or take it back. We

can dance around it, fight it, pretend all we want, but it's the truth.

As the night continues, we talk about my work day, Tori taking an interest in the tragedy one of my patients suffered. We talk about her next performance. Sometimes, we don't speak; we simply sit in a silence that feels comfortable in a way it hasn't before.

Now, we walk down the beach together. The security team is parked on the beachfront, but I've told them to keep their distance. I've got a text cued up and ready to go if we need them, but if anybody even thinks about trying to hurt my woman, I'll rip them a new one.

"Elliot's a good kid," Tori murmurs, her head resting against my chest.

"I enjoyed watching you together this morning. I wouldn't have guessed you were an only child. You were great with him. You had a maternal energy about you."

She sinks her hands into my side. "Maternal? Me?"

"Why not?" I say. "It came naturally to you."

"I've never even thought about having kids."

"Why?" I ask.

She laughs shakily. "Well, firstly, to have kids, you need to find somebody. I've never thought about that."

"You've found somebody now," I tell her, kissing her just behind the ear, making her tilt her head in a captivating and magnetic way.

She stops and turns to me. “Are you saying you want to get me pregnant or something?”

Yes , some insane part of me wants to roar, the Cupid-fueled part.

“No,” I tell her. “I’m just saying, when the time comes, I think you’ll make an amazing mother. Think of the fuel it would give you for your poetry. A whole new world of subjects would open up.”

Her eyes glimmer as if she’s seeing that future, but then she shakes her head. “It’s too easy to mess up a kid. I wouldn’t trust myself.”

“You’re not messed up, Tori. You’re perfect.”

“Do you really mean that? Or is ‘perfect’ just a word you like to use?”

I grab her hips and pull her against me so there is little to no space between us. We’ve walked away from the main section of the beach. It’s quiet here, nobody watching us, nobody listening.

“I mean it,” I tell her, then press my lips against hers.

She moans, triggering my lust. As we make out, I take off my jacket.

“What are you doing?” She gasps between greedy kisses.

“I don’t want to get that dress sandy...”

“Huh?”

She giggles when I put my jacket on the sand, then gently lift and lower her to it. I lie

atop her, kissing her again, knowing this is reckless, that I can't watch our surroundings.

But somehow, I don't care. It doesn't seem to matter when I've got her body pressed against mine. Our lips fuse as if nothing else exists or matters, and that's the goddamn truth.

As we kiss, I forget about the stress of the day and the heartache I had to thrust upon people who didn't deserve it. I forget about the Kents. I forget about everything except for the feel of her body.

"You're so hot," she whimpers.

"You're pretty damn hot yourself..."

"No, physically," she says. "You're burning up."

"It's you," I tell her. "You do this to me, Tori. You set me on fire."

She lets her head fall back when I slide my hand up her leg, feeling her naked thigh, the goosebumps on her perfect skin. I look around to make sure nobody's watching us.

I wouldn't be able to stay calm if somebody else saw Tori like this, her legs open, my hand under the hem of her skirt, the smell of the ocean rushing around us. I push my hand against the wetness of her underwear, feeling her folds through the fabric, her swollen nub begging for attention.

"Oh, God..." She shifts her hips against me, chasing the pleasure. "Yes, yes..."

"You feel perfect," I snarl.

“That’s your... favorite... word, huh?”

I smirk, kissing her neck. I do it softly at first, but her taste is addictive. I bite down, tasting her sweat, her essence. Her moans become more magnetic when I gently push her underwear aside.

I know I should stop. The beach is quiet, sure, but that doesn’t mean we’re safe. It doesn’t mean somebody might not walk by, catch us, see my woman like this, and provoke a furious protective instinct in me.

When I feel her sopping entrance, though, I know I can’t stop. I circle her wetness with my finger, leaning back so I can watch her as I caress her. Her mouth is open, starlight glimmering in her eyes and on her cheeks.

She shifts her hips in time with me, up and down, grinding her wetness against my hand. My breath comes shakily as I try to keep it together. My body throws signals at me: tear down my pants, bring my swollen dick to her waiting hole, slip into her slit, and fuck her hard on this beach. Who gives a damn if we’re in public?

Her moans change quality, becoming more urgent, her breath catching as though she’s on the verge of letting go completely. I push the heel of my palm against her needy pleasure point, caressing her entrance with my finger at the same time.

She grabs my face and stares into my eyes. “Oh, Alex,” she moans. “This feels... you feel... like fate.”

Her eyes widen as if her words have shocked her. She rubs her sweet pussy up and down my hand, her hips bucking like she’s getting ready to take off.

“It is fate,” I growl. “I don’t care if that means we’re nuts. I don’t care what other people would say. I don’t care if Valentine’s Day is supposed to be a cynical holiday

nobody takes seriously.”

Her moans become musical and poetic as I caress her heat.

“Something happened to us. You changed me. We changed each other. Texting you has been sweeter than any other relationship could be.”

She wraps her hands around my wrist and pushes so that I’m applying more pressure to her body.

Finally, she makes a gorgeous sound of release. I kiss her before her moan turns into a fully-fledged scream, and then she falls back, gasping. I look around to make sure nobody saw.

“Are we good?” she asks, panting.

“Yes,” I tell her. “Nobody saw what happened. Don’t worry, angel. I’d never let anyone else see you like that.”

She sits up, adjusting her dress, then takes my hands. “Did you mean what you said?”

“Did you?” I counter.

She bites her lip. “In the moment, it felt true. But fate... Valentine’s... I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” I demand, my voice growing fierce.

“It sounds like the sort of thing Mom would fall for.”

“Except you’re not falling for anything,” I say. “I’m not lying to you. I’d never lie to yo?—”

My cell phone rings.

I sigh. “I need to get this. That’s the ringtone I use for Catelina. Elliot might need me.”

“Yes, yes. Get it,” she says quickly.

Her eyes register fear. I know what she’s thinking. Has Damien somehow got his hands on Elliot? I answer the call.

“Alex,” Cat says. “Elliot is home from his friend’s. He told me he took a tumble on his bike and said he wasn’t hurt. But now he’s having trouble closing his fist. I think maybe something is wrong?”

“Thanks for calling, Cat,” I say, relieved that Damien isn’t the problem. “Take him to the hospital. I’ll meet you there.”

“The hospital?” Tori says once I’ve hung up, sounding strangled with fear. “Oh, God. What’s happened? Is he going to be okay?”

Her concern touches me. “Hey, relax. He just fell off his bike, that’s all. It sounds like he might’ve fractured something.”

“Oh.” She lets out a trembling breath.

“It’s sweet, Tori,” I say, standing and offering my hand. “How much you care about him.”

CHAPTER 23

TORI

“Would you mind going and sitting with Elliot?” Alex asks when we arrive. “I’ll tell Cat she can head home for the evening... and go and see if any nurses are available.”

“Sure,” I say, walking to where Elliot and Cat sit. “Cat, I think Alex wants to talk with you.”

“Hey, Tori,” Elliot says, gently holding his injured arm.

“Hey, little man. What happened?”

He rolls his eyes, seeming older than ten for a moment, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders. “I don’t even know. My bike is usually pretty solid. It’s a good bike. I got it for my birthday. Uncle Alex helped me choose it. But the front wheel got all wobbly out of nowhere, and then it buckled, and I went flying over the handlebars. Tori, it’s like, it didn’t even hurt before I got home. How weird is that?”

I look across the hospital’s waiting room at Alex, looking dashing in his suit. “Sometimes things take a while to sink in,” I mutter.

“Like you and Uncle Alex, you mean, huh? I’m not stupid.”

I laugh, ruffling his hair. He giggles, and it feels so normal. Alex looks over at us, a smile instantly reshaping his features. My body is still aching from what we did on

the beach. My mind and heart alight by what we said, too.

“How would you feel about that?” I ask carefully.

“He smiles a lot more when you’re around,” Elliot says. “I think you and him are neat.”

“Neat,” I mutter.

I know he means neat, as in cool . But I can’t help but think of the other meaning. Orderly, logical, something that makes sense. I’m not so sure we qualify as that.

Soon, Alex joins us, leaning down and hugging Elliot. “What happened, little man?”

Elliot explains about the bike.

“Hmm,” Alex says. “That’s odd. I went over everything on the bike just last week.”

“The wheel was really loose,” Elliot says.

“Where did you keep the bike last night?”

“On the beach,” Elliot says with a guilty shrug. “Why, Uncle Alex?”

“It’s... nothing.”

Alex looks at me over the top of Elliot’s head, suspicion in his eyes. Is he thinking that the Kents had something to do with this?

“We shouldn’t have to wait too long,” Alex says.

“Aren’t you the boss, Uncle Alex?” Elliot says.

“So what? I should cut the line, push to the front, even if somebody else needs to be seen more urgently than we do?”

“No, Uncle Alex,” Elliot replies.

“Good answer, kid. Just because we have money and status doesn’t mean we get to treat other people as lesser.”

“I know,” Elliot says with a sigh.

“How’s the pain?” Alex asks.

Elliot sits up straighter. “I can handle it.”

“You’re being very brave,” I tell him.

Elliot beams at me. “Thanks.”

“Oh, aren’t you just the sweetest family.”

We look up at the woman’s voice. She’s elderly, but stylish, her hair colored to perfection, wearing cream chinos and a sweater vest to match.

“I’m sorry,” she goes on. “I couldn’t help but overhear. Your little family reminds me of mine. They’ve all flown the coop now, of course.”

“We’re not—” I begin, but Elliot cuts in.

“Thank you, miss. They’re the best Mom and Dad ever.” Elliot looks up at me with a

grin, his expression one of pure playfulness.

“That’s very nice of you to say, son,” Alex says.

Oh, so that’s how it is. It’s two against one.

“Nice?” The elderly woman beams. “That’s an understatement, young man. Being called the best by your child... there are no words to describe what an honor that is. It goes far beyond nice .”

“You’re right,” I say. “I take pride in being a mother, but I don’t think I’m the best.”

The elderly woman smiles, looking at me and then Alex. Maybe she’s wondering how old I was when I ‘gave birth’ to Elliot. If she thinks I’m in my late twenties and that Elliot is slightly younger than he is, then the timelines match.

“I won’t ask you the trick question, though,” she says, looking at Elliot, a wicked grin on her face.

“What’s the trick question?”

“Elliot...” I stroke my hand through his hair, shocked by how natural it feels. When he looks at me with bright eyes, I almost regret it.

What if I let him care about me and see me as a maternal figure, only for mine and Alex’s... what, relationship ... to end? What then? It’s a risk I shouldn’t let myself take, yet the easy banter is difficult to resist.

“Do you really want to be tricked?” The woman asks.

“I don’t think you can trick me,” Elliot says, holding his chin up high as he looks at

the elderly woman. “Mom and Dad taught me better than that.”

Alex winks at me over the top of Elliot’s head. I can’t stop myself from grinning. Sitting in a waiting room has never been so much fun.

“The trick question is... who do you like more, hmm, Mommy or Daddy? That’s a question no child can ever answer.” She taps her nose. “Even if they have an answer.”

Elliot shakes his head. “I love them both the same.”

My heart picks up speed, and my belly swirls. I’ve always wondered what being part of a normal family would be like, just never from this particular angle.

“Of course you love them the same,” the woman says. “But I’m not talking about that. That’s the trick to it, see?”

“You asked who I liked more,” Elliot says, nodding. “I get it. But it’s hard to pick between Mom and Dad. Dad is really cool because he works hard and buys me LEGOs, but sometimes he’s too busy with work. But I know that’s only because he wants the best life for us. Mom is cool in her own way because she’s really good at poems and helps me with my homework.”

My heart freaking feels like it’s going to burst. I know I need to get myself under control, but this is an unreal level of emotion.

Suddenly, I wish Cleo and Lily were here so that I could somehow pause time to talk to them about this and declutter some of the confusion in my head.

“Oh, what a delightful answer,” the elderly woman says. She looks up when a nurse approaches. “Hello again, Cynthia. Is it my time?”

“Yes, Gloria. Shall we?”

Once she’s gone, Elliot laughs. “That was fun, kind of like being an actor.”

I smile, but there’s fear bubbling in me, too. That almost felt too natural.

“Are you okay, Tori?” Elliot asks.

I force the smile to remain on my face. “Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. You’re the one with the busted arm.”

I fold my arms, sinking into my seat. My phone buzzes a moment later.

Alex: Is something wrong, my vivacious Valentine?

Tori: No.

Alex looks at me, his eyebrow raised, then types on his phone.

Alex: You’re aware I can read you, right, beautiful? Something changed after that elderly woman left.

Tori: Maybe I’m scared. Possibly worried by how easy that felt.

Alex: The only reason you’d need to be scared is if I lied to you, angel. If I was misleading you, or a cheating asshat, or if I had plans to hurt you in any way, maybe then it’d make sense to be scared. But I’d never do that. This is the real deal.

I put my phone in my pocket, chewing my bottom lip. I’m not sure how to tell him that that’s part of what worries me. Caring is dangerous. No matter how certain I become that Alex is nothing like Mom’s exes, it’s not like I can undo years of

observations and imprinting just like that.

I can't unsee what I've seen, unhear what I've heard. I can't make myself into a different person, one who hasn't experienced all the bull crap romance can dish out.

My phone buzzes again.

Alex: That was just a bit of fun. I'm not going to rush you, Tori .

Tori: I know.

I tell him that, but I'm not sure I believe it, and I'm not sure he does either.

This started as a casual walk on the beach, with jokes of dick pics and keep-it-casual promises, and now I'm pretending to be his nephew's mother as security watches over us, making sure a criminal doesn't take his sick obsession further.

How did life get so messy so fast?

Tori: I meant what I said on the beach. When you kissed and touched me, when we're together, it feels like fate. A past version of me is seriously annoyed with myself for saying this. I'm supposed to be able to keep my distance. But ever since we met, I feel different.

Alex: You feel like you've been shot with a Cupid's arrow. I know how that sounds. I'm almost forty. Do you think I said, texted, or even thought things like this before you came along? Hell to the no, but it's the truth.

Tori: We're both as crazy as each other, then.

Alex: If wanting you makes me crazy, send me straight to the asylum.

I smile, looking across at him. His eyes seem to sparkle in the hospital's bright lights, alive with meaning and emotion.

Soon, it's time for Elliot to be seen. I'm touched when he says he wants me to join them.

Later, past midnight, Cleo, Lily, and I are on what we sometimes call a 'slumber party' group call. We used to have sleepovers all the time when we were kids, but less so now.

I lie in bed, my body still aching from the beach even though it's been several hours.

"You need to tell him how you feel," Lily says.

"And how does she feel?" Cleo demands.

"Haven't you been listening?" Lily replies with some sass of her own.

I've just finished giving them the lowdown on everything: the security, the date, the hospital visit.

"She cares about him," Lily says. "Sorry, Tori. I don't mean to refer to you in the third person. But you obviously care about him. And I know you'll call it superstitious or whatever, but I think you were fated to meet that night."

"Oh, jeez," Cleo mutters.

"You're going to hate me, Cleo," I say. "But when we were on the beach together earlier, I actually started to think the same thing..."

"Not you, too," Cleo says.

“I don’t know how to explain this feeling. It’s like I’ve been shot with a freaking Cupid’s arrow.”

“Oh. My. Gawd.” Cleo makes a puking sound. “Am I going to be the only maneater left in this entire city? What is happening?”

Lily and I laugh.

“But just because I’m having these crazy thoughts and feelings,” I say, “doesn’t mean I’m going to automatically follow them, you know? I still need to be careful.”

“Careful of what?” Lily says angrily. “Careful you don’t fall in love with a man you clearly already care about? Be careful you don’t get a cute little boy to care for in the process. Don’t you want a chance at being happy?”

“A chance,” Cleo says. “That’s it right there, Lils. There’s a chance she’s happy, sure. There’s also a chance she should’ve listened to me and kept her head on straight.”

“Life or death,” Lily begins.

“Easy, Lils...” Cleo laughs.

But Lily isn’t playing. “Humor me, Tori. Life or death, if you had to bet on it, would you say that you’ve got a better chance of being happy with Alex or without him?”

I swallow. It’s a poignant question that cuts right to the heart of the issue.

“I think I’d say with him,” I murmur. “I think .”

“Well, there’s your answer... and your problem.”

“My problem?”

“You think way too much,” Lily says.

Once the call ends, I think about what she said. Perhaps she has a point. Maybe I’m in danger of overthinking my way out of my chance at real happiness.

I go to the window and look at the street and the security cars watching over Mom and me. Then I turn around and look at the wall, at the framed photo of me at the poetry slam.

I look so confident in that picture. I wish I felt that way right now.

CHAPTER 24

ALEX

I open Elliot's door, looking in on him as he sleeps on his side. His forearm has a small bandage with a splint, but it didn't require a cast. He breathes softly. I smile, thinking about how he led the way with the fun in the hospital, how brave he was, and how much closer he brought me to my girl.

Something magical happens, too. As I stand here, it's like I can let go of the unfair resentment I've clung to since the crash, since the affair, since all that pain. I'm able to be a proud uncle-slash-guardian-slash-father figure.

Closing the door softly, I go to the front window. The security car flashes its lights at me, letting me know everything is as it should be. I'm restless and pacing despite the day's events, knowing that I should probably try to get some sleep before work tomorrow.

My shift starts at ten. It's already one thirty. But I can't sleep as I think about last night, the date, the dinner, my woman in her mouthwateringly stunning dress.

When we said goodbye this evening, I felt her clinging to me as though she wanted to stay, as if she didn't want to let me go. But then she pushed herself away like she was forcing herself.

Does she still think we have any chance of being distant and casual?

When my phone buzzes, I grab it up quickly, feeling like an overeager teenager. But screw it. I'm done pretending her texts don't mean a lot to me. They make my day.

Tori: I know you won't get this until tomorrow morning, but I just wanted to say, Alex, that last night meant something to me. The date was incredible, the beach after is something I'll never forget, and, as weird as it sounds, even the hospital was nice.

Alex: That doesn't sound weird at all. Pretending to be Elliot's parents was funny and touching.

Tori: Do you ever sleep?

I smirk, walking to the back door and onto the porch, looking out at the ocean. About twenty feet away is the rock formation where Elliot often leaves his bike. I've got no cameras that far out, but the fact that the wheel was loose has my hackles raised.

Would Damien do that? Loosen a kid's bike wheel? Then again, it's not like he hasn't done worse.

Alex: Before I met a specific poet, I slept like a baby. But now I can't stop thinking about the date, the kiss, the hunger I feel every time I touch you.

Tori: Hunger, huh? Are you a vampire?

Alex: Judging by how I was biting you earlier, I think I might be.

Tori: Don't start talking about that. You'll make me go crazy all over again.

Alex: The way you were moaning had me going crazy. It was so damn beautiful, my virgin, voluptuous Valentine.

Tori: I need to think of a nickname for you. How does 'sexy surgeon' sound?

Alex: Haha, I could get used to that, though I've never thought of myself as sexy.

Tori: What? Have you ever looked in a mirror?

Alex: I've never given a damn about how I look. I know how that sounds—like a load of bull—but it's true. I work out because I like how it makes my body feel, stay relatively clean-shaven because I don't like the feeling of stubble, and keep my hair trimmed because it's better for work.

Tori: Well, let me express serious gratitude for all those factors. Because, newsflash, my sexy surgeon... you're a hunk.

I laugh.

Alex: If that means you're going to moan for me like you can't take it anymore, then call me any damn thing you want.

My manhood stirs, my body growing hot even when the relatively cool night air whispers against me.

Tori: You seriously need to stop.

Alex: Why's that? Why do you want me to stop telling you that trailing my tongue up and down your petals is all I can think about? Why do you want me to pretend I'm not obsessing over your round, creamy ass? I want to bend you over, stroke my hands over your roundness, bring my swollen end to your hole and thrust inside, feel your wetness kiss me.

Tori: You're getting me wild.

Alex: Wild, how?

My balls are flooding, my length burning with heat.

Tori: Wild like I'm thinking about asking you something I wouldn't have dreamed of before.

Alex: If you're thinking of asking me to arrange a ride for you here, you better ask me before I go ahead and do it anyway.

Tori: Whoa, are you a mind reader?

I smirk.

Alex: When it comes to you, I'm becoming one.

Tori: Maybe I'll just leave it in your hands.

Alex: I've already decided. I'm going to tell your security detail to give you a ride here. I'd come to you—I'd run across the damn city if that's what it took—but I can't leave Elliot.

Tori: I get that. You're a good dad. Sorry—uncle. That was a genuine typo.

It probably was, but it doesn't change how her text makes me feel. Before she came along, I sometimes wondered if I'd find a woman to have kids with or a woman I'd care about enough.

Tori: What should I wear?

Fuck, that question makes me ache. I reach down and grind my hand up and down the

front of my pants, my manhood throbbing, trying to break free.

Alex: You could wear full ski gear, and you'd still be the sexiest woman I've ever laid my eyes on.

Tori: Okay, charmer, but what do you want me to wear, huh?

Alex: Something I can tear off easily.

Tori: I'm not going to lie. I'm nervous AF about doing this, but I'm also excited too.

I've worked myself into a frenzy by the time she arrives, my body burning, my steel so solid it's soaking my underwear with precome. I open the front door, and she slips inside wearing a jacket that cuts just above her knees.

She takes a few steps, looking around the living room, then turns to me and opens her jacket. "So..." She bites down nervously. "What do you think?"

I stare at my Valentine in her bra and underwear. Both are lacy and purple, the bra pushing her large mounds together, creating a view of sumptuous torture that has me pulsing and aching all over.

I stumble forward, feeling like I'm in a dream.

"Oh, fuck," I murmur.

CHAPTER 25

TORI

I've never seen somebody so entranced.

He looks at me like I'm the only partially clothed woman he's ever seen. His gaze says he wants to worship and devour me in equal measure. He looks at me like I matter; at this moment, we matter.

He's wearing a t-shirt and shorts, the fabric of his shorts showing the outline of his manhood. His muscles are tense, veins bulging as if he's barely keeping a lid on his lust.

Slipping his hands inside my coat, he squeezes onto my bare hips, making a groaning sound I think I could get used to very fast. He leans down, bringing his lips to mine, but he doesn't kiss me right away. Instead, he looks into my eyes.

"You've got the most perfect body," he says fiercely.

When I roll my eyes, he gently touches my face and makes me look at him.

"Don't laugh it away or pretend it's not true. It's a fact, angel. You look perfect. Curves in all the right places."

"Yeah..."

Before I finish with a right , he touches my wrist and guides my hand to the front of his shorts.

“Can’t you feel how perfect you are? I’ve been rock solid ever since you agreed to come here. I’ve been fucking pulsing with how hard I am.”

I moan as I stroke my hand up and down his length. He’s not lying. He feels like he’s ready to explode any second. As he smooths his free hand down my stomach and to my underwear, I realize I’m able to let it all go—the doubt, the fear, the poet’s curse of constantly being outside myself, watching.

No. I’m in this moment. I’m with my man.

“We should go somewhere private,” I murmur. “What if Elliot...”

I giggle in delight when he sweeps me off my feet. He does it with such ease as though I weigh nothing. I feel like I’m flying as he carries me through the house. He makes me feel weightless and precious when he handles me like this.

He pauses near his door. “Help me out here, will you?” he whispers.

I laugh, reaching down for the handle.

The second it’s open, he pushes inside and carries me to the bed. His body feels on fire, heat smoldering up from inside. He lays me on the bed and then stands over me, visibly trembling, staring at me as if nobody else exists, has ever existed.

I’m getting poetic. Sue me. I can’t take this casually like Cleo would. I can’t be one hundred percent pure emotion like Lily, either. I’m somewhere in between, a unique mix that exists just for me and my man.

“What are you thinking?” he says passionately, climbing onto the bed, climbing on top of me.

I wrap my arms around him as he presses his body against mine, letting me feel all the hunger inside him.

“I was thinking that I’m done fighting,” I whisper, stroking my hands up and down his bare arms, feeling the solidness of his muscles, his lust pulsing through him. “I tried to pretend I could be like Cleo, that this was simple. I tried to pretend, full stop, but something’s happening here...”

“Valentine’s magic,” he says with an ironic smirk.

“Ha ha,” I mutter.

He kisses me fervently, trailing his hand up my leg, sizzling pleasure dancing up my thigh and kissing my core. My underwear feels suddenly wet and sticky.

“Who said I was joking?” he murmurs between frantic and hungry kisses.

“Magic, fate. It’s all so...”

“Poetic?” he offers.

I raise my eyebrow, squeezing down on his arms, digging my nails into his skin. My nails bend like they might break against his solid flesh. “I was going to say cheesy.”

“It’s Valentine’s magic, my voluptuous, virgin Valentine, but perhaps not in the way people usually mean ‘magic.’ A miracle led me to a night like that, dragged along by my friend. Where I just so happened to see the most beautiful, curviest, angelic woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on, and that some jerk gave me a chance to defend

you. Call it a coincidence if you want, but something changed between us that night. Texting changed us. A simple walk down the beach, for us, meant so much more. Maybe it's cheesy, but I was starting to give up hope of finding love before I met you."

"Love?" I whisper.

"I know." He kisses the edge of my mouth, making me shiver. "I'm moving too fast."

I grab the back of his neck and pull him in for a passionate kiss. "That seems to be a theme with you..."

I kiss him deeply, losing myself in the sensation of our tongues flaring together, finding each other hungrily and desperately. The more we kiss, the less it means I have to talk to him about the L-word.

It should be impossible, right? Letting myself even entertain the L-word would be a very Mom-like thing to do. I need to slow down.

But when he presses his hand against my underwear, causing my clit to ache and my core to throb, all my doubts drain away. I don't have to question everything.

In the back of my head, poetry starts to whisper.

I never knew if I wanted you, but a kiss, a touch, and your love proved me wrong. I was never sexy or desired, but then you came along...

I gasp when he kisses my neck and then moves down to my breasts. He unclips my bra and presses my mounds together, leaning back so that he can get a better look at me. His eyes are pure fire, his jaw tense, so flooded with lust and hunger that his veins push against his neck like he's struggling to maintain a semblance of calm.

“I’m going to need to think of a new nickname for you,” he moans, massaging my breasts, tickling sensations teasing all over my body.

“Maybe we should stop, then, huh?” I tease. “I don’t want to steal your virgin Valentine from you.”

“No. Fucking. Way.”

He leans down, sucking on one of my nipples as he massages my other breast with his free hand. I shiver as pleasure swirls around my breast and over my chest, down into my belly, all through me. It’s like a warm balm that pushes away any concerns.

I don’t have to think anymore. I don’t have to doubt.

Even when he slides his hand over my stomach toward my sex, there isn’t the expected flair of self-consciousness that I’ve become so used to. It’s the opposite. The way his hand trembles against me makes me feel so fucking sexy.

I arch my back, tearing at his shirt.

“You want me so freaking badly,” I moan. “You’re hungry for me. I can feel it.”

He lifts his arms as I pull his t-shirt free, revealing his hard chest, his lean abs.

“You’re the only woman I’ll ever want,” he growls. “The. Only. Fucking. One.”

“Show me,” I whisper, taking his wrist and guiding his hand to my underwear.

“You’re so damn sexy when you’re confident.”

“I’ve never been confident before. You bring it out in me.”

“Then I better stick around...”

I’m unable to reply when he slides his hand down my underwear and over my naked sex. He finds my lips again, kissing me as he massages my clit. I hold onto his round, firm shoulders tightly.

Suddenly, he groans like he can’t take it anymore, kissing over my belly, then down toward my sex. He pulls my underwear down, the fabric tickling my thighs. I prop up on my elbows, looking down at him as he tosses my underwear to the floor.

He stares at me with complete obsession, looking up, his eyes hungry and fascinated, before returning his gaze to my core.

“Fuck,” he groans, stroking his thumb along my clit. “You’re perfect.”

I instinctively shake my head, but then he sinks his touch into my thighs and squeezes hard, owning me.

“Perfect,” he growls.

CHAPTER 26

ALEX

She tries to shake her head when I call her perfect, but she is.

Her virgin slit is glimmering with wetness, her nub looking engorged with her lust. Her folds are needily swollen with her desire. I grip her thighs, holding her in place, owning her.

She moans, staring down at me with wide, fascinated eyes. She looks so damn beautiful; it makes my chest ache knowing that I'm the only one who will claim her.

I bring my mouth to her drenched entrance, kiss her hole and then her lips, then move to her jewel. She gasps in the most erotic way when I trail my tongue up and down her nub. When she shivers in desire, her thick and gorgeous thighs tremble for me, her curvaceous fleshiness jiggling captivantly.

I slide one hand around to her ass, holding onto her fullness as I lavish her pussy with attention. My tongue goes into overdrive when her hips begin to buck and shift as she confidently chases her pleasure, meeting my tongue strokes with hunger of her own.

She reaches down and trails her fingers through my hair, clawing onto my scalp, pulling me toward her. I stroke one hand up her body, over her perfect, plump tits, then offer her my finger.

"Suck," I snarl. "Get it wet for your virgin pussy. Make it slick for when I slide into

you.”

She gasps, then nods as she sucks my finger. That makes me even harder. My steel pushes against my shorts, precome flowing freely now, my briefs wet with the desire and the heat.

I bring my slick finger to her entrance and push in gently, groaning when her tightness wraps around me. When I suck on her clit, pulling it into my mouth, pressing my tongue against it, she gifts me with the most captivating, hungry, breathy moan.

Her hand tightens on my head, fingernails digging into my scalp as if she can't take this anymore. Her clit feels like fucking fire in my mouth, and her virgin slit widens just a tiny bit like her body is getting used to me. The tip of my dick throbs as I think about sliding inside of her.

She shifts her hips when I open my mouth to devour more of her. Her taste moves slickly over my tongue, making me even more crazed than I already am.

“Oh, Ah-Alex,” she whimpers. “Fu-Fuck yes.”

“You're so damn perfect,” I growl.

“Don't stop,” she says urgently.

Her self-assuredness makes my perfect poet even sexier, which shouldn't even be possible. But it'd be a waste of time to think about what should and shouldn't be possible with my voluptuous Valentine.

I slide my tongue down her folds, slipping my finger out of her entrance and moving it to her clit. Now, I lick her hole instead, tasting her tanginess, like her virgin body is

giving me signals that she's ready.

But first, I need to feel her come, the tremor in her body, the flutter of her virgin walls.

She squeezes her thick thighs around my face, making the most delicious prison a man could wish for. She traps me against her sex as I make my tongue firm and slide it into her, showering her clit with attention at the same time.

"Yes, yes," she gasps. "Oh, fuck, yes, Alex, Alex..."

"Come for me," I growl, my voice muffled by her thighs. "Come all over my face. I need to taste you. I'm. The. Only. Fucking. One."

I swap my hand and my mouth again, licking her clit fast, my tongue flickering as her moans become more intense. My finger makes gorgeous wet noises as I slip it in and out of her, owning her pussy, owning her perfection.

Finally, she squeezes her legs even tighter around my head. She strokes both hands over my scalp, gasping as she claws at me. Her pussy gushes with wetness, her hole pulsing around my finger as if ready for my rock-hard pole.

I stand up, looking down at her naked body, my cock aching.

She sits up, breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling rapidly, making her tits sway. A dreamy, confident smile spreads across her lips when she sees me staring. She pushes her breasts together, pouting at me, one eyebrow raised.

"Like what you see, huh?"

"Like is a goddamn understatement."

“You’d better show me your...”

I tear down my shorts and my underwear, my cock springing free, a line of precome flinging from the head and landing on her breast. She moans and rubs it over her skin, making me wild and threatening my control. I have to remind myself she’s a virgin, so I don’t flip her over and spank her creamy ass as I grind myself inside of her.

“You’re ready,” I groan.

“Uh uh,” she murmurs, her eyes glimmering like she’s nervous. But then she visibly pushes past the nerves. “Don’t you need to be wet?”

I groan when she wraps her hand around my dick, stroking her hand from my tip to my base, spreading the precome so that my entire length shines with it.

“You’re so big,” she whispers.

“I’ll take it slow, my perfect poet,” I say, my voice husky, the hunger inside me telling me to do the opposite.

Ravage her. Possess her. Take her. Hard.

She must be able to read my thoughts on my face. She slides her hand down her body, pawing at her slick core, her eyebrow raised in that sassy-as-fuck way. “Maybe I don’t want you to take it slow. Maybe I want you to let all that hunger out.”

She laughs in delight when I throw myself at her, falling back on the bed. I kiss her neck, biting down, reaching with my other hand to grab my dick and guide the tip to her entrance.

When my bulging head kisses her entrance, she gasps, her walls widening around me.

She grips my back, sinking her nails in, staring with a mixture of desire and shock.

“Had a change of heart?”

“Oh, Alex...” She bites her lip, nodding. “Maybe slow at first.”

I arch my back, gently grinding my girth into her. She opens her legs wider, her eyelids fluttering the deeper I get. Her pussy is so fucking tight, and I almost lose control, almost give in to the hunger that tells me to thrust savagely all the way in.

She tilts her hips, arching her back, pushing down toward me as I get deeper and deeper inside of her.

“We can’t... pretend... anymore,” she moans, leaning up to kiss my neck.

“I could never pretend,” I groan, her tightness squeezing onto me, her perfection driving me to obsession in a way nobody else ever will. “The second I saw you, Tori, I knew you were the one. I knew .”

“I know now,” she gasps. “Don’t be mad that it took me a while...”

“The only thing that could make me mad is if your tight, horny hole doesn’t cream for me again.”

Her head falls back when I grind all the way inside of her, her walls tightly clutching the base of my cock. I watch her, captivated. A bomb could go off outside the house, and I wouldn’t be able to look away.

Slowly, a smile spreads across her face. In time with the curve of her lips, her pussy relaxes, pleasure flowing through her. It’s like she’s massaging my length.

She meets my eyes, her confidence returning. “I want it,” she moans. “I want you.”

I slip out of her slowly, then grind in just a little faster. Her body vibrates when I collide with her, her breasts dancing for me, her fullness swaying.

She drags her nails down my chest. “Faster,” she moans. “Harder.”

“Don’t tempt me,” I snarl. “You’ve got no idea how badly I want to watch your body shake for me, your tits bounce.”

“These tits, huh?” She moans, pushing her breasts together, knowing the power she has over me. “Hmm? Is this what you want?”

I let out a savage growl as the reins of my desire loosen. I slip out and then drive firmly and hungrily into her body. She gasps, the mattress making a whining noise as she grabs onto my arms like she thinks she might fly away.

We find a faster rhythm, one that has me hypnotized. I’m in heaven, a man with too many choices. Do I look at her face, the pleasure shaping her expression into something all too captivating, or do I look at her bouncing breasts, or look even further down at my hard steel slipping wetly in and out of her tight, slick hole?

She closes her eyes as she bounces up and down, guiding her tunnel along my hardness. I sense the subtle changes in her body. When she bounces with more determination, I rev up my speed. She rewards me with a soul-searing moan that floods my balls with come and threatens to make me explode.

She drags her nails down my chest, leaving marks, branding me.

“You’re going to come again,” I growl.

“Is that... a... question?” She gasps.

I smirk. “It’s—a—statement.”

The head of my cock pulses for a moment like the come is going to erupt out of me. But there’s no damn way I’m going to give into this all-encompassing pleasure until I’ve felt her drench my cock with her release.

She rocks her hips with more urgency. I take the hint, moving even faster, pounding into her soaked slit, our bodies making wet noises of near release, her pussy singing for me.

When she tightens around my base again, I know that she’s going to come. I watch her closely, holding back the wave of come that’s trying to erupt out of me, holding back the lust, holding back the feral savage inside so that I can feel her release first.

She suddenly clasps my face in her hands, turning my gaze so that I’m staring into her eyes. Her eyes flood with pleasure, joy, and her release as her pussy pulses around my cock as if trying to coax the release out of me.

Her orgasm keeps going, lasting ten seconds, then twenty, her walls gripping me tightly, then releasing slightly in titillating waves. I bite down, my entire body tense with the desire to empty inside of her.

Finally, she falls back, her body coated in sweat, making her curves shine and glimmer for me.

Sitting up, she says, “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

I stop, shock rioting through me. “You want to stop now ?”

“I don’t want to do this ,” she says, wriggling down the bed.

CHAPTER 27

TORI

He leans back, looking shocked, his jaw tight, his eyes flaring with wild hunger. His rock-hard cock is coated in my release, his tip glimmering with a big dollop of precome.

“I don’t want to stop, silly,” I tell him, grabbing his arm and guiding him to the bed. “I can see how close you are. I want to be sexy for you.”

“You’re always sexy,” he growls.

“But like this...”

I guide him to his back and then climb on top of him. I’ve never had crippling body-image issues, but it’s not like I’ve ever been super confident, either. When I sit on him, reach down, and grab his thickness to guide it to my aching pussy, the flood of confidence is intoxicating.

I slide down his length, every inch of my sex aching as he grinds inside of me.

He growls, massaging my breasts as I begin to bounce. I feel my body shaking, and there’s a slight whisper of nerves, a tiny voice, but it’s easy to ignore it when I see how badly he wants me.

No, not wants. Needs. He’s staring like he’s been waiting his entire life for this

moment.

I let myself go completely, bouncing up and down, grinding on his length and owning the pleasure, owning the moment. A wave of power washes over me. It feels like I sometimes do onstage, the crowd applauding, the emotion pulsing out of me.

The veins on his neck bulge, and his eyes open wide, staring in fascination as I prop my hands on his chest and bounce over and over. His length makes a searing path inside as he touches a place I've never experienced before: deep, hot, needy.

His lip twitches when he hears the quality of my breathy moans change. He sits up, smoothing his hands over my back. We rock together, his warm breath moving over my body, face, and neck. I'm sure I can feel his manhood expanding inside of me as the pleasure floods into him, causing me to fall over the edge with him.

"Oh, fuck," he groans. "My perfect poet..."

"I love—the new—nickname..."

"Fuckkk."

He falls back as his pleasure erupts, his hands molded to my hips as his cock pulses and his come fills me. I sink my hands into his chest again, leaving marks there, tattoos of possession.

Finally, he lets out a trembling gasp and pulls me on top of him, his wilting manhood slipping out of me. I slide into his embrace, putting my cheek against his naked chest, feeling and listening to his heartbeat.

"I never thought losing my virginity would feel so good," I whisper.

He kisses the top of my head, squeezing my shoulder. “You were so damn sexy” He sighs when his cell phone rings. “It’s Gray, the head of the security team. I better get this.”

I tighten my grip against Alex’s bare stomach. Please don’t let Damien ruin this moment.

“What do you mean you can’t find her?” Alex growls. “You’re supposed to be the best security team in the goddamn city. So she slipped away, did she?”

He sits up, looking furious.

My phone buzzes from the floor, my coat pocket. Dread swirls through me as I reach down for it. It’s a text from Mom’s number with an image attached.

I almost don’t want to open it. It’d be easier to stay in this bedroom, to pretend none of this is happening. Terror threatens to paralyze me, but somehow, I know the text and phone call are related.

When I open the image, I almost drop my phone.

Mom, tied to a chair, blood smeared down the side of her face. She has a gag stuffed in her mouth.

A moment later, a text arrives with an address: a beach house less than a mile away. Then another text.

Unknown: If I see your security, the bitch gets it. Come here. Come alone. Come now.

My hand trembles as I show Alex the screen. He clenches his fist around his phone.

“We can’t tell them,” I whisper.

He grinds his teeth, then nods. “Gray, it’s all good,” he says. “Tori just heard from her mother. She’s fine. She just wanted some alone time. No, I won’t tell you where she is. You don’t need to sweat it.”

He hangs up.

“Fuck. What the hell is going on?”

“How would he get to her without the security seeing?”

“They’re probably only watching the front of the building,” he muses. “He could’ve used a back entrance. Or maybe he lured her out somehow. So much for the best goddamn agency in the city. Fuck .”

I put my hand on his chest. “We need to slow down. Think.”

My phone buzzes again.

Unknown: Tick tock...

“Why is he doing this?” I snap. “Okay, so Mom cheated on his dad. Fine. But to go this far? Isn’t that just insane? Pathetic? Deluded?”

“It’s all those things and more,” Alex says. “But the sad fact is, there are insane, pathetic, and deluded people in this world who will happily hurt others to make themselves feel better.”

“I have to go to her,” I say. “I can’t just leave her there.”

“I’m not letting you go alone,” Alex growls.

“You saw the text?—”

“I can’t let you go alone,” he snaps. “Get that out of your head. If I let you go alone and something happened to you, I’d never forgive myself. That’s not happening. If we’re doing this, we’re doing it together.”

“He can’t see you,” I whisper. “He can’t know you’re there. You’ll have to let me go into that house alone...”

When he shakes his head, I grab his hands and squeeze them tightly. “My mom isn’t perfect. We’ve had our problems. I won’t pretend otherwise, but if I lost her...” I shudder, tears welling in my eyes. “I can’t lose her. You have to let me save her.”

“You’re not going alone,” he snaps.

“Then we need to think of a compromise and think fast,” I snap. “I can’t let him do this. Mom is the only family I’ve got left.”

He grinds his teeth.

“Listen,” I say. “You say you’ll never forgive yourself if something happens to me. I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to Mom.”

“I’m going to be there,” he growls. “Let me see that address.”

I show him my phone.

He sighs darkly. “I don’t like this, Tori, but if we’re going to do it, I might have an idea. He doesn’t want to see any security, but he can’t police who uses the beach. I’ll

put on some running gear and a hoodie so he won't know it's me and jog up and down the beach nearby. Lure him to the back porch..."

I nod quickly, my heart pounding as I mentally prepare for this. "Okay, we can do that."

"And if you need me, scream, okay?" he says urgently. "I'll be in there in two seconds flat. I'll tear his arms from his goddamn body if he even thinks about hurting you."

"What are you going to tell the security?" I ask.

"I'll tell them I want them to stay here, watch the front and the back of the property, to make sure nobody can hurt Elliot. I'll say we want some alone time. I hired them so they won't press the issue. But Tori?—"

"I know. You don't like this."

"That's a goddamn understatement."

"What other choice do we have?" I say. "If I don't go, he could kill her."

"If you go, he could kill you," he counters.

"That's a risk I have to take. For Mom. You'd do the same for Elliot."

"You've got me there," he snarls. "Goddamn it. Remember, I'll be nearby. And if you're not out in five minutes, I'm coming in anyway."

"Alex..."

“No,” he snaps. “I’m not arguing that point.”

“What if it takes longer?—”

“Enough, Tori,” he says firmly. “Five minutes is already too much time to be alone with that psycho. You wanted a compromise. This is your compromise.”

He’s not going to give in, is he?

“Fine, let’s do this. But I’ll need a change of clothes; I’ve only got my coat and underwear.”

“I’ll loan you something,” he says. “But it’s going to be baggy.”

A surreal feeling hits me as I walk up to the entrance of the beach house. I know Alex is jogging up and down the beach behind the property, but that doesn’t do much for the nerves and the fear twisting through me.

For Mom , I remind myself.

The door swings open before I can ring the bell. Damien holds a gun in one hand. He’s got his other clutched to his chest, probably from where Alex snapped it the last time he tried to pull some crap.

“You did the right thing coming alone,” Damien says smugly.

“What do you want?” I hiss, thinking that ten seconds have already passed.

I know that Alex will be counting down. He was livid about putting me in harm’s way. But he didn’t have a choice. If he’d refused, I would’ve come here anyway, with or without him.

Damien steps aside, nodding into the house.

“Where’s the big bad wolf?” he says, laughing in a self-assured way.

I rush to the center of the room, where Mom is tied to a chair. I glide my hands over her body, checking for injuries. Apart from the knock on her head, she seems unharmed.

“Where are your goons, huh?” I snap, spinning to him, letting anger rule me, which probably isn’t the best idea.

He rolls his eyes at me. I turn back to Mom, taking the gag from her mouth. She sucks in a breath. “Your man scared his goons away,” Mom says bitterly.

“Enough of that,” Damien snaps, striding over.

“Why are we here?” I demand. “I know Mom made a mistake, but hurting us won’t turn back time. People cheat, Damien. It’s wrong. I hate it. I’d never do it, but it’s a fact of life. You don’t kidnap people. You don’t stalk people because somebody cheated on your dad. Can’t you see how warped that is?”

“You think I’m some evil piece of shit, don’t you?” he says wearily, as though he’s got the weight of the world on his shoulders. He walks over to the couch and drops down, resting the gun against his knee. In my head, the seconds tick by.

What if Alex storms in here before I get a chance to lure Damien to the porch? What if my man smashes through the window when the gun is still aimed at me?

Why did this have to happen now when my body is still sizzling from what we did?

“You’ve kidnapped an innocent woman,” I snap. “You stalked her daughter to a bar

and got a job there just to?—”

He laughs, shaking his head. “You’re not that special, Tori. I got a job there because I needed a damn job because my dad made me promise to try and stick to the straight and narrow before he died. Before he died .” He glares at Mom. “You heard that, didn’t you, Monica? My dad died because of what you did to him.”

Mom sniffles. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

Mom, you don’t owe him an apology , I almost say, but then I think better of it. Antagonizing him probably isn’t the best idea.

“We Kents have a reputation, it’s true,” Damien says. “But we’re not as bad as people like to make out. We’ve got fingers in pies, but only because that’s the only way to make some damn money in this city. At least, it was before Dad... Monica, tell your daughter why my father took his own life.”

I gasp.

Mom shudders, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I didn’t plan on any of this. He was so intense, so possessive...”

In the back of my head, I think about Alex, how intense and possessive he is, and how much I like it.

Focus, Tori .

“You cheated on my dad,” Damien says. “You got rid of his child. The pain was so bad, he took his own life.” Damien speaks numbly, but there’s emotion beneath the surface. It almost makes me feel sorry for the lunatic.

“Mom,” I whisper.

Mom sobs, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I’m just so sorry. Please, if you’re going to hurt anyone, hurt me. Tori has nothing to do with this.”

“I was going to make Tori love me,” Damien says in a distant voice. “When I realized who she was, that was my plan. Woo the bitch. Make the bitch love me. Break her heart. But you, Tori, you were so damn stubborn. Now, I’m going to simplify things.”

He stands up, aiming the gun at me. “Stick that gag back in her mouth.”

Terror seizes me. I want to tell him to go to hell, but it’s difficult to summon any words with the cold barrel of a gun aimed at me.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I whisper, picking up the gag.

She shudders. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I assure her. “You’ve made mistakes, but you’re not a bad person.”

“Ha,” Damien grunts. Once I’ve replaced the gag, Damien strides up to me and nudges me with the gun. “On the kitchen counter, there’s a glass of water. Drink it.”

I urge myself to grab the gun, yank it from his grasp, to do something. When I told Alex I needed to come here, I thought I might be able to force myself to take action. It all seemed so much more possible when I wasn’t one trigger pull away from the final act.

Walking to the counter, I look down at the water, little bits of white powder floating in it.

“What’s in it?” I ask.

“Drink,” he orders. “Or I’ll make you watch me kill your mother.”

What choice do I have?

Oh, God, this was a mistake.

My hand trembles as I raise the glass and drink down the thick liquid, granules of powder sliding down my throat. Instantly, my vision grows hazy, and my balance feels off.

I stumble. Damien laughs and guides me to the couch, pushing me down.

“You’re going to watch us make sweet, sweet love, Monica,” Damien growls as I try to claw onto consciousness. “I want you to think of my father every single fucking second. I want you to think of what you did to him, what you did to me . I want you to remember. This is all your fault.”

I open my mouth to scream, but no noise comes out.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER 28

ALEX

I stalk toward the beach house, my heart pounding, my instincts ready for war.

I should never have agreed to this. What if he's hurt her already? I'll never forgive myself for putting my woman in harm's way. Tori's too damn stubborn and fierce for her own good. I walk onto the back porch, ducking under a window and moving to the glass sliding doors.

The curtains are drawn, but there's a crack through which I can just about make out Monica tied to a chair, the edge of the couch—and my woman's legs jostling around. Fucking hell. Is he going to...

I can't even think of it.

I need to slow down and formulate a plan.

That all goes out the window when I hammer my fist into the door. The glass shatters into pieces, cutting into my hands. I leap into the house, letting out a roar when I see what the bastard is going to do.

He must've drugged Tori. She lies on the couch, her eyes closed. The prick has already taken off her shoes and socks.

He spins to me, picking up the gun from the coffee table and aiming wildly. I bellow,

throwing myself at him. The gunshot is so loud my eardrums start ringing.

Fire pulses in my arm as the bullet grazes me, but I don't stop. He fires again, missing this time, and then I'm on him.

He roars when I grab his wrist, wrenching it vigorously, twisting his one remaining good hand. I grip his shoulders and turn, throwing him across the room. He crashes through the coffee table.

I leap on him, seeing red, bringing my fist down in a blow that might've killed him if the rat didn't quickly roll to the side. He takes a blade from his boot, whining in agony as he forces his shattered wrist to function just enough for him to aim the knife at me.

He stabs me through the calf, causing me to stumble, and then scrambles to his feet, scuttling toward the door. I ignore the pain in my leg and my arm and chase after him.

There's no damn way I'm letting him go after the shit he just pulled.

He runs down the beach, but I move faster. I don't care about the blood soaking my sweatpants, making them stick to my legs. He was going to hurt my woman. I can't even think of it. He was going to take something from her. He has no right.

When he realizes I'm catching up, he turns, holding the knife out.

"I'll slit your throat, you fuck," he roars. "Back off."

"If you drop the knife, I might let you live," I growl. "But if you go for me again after everything you've done, it's over for you."

“I should’ve gutted that little shit instead of playing a prank,” he snaps. “And I should’ve stabbed that fat bitch the second she walked through the door!”

Hot rage blurs my vision. So he tampered with Elliot’s bike. And he just called my woman the F word. That’s unacceptable.

I jump on him. He screams like a scared little girl and thrusts the knife at me. It punctures my shoulder and stays there, embedded in my arm. I don’t even feel the pain with the adrenaline pumping through me, though I’m sure I’ll be feeling it tomorrow. I grab his arm, spin him around, tossing him to the ground again.

This man just doesn’t know when to quit. He tries to crawl away from me, but I don’t give him a chance, bringing my foot down between his shoulder blades. I feel his weak body buckle. I pull the knife from my shoulder and lean down, bringing it to his throat.

I’m ready to kill him, to drench the sand with his blood, ready to end his mongrel life for daring to hurt my woman or nephew.

“Please,” he begs. “Puh-please.”

“It’s too late for that?—”

“Hey, leave him alone!” somebody yells, jolting me from the moment.

I look up to find a group of passersby watching me, one of them with their phone to their ear.

“We’re calling 911,” they yell.

“Good,” I call over. “Tell them we’ll be waiting for them. You’re coming with me,

you bastard. You're not getting away again. And I need to check on my woman."

I bash Damien in the side of the head with the hilt of the knife, causing him to fall unconscious. Then I pick him up, toss him over my good shoulder, and walk back toward the house.

About two hours later, I sit at Tori's bedside in the hospital, checking on her vitals. My colleagues tried to insist that I let them take the lead, but I wanted to be the one to get my woman healthy again. I hate myself for ever leaving her side, for causing her to end up here.

Gray assures me that all is quiet at home, Elliot is safely asleep in his bed, and Catelina's there in case he wakes up.

Monica sighs from the corner of the room. "This is my fault," she murmurs.

"You didn't know what he was going to do, ma'am," I say firmly.

"Maybe not specifically," she replies. "But I had a feeling it would be bad when I broke things off. I just never expected him to, and when he did, when he was gone, I didn't think his son would come after us."

"He's in jail now. And he'll be in prison for a long damn time. Kidnapping, assault, drugging Tori. He's not going to bother you or your daughter ever again. And if he does, I'll be there to set him straight."

Monica snuffles. "Tori couldn't have found a better man."

"I second that," Tori says quietly, opening her eyes.

I clutch her hand, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank God you're awake."

“Is everybody okay?” she croaks. “Elliot?”

That touches me more than she can ever know. “He’s safe,” I reassure her. “He’s with Catelina and the security detail. Damien is under arrest. He was ranting and raving when the police turned up, threatening to stab and shoot me again. He admitted his plans for you, too.”

My tone grows dark when I think about what his ultimate goal was: the sick bastard.

“He’s lucky I didn’t kill him,” I snarl.

Tori sits up.

“Hey, take it easy,” I murmur.

She looks at me stubbornly. “You said he shot and stabbed you?”

I nod. “A grazing flesh wound to the shoulder, a stab to the other shoulder, and one to the leg. But don’t worry about me. I’m not leaving your side until that filth is out of your system.”

“But—”

“No arguments. I would’ve taken the entire magazine of bullets to keep you safe, my perfect poet.”

She smiles, tears filling her beautiful eyes. “If we’re finally settling on nicknames, how does ‘perfect protector’ sound?”

“I didn’t protect you as well as I should have. I let that prick drug you.”

“Hush,” she says. “We’re safe, Alex. You saved us.”

Monica joins us at the bedside, taking her daughter’s hand. “I’m so sorry, Tori. About everything. About the way I’ve been since your father’s passing: all the men, all the drama, all the mess. I’m done with it. I’m done living for myself. From now on, I’m going to be better.”

“You’ve made mistakes, Mom. Everybody has. But I still love you. That’s never changed, and it never will.”

CHAPTER 29

TORI

I throw my arms out to my sides. “Boom – and I was lost!” I yell, my voice traveling across the bar, bouncing off the walls, as Cleo, Mom, Lily, Elliot, and my man, my perfect protector, my not-so-grumpy Valentine, watch me from the crowd.

It’s been two weeks since the craziness with Damien. He’s in jail now – good riddance – strung up on a litany of charges, he’s going to be locked up for at least ten years, maybe longer.

The crowd is quiet, staring at me. I always thought nerves would twist me into a freaking pretzel if I ever performed in front of my friends and Mom, but with my man’s support, I’m able to push through. It turns out I never needed to be as scared as I thought.

“But then you found me,” I say, looking at Alex.

He’s dashing in his gray suit, his hair neatly styled. His injuries are still healing, but he hasn’t complained once. Whenever I ask him if he’s okay, he throws the question right back at me.

“Destiny, fate, call it what you want,” I say, almost giggling when Lily winks at me from the crowd. “Brand it what you will, but I’ll never have my fill. My man, my protector, a love that hate can never kill. Am I insane for this feeling? Am I mad? Do I care? Am I casual? Am I wrong? Am I done questioning?”

I raise my voice with each question, my tone shivering, and suddenly the lights go out. Everybody gasps.

I whisper into the mic.

“Or can I finally just be ? Just be happy? Just be me – us? Forever?”

The lights come up, and everybody starts clapping. I smile and give a short bow, then replace the mic in the stand.

“Thank you so much, everybody. As you can probably tell, I’ve been experimenting with some non-conventional rhyming—or not rhyming patterns— and I really appreciate your support.”

I return to the table, blushing when Cleo leaps to her feet and claps me on the back. “I still can’t believe you kept this a secret,” she says, raising her voice over the sound of applause.

“You don’t think it’s dorky?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s majorly dorky. You’re the queen of dorks. It’s cool.”

“She’s just messing,” Lily says with an eye roll. “We both think it’s awesome.”

Alex wraps his arm around me, pulling me in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I’m nervous,” he says.

I look up into his dreamy eyes. “Nervous... why?”

“Didn’t I mention?” he says with a smirk. “I’m the final performer of the night.”

“What!” I gasp. “You’re kidding.”

But he’s so not.

The announcer takes to the stage. “Our next performer is making his poetry-slam debut with a very special message. Please, welcome to the stage, Alex Whitmore.”

“Yay, Uncle Alex!” Elliot cheers.

I wink at him. “Did you know about this, young man?”

“ Maybe ,” he says, giggling.

I watch in awe as Alex walks onto the stage, standing at the mic.

“I’ve never tried writing a poem,” Alex says into the mic. “I’m more accustomed to dissecting than I am prose, but for my woman, the woman I love more than anything, I knew I had to try. This art form is important to her... and anything that matters to her, matters to me, full stop.”

He looks at me, and I mouth, I love you .

He clears his throat, then speaks clearly and confidently into the mic with his husky, manly voice.

“It started with texts, just a gentle nudge. Our friends played Cupid and gave us a little push. But soon, your words became my escape, a poet’s heart, so bold, so great.”

I let out a trembling breath as he stares at me in that unique way of his.

“That night at the bar, I knew you were rare; rescuing you from that jerk was my only care. But the truth is, my heart was already undone. I knew you were the one the moment you’d come. I’ve watched you perform, each verse a flame; your passion, your magic, never the same.”

Several people gasp when he takes the mic from the stand and lowers himself to one knee. I can’t, though, my throat closing with emotion, my heart pounding hard as my body floods with pure happiness.

“You call me your protector, but it’s you who’s my rhyme...” He places the mic down, reaches into his jacket pocket, and takes out a ring box—the diamond glistens under the stage lights.

“Will you be my forever, my perfect Valentine?”

Cleo nudges me. “If you don’t get up there, I will.”

I laugh, but it comes out as a happy sob too. “What happened to keeping it casual, huh?” I joke.

“You two are making me rethink a few things...” she mutters.

I rush onto the stage as everybody begins to applaud. Up close, I see that the ring has a little Cupid figurine, the diamond at the tip of Cupid’s arrow. My vision gets blurry as tears flood my eyes.

“Tori Hart,” he says, in a voice low enough for only me to hear. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I cry, offering him my hand.

He slips the ring onto my finger and then sweeps me into his arms. I hold onto him tightly, knowing I'll never let go and that this is forever, feeling like the luckiest girl alive.

I found my 'one and only' when I wasn't even looking.

Maybe there's something to this Valentine's magic after all.

"I love you so much," he says roughly, bringing his lips to mine.

"I love you too."

EPILOGUE

ALEX

Six Weeks Later

“What do you think, Uncle Alex?” Elliot says, gesturing to the table where he’s built a wedding scene out of LEGO’s.

“I think it’s brilliant, little man,” I say, ruffling his hair.

“Uncle Alex, you know I’m almost eleven, right?”

“Does that mean you’re too old for hair ruffling?”

He grins, shaking his head. “Nah, it’s cool.”

“What about tickling?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m too old for that...”

He erupts into giggles when I leap on him. As he laughs, the last six weeks replay in my mind: the proposal, my woman moving in with us, the love we share every night, the way she nudges me to bond on a deeper level with Elliot, her bonding with Elliot.

Last night, in bed, she lay in my arms and whispered, “I can’t believe how deluded I was when this first started, Alex. It’s like I wanted you to be the bad guy. I was

looking for a way out, a way to ignore what I knew I was feeling when I loved you already.”

I told her the truth: “I loved you the first moment I saw you.”

I put Elliot down when my phone buzzes.

“Remember the rule, Uncle Alex. You can only text if it’s Tori.”

I chuckle. “Seems I’m in luck, then.”

Tori: Do you think you could come to the bar?

My instincts turn to fierce protection right away.

Alex: Is something wrong?

Tori: No, but something has happened. I know it seems silly because it’s us, but I don’t want to tell you over text.

Alex: Is it good news or bad news?

Tori: I think you’ll need to decide that for yourself.

Alex: Okay, Miss Cryptic. But do YOU think it’s good or bad news?

Tory: My opinion sort of depends on your response.

I smirk, rolling my eyes. “Elliot, want to go for a ride?”

I drive to the bar, memories surging through me when I walk through the door. Julian

still can't believe that his ploy worked. He loves jokingly taking credit for us.

Tori rushes over to us, taking a moment to bump knuckles with Elliot. "Hey, champ."

"Sup, Tori."

"What is it?" I ask, taking Tori's hand.

"I'm pregnant," she says cautiously, clearly worried about my response, just like she said.

I let out a cheer so loud several people turn to look at us. Tori giggles when I pull her into my arms. "Pregnant? This is amazing news."

"Are you sure?" she asks. "You don't think we're moving too fast?"

"Tori, my perfect poet, I knew I loved you the moment I saw you before we even exchanged our first text. Nothing is too fast for me... unless it is for you."

She blinks, her eyes welling, making her look even more emotional and beautiful. "Whenever I tried to take it slow, I was kidding myself," she says. "I wanted a happily ever after with you the night we met."

"I love you," I say, pulling her into my arms.

She wraps one arm around me and pulls Elliot in with the other. "I love you too. What do you think, Elliot? You're going to have a little cousin."

Elliot beams up at us. "I think I've got the best family ever."

Considering where we started, the betrayal of my brother, his dad, and his mom this

touches me deeply, and I feel a tear well in my eye.

EPILOGUE

TORI

One Year Later

“She is just the cutest,” Lily says as she rocks Cadence back and forth. “Look at the little Cupid. Aren’t you just the cutest little Cupid?”

“Did she have a say in her sickeningly romantic attire?” Cleo says sarcastically, pouring herself a glass of wine.

I giggle. We’re sitting on the back porch of my and Alex’s beach house, the sun setting, the waves lapping softly. Cadence is dressed up as Cupid since it’s Valentine’s Day.

“I think it’s perfect,” Lily says. “Cupid brought them together the first time, and little Cadence has made them fall in love even more.”

“I wish I could say you guys make me sick,” Cleo says. “But it’s actually very sweet.”

“I knew we’d break down your walls one day,” I tease.

“Can I hold her?” Cleo asks.

“Of course. She loves Auntie Cleo.”

“Not as much as Auntie Lily, though,” Lily giggles.

My phone buzzes. I take it out, a thrill of nostalgia touching me as it always does. My husband has sent me a selfie of him in surgical scrubs.

Alex: Not long until we can begin our Valentine’s celebrations, my perfect poet. I love you.

“Hey, do you mind?” I ask Cleo.

She laughs, clutching Cadence to her chest. “Yes, actually, I do. I think I’m going to keep her.”

“Careful,” Lily says. “She might shoot you with one of her Cupid arrows. Then you’re really screwed.”

Cleo grins and hands me my baby girl. We called her Cadence as a tribute to the significance slam poetry played in our romance... the cadences we took on stage, the cadences we take with our love.

Holding my daughter, I take a selfie with the sea in the background.

Tori: We can’t wait to see you, and we’re both very proud of you for working so hard. I love you.

I sit down, clutching my daughter to my chest, feeling so much love flow between us; sometimes, it feels unreal. That’s a common theme in this new, bright, wonderful life of mine. I tried so hard to talk my way out of this happiness, letting the ingrained doubt and distrust misshape me.

But in the end, love found a way.

“I know that look,” Cleo says.

“One hundred percent,” Lily agrees. “Do you want me to hold the little Cupid so you can get your poetry book?”

I laugh. “You know me too well...”

ALEX

Ten Years Later

I type, sitting beside Piper's bed because she had a nightmare. Our daughter is now sleeping with the blanket pulled up around her chin, but I don't want to leave her just yet.

Alex: I loved you the moment I laid eyes on you. It wasn't the first text, the first kiss, or even the first time we spoke, my perfect poet. It was the first time I LOOKED at you. I knew, right then, that you were the woman for me. I knew my search was over. Maybe part of me even knew you might stubbornly try to pretend you didn't feel it, too, but love was already in my heart. I couldn't ignore it. I knew there was no going back, and I'd never want to. I can't wait to celebrate our anniversary tomorrow. I love you.

I set my phone down, smiling when Cadence pokes her head into the bedroom.

"Is she okay, Daddy? I heard yelling."

"She had a nightmare."

"Can I sit with you?"

"Come here, angel."

She smiles and walks across the room, smiling at the baby monitor resting on Piper's

bedside table. Our third child, Theo, is sleeping soundly in his crib.

“It’s going to be awesome when Mommy’s home tomorrow,” Cadence says.

I smile. “It’s going to be the best.”

“I’m so proud of her.”

I wrap my arm around my daughter and pull her in for a hug. “Me too...”

Tori has spent ten years perfecting her craft while being the best mom these kids could ask for. She’s progressed to the point where she can give lessons around the country, sharing her love for poetry.

The phone buzzes. It’s my woman.

Tori: Your text just brought a tear to my eye, my perfect protector. I love and miss you and the babies so much. I can’t wait for tomorrow. I’m going to give our babies a big kiss and then put on that dress you like, you know, the red one with the Valentine’s theme.

A moment later, a message comes through in the same thread. It’s from Elliot, who’s currently at college studying architecture.

Elliot: Uh, guys, you know this is the group chat, right?

Julian shoots a message not long after.

Julian: I don’t even send my wife messages like this, bro, and our honeymoon was only a couple of weeks ago. You’re making us grumpy men look bad!

Monica texts, her profile photo showing a selfie of her and Gray, the man she met

when I hired him as security detail a lifetime ago when all that Damien crap was going down. They've been happily married for seven years.

Monica: Yeah...

Monica: This is very sweet, but maybe ease up on the spice.

Lily: Amen to that.

Lily's photo shows her, her husband, and their five children.

Cleo: The spice I can take . But the romance? Please, I just ate.

Lily: Says the late bloomer who just got engaged.

Cleo: If you use the F word, I'm leaving this chat.

Lily: Fate, fate, fate...

Cleo: Just be thankful Alex and Tori post so many cute pictures of baby Theo here. Or I'd be gone, for real.

Tori sends me a text in our private thread.

Tori: Oops.

Alex: Laugh out loud, right?

Tori: Ha! I just spit out my coffee.

"Daddy, can I read you my poem?" Cadence asks.

I put my phone away, smiling at my daughter. “Sure you can, sweetie.”

THE END

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