



Treasured

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Description: I'm not looking for love, not now... not ever again. Been there. Done that. No thanks. The only thing good that came from it was the little man in my arms. The only man who will ever hold my heart again. He's the one thing I did right, and I'm going to raise him to know what love really is. My life is dedicated to giving him the life he deserves and working at the shelter that once housed us. I'm here to empower women just like me, whose shoes I'd walked... and ran in, that there is always a way out. They deserved more. Then I met Dwayne. And he reminded me that I too deserved more. More than lonely nights and carrying the weight of the world alone. Those muscles that made my knees weak and that sexy stubble that covered his dimples made it easy to forget myself for just one night. A night I'd never forget, no matter how hard I tried. I'm aching to be his, but afraid of the fallout that will inevitably come. He proves me wrong and shows me what love really is, and what it's like to be treasured.

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Chapter One

Mary

For the first time in my life, I was free. The warm air hit my skin as I exited the airport. One night without my son was going to be awesome. I had not had a me night in years, if not my entire life.

Tonight, I represented my family at a charity benefit where people paid five thousand dollars a ticket to have dinner. So I headed outside and followed the driver who was holding a sign with my name on it.

This was a perk. He took my small bag from me and brought me to a hotel that had a huge lobby with white floors. I'd only seen it in pictures of huge monolith-style hotels, until now. I walked to the front desk, and once I showed my ID, the clerk asked, "Mary Steel?"

She typed fast as I said, "Yes."

She gave me my license back and a plastic room key while she said, "I've checked you in. You have massage, hair, and makeup appointments, and your deliveries are already in the room."

"Thanks," I said and read the room number. Inside, my soul did a backflip and jumped up and down. Hair, makeup, massage? This was a dream.

My one-year-old was safe staying with my big brother for the night with cousins

checking on them. And I was in the lap of luxury.

I put my card in the gold-framed elevator, which then delivered me to the sixteenth floor.

Music played, and I closed my eyes. Once it stopped, I realized I was on the top floor. I followed the number on the paper, and when I reached my room, I opened the door, happy to see my bedroom was in a separate space from the living room.

This was slightly smaller than my two-bedroom but way larger than the room we'd lived in for a month before I checked into my own place with my baby boy. A year ago, we'd shared a house with another family.

Now I was here—free, safe, and holding down my job—and I had a room to myself that had probably hosted the rich and elite. Okay, so my ex-boyfriend's boss was going to be in attendance at the charity benefit, but I had never met her, and if I saw her last name on a name tag, I would avoid her. The less he would hear about me, the better. But he wasn't on the guest list, and my family was running this, so he would be arrested if he came near me.

I let out the breath I so often held when I thought of him, and I wandered into the walk-in closet, where I saw a red dress on a hanger with my name on the plastic bag.

I laughed. At twenty-four, I would now experience a little of what the prom I had missed must have been like. I hugged myself. The phone rang. It was my brother, who was supposed to have been my date to this event until his company took over his life. So he made up for it by offering to pick up my son from our cousin's house and babysit for the evening.

"How is everything?" he asked.

He would have enjoyed this. Neither of us had two nickels to rub together as children, and we had sported matching black eyes on more than one occasion. I would never let what happened to us happen to my Bruce.

My brother felt the same way. He'd been my protector for years. Now he was the president of his company, with a software app launch scheduled for next month. My heart expanded in my chest as I thought of how proud I was of him. "Joseph, hi. I'm good. Thank you for keeping Bruce."

"He's fine. He won't stop laughing. It's infectious. He loves to bang on the piano."

I laughed as I remembered that sound. My son loved noise, and he would probably break the grand piano my brother had in his penthouse.

My heart raced, but then I reminded myself that nothing would happen tonight and that tomorrow I would be home. Bruce was safe. I let out a sigh to slow down the adrenaline and said, "Don't let him break anything, but I'm excited for tonight."

"If you need me, I can fly out. Olivia said she'd babysit."

"No." His promotion was new, and he needed to show everyone he was capable. I shrugged and took the dress off the hanger as I said, "You need to focus on work. You're the boss, and you took the night to watch my son. It's enough. You are protecting my heart's biggest joy."

"You deserve a break too. You work too hard."

My hairdresser would arrive any moment. Tonight, I was living in a world where all my whims would be taken care of. I was special. I laughed. "It's funny, actually, as Dad said we'd never amount to anything."

“I haven’t given him much thought these days.”

His issues were probably tied to fighting my battles, too, so his shoulders had taken double duty, even after our father died. But I would not be thriving if I didn’t know I had someone in my corner. And family was family.

I placed the dress on the bed and said, “Letting go of what happened helps you heal.”

“Yes, you and your positive affirmations to forgive the past.”

If I could reach into his heart and rip our past away from him, I would. I kicked off my sneakers, as jeans probably weren’t good for a massage. I needed to change into my sweats. “You should try it once in a while, Joseph.”

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“Leave me with my regrets.”

My phone beeped with a message—my appointment was on her way up. I tugged on the cotton bottoms fast while I said, “What regrets? You saved my life more times than I can count.”

“I... the best thing I did for you was chase him off for good.”

“Him” meaning Arthur. My son’s father had been my biggest mistake, but then again, without him, I would not have Bruce. His still name sent ice chips through my spine. When Arthur snapped, I feared for the safety of my son and knew I had to leave. Now he was long gone, and I glanced at the door and hoped the staff coming were all women. “You did that twice for me. I won’t need that service ever again.”

“Call me when you get home.”

“I will.” There was a knock at the door. My hands trembled a little. Then I glanced through the peephole and saw three women in black smocks, carrying rolling luggage that must have been filled with hair products, makeup, and whatever a masseuse carried. I unlocked it as I said to Joseph, “Tonight I’m going to pretend to be a princess.”

“You’ve been playing that game all our lives.”

When I’d been a girl, the game had been to mentally check out so I wouldn’t have to listen to our drunken father. Now, I waved for the three women to come in and said, “This time, it’s fun.”

“Fair enough.”

We said, “See you tomorrow,” and I hung up the phone.

The masseuse set up a table that had been folded, and the hair and makeup ladies found stations in the room—it was like my hotel room was a salon. I lay down on the massage table, and once the woman started, I closed my eyes.

Maybe tonight would be my coming-out ball or like the prom. I never had the chance to just be pretty. Sure, my job tonight was simple. I would pick up the check from the benefit, say a one short sentence thanking the benefit guests, and fly home the next morning. However, I never had any of this pampering stuff, ever, where someone else did my hair and face. My cousin, Indigo, who owned the shelters I ran, had really set me up.

I followed the women’s directions, and soon I was done. My hair was in an upsweep, like I was some noble of old who had lady’s maids to ensure every strand of hair was perfect.

In reality, I would have been the maid in any scenario of my life, except I had no special skills with a brush.

I tipped them, and they left together.

I shoved the rest of my money back in my pocketbook and locked it in the safe. Done. I checked my dress in the mirror to ensure everything was on right and stopped and stared at myself. It was me, but it wasn’t. I glowed. My dark blond hair, which normally reminded me of dry baked dirt, now seemed soft and elegant. The dress was strapless, though my breasts were covered.

This was the princess version of me, and no one was going to stop me.

However, as I turned to the door, I froze. The dress had no pockets, and I never went anywhere without my phone. I sucked on my bottom lip until I realized I had on lipstick and stopped.

If something happened to Bruce, I would need to know. No one would see me anyhow, so I tucked it in my strapless bra and floated out the door to the first floor and headed to the conference rooms.

There was a table with name tags on it. I checked in with the first person and took my name badge, then a woman holding papers gestured for me to follow her. “Ms. Steel, this way.”

The room had a crystal chandelier. Every table had fresh pink and red flowers that were prettier than roses, with a white tablecloth and a sheer gray overlay.

She showed me to my already half-full table and left.

My table was number one—beside the dance floor and near the stage. Perfect.

I could dash when my mission was finished. I sipped my water and glanced across the room.

The room was half-filled already. Groups were visiting like they knew each other, and everyone was dressed elegantly. Black attire, blue attire—even one woman in orange. They all oozed class and money, and the men in the room all wore suits and tuxedos that probably cost a lot.

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. Across the room sat a man with dimples and huge muscles who commanded attention in a black tux.

I’d thought men with that huge of a frame couldn’t be real. My brother worked out

for hours every day, but he was still thin. This sexy man mesmerized me, and he filled out that tux. His white teeth and that sexy stubble on his face made my girly parts come alive.

My eyes refused to look away. I stared for a moment, and my mouth watered.

I leaned closer to one of the older couples at my table and pointed toward the confident man with mesmerizing dark eyes and asked, “Do you know who he is?”

A woman with white hair shrugged. “I don’t know exactly. One of the guests.” Then she added, “He’s at the Cole Security Forces table.”

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Now I had visions of that sexy stranger as some hero in an action movie. Hell, he could star in my fantasy. I know the nice lady at the table wanted to go back to speaking with her husband, but I had to ask: “Security?”

She blinked and stared at me like I should know already, but she said, “Military-type security. The company does well on the market.”

That dark hair of his was in one of those just-woke-up-from-bed styles that made me wonder who he was with, but I shook my head and picked up the water glass at my seat. “Thank you,” I said.

She smiled at me and said, “I don’t see a ring. If you want us to bring him over to you, we’ll help.”

“It’s okay.” My face heated. I gulped the rest of my water but still ached in a way I hadn’t for any man in years. I kept that to myself. “Thank you anyhow.”

I probably should have asked her name. I forced myself to ignore the man across the room. I took the opportunity before the party began to slip away to the ladies’ room.

The music switched to a happy beat, and couples headed to the dance floor. I zigzagged around and glanced at the walls for restroom signs to point me in the right direction.

However, a couple flew past me, and I swirled to get out of the way.

Warm hands pressed against me and held my waist. It was like I was protected in a

wall of muscles, but I turned around and saw the brown-eyed sexy stranger I had sized up earlier.

Confidence oozed off him like an aphrodisiac. I didn't move when he said, "I got you."

And he could have me. Fuck. I wasn't here looking for a man. The last one I'd had in my life had caused enough damage, but maybe one night might be nice. For once, I was free. And he would never be in my world permanently. I was a single mom with loads of responsibilities, but my lips curved up in a smile as I said, "Yes... yes, you do. Now, let me go."

He winked but did what he was told. "Of course, ma'am."

A string brushed against me fast, but I had no right to feel upset he'd called me "ma'am." I put my hand on my hips and said, "I'm not a ma'am."

He showed off his dimples and asked, "Should I call you Sexy or My Angel?"

A flirt. Nice. I shrugged and said, "I'm neither. Just plain Mary."

He looked me up and down, and the heat in my body followed his glance. Then he met my gaze and said, "There is nothing plain about you."

Now that was a line. I pressed my hand to his chest and realized how dense those muscles of his were. "That's hilarious, but thank you."

His face grew serious. "Hmm, I'm usually better at this."

This man would never be mine. I wasn't in his league, and I came with baggage. It was better to cut my fantasy life in pieces right now, so I said, "I'm not sexy or an

angel. I'm just a mom, and I'm not used to smiling much."

His eyes widened. "That can't be true. Children can be hysterically funny."

"He's not quite old enough yet." This wasn't a lie. I took out my phone from my bra, which probably wasn't the classiest place to have it, but it was all I had. I pulled up my photo reel and showed him. "But I'll show you my angel."

He swiped the screen and looked at a few pictures, then I took my phone back and said, "Nice meeting you."

I pivoted to leave and head to the bathroom, but his hand brushed against my wrist, and he said, "I'm not going anywhere."

Cute, but no single man like him would want to be saddled. I gave him a shrug and took my hand back as I said, "The good ones always leave. That's life."

"Easy to prove you wrong on that one."

I sashayed toward the door. I knew he was watching. My hair stood on its ends, but he would soon find for himself a woman more his speed, one without my life. But it was nice that for one moment in time, he had noticed me.

To be treasured by that man would be an experience of a lifetime but not mine.

Chapter Two

Dwayne

I had assumed going to the party would mostly just show my "business partner" I was serious. I would show my face to Wanda and dig up personal details about Arthur

Waterstone from Mary Steel, his ex. But the mission clearly had gone up a notch.

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Mary was a knockout.

I needed to be smart now. Wanda Frost had been my brother's fiancée until he was shot and killed. I'd teamed up with my brother's friends, who ran Cole Security, to help get her out of the company he'd started.

Since returning stateside, my mission had been to reclaim the company that was rightfully mine. Two weeks before, I'd had a meeting with Mark from Cole Security, as Wanda was selling guns illegally.

The years training to be a Navy SEAL were still fresh as I retired my uniform, but once again I was running in Devon's shadow. He'd trusted these men, and they remembered him as the saint he was.

They'd found Mary as a source to target while I handled the legal paperwork to oust Wanda from the company.

So there I was, out to prove that I, Dwayne Jenson, was better than my older brother had been. I'd earned better grades in school, continually outperformed him in every physical challenge, and went to church every week to talk one-on-one with my creator—something Devon had always said was stupid.

And then, he was gone. My older brother, who judged me, now no longer called, and that had been hard.

Guess it was harder on my security team, though, since they continued to share stories about how wonderful Devon had been every time we were together, like on

this night, at the table.

I mostly listened, but my first mission to get intel on who worked at my company had just grown more interesting.

Nothing had prepared me for the pretty blonde who had sauntered past. For the first time in a while, I was alive, and my nerves were on edge for her return.

As I waited, I circled back to my table and my new associates. Natalie asked, “You were just talking to Mary Steel?”

The sharp eyes of Mark Dixon and his wife, Charlie, were on me like laser pointers on a gun, and I stood at attention. “Yeah, the opportunity presented itself more easily than I imagined.”

Mark winked, like he wanted to laugh at me though we weren’t that close. “Look, Thunder Thighs, the blonde can’t distract you from why we’re here.”

The blonde was most definitely for pleasure and not a mission. But they were right. I didn’t need to get distracted. She had information I needed.

Even though my body craved far more—and a tiny voice in my head whispered there was more—I gave a curt nod. “I’ll find out about Arthur and Wanda if she knows anything.”

Charlie motioned with her head. “Your girl is coming back. I can run a background check on her, if you need.”

“Stop. When Wanda walks in, I’ll be ready to remind her that she can’t keep me from my company.”

The farther away from work people, the better. Mary and I needed to be alone. I met her halfway between the dance floor and where she'd gone, and I immediately said, "There you are."

She turned to me, but she shook her head and asked, "You're still here?"

I cocked my eyebrow and met her sarcasm with my lips turned up. "Are you upset?"

"Surprised." She spun toward the room. "Look around. There are tons of beautiful women here tonight that are more in your league."

She was selling herself short. Her curves were deadly and would fill my dreams tonight. So no one else would hear us, I whispered into her ear, "None as interesting as you."

She turned back toward me and heaved that perfect chest that was neither too big nor too small as she asked, "What's your name?"

The lights flashed near the stage, and I smelled the sweet air around her as I said, "Dwayne Jensen, ma'am, and yours?"

With her thumb, she pointed toward the stage and said, "Mary Steel." She took a step back. "And it looks like I'm needed onstage."

I followed her, asking, "Running away from me again?"

She shook her head and said, "I'm here to do my job."

I winked at her and said, "Funny. Me too. Go and finish yours so we can get a drink."

Her hips swayed as she rushed onto the dance floor and up the side of the stage.

Mark's voice came through my earpiece: "The other target of yours is here, Thunder Thighs."

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Guess he'd found my call sign funny. Didn't matter, though. I glanced at the doors and saw Wanda again. I hadn't seen her since I was still in college. "I see her."

Charlie reminded me of the report I'd been shown earlier that listed her as an international arms dealer who worked with some shadowy characters using Mary's ex as the contact. She followed that with, "Wanda Frost has quite a reputation."

No way my brother had known that about her. If he had, he'd been more lost than I remembered. I didn't even blink as I approached her. "I remember why my brother named me his backup if something happened to him. I hadn't realized she used my time in the SEALs and found herself a loophole."

Charlie repeated, "Then you're warned."

"I got this," I said and then approached as she grabbed her name tag. Wanda wasn't nearly as vibrant as Mary, but I was still all smiles when I said, "Hey, you."

She pivoted around me. "Get lost."

"Wanda, my brother thought you were perfect once."

She turned around.

Mary's voice was on the speaker, and I turned toward the stage. She had a microphone in her hand. "Tonight, we raised over one hundred thousand dollars for women's shelters."

“Dwayne.” Wanda hugged me and kissed my cheek. “I almost didn’t recognize you. You look healthy.” Her phone rang and she stepped back as she said, “Look, you and I should talk in person soon.”

“Sure, but if you want to save yourself the headache of lawyers, you’ll sign off on my control without fighting me,” I said, hoping she would buy this reminiscing thing.

“Yet I made us both a lot of money,” Wanda said with a nod. “And the board likes me.”

Honestly, facing my past wasn’t my style. If I was caught in my memories, then I was avoiding the present, and that could get me killed. But the board didn’t know Wanda had the company under federal investigation. Everyone would soon.

Mary continued to brighten the room with her voice. “Thank you, everyone, for being here. This money means a lot to my family.”

Steel. Her last name had been on the program. And her brightness on the stage made her almost like an angel in the distance.

Wanda stepped back, waving her ringing phone. “Now is not the time for this.”

“I came here to give you fair warning,” I said then handed her my business card. “So you’ll call me when you see you have no way to stop me.”

“Cocky.” She took the card and hugged me again. “That’s probably what got your brother killed too. Later, Dwayne.”

At least she’d remembered me.

Mission accomplished for the evening. My team would be happy.

Next, I turned my attention toward Mary. She was off the stage and sitting in her seat.

I pressed my thumb to my lips and imagined what kissing her might be like. I made my way over to her and slid into the empty seat beside her.

She shook her head at me and said, “I saw you talking to that pretty woman.”

I would never betray Mary with someone like Wanda, but I patted her knee and said, “She is my brother’s ex-fiancée and a temporary business associate.”

“My ex works with her.” Mary’s knees brushed against mine, and a spark rushed through me. “And she’s staring at us.”

Jealousy would get me nowhere fast. I massaged her knee under her shimmering red satin dress and said, “Small world, then. But for the rest of the night, I’m completely yours for the taking.”

She tapped the table. “We’re not—”

“Oh, we are.” Change the topic and keep her talking. The plan was simple. I folded my hands. “I should also say I’m impressed with your family’s charity.”

Her face blushed prettily. “It’s not just a charity. My aunt started these shelters because she’d been abused before she met my uncle, and she wanted to help other women find their strength in a safe environment. My cousin, her daughter, owns the place, but I run it.”

No man should ever hurt a woman. Cherish was better. I nudged her and said, “That’s noble.”

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Her finger traced her water glass as she said, “No, it means sometimes the Steel women pick the wrong men.”

Her tone told me she’d had a bad experience, and I assumed his name was Arthur. I kept my voice low and said, “That’s not me.”

She sat back and stared at me like she didn’t believe me at all. “That’s what they all say.”

I leaned closer, ignoring how my hair stood on end from being so close to her as I said, “I... look, I respect that you’re a mom, and I respect that mind, body, and soul of yours.”

Music started up, and people filed out onto the dance floor around us.

Her finger touched mine, and energy coursed through me as she said, “That’s crazy.”

And then she cracked up, staring at the ceiling as she laughed. My own shoulders relaxed like I had found a slice of heaven. “You finally laughed.”

The DJ started a fast song, and she took my hand and tugged on it. “Okay, Dwayne. Do you want to dance?”

I pressed my hand to my heart. “With you?”

She crossed her arms and said, “You can go to your brother’s ex if you want.”

I stood up and walked with her to the dance floor, where I said, “No, you’d be the perfect woman in my arms right now.”

She curled her arms around me and said, “I can’t believe I’m falling for this charm.”

We moved in beat with the music. “You think I’m charming.”

She giggled. “I think you’re unbelievable.”

I let my hand go a little lower on her backside. “You can find out more later.”

Her face blushed, but instead of throwing me off her, she laughed and said, “The sex innuendo so early. I’m shocked.”

Interesting. I held her tight and stared into the blue eyes that bore into my soul. “I’m a man who knows what he wants.”

Her eyes were like ice, but she didn’t pull away. “And then will find an excuse to leave in the morning before we even exchange phone numbers.”

Or I’d keep her forever. Mary wasn’t someone I would ever willingly leave. Part of me wanted to claim her as mine and never let her go—ever. But she would not want to hear about that instinct. So I squeezed her palm in mine. “You could give me a chance, y’know. I might surprise you.”

She shook her head. “I’m not looking for a surprise.”

She glanced up and down my body, and I hoped she liked what she saw. I practiced in the gym for hours every day to be at my peak. “What are you looking for?” I asked.

She sucked in her bottom lip, and I spun her around to the music, which changed to a slower beat. She came into my arms willingly. She made the air smell like roses. She went onto her tiptoes and whispered in my ear, “Honestly?”

My lips tingled to taste her. Every part of me wanted to claim her as my own and keep her. I asked her, “If you could have whatever you want in a man, what would that be?”

She rested her head on my shoulder. Unlike my last girlfriend, I would keep her forever close. I was normally closed off, but she made me want to hold on and not let go.

For a minute, I wondered if she hadn’t heard me or had just chosen not to answer.

The song continued to preach about love, but then she finally glanced up, and it was like the sun had burst out of the morning sky as she said, “To be treasured as his one and only, to be loved and be considered important and as a partner in life...” My shoulders widened as if she were giving me direct orders to follow. She turned her head down. “Y’know, the guy a girl can count on, no matter what shitstorm shows up in her life next. One who’s rock solid and right there, holding my hand.”

I squeezed her waist like I was promising her to be that guy but instead said, “That’s honest. I like that.”

She let out a small “ha” that I would have missed if we weren’t so close. “What can I say? I’ve had time to think about it.”

I glanced over her head and saw a flash of light in our direction. Then I met Wanda’s gaze.

Mary wasn’t a target in our war for control of my brother’s company. I had the

shares. So I pointed her toward the back door and said, “Tell you what, let’s finish this dance, say hello to everyone, and get out of here, together.”

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She licked her lips as she sized me up. I hope she saw the me inside that no one else did, the boy who had once competed for everything to prove he was the best. She raised her eyebrow and asked, “You’re serious?”

I twirled her one last time as the song wound down and said, “Yes.”

She laughed and squeezed my ass. “Then you’re on. It’s my one night of freedom.”

And it was my one night to prove I was more than a one-night stand, it seemed.

I wanted to hold her and never let go. No other woman had ever done that to me. I was hers for the taking.

Chapter Three

Mary

Holding a man who was practically double my size and all muscle everywhere was not how I thought I’d spend the night.

Truthfully, I’d not had any man touch me since... stop, now. Arthur wasn’t worth a moment’s thought.

Besides, I was there with Dwayne, and he seemed like a man who’d stepped out of my fantasy to dance with me.

Inside, I was already humming to be his, but that was crazy.

Heck, I was being reckless, but I ached to be held by him.

I didn't remember ever being truly held, and tonight, being in his arms might make the best moments to cherish.

So I opened the hotel room door with my swipe card and showed him in as I said, "This way."

As the door closed, my skin prickled. I'd not been alone, with a man, in forever.

Dwayne put his phone on the desk and then turned toward me. My heart was in my throat. "Did you get enough to eat in there, Mary?" he asked.

I let out a small sigh. No need to be so scared. He wasn't here to hurt me. I shook my head and slipped out of my heels. "We're not here to eat. Are you getting cold feet?"

I walked toward him, but he took my hands and said, "I'd like to talk first."

My heart swelled. I would never get romance in my life. I knew it, but this one second was... sweet. However, I lowered my shoulders and arched my eyebrow. "In my hotel room?"

His muscular hand ran up and down my arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps and zaps aching for more, but he sat on the small sofa and asked, "What can I say? I want to know more about you. How old is your son?"

This wasn't like my ex. He'd never asked me... anything. He talked about himself, all the time. I lowered myself beside him and fished out my phone as I said, "He's eighteen months now."

He motioned with his head, so I pulled up a photo I had taken the week before. He

smiled, and butterflies flew in my stomach.

I'd once ached for my son's father to love us both, but he'd thrown my baby.

My heart had stopped, and I would never forget it.

Dwayne was four times more muscular and could do serious damage to anyone with one push, but he handed me my phone and asked with a brightness in his gaze that made me hunger for him, "Still a baby. What happened with the father?"

The topic. The buzzkill. I met his gaze, and my lips tingled to kiss him. Instead, I glanced down at his hands, which were bigger than my waist, but I wasn't afraid now. So I said, "He beat me."

His face went white, and his hands curled. I reached out and squeezed his thumb and ignored the energy that rushed in my veins as he said, "Wait. What?"

Time for the whole truth. If he didn't want that night, I would get it. Maybe I wasn't ready for a one-night stand either. "I didn't leave when that happened. I left when he threw our one-week-old baby against the wall. I almost let my son die because I was afraid to get out. I'm not that stupid anymore."

He reached out and hugged me.

I leaned in to his embrace. I hadn't expected this. I had never expected to feel desire in my veins again. He said, "Mary, that's horrible. A real man protects a woman."

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That was the fairy tale. He let me go, and my stomach twisted like I was experiencing a physical loss. “You can leave now if you want. I’ve been getting help, but that’s generally the deal-breaker conversation.”

There was a knock on the door. I jumped up, but he slowly followed and said, “I’d like to stay and for you to eat.”

I opened the door and saw two plates of food and a bottle of wine. I waved the server in. “You ordered room service?”

He tipped the server, who quickly left, and said, “I charged my room.”

I locked the door once again and crossed my arms as I walked toward Dwayne. “Why?”

He showed me the cheeseburger and fries he ordered for me and said, “You seem fragile, and I need you to have your strength tonight.”

Well, he wasn’t into me eating salads. My mouth watered for the carbs I would normally avoid. I picked up my burger. “Seriously?” I took off the paper and smelled the meat. I’d not had one of these since graduating high school. I scooted into the small couch and held it to my lips. “I thought men liked frail women.”

He sat beside me and bit into his. As he finished, he winked at me. “Personally, I’ll need a woman who can kick my ass once in a while.”

“I’ll never be that physically strong.”

He scooted closer, took another bite, and said, “Oh, I mean one who can tell me what I did wrong and not want to walk out the door when I fuck something up.”

I took a bite. Wow. It was better than the memory burned into my mind of my friends pressuring me to eat lunch like I was anorexic. “Funny. I’ve been hoping a girl like that shows up for my brother.”

“You have a brother?”

He poured the wine. I finished my burger. He’d been right—I didn’t remember when I ate last. I put my napkin on my lap, holding my plate, ignoring the fries, and said, “Yeah. My brother was arrested briefly for beating the crap out of my ex. Judge exonerated him.”

He handed me a glass. “I like him already. I would have joined him if I knew you then.”

I picked up his hand and let his fingers wrap around mine. I squeezed his hand as I said, “You could probably kill him with these hands of yours.”

“I promise to be gentle with you.”

I laughed and closed my eyes as I imagined being with him and not breaking in half. “That would be nice. My therapist said I should honor my inner goddess and expect the next guy I love to be the best man I can imagine.”

Dwayne put his arms around me, sending my heart soaring. Yes, this was all temporary and the only reason I let him in. “And what do you imagine for this guy?”

“Just to be good to me and my son. I’ve not thought too deeply other than what I’ve already said. What about you, Dwayne?”

His gaze narrowed as his hands explored my body more freely. “What about me?”

I put my plate on the desk and then cupped his face. “What do you want in your woman besides for her to call you out on your crap?”

I tugged on his shirt. If he was staying, I needed to taste him soon. My skin burned for him.

“I’d like a woman who can dance with me, laugh with me, and... one that makes amazing cheeseburgers.”

I laughed, and he tossed his shirt on the floor.

Those muscles were all real. The red leaf with angel wings and a diamond caught my attention on his upper arm, but I stuck to the conversation and laughed. “So you care about food?”

He reached behind me and unzipped my dress as he said, “I’ve never met a guy who doesn’t.”

“Fair enough.” I turned so he could help me out of my dress. Once it was on the floor, I faced him in my bra and heels. I blinked and asked, “So, now what?”

Inside, I was shaking and hoped he’d crush me to him, but instead, he traced the skin down my side like he cared about me. “What’s your middle name, Mary?”

I reached out and brushed against that wall of hardness he was and knew he wanted this, too, but I met his brown eyes. “Why?”

He didn’t move at all. “Because I’m curious to know everything about you.”

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I stepped back and pointed to the other room with the bed and ignored how my body pulsed. “You don’t just want to fuck me?”

His lips curled up to show off those dimples of his. “No... I mean, yes... I want to be with you, but my instincts have guided me through life, and the second I met you I knew one thing.”

I unhooked my bra. He needed to get the hint. I needed to taste him everywhere. “What’s that?” I asked.

I let my bra drop, and he reached out. His whistle sent my heart practically soaring out of my chest. He came toward me and said, “That I am yours, and you are mine. I can’t explain more than that. It’s just a feeling.”

If only that were true. I had craved to be the one for a man like him, but I had a history of bad choices. Tonight was all I could offer. I crawled onto the bed. “You trust your feelings?”

He brushed against me, and my skin was alive and aware of him. “Always.”

If only I believed in fairy tales. I rolled off my underwear and let him watch, and I knew I was probably blushing. “I’ve not trusted my own senses in a long time.”

My veins were alive for him. He unbuttoned his pants, and my eyes widened. He was thicker and longer than any other man I’d ever seen. The idea of him inside me had already left my lady parts ready.

“What are they saying right now?” he asked.

Take me. I’m yours. The words would never, ever come out, so I tugged the sheets off since we didn’t need a comforter under us. He joined me on the bed. I curled into his arms as I said, “I have no idea, but I know I want you to kiss me already.”

And then his lips met mine. His hard kiss practically branded me, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, not wanting the moment to end.

When it did, he kissed my nose, smiled with those dimples, and said, “Damn, girl. You pack a punch.”

I pressed myself to him, and it was like fireworks exploded inside me. I laughed and held him close. “Likewise, Dwayne.”

I was ready for him. Tonight was all we had, all I could offer him.

Dwayne was the closest thing to the perfect man I’d ever imagined, and in his arms, my body took flight.

Chapter Four

Mary

My muscles tensed with desire as his kiss steamed me up.

I’d brought the sexiest man I’d ever seen — or the one closest to it I’d seen in person—back to my hotel room from the ball.

Excitement hummed in my veins as I let this huge, muscular man with broad shoulders and smoldering dark hair get my heart rate up just from his presence.

I knew nothing about Dwayne except he could afford a benefit ticket that cost five thousand dollars and it was impossible not to notice him.

Serious goose bumps were on my arms, yet he'd also put me at ease with his comments.

Until he kissed me again.

My body blazed alive like we were teenagers and this was my first time—just like in all those books that talk about fireworks.

His lips on mine emboldened me, and his arms around me made me feel safe and protected. Which was funny, as I'd never actually felt fully safe or protected in my life.

His hands pressed against my back, and his kiss grew harder.

And I was breathless, wanting more.

The whirlwind in my veins rushed heat right through me. My chest hardened, and I didn't care that I was probably red in the face.

He didn't care, either, as his fingers roamed my back, causing me to shiver.

This was it. I directed him to the bed. Blood flowed to my genitals, and he was hard. We were ready, so I climbed on his lap and continued to kiss and caress his face.

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My nipples hardened. He let me lead, so I ran my fingers through his thick, coarse hair.

And I teased his swollen with my wiggles.

We both knew he liked it.

His tongue captured mine in a dance that made me roar a primal song that came from my heart. I savored how his tongue battled mine and how his muscular hands cupped my ass.

I needed him. My heart fluttered while I was on top of him.

The fire in my veins grew stronger from his kisses, which made me ache.

With Dwayne, though, being naked empowered me. My heart jackhammered when he moved to be on top of me.

My fingers ran through his hair. I wanted him and savored his small bites on my skin as he suckled me. Good. I would have his mark. Part of me wished this moment with him would last forever.

He suckled, licked, and savored my breasts, which he held cupped in his hands. My nipples stood out like raspberries, and he feasted on them like he was starving.

All I could do was moan as his hand went lower, and his fingers strummed my most sensitive parts like the strings of a guitar.

However, he took his time with me. I trembled from his kiss, thrilled he had captured me as his own for the night.

I needed him inside me, filling me in a way no other man ever had.

I cupped his manhood to urge him forward and understood immediately he was hard and roaring to start. I yearned for his huge member like it was a heat-seeking missile and I was the target.

Yet he hugged me close and tasted me like I was someone special, and I knew this could be the start of a romance instead of a one-night stand.

Maybe in another life, it might be more, but this would all we'd ever have.

His suckling teased a pleasure that was about to sweep through me as he cupped my ass like he was branding me.

Damn, I needed him tonight. I'd not had anyone since...

I refused to let that thought fester and destroy this. Instead, I pushed for him to move and repositioned my legs on either side of him so I could ride on top.

In control, I cupped his balls and thrust his cock deep inside me.

Damn. He was huge, with the kind of size guys whispered about as a fantasy, and he filled me completely. I gyrated and took his hands like we were longtime lovers while I rocked back and forth.

I swiveled my hips, rocked and rode him, and the apex between my thighs was rushed with pleasure.

His hand let mine go so he could squeeze my butt while I ravished him.

He closed his eyes and let me fuck him.

I had no idea for how long, but my heart rate was higher than it had been in years. But I wasn't afraid—not with Dwayne.

I lowered myself for a kiss.

Dwayne shocked me when he took my nipple into his mouth and suckled again as I stroked his hard dick. My clit was so sensitive to him, and my breathing increased.

His hard abs were unlike any other man's I'd ever seen. The man between my thighs now could rip me apart. I knew exactly what it was like to be beaten and bruised, and I should have been terrified that Dwayne was bigger, stronger, and trained to be a killer.

Yet he let me set the pace, and my muscles tensed with small delicious spasms to my feet.

And all he did was massage my body to encourage me.

Damn, if I would have known sex was like this, I would have never been such a stupid fool.

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The thought invaded my brain, but then my mind became fuzzy as he entered me and sat up. He plunged deeper into my center.

I was impaled and yearned for this as he set the pace and hammered into me like he was claiming my body and soul as his own.

My heart rate peaked. I'd never been like this, and yet he plunged into me slowly, despite my body being on fire.

My vaginal muscles contracted. I had never breathed so fast before.

My eyes fluttered while his cock went in and out. Even my feet spasmed.

He rammed into me like he had his own score and I was his, but unlike any other man, he seemed to hold onto me like he cared about me.

I held onto his neck like it was my lifeline. Even my uterus contracted. I was hot everywhere and didn't care if my skin flushed.

I was swept into a storm, convulsing in an inferno, as he slid in and muscles contracted as he ejaculated.

Right then, I didn't care, though. I was in ecstasy and the bliss of being only his.

No other man had ever been like that. None probably ever would.

And at least for that night, I knew what an orgasm was. Dwayne was everything I'd

ever wanted.

Chapter Five

Dwayne

I hadn't slept beside a woman for as long as I could remember. It hadn't been the gel hotel bed. It was her soft hair and sweet smile, though she made me work to see it. She held me like I was her anchor.

In the middle of the night, she'd screamed in her sleep like she'd survived a battle, too, but she stopped when I lightly pressed my hand to her back the way my mom had done to me as a boy.

Now I stared at the bright light of the morning streaming around the pulled curtains that darkened the room. I shifted my six-foot-five frame out of her small arms.

However, the second I moved, she sighed and opened her eyes. Our brown eyes met, and I leaned forward to kiss her. Even in the morning, when I never kissed anyone, her pretty lips enticed me.

For the first time in a long time, I wanted only one woman. Mary.

She blushed as she slipped her hands on my muscles.

"When's your flight to Pittsburgh?" I asked.

She glanced at the clock and closed her eyes as she said, "Soon."

I grabbed my pants so I wouldn't make her nervous with my junk out. Once the zipper was up, I raised my eyebrow and said, "That's a nonanswer."

She'd tugged on her bra and underwear, hiding her secret treasures, and slipped into the bathroom to freshen up, and when she returned, she said, "My cousin sent me on her plane. It's a one-time perk, and I'm not taking advantage."

She opened a bag and grabbed a pair of jeans as I said, "So, you're a rich girl."

"Ha ha. No. I'm the poor relation." She tugged on her T-shirt.

I did the same, with my undershirt first and then the dress shirt, though I didn't bother with the buttons. "Would it be okay if I come to see you in Pittsburgh?"

Her smile faltered, and she took my hands. The spark she set off was better than a shot of morning coffee as she asked, "Why would you want that?"

I traced her cheek, which was smaller than the palm of my hand, and said, "Because you're my north star."

Her smile crossed her face, and my lips curled higher as she said, "Sounds sweet, but I don't understand that one."

I kissed her cheek, which was smooth against my calloused hands. "Seeing you again would be... fun."

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I pointed to the bathroom, and she nodded. I gave her a thumbs-up and quickly freshened up.

The bathroom didn't have much, but she still had a Lancôme perfume bottle, which I smelled. This was what she'd been wearing last night. I came out a minute later, and she was packing her dress. She crossed her arms and met my eyes. "Look, I'll have my son then. It's a different experience when a baby is around, and we both agreed it was one time."

How someone had let her belly swell with his son and then let the angel go free made no sense. I lucked out. I came closer, and she lowered her arms as I said, "I never said that." I pressed my hand on her shoulder. "I could treat both of you for a nice night out."

Her lips pursed like she was judging me, but she let out a sigh and said, "Having children around kills the romance feelings fast."

My close SEAL buddies had given me a second nickname, Chance, and it seemed once again I had scored, but I let her go and grabbed my phone from the nightstand. "At the family picnics, I'm usually playing around with the kids in the backyard."

A small laugh escaped her lips, and she lowered her shoulders. A moment later she took my phone from me and pointed for the password. I let it use facial recognition and then gave it back. She typed in her number and said, "Okay... sure, let's live in a dream for now that we'll somehow connect again. Here is my contact."

I called it, and her phone rang. She slipped back and picked it up so she had my

number. She let out a small breath, and I said, “If you are ever in Pittsburgh and still single, call.”

Her lips curled higher, and she came back to me and kissed my cheek. “When I do, we’ll call it a real date.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and said, while our noses were close, “I’ll see you soon.”

She pushed her wayward hair behind her ear and lowered her lashes. “Guess this is a test to see if you keep your promises.”

Her lips were puckered, and I took one more taste. Mary was sweeter than Polynesian Watermelon ‘Otai. As our gazes met, I said, “I’ll never disappoint you, Mary. Talk to you soon.”

She held my hand as I walked to the door, and I stole one quick kiss.

I knew she was watching me walk down the hall, so I waited till I turned the corner to the elevator to read my missed-call log. Mark, my brother’s friend I’d hired to help me get my company back, had texted. As I stepped onto the elevator, I read, Has Wanda been served by the lawyers?

I’m calling her now, I wrote back, and the doors closed. I would get an inspection of my property faster than control, and that was part of the plan.

Once in the lobby, I headed back to the valet and handed over my ticket.

My gray Lexus with black leather seats pulled up—the luxury I had bought for myself when I moved here temporarily to work with Cole Securities. I tipped the valet and hooked the phone to my dashboard. As I drove away from sweet Mary, I

dialed my almost-sister-in-law.

I said a little prayer she would cooperate and leave peacefully with the buy-out offer, but the service taught me that anything was possible. On the second ring, she answered, and I said, “Wanda, hey.”

Her low voice was still the same as when she had come to my house years ago, holding my brother’s hand. “Dwayne, I hadn’t expected you’d call. Got your lawyers’ missive.”

Last time I had trusted Wanda, I was eighteen and about to graduate high school. My mother had me call her with the news about Devon since she couldn’t. I tapped the wheel and forced that memory to dissipate. “My brother’s shares are mine, and our legal battle will end shortly.”

Wanda seemed pensive. “We’ll schedule that tour so you can see that nest egg I built for you and your mom is secure.”

Mine and my mother’s financial freedom hadn’t been her concern, and she only mentioned it now to get me to back off seizing control. I had no idea what my perfect brother had seen in Wanda now.

She had our manufacturing plant sending guns to our country’s enemies. I made a turn to head back to my beach apartment. “So I’ll have my secretary speak to yours about a mutual time this week.”

Wanda sighed. “I’ll be here all week, though next week is Paris.”

“This week it is, then,” I said, ignoring how hot my face felt.

When I was eighteen and joining the SEALs after my brother had died, I thought I

could trust Wanda. The discussion with Mark when I'd shipped home had destroyed that illusion.

My neck muscles tightened. This would end soon.

I tapped my steering wheel while she said, "This didn't have to become a battlefield. I'm not married, since I couldn't find anyone as great as your brother."

I hit the brake at a red light and heard a plane in the air high above me. "Devon... he was always the good one, and my mom considered you family."

Not once had I told Mom what Wanda had done. Then my mother stunned me and said I had the shares because my brother, before he'd died, had told Wanda not to break the law on selling weapons, even if the path was clear and easy. She'd promised she would honor my brother's wishes, but trusting her had been my mistake.

Wanda then said, "I'm having my lawyers help me understand the details of your offer. In the meantime, I saw you dancing last night at the ball."

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Mary would be leaving soon, and she wasn't part of Wanda's web of lies. Mary had made my muscles tingle, which was quite an accomplishment for such a small woman. My heart swelled just thinking about her. "Mary runs a women's shelter. She's very sweet and very much a do-gooder."

"Not what her ex said." Her phone beeped, and she said, "Work emergency." She then let out a small sigh and said, "I have to go, but we'll talk soon."

Mary's ex had beaten her and a baby. I pressed the gas and continued home. "One moment."

"What?" she asked quickly.

No one was on the road or in the way. I ignored how tense I was. "The offer on the table has a time limit. If you want a buyout and not jail time, think fast."

"So sad," she said. "Devon has said you were the best brother. He'd be rolling over in his grave."

I steeled my spine then said, "Or he'd have seen the truth about you, if he'd lived."

"Look at the time."

I pressed my hand on my heart, approaching the beach where I lived. "You can't run from me for long."

"Bye."

Good. I hung up the phone, parked the car, and stepped out. The smell of the salt in the air and the crash of waves in the distance was soothing as I let myself into my house.

Working with Cole Securities was awesome. Remembering the past all the time was exhausting but necessary. They were interested in permanently ending the arms dealing, so together, we had both gotten what we wanted.

I let myself in and immediately charged my phone. I grabbed my computer to read more paperwork for my lawyers to handle, and I planned to speak to Mark at Cole Securities.

Soon, I finished up the papers, took a shower, made myself coffee, exercised, and did more filing, and the sun was high in the sky when my phone rang. Mark hadn't even said hello when I told him, "I spoke to Wanda."

"And?" Mark asked.

I would have forced my way in, and they had their opportunity to investigate her on the inside. So I closed the laptop and said, "I'll be flying to Pittsburgh for the tour."

"You should have our team with you."

I thought so, too, but I kept that thought to myself and said, "I was a Navy SEAL, too, and it will be smoother if I handle this myself."

"We can bug the place faster if you get your head out of your ass, Thunder Thighs."

Alone time with Mary meant I didn't need an audience. I ignored how my gut twisted. At the end of the day, the company would fall under my control. I would stop all illegal activities the same day I took the reins. I stood up and said, "I'll plant the

bug. You get me the hard evidence of the deals for both the authorities to shut her down and my takeover bid.”

“I owe it to your brother to keep your ass alive and in line.”

Devon. His spirit was alive in every conversation with Mark. I glanced out the window and at the seagulls that sat on the fence separating my house from the white sands and ocean beyond. Until now, I’d always been landbound anyhow. “That bullshit on protecting me never worked in the SEALs, and if his death gets in your way of seeing I’m capable of watching my own damn back, then we’ll renegotiate the contract.”

“Thunder Thighs, you have balls, but don’t be fucking stupid.”

Laughter exploded from me. “Remember, we’re on the same team, but we have different goals.”

“Mine include not letting you get hurt, but I’ll send over some donuts to you if you fuck this up.”

“Later, Mark,” I said and hung up the phone.

However, I sat back down to finish work then exercised again. To cool off, I ran on the beach, and by the time I returned home, the stars were coming out. My phone was charged, so I grabbed it and dialed the woman I wished was here with me.

Two rings later, I heard her calming voice, which was like the ocean outside to my ears. “Did you make it home?” I asked.

She let out a small chuckle. “You called. I hadn’t believed you would.”

I imagined she patted her hair the way she had at the party. It was like I could still see her though we were miles apart. “Turns out I have business in Pittsburgh, so I wanted to check in and see if I can take you out when I get there.”

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A scream echoed in the air, and I knew it was her baby. She quickly said, “We probably shouldn’t.”

“You want to.”

“Text me when you arrive.”

“I will. Have a nice night, Mary.”

We hung up, and I headed to my shower. Last night I’d tasted a paradise I never thought I would experience, and now I couldn’t wait to see her again.

Chapter Six

Mary

It was five o’clock, and I swung my heels under my seat. The shelter had ten percent of its beds free, so if anyone needed a place in the middle of the night, the staff was able to process and protect more women from abuse.

Finances were in order. The shelter was cleaned from top to bottom, and we had no crises. Everything was good for the women under my care.

I’d been one of them once—one of the women I now provided for. Beaten and practically left for dead. Now my son had just turned one, and my ex almost killed my innocent baby. I finally had my trigger to change, and so I checked in here, and now a year later, I was in charge. But in that space of time, I’d been reborn too.

I'd been lucky, though, because I had family. Some of the women didn't.

I pivoted my seat to the new security monitoring system being installed as my brother finished screwing the new stand in place. As he held the driver like he was construction and not a CEO these days, he glanced over at me. I winked at him, and he said, "You seem happy today, sis."

Joseph knew me, but he didn't need to know about Dwayne. I took a deep breath and decided to ignore his statement. "Thanks for upgrading our system."

He finished with the last corner of the stand and dropped the tools, then wiped his brow dramatically. "Since becoming President of KeyLogic, I don't get to touch systems anymore. Now, why are you this happy?"

I wheeled my chair closer to him. "Because my favorite brother is here?"

He stood up and brushed his pants off and pointed to his matching jacket on the wall. "And?"

I stood up, too, and fixed his blue tie. I couldn't let him leave here looking a wreck, but I said, "Fine. At the benefit, I met someone."

He put his gray suit jacket on and said, "I thought you swore off my kind."

Dwayne had been in my thoughts every other second of the day. I sucked on my bottom lip then decided to speak. One of the hardest steps I had to learn was to not live in my head all the time, and my brother was always in my corner. I bounced on my heels. "Well, he was a one-night exception."

Joseph held the door open for me as we exited. "But?"

I turned off the office lights as I spoke about Dwayne. “He called and asked me out this week.”

“In Virginia?”

“No, he’s coming here, to Pittsburgh.”

As we stepped into the parking lot, a blue car turned on and sped out fast. My heart pumped for a moment as I stared at the smoke from the tires, but I shook my head and stayed next to Joseph as he said, “I’m happy for you. Just be careful that he’s not like Arthur.”

Hmm. My ex had liked the color blue. I snapped my fingers like I had figured out why I had goose bumps, but as we made our way to my gray Rav4, I asked, “Well, do you want to babysit Bruce for me if I do go?”

He opened my door for me again and said, “Sure, if that means I get to meet him, whatever his name is.”

I squeezed my brother’s arm. I couldn’t keep a secret. “Dwayne, and yes.”

“Okay, well, drive safe,” he said and clicked his BMW to unlock it. “Your staff should find the updates are easy in the morning, but you know how to find me.”

I probably should cancel with Dwayne and just stay home with my son. I never wanted another man for romance. My skin was jumpy like I was making a mistake right now, but I kissed his cheek and said, “Thanks again.”

Joseph and the rest of my family were the reason I found my strength. I was one of the lucky ones.

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My brother waited for me to start my car, and he followed me out. If I protected my son half as much as Joseph watched out for me, then he would be better off.

The drive home was uneventful, and I pulled into the parking lot of my red-brick apartment building, which had been built in a different century. I parked and headed up the steps to the third and top floor. My salary was decent enough, and this place lacked amenities like a working dishwasher, but it was in a good school zone.

I unlocked the double locks and saw the clean, sparkling floors and baby carpet in the middle of the room where my boy was currently playing with his stuffed animals. Bruce was clean and fresh. I locked the door behind me and asked my cousin, Zoey—who'd picked him up from day care for me after her college classes—"How was Bruce?"

Zoey put her schoolbook in her bag and said, "I picked him up from the day care covered in apple sauce, but I cleaned him up for you with tubby time."

At twenty-one, Zoey should be partying with her friends, but she took time for me and Bruce. I put my shoes away since I didn't like to trek dirt in my apartment and said, "You went above and beyond."

She came over and grabbed her shoes, preparing to leave. "We're cousins. Happy to help."

But as she lowered her shoes on the ground, the door rattled. We both stared at it, and then someone knocked.

Zoey asked, “Who’s at the door?”

My spine tingled. I slipped to the door and glanced out the peephole. Then my heart skipped a beat, and adrenaline raced in my veins. Do I call 911? Joseph would know what to do.

I swallowed, and my hands trembled as I reached into my bag and grabbed my phone.

I found Joseph’s number then met Zoey’s gaze with mine as I asked, “Can you stay with Bruce for a few more minutes?”

She put her shoes back on the shelf and nodded. “Who is that?”

“Arthur,” I said and placed my hands on the locks.

She pressed my arm, and I glanced at Zoey as she said, “If you leave my sight, from the peephole, I’m calling the cops.”

Right. I wasn’t alone, and unlike the woman I was before, I was different now. I still couldn’t breathe right, but this was my line in the sand now. Bruce was mine legally. He had no rights at all, and I was strong. Once I pumped myself up, I said, “Thanks, Zoey.”

I slipped out, and Zoey locked the doors behind me. I crossed my arms and said, “Arthur, I have a restraining order.”

“It expired an hour ago.”

Fuck. The police wouldn’t interfere. I almost pressed my phone, but I asked, “So, you’re here to threaten me, then?”

“I want to see our son.”

Never. I widened my stance and blocked the door. “The boy you tried to kill the day I brought him home from the hospital?”

“That was an accident.”

Lies from a liar. I’d been stupid once. He’d been charged with abuse, which made my legal claim easy. “The cops didn’t believe you.”

“I’ve changed.”

So? Perhaps that was heartless of me, but fuck him. I pointed down the hall and said, “I’m happy to hear that, but I have sole custody, and you need to leave now.”

My phone began to ring. Arthur saw my phone and stepped back, though he said, “This is just the beginning, Mary. I have a good job now, money, and connections. Do us both a favor and be ready to share, or I’ll sue and get full custody.”

I glanced at the call. Dwayne. Now he was a hulk of a man who could blockade the door. “Goodbye, Arthur,” I said.

He stepped back, and I knocked. Zoey opened the door, holding a frying pan. I entered and checked the locks. She put it down and asked, “What did he want?”

I denied the call. I’d call Dwayne back. My son continued to play and try to figure out how to stand. “To threaten me.” I said.

Zoey tilted her head but bounced on her feet. “Are we calling the police?”

I shook my head. I’d been with Arthur in high school and moved in with him once

my parents had died. I thought we'd be in love forever, but then the abuse started. Now I just had lists of things to handle. "He left, but he said the restraining order expired. I'll call Joseph to stay over with us for the night, and tomorrow, I'll call to reinstate it, I guess."

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Zoey shrugged. “He tried to enter without permission.” I didn’t say a word. She bumped into my side and asked, “What did he say, then?”

I met her concerned gaze and let out a sigh. The old me was inside and was used to being a silent sentinel. I forced my lips to open, and when I was able to, I said, “That he’ll sue me for sole custody.”

She took out her phone from her back pocket. “Let’s talk to Indigo, too, so you’re lawyered up, and we’ll get that custody issue handled fast.”

Our cousin Indigo married a billionaire, and his lawyer had been helping all the Steels since. I went to my fridge and took out my pitcher of cold filtered water and asked, “Is your sister still dating Frank?”

She grabbed a cup and handed it to me. “Natalie denies it and says they hate each other.”

Zoey’s older sister, Natalie, and Frank were intense. I took the cup and whispered, “That’s not hate in their eyes.”

She snorted. I sipped my water, and the cold tickled my throat while the frigid sensation somehow calmed the nerves in my stomach. After I finished, I said, “You don’t have to stay. I’m sure you have schoolwork.”

Zoey took another glass and poured herself a drink and said, “I can wait till Joseph gets back.”

“I...” My pulse skipped faster for a second. I shouldn’t be a burden, but then I took a deep breath. I’d offered, and she’d made a choice. I said, “Thanks.”

And then I called my brother. Joseph asked no questions and promised to be right over.

Luckily, he was single and free, though one day, I would find a way to pay him back for everything.

Zoey helped me prepare dinner. Time flew, and this time I heard my brother’s knock—three fast and one slow, with a tap of his finger. He’d had that knock with me since we were little. I opened the door.

He hugged me right away, and I tugged him in as I said, “Joseph. We made your favorites.”

“Good.” He patted his belly. “I’m hungry.”

Seriously, he could eat five-star cuisine, but here he was with my frozen mac and cheese.

Zoey quickly said, “And I have to go.”

Joseph took my key from the wall and said, “I’ll walk you to your car, Zoey. Lock your door, sis.”

I saluted him like we were in the army and followed them.

Bruce had fallen asleep surrounded by his stuffed animals, and I let him. When he woke, I would snuggle with him.

However, I grabbed my phone and texted Dwayne, I had unexpected drama to take care of. Sorry I can't talk tonight.

Three dots appeared. My pulse now strummed in a new way, and then my phone beeped, and I read, I'll be in town tomorrow night. Want to get coffee or is that too soon?

Maybe it was the amazing sex we'd shared, but Dwayne was a beautiful exception to my runaway impulse. I liked him and felt safe near. I quickly typed back, I don't want to leave my son with the sitter too long.

Bring him.

Sweet words. Most men weren't that into children. That's not exactly romantic.

More dots. I closed my eyes and remembered how my lips had tingled from his kiss. When my phone beeped, my smile deepened. We'll walk the park with our coffees, and you can tell me more about yourself.

Sweet. Dwayne was built like a tank, but somehow, I wasn't afraid of him. I heard my brother with the key and typed fast, Okay. Text me when you arrive.

Joseph popped in a moment later and locked the door. I put plates on the table for us and grabbed a bottle in the fridge for my son. I scooped him in my arms now and held Bruce. I could have left him to sleep, but I didn't have the heart. It had been too long since I held my now-twenty-pound baby.

Joseph grabbed the silverware and sat across from me. "You had trauma tonight," he said.

I rested my son on one leg and ate one-handed. As I finished my first bite, I asked,

“Did I interrupt a date or anything for you?”

He shook his head and said, “My company is on path to break into billion-dollar investments. I’m too swamped to date.”

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I stopped eating and stared into my noodles. “That’s not good for you, Joseph.”

He swallowed and said, “I wouldn’t have this chance at work if not for family, and I won’t let anyone down.”

“You need to live too,” I whispered, and then we both ate.

We settled on my couch, which was the old couch he had been about to toss when he’d bought himself his penthouse and all new furniture. I’d refused to sponge off him, and I’d paid for my place, on my own.

After he cleaned the dishes, we watched a movie—some silly comedy—while my son snuggled with us.

When the movie ended, Joseph clicked the TV off and said, “You aren’t yourself tonight.”

I held my sleeping son a little closer and asked, “What do you mean?”

He grabbed a diaper for me to change the baby and said, “After a confrontation, you’re usually in need of calming down. I like this stronger sister.”

I laid my boy on the couch and switched out his diaper so he could sleep longer with a clean bottom. “I have a son who needs me. He’s why I left, and he’s why I’ll be okay.”

He took the diaper and tossed it away for me. When he returned and I had fixed my

son's snaps at the bottom of his outfit, Joseph said, "Or it's the new guy you're making moon eyes over."

I tidied up the living room and put the toys away while my son snoozed on the couch and said, "Stop, or I won't let you meet him."

Joseph helped me with the toys. "You said yes, then."

"I did."

"I hope whoever he is is good enough for my little sister."

"Get some sleep," I told him, and Joseph went to the bedroom that I had for Bruce when he got bigger. However, I'd moved his crib into my room the week we moved in here and hadn't moved him out yet. I laid my son down and got ready for bed.

Tomorrow's silver lining was that Dwayne would be around. I probably should have said no to coffee, but seeing him again helped dispel the fears in my mind when I closed my eyes, and being near him again filled me with the strange sensation of my body warming. With him, I made a one-time exception to my life plan of celibacy.

Chapter Seven

Dwayne

Five thirty was taking forever. I watched the second hand on my watch, which never seemed to move fast enough, as I found us seats.

Every time someone stepped in the door or there was a jingle of a bell, my heart thumped, but so far, no Mary.

Time had arrived, and for the first time in years, I swallowed fear. I reminded myself she'd be here, and I tried to ignore how my skin was prickled.

Being shot at in the desert had made me laugh. Now, here I was, but this time when the door jingled, it took a second to see who'd come in as a green stroller scooted in first. My hair raised in anticipation. Then I stood up, when I saw her.

The blond angel who'd filled my dreams. She waved, and I pushed her seat back. As she came over, I bent down to see the sleeping boy, and I beamed up at his mother. "This must be Bruce."

She sighed, took off her jacket, and said like she'd been in battle, "He was a little fussy before we left."

I tapped the table like it was a piano and said, "Well, let me get you your coffee."

She fixed her son's straps in his stroller and called out, "I want tea—black, with milk, no sugar."

I pushed my chair back and said, "Simple and easy."

She shook her head and whispered, "I thought that's what we were, but you surprised me."

My ears buzzed. I pressed my hand to my heart and said, "I'll be back with a witty reply for you so you'll agree to a dinner date with me."

Ordering drinks and a steamed milk in case her son wanted something was easy. Not many customers were in line, so I waited for the barista, and a minute later, I was returning with our drinks.

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She'd worn her hair down this evening, and her skin had a nicer glow without the makeup and glitter from our first meeting. I handed her the tea, and she said, "Thank you for this."

I sat across from her and folded my hands on the table. "No problem. So, tell me more about you, Mary."

She sucked in her bottom lip and shook her head. Then she pushed her hair behind her ears as her face turned red, and she finally said, "I don't like talking about myself. Why don't you go first?"

My nerves weren't good. I used to be a charmer, but with Mary, it was like I was free to be honest. "After my brother died—"

She covered her lips, and her face went white. "I'm sorry about that."

I reached out and patted her arm. "It was ten years ago, but thanks."

Her blush went down her neck, but her lips curled higher as she asked, "What were you going to say?"

The gleam in her eyes somehow invited me into her world, and I hadn't been expecting this sense of awe. "I joined the SEALs, just like he did."

Her eyebrows rose. "You were a Navy SEAL."

"Yes." I picked up my coffee and sipped it. "Been serving my country for a while

now.”

She sat back, and her shoulders slumped as if she were relaxed. “This explains... you and maybe why I feel safe with you.”

I leaned closer and asked, “You do?”

She finished her tea and then perused my muscles. Then she leaned closer and said, “Well, you’re sort of shaped like my cousin, who’s a professional wrestler, but you don’t seem competitive. You seem calm and sure of yourself, but I’m not a good judge of character, and I’ve not dated anyone in a long time.”

“I’m honored,” I said, and our knees brushed under the table, but my mind buzzed. I’d watched wrestling on TV—all that fake fighting. “Who’s your wrestling cousin?”

“Stone Steel. He just started.”

I’d read an article. Her cousin was supposed to have competed in the Olympics. I smiled and said, “I’ve seen him. Are you related to the singer too?”

She let out a long sigh and then said, “Another cousin. They’re the talented ones.”

Mary was strong too. I stood up and tossed our cups and waved for us to leave for that walk. “That’s more than talent. Seems to me your family has drive.”

She fixed her jacket and walked beside me as she said, “They do. Not me, though.”

I held the door open for her. Once we were outside with the fresh air hitting our faces, I pressed my arm into hers gently and said, “You’re... tell me about you now and how I got so lucky that you’re not with your son’s father.”

She let me push the stroller and crossed her arms like she wished to hide but then said, “Fine, but that’s not a happy story.”

With one hand, I massaged her shoulder and hoped she trusted me as we entered the park path near the reservoir. “Sharing our past is a good way to start, and I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

She blinked and stared up at me. For a few moments, I wasn’t sure she’d speak at all, but then she said, “You make it easier to talk. My ex, Arthur... he was my one and only, until you.”

I was honored, but I asked in a low voice, “Are you wanting him back?”

“Absolutely not.” She lowered her arms, and her face became red like she was angry now, and she said, “He beat me. He almost killed Bruce when I came home from the hospital.”

“You’re stronger now.” I curled my hands tighter around the handles of the stroller.

She swallowed then said, “I don’t always feel that, but I have full legal custody, and he’s gone from our lives now, though he’s threatened to sue me.”

She took the stroller back, but I stayed beside her, and as night birds sang around us, I said, “I’m glad you told me. I hope you know you can trust me.”

She slowed, let out a sigh, and then said, “I... last night when you called, he came to my apartment, uninvited—“

“Did he hurt or threaten you?” Tension raced up my spine. If she was in danger, I’d help. No one would ever get to her again if I was there.

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This time, she massaged one of my shoulders like she needed me to relax, and then she said, “He... tried to threaten me, but I called his bluff. Then my brother came over and stayed in my spare bedroom.”

Good. She wasn’t alone entirely. “So you were protected.”

“I can’t keep calling him.” We walked in sync as she continued, “Joseph and his company are about to launch some major app and software, so he’s super busy these days, but he makes time for us.”

Good, I thought again. I wasn’t sure how much Mary would let me in her life yet, but I said, “Well, if you need me this week, I’m in town.”

She looped her arm in mine and placed it on the stroller. “When we first got together, I was okay with it because I never thought I’d see you again. Now I’m getting confused and crossing the lines.”

I smiled. “Is that your way of telling me to get lost?”

She snuggled closer. “No!”

“Good,” I said, and we curved around the reservoir on the empty path covered with green branches overhead.

She gently elbowed me, and our gazes met. “I’m glad you’re here today. And having you on my side a little is nice. So, what do you do now that you’re not a SEAL? If I remember right, you work for Cole Securities.”

Where I inherited a bunch of older-brother types that I hardly remembered and now everyone checks on me to make sure I'm not overburdened. I swallowed and simply said, "With Cole Securities. I hired them to help me get my brother's company out of Wanda Frost's hands."

"Arthur works for her."

"He won't work for me. I'd choose you if you let me."

"I don't want to think about him." She motioned with her hands and pushed forward in silence for a moment and said, "It has to be hard to go from larger-than-life hero to legal paperwork as a means to get what you want."

I laughed as she created a box like she was a mime. I helped steer the stroller. "Being a SEAL isn't like the movies."

She winked at me and retook the stroller. "I'm sure it's not. What was the best part of the job?"

Her son started crying. She stopped short and turned him toward us. I knelt down and motioned that I could hold him. She unstrapped her son, kissed his head, and handed him to me.

He smelled good, and I was captivated by his big blue eyes. As we stood up again and I held him to my chest to keep him close, I blinked and remembered her question. "Being around others who I knew were just as capable as me and that we'd look out for each other. I missed my mom's cooking, but otherwise, my team was like family."

Her lips curved into a wide smile as she glanced up. "That sounds nice."

Her son took hold of my finger and held it tight. My heart melted a little as I said,

“And you sound like you and your family are close.”

She wiped her eyes like she had sudden tears when she stared at us and said, “That’s one of the best parts of my life. I have people who care about me.”

I inhaled and hugged her son as I said, “Include me on your list, Mary.”

She placed her small fingers on my hip. “You care about me?”

I bounced her boy, and he laughed. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” She went onto her tiptoes and tugged me to lower my face as she said, “It’s nice. Look, I don’t live in a fancy place or anything, but you’re welcome to come over.”

I kissed her cheek. “I’m touched.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “What does that mean?”

Her boy closed his eyes, so I put him back in the stroller. She helped me with the straps. As we finished, I said, “That I need to get my things from the hotel, but I’m excited to spend every second I can with you.”

As we headed toward the parking lot, she said, “Okay, look, I shouldn’t ask you over.”

“You want me. It’s okay to admit it.”

She typed a text into her phone. “I’m probably crazy, but here is my address. Meet us there.”

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I pressed my hand to my chest. “I’ll be fast.”

Then I walked her to her car and helped her with the stroller and baby seat. Once her baby was secure, I quickly claimed her lips as my own.

Mary was an angel who I needed to keep in my life. Her kiss set my skin alive and awake as adrenaline raced through me. She was mine—now, forever—if she would have me.

Chapter Eight

Mary

I came home. My son had woken up in the car but slept for most of the ride, so it had been easy to put him in his crib. Then I quickly put the washed dishes away, cleaned up the room, and took a sixty-second shower to wash myself without wetting my hair.

Any second, Dwayne would show up, so I applied moisturizer. My skin still buzzed from his touch, and I’d caved in letting him come here.

Bruce was young enough to not remember much, and honestly, Dwayne’s touch made my knees weak.

As I finished ensuring my spare bedroom was clean, my stomach did a little flip. This was about to be real, and where I’d have to show him if we—no, when we—honestly, I couldn’t even say the words, but that night we were going to repeat our night in the hotel.

There was a knock at the door as the moon appeared in the sky, and I checked the peephole.

The huge guy with sexy dimples on the other end was all mine.

I swallowed and flung open the door. Then his lips met mine. I rose up higher on my toes and held onto him.

Once the kiss ended, I invited him in, and he offered a bottle of wine.

I double-locked the door and put the bottle down to grab glasses for us. Dwayne explored my living room but was clearly looking for something.

I left the kitchen and pressed a finger to my lips. Then I opened my bedroom door and waved for him to follow me.

We stood over the crib, and I said, “Normally, he sleeps with me in my room.”

I motioned for us to leave, and I closed the door.

“We can go in your bedroom later. Is this going to be his room?”

My body softened at his words as he pointed to other room. I took his hand and opened the door. “Yeah, but it has a bed for when my brother stays here, for now.”

We left the door open and stood outside, but Dwayne asked, “Do you call him over often?”

Almost a year ago, I’d had to learn to live all by myself, with a baby. When I’d signed the lease, I’d been nervous. My face heated when I started to explain. “At the beginning of moving here, yeah...”

The front door rattled like someone wanted to get in. Dwayne crossed his arms and asked, “Who’s that?”

My heart twisted in my chest as fear inched through my body. I trekked forward to look as I said, “No one I invited... give me a second...” At the door, my stomach clenched, and I stepped back.

Why was he back? Ice raced up my spine. I wasn’t sure what to do.

Dwayne then took my hands, and the world became full of color again when he asked, “Who is it?”

Heat rushed through me, changing me and centering me back in my body. I pushed my hair behind my ear and said, “Arthur. My lawyer said the restraining order goes into effect at midnight.”

Dwayne led me back to my living room and rubbed my arms as he asked, “He’s your ex?”

I placed my hand on his chest. These men were so different, and honestly, Dwayne was double a man’s normal size, yet his heart under my palm somehow didn’t scare me. I swallowed and said, “I hadn’t seen him until yesterday.”

His face darkened, and he patted my shoulder. “Stay back. I’ll have words with him.”

I tugged on his arms. “Don’t. It’s my battle.”

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He kissed my knuckles. “You’ve already been told you’re not welcome here.”

True. I trembled a little, but he unlocked the door and then stood, fully blocking my view.

Half of me wanted to run in the bedroom and lock myself in there with Bruce.

However, I stood where I was and listened as Arthur asked, “Who are you?”

Dwayne didn’t budge from the frame of the door and said, “Mary’s boyfriend. And you’re interrupting our evening.”

Boyfriend? I felt hot. He sounded so serious.

Arthur’s voice screeched like static, “I didn’t know she’d found someone else.”

Dwayne held the door like he was about to shut it. “Look, buddy, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave Mary and Bruce the fuck alone.”

Wow. I’d have never sounded half as forceful. Arthur’s voice no longer banged against my skin like nails when he said, “He’s my son. You’re a man. You must understand.”

“Step back,” Dwayne said, and my heart froze. Arthur would be stupid to threaten Dwayne. “I’ve killed men with my bare hands. Mary and her son are under my protection now.”

“Mary!” Arthur called out.

My heart thumped, but I pressed Dwayne’s shoulder and wiggled beside him as I said, “Go, Arthur. Don’t come back.”

Dwayne slammed the door, and I locked it.

Once we were sure he was gone down the hall, I returned to the wine and poured us each a glass as I asked, “Is what you said true, Dwayne?”

He leaned on the countertop and took his glass. “Yeah. In war, hand-to-hand combat happens.”

I sipped from my glass and then put it down. “I didn’t mean that.”

He directed me to my couch. “What did you mean?”

He took up most of the sofa, but I curled up beside him. “Boyfriend. Is that what you want to be, with me?”

“Yeah.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “I’d like that, Mary.”

“We don’t make sense.” I fluttered my lashes, and my heart raced. “You don’t even live near me.”

His lips came closer, and I put my wineglass down so I wouldn’t spill. “We have a lot to figure out, but I want you, and I don’t share well.”

He put his glass beside mine, and our hands brushed. I ignored the racing heat in my veins as I said, “I’m scared of how easy everything is with you.”

He touched my arm and left a trail of goose bumps. “Are relationships supposed to be hard?”

I opened my lips and let out a small sigh. “I’ve avoided them, to be honest.”

Adrenaline coursed through me, and my lips were moist when he leaned closer. “That guy at the door doesn’t represent all men.”

I closed my eyes and said, “True enough. You’re more like my brother.”

He sat back, but his hand pressed on my thigh as he said, “I hope the fuck not.”

I laughed. That had clearly not been sexy. I was out of practice. “No, I mean you’re protective and sweet. But unlike him, you’re sexy and make my heart skip a beat.”

He curled his hand under my thigh to bring me closer. “That’s better.”

Butterflies grew in my soul. “But you’re good to me, and I like that about you.”

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He asked, “Are you safe here?”

I sucked my bottom lip and ignored the ice that inched up my back. I was different now. I took his hands in mine and squeezed. “I hope so. I mean, Arthur coming over makes me nervous, but that’s just started happening. For the past year, since I became a mom, I’ve been really learning to believe in myself, and we’ve been fine.”

He tilted his head toward me and said, “Good.”

I swallowed and nodded now that the truth was all coming out of me. “And I started online classes for a degree in management.”

He smiled at me, and I swear I saw acceptance in the gleam of his eyes when he said, “You already manage a shelter.”

I exhaled, and the coldness in my veins dissipated. “True, but I want to be respected and learn things. I skipped learning a lot about myself, but learning about other things is almost easier than looking inward.”

He scooted closer, and my heart thumped. I hoped he would kiss me finally. “And you want to be honored, I imagine.”

“Yeah, that too.” I ignored the tremble in my body and asked, “What about you?”

He traced down the side of my body with his fingers and said, “I’m learning about you, Mary.”

My eyes fluttered closed, and this time, his lips met mine.

Fireworks exploded in my cells, and I sighed when he ended it. His brown eyes made me all soft and tingly. “What else?”

He picked up my wine, gave it to me, and took his own. We clinked our glasses together, and then he said, “Well, I left the service a few weeks ago, but I’ve debated going back in for another term.”

“Not that long ago.” We both took a sip. “Why did you leave?”

He took another gulp, finishing his off, then said, “Cole Securities informed me of what was happening at my brother’s company, which I own majority shares in.”

I sipped more slowly, and moments passed before I asked, “You mean where Wanda and Arthur work?”

“Clearly your ex had no idea who I was.” He put the empty glasses back down and said, “I’d never met him before and never heard his name, really. I took the meeting with Cole Securities thinking it was about some job they had for me. My brother died, and they were with him when he was killed. But they convinced me fast to start a legal battle.”

Oh no. I would be a wreck without my own brother. I rested my head on his shoulder and said, “Oh, wow. That’s so hard about your brother.”

He turned toward me again, and I sat up. Our bodies touching felt good. “So now I have all these people looking over my shoulder to help me, but I’m in a waiting pattern to actually do anything.”

I curled my fingers around my head and scrunched my hair then asked, “How much

longer are you stuck?”

Our noses touched as I climbed on his lap. He didn't stop me. “Hopefully not long. Now, tell me something funny about you.”

I let myself go and curled around him, letting out a sigh. “Funny?”

His gaze seemed darker, and his cock was clearly stiff underneath me, but still, he said, “Yeah.”

Nothing funny about me came to mind immediately. I stalled as I tried to come up with something. “Hmm, I sing the princess songs from animated movies when they play.”

His dimples appeared. “Cute.”

His hand went to my ass, and he pulled me closer to him. Goose bumps grew all over me, making me warm and fuzzy, and I wrapped my arms around his neck and asked, “And you?”

He pressed his forehead to mine and then said, “My call sign in the SEALs was Thunder Thighs, and my brother's friend Mark thinks that's hilarious.”

The man under me was nothing but hard muscles everywhere, but I raised my eyebrows. “Thunder Thighs?”

“Yeah.” His hands played with my spine and sent warm sparks through me. “When I joined, my legs and ass were thicker than the other guys.”

I curled my hand on his abs and patted him. “You're all muscle, Dwayne.”

He lifted his shirt up to let me touch his six-pack as he asked, “You like what you see?”

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“Yeah,” I said and helped him take his shirt off. Finally. My breathing became more intense as he showed himself.

Once he tossed his shirt on the floor, I pulled him closer so he would hold me again and said, “Good, then come here.”

“Finally.” His lips claimed mine.

I let out a warm sigh and kissed him like he was the last man I would ever need. His hands went up and down my body, cupping my ass fully.

I traced his back, and he fully picked me up and carried me into the other bedroom.

When he let me down, I slid my body against his, and he cradled my breasts for a moment then caressed my sides.

I had too many clothes on, so I pulled off my shirt and tossed it. He helped me, tentatively brushing my boobs a little more.

I laughed, and his fingers curled behind me and snapped off my bra like he’d been waiting for a dessert.

I arched my back to help him take it off.

The moment I was free, he leaned down and sucked my nipples, which had hardened for him.

My toes curled as I was holding him and hugging him while he feasted on the second one.

Heat rushed through me as he returned for more kisses.

I would never have enough of him. As he tasted me, his fingers flicked my nipples.

Damn, I was ready for him. I gripped his pants and belt buckle, tugging his hard shaft toward me. We were both still wearing too many layers.

I needed to be with him. His lips met mine, but I needed more.

He kneaded my breasts, and I unbuckled his pants.

He didn't stop me. His kisses were so deep it was like we were already one.

Yet the spark inside me strummed; there was so much more. I reached into his boxer briefs, and his hard dick was there, ready and waiting like a pole staff.

He flicked my nipples with his tongue, and I went down on my knees, pulling off his pants.

He stalled me, but I needed to see him, lick him, touch him.

So I slid his clothes off and tasted him.

I tried to go deep, but he gently nudged me off him, prodding me to stand.

I did as he wanted, and he sucked my nubs again and helped me remove my own pants and panties.

His fingers brushed against my apex that needed him, but clearly, he enjoyed my breasts as he never let them go except to try the other.

I turned and rubbed my girlie parts to his hard cock. I placed my hands on the edge of the bed for support, but he understood what I wanted.

And when he pressed open my folds and entered me, I arched my back for him.

I don't remember ever moaning in my life, but it was all I could do now. I needed him inside me, and this felt deeper.

He sighed, too, as he pumped in and out of me as he found a rhythm.

I moved and he went deeper. To keep me close, he held onto my hips.

Damn, I'd never been this hot. I held on to the edge of the bed harder, as it was all I had to not lose myself entirely.

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I reached behind me to feel him, but he had no part of him that was still.

So I curled my fingers around the edge of the bed and enjoyed the ride.

He took me fully, deeper than I thought possible with that huge rifle of his.

I swear I almost lost consciousness.

Once he moved my leg, he somehow found a way to go deeper, and my entire body melted. He edged even farther inside me, and now as he drilled into me, it was like we were one, and he'd found my soul, which I hadn't even known existed.

Suddenly, he pulled out, and I was already seeing stars. I knew he wasn't done, as he was still hard and long, but I couldn't breathe.

I was so hot for him, but he guided me to lie on the bed.

I was his, anyway he wanted me. I swear I lost consciousness and died a little for a moment as total bliss enveloped me, but I managed to hold on long enough to know he joined me in this state.

We were together, and it was like we had found each other and joined in a way I couldn't explain. Part of me wished we could be more than just temporary when I was in his arms.

Chapter Nine

Dwayne

Mary's place was small, much like the apartment I grew up in with my parents and brother when I was little. We'd moved to a house when I was six or seven, but Mary's place, with her sheer white drapes, reminded me of long ago.

My brother leaving me his shares of the company had grown my bank account astronomically, and while in the service, out of the country, I'd thought Wanda running things provided me with more money than I ever dreamed possible. I'd taken care of our mom.

I used to think Devon had it all, but now, in Mary's arms, I realized maybe his life wasn't perfect. He'd skipped giving everything right to Wanda, probably because he understood she might be sketchy.

And while snuggling in Mary's bed was nice, the light streaming in meant it was morning. The woman next to me was sweet, and I'd not done my workout, but I ignored that and slid out of our bed.

Luckily, I had my toothbrush, but as I came out, I heard her son.

Mary hadn't. I peeked my head in her bedroom, and he stilled. I backed out fast and checked. She was still sleeping, so I went to her refrigerator and took out a bottle.

I returned, and he reached out for the bottle. I handed it to him, and he grabbed my hand too.

Bruce looked like his mom. I decided to pick him up and bring him with me. I held him as I gathered everything to make coffee, eggs, and bacon, but when it was time to cook, I set him down.

I found toys and a mat, so I set it up, and he seemed fine.

I washed my hands and cooked.

Soon, the bacon was fried, eggs were on plates, and coffee poured, when she came out. She scratched her head then hugged her son and kissed my cheek. “Good morning. This is lovely.”

She took the diaper and wipes and picked up her son, who’d been standing by a table designed for him. I brought the plates to the table and said, “You were sleeping, and Bruce was up, so I had him help me.”

She changed his diaper fast as she asked, “He didn’t scream?”

Once she finished, she stood up, tossed the old diaper away, and cleaned herself up. I brought the coffees to the table and said, “No. I showed him a bottle right away.”

She came toward me, and her eyes were full of wonder. “And you made breakfast. I’m impressed. This looks delicious.”

I held her chair, and she smelled the coffee as I joined her. I closed my eyes and folded my hands to pray, and she did the same thing. Once we were done, I said, “We both have a few things to do today, but I want to come back here to be with you two.”

“We’re just temporary.” She wrapped her hand around her coffee mug, and her phone jingled on other end of the room.

“I want more.”

She ignored the ring and met my gaze. “Maybe one more night.”

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“One day at a time.”

She sipped her coffee, and when she finished, she said, “Right. Work. I guess I have to go to that.”

We both ate and drank a little of our breakfast as Bruce played with his toys. A minute later, her phone beeped, but we both ignored it until she had finished her plate. I stood up and retrieved it for her, and once I returned, I said, “You have a message.”

She wrapped her hands around the plates and took the phone between her fingers while she cleaned up. I took over to wash everything fast and she let the plates go and said, “Oh. Thanks.”

I added soap to the sponge, wet all the dishes, and as I scrubbed, I saw her scowl and how she then massaged her temples. I turned the water on to wash the few dishes and asked, “What’s wrong?”

She walked over to me and dried everything with a towel while she said, “Day care. It’s closed. I hate taking him to the shelter as sometimes the women start comparing their own children to him, and Bruce is doing well. I don’t want to make women just finding their strength sad.”

We finished the chore, and I bumped into her side playfully. “I can take him with me if you want.”

Her eyes widened like she was in shock. “Really? I can call my cousins and try to

find someone.”

I smiled and said, “Don’t worry about it. I am meeting my brother’s ex for coffee to finalize the tour times and going for a run in the park. My mother will then want a full report, but other than that, my day is pretty empty.”

“Where for coffee?”

“Same place I met you.”

“That’s public enough.” Her blush extended all over her body as she asked, “You’re sure?”

I leaned against the kitchen counter. “Yes. I’ll protect him with my life.”

She shook her head, and she didn’t meet my gaze as she said, “I’m nervous about leaving Bruce.”

I took her hands and kissed her knuckles. “Up to you. No pressure. Just wanted to offer.”

She swallowed and pressed her tiny hands into mine. “I… trust you. Will you keep your phone on and message me every hour?”

If she let me, it would be like I had won a small victory into her heart. “Absolutely, but twelve thirty to one thirty is lunch with Wanda.”

“Okay, I’ll pack you a diaper bag.” She went on her tiptoes, squeezed me, and let me go. I watched from the door as she put diapers, wipes, an extra change of clothes, his jacket, shoes, and fresh clothes out. Then she placed her items in the living room and marched past me in the kitchen to the refrigerator and poured more milk into bottles.

Once she finished, she put them on a shelf and showed me the ice pack and a bag that kept cold. I nodded, and she said, “Well, I can get off early. Say, three?”

Lugging all her items might double the workout routine, but I ignored that and said, “Amazing. We can do something as a group then.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip and returned to Bruce as she said, “Like what?”

Mary and Bruce needed fun, and I could handle that. “I’ll surprise you.”

Her lips pinched together. “I never liked surprises much,” she said.

From what I’d heard so far, she had only received bad ones. “You’ll enjoy mine,” I said.

She kissed her son’s cheek. “Since it includes Bruce, I will.”

I helped her stand up, and I ran my fingers along her side. “So, your trusting me is a step in the right direction for what I want.”

“Don’t read more into it.” She went on her tiptoes and hugged me. “I let you in the door, but don’t push me.”

I cupped her sexy ass to keep her pressed against me and said, “I won’t let you down.”

She lowered her lashes. “Then okay. We have a three o’clock date.”

Our lips met, and she tasted sweeter than ice cream on a warm day. As our kiss ended, I said, “You’ll see soon that you want more.”

“You don’t give up.” She let me go and then pointed to a hook on the wall. “There is a key.” She then opened a closet door and tugged out a heavy-looking seat. “Do you know how to use a car seat?”

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I crouched, inspecting it, and saw the strap and hook. I stood up. “I’m handy even with a rental. He’ll be safe with me.”

“Okay,” she said. She glanced at her phone, scrolled through, and then texted me an instructional video.

My lips curved into a smile, and I kissed her fast.

She didn’t mind. After the second our kiss ended, she darted into her room to change. I went to sit with Bruce on the floor until she came back out.

Later, I jumped up to walk her out and say goodbye. Her lips on mine set me off course as I watched her head to her car.

I went to the closet and found a stroller. Perfect. I packed what she had left me, tried to feed Bruce some bananas in a glass jar I found, and marveled at how smiley he was with those two teeth of his.

Once I cleaned him up and checked his diaper, it was time to go. I needed a run. So I grabbed one bottle, the stroller, and the car seat.

Outside, the air was fresh, and I drove us to a park on the way home.

Bruce passed out in the stroller as I raced around. Near the end of our park visit, I let him play in the sand a bit, and then we headed back to her home.

Children were more work than I had thought. I changed his clothes so he would be

fresh and clean and grabbed another few bottles of milk.

Luckily for me, Bruce passed out on the drive easily.

We arrived a few minutes before our meeting, and I carried Bruce in with one of his bottles. As I stepped through the door, my eyes widened. She was early. I passed the line and joined her at the table. “Wanda.”

Her eyes widened. “Who’s this?” she asked.

I held him closer and said, “Mary’s son. He needed to come along.” I slid back as the line lulled. “We’ll be right back.”

She waved me off, and we were fast in line. I ordered a black coffee and steamed milk for Bruce as a treat. I poured it in one of his empty bottles and handed it to him.

“You’re dating a single mom?” Wanda asked as I sat back down.

“Yes,” I said, bouncing him on my lap.

She sat back and sipped her latte. She set down her cup and said, “That’s responsible. Your brother and mom never thought you’d be.”

“I grew up. Are you ready to talk about the schedule?”

“You never complained all those years I put money in your accounts.”

“I should have asked more questions.” I showed her my dimples and hoped she was ready to let go with a whimper more than a fight. “Years as a SEAL taught me how to handle myself, and your lawyers must have said I have the right claim.”

She smiled and made goo-goo sounds at Bruce for a moment. Then she said, “I hope on the tour, you see I run a tight ship and that you’ll drop your suit so we can go back to what’s worked well for both of us.”

Cole Securities intended to stop her and all her illegal deals. The board was about to see negative press until I stood up and took what was mine. Her time was done. I gulped down some of my coffee and rocked Bruce, who was curled up in my arms like he wanted to sleep, and I said, “Look, let’s just set the schedule.”

Her eyes went glassy as she watched us. “You might be coming in at a perfect time. I’ve been wanting to retire, and if you take over, maybe I can enjoy my life... maybe find a guy who can give me my own baby.”

If that was how she saved face, she would walk away fast. I put my cup down and dropped my wall around her, talking to her like she was still family. “Maybe you’ll find a single dad so you don’t have to bear the pain. We both know you don’t get your hands dirty, directly.”

The glimmer in eyes dulled. “Dwayne, come to the factory tomorrow at ten. But it’s no place for little ones.”

Right. Gun manufacturers had too much potential for accidents. I snuggled his body to my chest. “Done. Thanks.”

The idea that something about Wanda’s company was related to my family did gymnastic circles in my mind. Once Wanda left, I put Bruce back in his car seat to take him home.

I first called my mother on the drive, but I got her voice mail. I tapped the wheel and decided to call my Cole Securities contact next. His wife was in the CIA. He answered on the first ring.

“Mark, we have to talk.”

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“Thunder Thighs, what’s going on?”

I pulled into Mary’s place, and a silver car bulleted out of the parking lot. I watched and waited till the dust settled and then retrieved Bruce. “Tomorrow, I’ll plant the bug. Have your wife and her CIA intel friends work fast.” I left the stroller and car seat and held Bruce to my chest.

“Why the sudden rush? Are you suspecting something?”

I shuffled Bruce while I retrieved the keys and said, “Maybe it’s nothing, but my gut instinct is she’s planning something.”

“With direct access, we should have everything on her drive within minutes. Trust me,” Mark said quickly.

I unlocked Mary’s place and locked up. “Good. I want you personally to check everything with Arthur Waterstone’s name on it.” I took Bruce to his crib and laid him down.

“Okay. Your girlfriend’s ex. We’ll be in touch when we figure it out.”

“Good,” I said, and I checked to make sure the baby monitor was on then slipped out of the room. Wanda had hired Arthur so she’d not directly deal with criminals, but those days were ending.

I still had an hour before Mary, so I made lemon-piccata chicken and pasta so she wouldn’t be hungry. Then I checked on amusement park times.

Perfect. There were later hours in the spring, which would give us enough time for Bruce to have fun while I guided his sexy mother around.

The idea of staying in Pittsburgh and spending every day with the two of them rushed into my heart like a small dream.

As the chicken baked, my phone rang, which woke Bruce up. He screamed. I answered my phone while rushing into the bedroom and picking him up. “Momma. Finally.”

“What’s going on? Do I hear a baby?”

I tapped his back like I remembered seeing people do when holding babies, and he calmed down while I brought him to the kitchen and grabbed one of the bottles. “I’m babysitting for my girlfriend.”

“And you’ve not brought her to me.”

Bruce suckled, and I took him to the couch to hold him as he drank. “Momma, did Devon ever explain why he suddenly left me all the shares of his company before he died? I remember his will was clear on it, and I never complained about the money, but I used to think my brother had a perfect life.”

My pulse raced. I’d had a gun held to my head and hadn’t blinked, but my mother still had this power over me. “He wasn’t perfect,” she said. “No one is. He hoped he’d guide Wanda to stay on the right path, but she stopped calling us after a while. I’ve been praying for her since you told me what Devon’s friends revealed.”

I closed my eyes. I’d not written a will. I’d just assumed whatever I had would go to my mother. Bruce giggled as he stared at me. “I should have come home sooner,” I said calmly.

“You needed to find yourself, and when you left, Wanda was still visiting. Don’t be hard on yourself.”

“I had blinders on when it came to my brother and Wanda,” I said like that was some answer. Seriously, my brother had trusted me, and so far, I’d failed his memory.

Owning my brother’s company with his fiancée was very different from what I had expected. When I had decided to come home from the service, I figured I would work with her because I knew people in the military and had connections that might be good for wanting new weapons.

Mark’s conversation had changed my goals. My mother just said, “You were a kid when he died, and you were serving your country.”

My skin prickled, but I tried to calm down as I asked, “Can I see his will again? I want to send it to my lawyers.”

“I’ll email you.”

“Thank you,” I said then hung up the phone.

On another day, I would have worked out at the gym for an hour. Today, though, I changed a diaper and settled on the floor to play while Bruce learned to stand up at his play table.

At three fifteen, the door opened, and Mary returned with a smile on her face that was clearly for Bruce.

He crawled over to her, and she hugged him. “How was your day?”

“We were good,” I said, but heat rose in my cheeks, too, the moment her lips met

mine. I held them both for a moment then let them go and said, “I made us dinner.”

She let Bruce down and followed me into the kitchen. “Where are we going after?”
Her gaze narrowed.

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I grabbed some plates out of her cupboard. “Are you ready to go to Kennywood Park?”

She bounced then grabbed the silverware. “I’ve not gone since I was a girl.”

I set one of the baby bowls out for Bruce so he could try the pasta without sauce, but I added the lemon sauce and chicken to the adult plates. “Well, it’s my treat for the afternoon. Hopefully, Bruce will enjoy himself.”

“Thank you for all of this,” she said, smelling the food on her plate.

Then she put it down and curled her arms around me.

Her kiss made me ache and filled me with hope. No other woman had ever made me want to kick up my heels and stay forever—only Mary.

Chapter Ten

Mary

The evening air was getting cold. Neither of us were in jackets, but I wrapped a blanket around Bruce so at least he would be warm.

Soon, Dwayne would be a memory in my life, but for now, he was here.

Young teenagers were screaming on the roller coaster we passed, but Bruce was quiet. He’d been overwhelmed, but the fact that Dwayne was here, holding my hand

and there for us, was new.

We headed toward the main gate, and I squeezed his hand in mine as we pushed the stroller. “Thank you for tonight, Dwayne,” I said.

He smiled at me, and my heart swelled a little as he said, “Soon, we get that dinner date I want.”

“Maybe,” I said. When he left for good, I would probably be heartbroken.

We headed past the bumper cars, but Dwayne stopped me and pointed toward the funnel cake stand in the distance. “Is that Arthur?”

His blue eyes met mine, and for one second, cold ice rushed through my veins. Then he walked in the other direction.

Dwayne had crossed his arms like a silent sentinel as he stared him down. I took a deep breath and motioned with my head to keep going. “Must be a coincidence. He’s leaving.”

We continued, but he scanned the area like he was surveying everyone we passed. Once we made it out the gate and headed toward his rental car, he asked, “Have you seen anything strange at work?”

I sucked on my bottom lip, and a memory hit me. “I thought I saw his car, but the restraining order is now in effect. He’d go to jail if he comes near us, and he respected that for over a year.”

Dwayne waited behind the stroller and let me get Bruce out, then he opened the car door for me. He waited till I strapped my baby in, and then he said, “Or he thinks he has a perfect plan. Do me a favor and don’t be alone for a while.”

Having a black eye and not being able to call my brother for a week when I'd been a client at the shelter now flashed in my memory. I'd been so afraid Arthur was tracking my every move for months, including adding an app to my brother's phone. "I can't live my life afraid. I've done that, and I can't go back to being so scared that I can't enjoy fresh air and sunshine," I said.

He kissed my forehead then said, "Let's go back home."

He got in and started the car. A few minutes later, we were on the curvy country back roads that eventually led to my house. The trees of the surrounding area and the hills where only deer could run had only amplified my fears once, but I'd slowly let that fear subside.

But this city in the middle of what would otherwise be a forest was all I knew, and it was a small place, with nature that called to me. I rested in the seat and said, "Since Bruce is sleeping, we'll have an easy ride home."

Dwayne gripped the wheel as he drove. "And I want you to realize that you have me now."

I'd always wanted someone strong enough to take on the world at my side. I'd never met anyone like him. He was my girlhood dream.

"Hard to believe." Part of me wanted him to last forever, but dreams were just that, and I'd never been good at holding out hope. I let out a sigh and said, "Besides, you live in Virginia."

His eyes narrowed, and he patted my knee. "Not if my lawyers come through. Then I'm moving here."

My heart raced as if he'd just offered me a diamond ring. "Really?"

He met my gaze. “Would you want to see me?”

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“I shouldn’t. I’m not... deserving.” I wasn’t sure how to be in a relationship, but Dwayne gave me butterflies in my gut and warm goose bumps on my arm just from that sexy smile of his with those dimples. My own lips curved higher as I said, “But yeah, maybe I’d like for you to stick around.”

He squeezed my thigh. “You’re worth far more than you give yourself credit for.”

“I don’t know the future.” I curled my arms under his. “But for the first time in my life, I’m happy, and you’re a part of that.”

“So you trust me as more than a booty call and babysitter.”

My lips parted fast and heat rushed to my face, but I narrowed my eyes and said, “Well, it’s a start.”

He nodded as we drove onto my street. “I suppose, but I should warn you that my mother wanted to talk to you.”

I inhaled and held it for a moment. He just leveled up, though my mind screamed that I’d trusted him with Bruce. “Your mother?”

He motioned with his head to the backseat. “She heard Bruce in the background and assumed you were my girlfriend.”

I ignored how my insides were twisting and decided to tell him how I felt instead of hiding it. “I’m not ready for that.”

“She lives in California and hates flying, so don’t worry.” He parked the car. “Moving too fast?”

I lowered my head and reached for the door handle. “Yeah, but it’s wonderful at the same time. It’s a Catch-22, because I want you here.”

He got out and carried in everything for Bruce while I picked up my son from his car seat. “Don’t overthink, Mary. Instead, give me time to prove myself.”

Bruce opened his eyes for a second, and he clasped Dwayne’s finger. We headed to the house, and he held his hand. “My son is clearly enjoying your company.”

“He’s a good kid,” he said.

The stars shone above us like we were graced with wonder, and honestly, I was happy. I refused to entertain any other thought, though as we neared my door, Dwayne asked, “What’s your normal evening like without me here?”

We opened the door, and he locked up as I rushed to get my boy into bed. He followed with a bottle to lay beside him for when he woke up in less than an hour for his late-night drink. “It’s Wednesday, so we’d be at home and probably just finishing tubby time.”

We snuck out of the room, and as I closed the door, he hugged my waist and said, “So you’d be naked already.”

I turned toward him, and his fingers brushed against my breasts. “Funny. No. We’re usually curled up in the living room, and I’m looking for something to watch on TV. What about you?”

I left his embrace and took out the bottle of wine he’d brought over the other night

and poured us two glasses. “I’d be working out still.”

I met his gaze and noticed how his cock was standing at attention for me already. “Really?”

He sauntered over to me and scooped up his glass. “I have my morning routine and evening routine. I usually finish the evening with a run on the beach.”

We both sipped from our glasses, but my body was already melting as we stood next to each other. “That sounds hard. I’ve never been a big exerciser.”

He glanced at me like I was dessert. “I’ve worked you out pretty hard the past few nights.”

I laughed, though I was getting hot all over. “Well, that’s fun.”

He rested his hands on the counter behind me and put his glass down. I finished my drink and put my glass beside his. “Mary, you’re beautiful, and I respect you. Plus, you make me calm just by being near you.”

I hugged him. “And you make me laugh.”

He unbuckled my pants as he said, “Then we’re both good for each other.”

His lips suckled my neck as he helped me step out of my pants. “I guess.”

“You guess?” He tickled my ribs.

I laughed and pressed my hands to his chest. “I surrender. You’re good for me. Just... nothing in my life has ever been easy.”

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His lips widened as he stayed close and just held me. “So you’re saying I’m a slut.”

I unzipped his pants and pressed against his pole. “There you go again. Speaking of, how many girlfriends have you had before me?”

He wiggled, and his pants fell off his body in one easy move. “I’ve not been serious about many.”

I stilled, and my heart raced. I needed to know this answer. “Avoiding the question. How many women have you had?”

He reached for my waist and said, “That’s a different question.”

He nibbled on my ear, and a blaze grew inside me, but I said, “I want answers to both.”

He stopped, and his brown eyes were practically black. “I’ve had maybe two serious girlfriends.”

I rose up on my tiptoes and pressed against him. “And?”

His cheeks almost turned a dark red. “I never counted how many women drifted into my life.”

I couldn’t decide what I wanted to know at that moment. I let it go and said, “That’s evasive, but okay.”

He took my hands to lead me to the other bedroom. “No one charmed me like you.”

We closed the door, and I relaxed when he tossed his shirt on the floor. My mouth watered just from staring at him. “Well, that’s better, but I’ve never been charming.”

He winked at me then reached for my shirt. “You’re sweet, tempting, kind, loving, and all mine, Mary Steel. For as long as you’ll have me.”

I wanted to believe him. I closed my eyes and whispered, “You’re one of a kind yourself, Dwayne.”

Then he kissed me. I forgot all my doubts and fears and kissed him back.

Chapter Eleven

Dwayne

The morning went by too quickly. We woke up, ate breakfast, showered, played with Bruce, and nine o’clock came too soon.

An hour later, I met with Wanda, and my mission was completed for the moment. Lawyers would handle the rest. Charlie and Mark would go through the data of her company, and we would get those who were selling illegal weapons.

Part of me hoped the domesticated bliss of the morning would continue. I read my emails—no will was there yet, but it was still early. I finished adding diapers to the bag and asked, “Mary, are you ready?”

“Yes.” She carried Bruce toward the door, and I followed with the bag. We tugged on our shoes, and she asked, “Will you be done by four?”

“Yes, and then you and I can have a nice quiet evening.”

She kissed my cheek and locked the door while I played peekaboo with her son. We laughed as we went down the stairs and stepped into the morning sun in the parking lot.

All was fine until we reached her car. A memory flashed in my eyes of a car bombing and how Ernie, a guy in my first unit, had died in a flash.

In the air, at that moment, there was the same smell. I pressed my hand on her waist. “Wait. Stop.”

She narrowed her eyes and rocked Bruce. “What’s going on?”

The smell of sulfur went higher up my nose. It was slight, but it was there. I swallowed then said, “Get back with Bruce.”

She tilted her head but didn’t move away. “We’re running late.”

I turned toward her and held both her arms. Hopefully, I was wrong, but my gut was fully aware. I pressed my forehead to hers and said, “Trust me. Give me your key and use my phone to take video of me.”

She let out a sigh but did as I asked and held up my phone as requested. I pointed for her to step back to the building. She marched. I stepped back a few feet and asked, “Am I in the frame with the car?”

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“Yes.”

I nodded and pressed the button on her car to open the locks.

At first nothing happened, but then my skin grew warm, and I flew back from the force of the explosion.

My shoes pressed against the ground, and I heard Mary scream, “What the—”

I held up a finger as other residents of her building rushed out. I met Mary’s gaze and then inched closer to her but said, “Stay there. I need to check my rental.”

Her face was white and contorted as she pressed Bruce to her chest, but she continued to film me.

Others came out screaming, and I didn’t smell the same thing. Mary put my phone down as others scrambled past her, and she yelled, “I’m going back in with Bruce.”

Good idea. My rental didn’t give me the same sense in my gut, but someone had broken a window. I called out, “I’ll be right behind you.”

In the distance, a siren sounded to let us know help was clearly on the way.

Once I checked the perimeter of the building, I told one of the guys who had said he was army that I was checking on Mary and it was her car. He nodded, and I rushed up the stairs.

Bruce was in tears and refusing his bottle. I didn't take off my shoes even though they were covered in ash. "What happened?" she asked.

Her eyes were misty and glassy, like she wanted me to tell her something else. I pressed my hand to Bruce's head, and he calmed down, so I spoke in a soft tone. "Someone tried to kill you and Bruce."

Her eyebrows furrowed, and she gave me back my phone. "Arthur left us alone for a year. I don't know what changed."

"He saw you with me."

Tears rushed down her cheeks. Bruce suckled his bottle in her arms, and I whispered to her, "My rental was also touched, but I guess it had better security."

"Bruce was scared. He could have died." She hugged her son closer.

"You're both safe." I kissed her forehead, and the police sirens grew louder. I told her, "Stay in and keep him calm." I stood up and ignored how alert and on edge I felt. "The police are here. I'll invite them up since you're the car owner."

She nodded, but her face seemed... empty. She said, "Okay. I need to tell work."

"They'll understand," I said, opening the door.

She called out quietly, "And my brother."

"Call him over," I said then let myself out and locked the door.

The police were talking to residents, and I approached one officer. Once he was free to talk, I put my hands behind my back and said, "It was my girlfriend's car that

exploded. She and her one-year-old are safe inside her apartment. The air smelled like sulfur, so I had her take a video when I approached the vehicle to inspect it.”

He took my phone and then showed the other officers. Four of them returned to me, and the one I had spoken to said, “We’re going to need to talk to her.”

“Of course.” I motioned in her direction with my shoulder. “She just wanted her son to calm down. He’s rattled.”

One of the other officers, an older man, nodded and asked, “What service were you in?”

I stood at attention for a moment and said, “I was a SEAL.”

Another man, young and with pitch-black hair, said, “Which means you understand advanced weaponry.”

I didn’t even blink, but I said, “You can ask her for my alibi.”

He tapped his pen to his paper, but all four of them walked up the stairs with me. I unlocked her door, and Bruce was resting on her shoulder.

The older officer asked, “Was that your car?”

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She ran her hand through her hair, her face pale. “Yes. I was supposed to be going to work right now.”

“Where do you work?” the younger officer asked.

She pivoted toward him and said, “I work at Steel Women’s Shelters. I’m the manager.”

He then asked her, “And can you vouch for your boyfriend’s whereabouts since you last used the car?”

She glanced at me and smiled. “We’ve been together the whole time. He stopped me from opening the door to put my son in. I owe him our lives right now.”

“Any idea who’d want you dead?” the older officer asked.

She showed them her son and said, “Bruce’s father. I have a restraining order against him that’s active.”

“Arthur Waterstone,” the younger man offered. My ears burned as he continued, “He works at DW weapons.”

Fuck. I needed my phone back. I grabbed hers from the counter and realized she didn’t have a password. I’d mention that to her later, but for now, I used it as she spoke to the officers. I asked fast, Mark, this is Dwayne. Arthur Waterstone? Do we have any new intel on him?

Three dots. I glanced up, but they were discussing her parking her car the night before while I was babysitting. Mark then popped up. Nothing new I see. I'll text you when I finish a search.

I'll call you soon, I typed fast then deleted the entire conversation from her phone and put it back.

Mary's conversation with the police ended. "Everything okay?" she asked me.

I smiled and said, "Yes, I had to talk to my security team, so I used your phone."

She stood up with Bruce. "I understand. The police need to finish their report."

I rejoined the conversation, and the older man said, "We told Mary she's not safe here until we apprehend whoever bombed her car."

I stood above her, but she seemed more herself, with color in her cheeks again. "She's safe with me," I said. "In fact, we can fly to my house in Virginia tonight to get them both out of here if she wants."

Her lips opened, and she held her breath. "I can't be a burden."

I stepped toward her and took her hand. My place was big enough for all of us. "It's your life, Mary, and Bruce's."

She rested her head on my chest, and Bruce cooed. "I'm scared," she said.

I hugged them. They made my life more alive. "I'll pay for police protection if that's your preference."

She shook her head. "No. Don't. You're enough. I don't want to be a burden."

The police officers started leaving. I let her go and walked the officers to the door. As they left, the older man handed me a card with a case number on it and said, “We’ll be in touch.”

I left the notes on the counter and returned to them. She rocked her son, and I took the seat beside her. Neither of us said anything, but Bruce wiggled to get down.

She sighed and let him since she’d set up a playmat. Then we both put our shoes away, and I mopped her floor for her while she cleaned the cabinets.

As we finished up, a knock came from the door. She looked more like herself now, but she still crossed her arms and stood in front of Bruce. “Can you get the door? It’s probably Joseph.” she asked.

Well, I knew what Arthur looked like. I glanced out and saw a man in a business suit. I opened the door, and he asked, “Are you Dwayne?”

“Let him in,” Mary called out, sounding normal.

“I am. Are you Joseph?” I asked.

“Yes.” I opened the door wider. Mary waved for him to join her. Joseph took off his shoes and said, “Thank you for being there for my sister today.”

He worked at Wanda’s weapons manufacturing—where I was supposed to be that day. My heart constricted. “The police suspect Arthur.”

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Joseph hugged his sister. “You need to be safe. He’s completely gone off the rails.”

I needed to complete my mission too. My muscles tensed, but I made coffee while I said, “I can take her to Virginia for a few days to get away from here until he’s been arrested.”

Her brother squeezed her hand and said, “Okay, a few days will be good for both of you.”

I pressed the button for the coffee to start and waved for her brother to join me in the kitchen. Mary was still unusually still and not so vibrant at that moment. I said, “Joseph, I have one thing I need to handle. Can you stay with your sister for an hour to help her pack?”

Joseph nodded. “Of course.”

Good. We were on the same team. I went to Mary and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Her eyes met mine. For a second, I swear I saw fear. “You don’t have to rush. We’ll be fine,” she said.

I kissed her forehead as her brother stared at us both. I let her go and said, “Keep your phone on and don’t leave. If there is any problem, call the police. I’ll call you when I get a new phone on the way so you can call me too.”

“Okay,” she said with a sigh.

I squeezed her hand. “We’ll be on a plane in a few hours.”

She let out an audible breath then rose up on her tiptoes to kiss.

For a moment, I didn’t move at all.

Then I let her go and nodded to her brother, grabbing a key.

The police were still milling around, but I headed toward town to pick up a phone at the local store I’d passed when I went to her apartment the first time.

Five minutes later, I had a phone and hopped in my car. As I drove toward the factory, I called Cole Securities. Mark answered.

I typed in my security code, then he spoke: “Thunder Thighs, he has set up some meetings the past twenty-four hours. We should have come with you.”

“We’re fine.” My heart was still strumming from that morning. I stared at the road. “He tried to blow up my girlfriend and her son. I’m going to plant the bug, but I’ll be back in Virginia tonight.”

Mark then said, “Be the fuck careful there. If I could do it, I would.”

I turned onto the highway. “I’m more worried about Mary right now.”

“Keep your head on straight.”

I saw my exit sign. I would plant the bug then get Mary out fast. I needed to call her with my new number, so I said, “I’m almost here. I’ll plant the bug in ten minutes.”

Done. I then called her, and her voice was soft. I refused to let her slip away because

I had failed her. She and her son were too special.

Chapter Twelve

Mary

My heart thumped in my chest. When Dwayne had left, my skin prickled, like I would die without him.

Bruce and Joseph were both here. My stomach shouldn't have been in twists. Joseph played with my son as he drank his coffee.

Slowly I made a list of everything I needed to accomplish that seemed endless, though the time it took was probably just a minute or so. Done, I jumped up and rushed to my room. I found a suitcase for myself and one for Bruce. I tossed his things in first. For a few days, he would need diapers, clothes, toys. When we'd gone to my cousin's wedding in Napa, his bag had been bigger.

Had I packed the stroller, and was the car seat still in Dwayne's rental? I had a headache, to be honest. Thinking wasn't easy. Joseph came up behind me as I stuffed clothes in a bag as I said, "I don't know if I should go."

"You're not making sense." He hugged me and said, "Someone tried to murder you." When he let me go, I had tears in my eyes. "You either go with your boyfriend to the beach or you come to my penthouse and don't leave until this is over."

Arthur would find out where Joseph lived, and Joseph had enough on his plate. That same thought had kept me in the shelter rather than my brother's place the year before.

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Nothing had changed, except this time, I would be hiding with the hottest man I'd ever met. I wiped my face to pretend I was fine, when inside I buzzed with the prickly sensation that I wasn't good enough for Dwayne. It rushed to my head faster than poison. I blinked and wished the thought would dissipate. "You have to go to work. I know Arthur almost killed me before, but I don't want Dwayne hurt."

Joseph grabbed the diaper box for me and said, "He's already saved you once."

I would have to take every diaper I had. I took out the sealed pack and fit it in the suitcase while I said, "I feel like a failure."

Joseph folded the clothes around the air-sealed bags. "Is that worth your life?"

"No." I glanced behind me and saw how happy Bruce was with his table as he tugged a lever back and forth to make sounds. I breathed a little easier then said, "I'm going to Virginia with him."

"Good." Joseph bumped into me playfully, and with his help, the bag had room for toys. We grabbed a few of Bruce's favorites. "Your new boyfriend looks like he loves you already, but if he hurts you, don't hide that. I'll always protect you."

I kissed his cheek and said, "I love you, but we both know Dwayne is double your size."

Joseph didn't move. "Doesn't matter. You're my sister."

I had no idea what I would do without him. Ever. We quickly finished packing the

first bag, and he put it near the door.

I started on my clothes, and packing for myself was easier. Toothbrush, clothes, shoes, and hairbrush were all I needed. I heard Joseph and Bruce playing while I packed.

I grabbed a blue dress that I had bought on clearance the year before that I'd never worn. I rocked on my feet and decided to pack that too.

As I zipped up my bag, I heard the door. I rushed out to ensure that Arthur wasn't here somehow.

A second later, Dwayne slipped inside, and I pressed my hand to my chest, refusing to cry.

He held his phone to his ear, speaking to someone fast, and locked the door, took off his shoes, shook hands with my brother, and then kissed me.

My questions quieted, and I was in his arms again.

While still holding the phone, he ended the kiss fast but pressed his hand on my back and asked, "Is everyone ready?"

"I guess," I mumbled. I knew I sounded upset.

Dwayne was amazing, but somehow depending on him felt like I was failing myself and Bruce. I pressed my lips together and vowed never to say that.

He held up the phone to me and said, "I need you to give the representative on the phone Bruce's info so they let you both on the plane."

I jolted. I should have realized this. I took it and said, “Of course.”

The woman introduced herself as an airline representative, and I quickly gave her what she needed. I’d hold Bruce tight and keep him in my lap the entire flight. Once I finished, I handed the phone back, and Dwayne finished the conversation.

My brother hauled my smaller bag to the front door. I was all packed.

Dwayne pocketed his phone and asked, “Ready? The flight leaves in two hours, so we need to get there.”

Right. I picked up Bruce and held him tight, pretending to be fine.

“Our airport is small. If you need me to get my sister, send me your information,” Joseph said.

Dwayne stopped and grabbed a pen off the magnet on the refrigerator and jotted down his info on one of my scraps of paper. “When I get back to Virginia, I’ll have my regular number with a new phone delivered, but this is my phone until we get it.”

He took out his business card from his wallet and handed it to Joseph with the number.

My brother studied it and asked, “Who did you hire as your security team?”

“Cole Securities.” Dwayne returned to my side as I bounced my boy. “They were founded by former Navy SEALs who were friends of my brother.”

Joseph tapped the card and folded the paper to put in his pocket. “Sounds like good timing, then, that you already hired a team that can keep Mary safe.”

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He turned toward me and stopped. “She’s the sweetest woman I ever met.”

Sweet wasn’t strong. I ignored how my gut was twisting, and I kissed my brother goodbye and grabbed the bottles of milk from the refrigerator. “Let’s go, Dwayne,” I said.

Joseph followed us to the door. “She’s been through a lot. And it’s my job to protect her, so don’t hurt her.”

Dwayne held up his hand like he was swearing an oath. “I won’t.”

I smiled and said, “I can take care of myself. My brother is not my keeper.”

Joseph glared at me, but Dwayne said, “I understand.”

Probably not, but the three of us headed out. I locked the door.

We were quiet as we went downstairs, and this time, the parking lot was empty except for my blasted car. I went slow and stayed close to Joseph while Dwayne checked out the cars. He unlocked both his and Joseph’s, then turned on the engines.

All was clear. We buckled Bruce in the back, and while it wasn’t logical, my heart constricted as we closed the passenger door. I swallowed the fear but practically jumped into the front seat.

Joseph waved goodbye to us, and Dwayne packed in our luggage, then took the front seat. Once he joined us and put the car in drive, I said, “Thank you for taking us out

of town for a few days.”

“I’m excited to show you my beach house,” Dwayne said, curling his hand around my own.

The drive to the airport was uneventful. Dwayne returned the car, and we were dropped off at the front gate.

As expected, there was no line, and soon, we were seated in our first-class seats. I swallowed but didn’t say a word about how I wasn’t his equal and couldn’t pay for this on my own. I tensed up but only said, “I didn’t expect to be this close to the hotel where we met this fast.”

My skin jumped but Bruce pressed against my legs as he said, “So, for our date, when you get all fancied up—”

He must have noticed my face was hot, so he put his hands out and offered to hold Bruce for me. I squeezed my son and said, “I can’t leave Bruce.”

He smiled like he wasn’t offended and asked, “Movie and pizza delivered, or do you want Chinese?”

My son was dead weight right now, and he wasn’t so little. I took a deep breath and said, “Those are my choices, then?”

“No.” He opened his legs and spread out all those muscles of his. “If you want sushi, French cuisine flown in special for the occasion—just let me know what you want to eat. And we can relax just watching the waves from my backyard.”

I held Bruce up to see if he would take him, and he did without questioning me. “Sounds perfect,” I said.

Bruce slept on his lap comfortably, like he belonged there.

Part of me wished I'd waited to have my son till I had met a man like Dwayne.

I hadn't thought like that ever, and I pressed my lips tight.

My wishes didn't matter, I guessed. We were there because I never made smart choices.

The plane landed, and he carried Bruce through the airport and grabbed our bags.

As we headed to his car while he pushed a cart, my stomach twisted. Once again, Arthur was out to destroy my life, and now, I had involved Dwayne in all this.

When my father had died, I hadn't freed myself. Instead, I'd gone from bad to worse when I moved in with Arthur, but I would never have guessed he would blow up me or his son.

Dwayne parked his car in a garage, and I could see sand sprayed a little on the street, like it had breezed onto the pavement. I sniffed the salty air, and my gaze wandered in search of the water.

He closed the garage door, and I retrieved Bruce and the diaper bag. We headed into his house, and I was determined to be more myself and not so melancholy. I stood in a huge empty room that had a TV and a couch with nothing else. "This is it?"

He took off his shoes and put them up. I handed him mine. Most people didn't have this habit, but I hated germs in the house. Perhaps he was appeasing me, but I didn't ask. "It is. It's a three bedroom, plus den, though I've been using one of the bedrooms as my gym."

I rested Bruce on the couch for a moment and took a deep breath. It smelled like the beach, but then I walked across the room and stared out the back window. There it was. White sand, blue water, and his backyard was green, though it had sand in it. I hugged myself. We weren't from the same universe. "The view is amazing."

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I heard his footsteps behind me. “I already have the best view.”

I turned around and my face heated as I saw that he was staring at my ass.

He winked at me then returned to the couch and picked up Bruce. “Let’s get him in his bed.”

Bed? I followed him and saw that one of the rooms was a nursery with green frogs, blue fish, and orange cats with a white crib in the middle. “You had a crib delivered?”

He set some stuffed animals around my son and stepped back. “My team... my brother’s friends had children who had outgrown it, so it’s a loaner.”

I took a deep breath and swallowed. As we walked out, I said, “Good. I don’t want you to spend a crazy amount of money on me.”

He playfully bumped into my shoulder with a smile on his face. “It’s not a bother. I’m just happy you’re here.”

Across the room, a chandelier caught my eye. It probably cost more than the rent at my place. “Your house is super fancy.”

He pointed out the obvious. “It’s empty. Maybe while you’re here, you can tell me what to put where. I have things my mother sent in the garage, and I’ve never had time to figure out where to put what.”

At least I had a job here, then, and I wasn’t useless. I nodded. “Done.” I glanced at

the white walls and peeked into his room. Even his bedroom only had a bed. I turned around and said, “I was my brother’s interior decorator when he moved into his place.” We went to the next room, the one closest to the beach, and I saw a desk facing the window. “Is this your office?”

He shrugged. “It’s where I fill out papers my lawyers send when I’m home.”

His wrapped his arms around me. My heart shifted, like I could breathe for the first time, but I pressed my hand on his muscular chest and said, “If you need to do something...”

He let me go, but his dimples were out in full force. “I need you to help me figure out what we’re ordering for dinner, especially for Bruce.”

I rushed out of the office. Honestly, I couldn’t stay still, and a mission sounded good. I went to his kitchen and said, “I’m sure your refrigerator...” So he had milk in his fridge that must have been delivered but otherwise nothing. I closed the door and said, “Hmm, what’s the closest restaurant?”

“Greek,” he said.

Restaurants cost more money, and he’d already spent a lot on us, but I shifted my weight and said, “I love kabobs.”

“Perfect,” he said then added, “You can help me fill my online cart, so we have groceries coming too.”

Right. I could handle this as it was temporary, and I would figure out how to repay him, somehow. Depending on someone wasn’t my specialty. Not anymore. Dependence was like addiction to me, but I inhaled and tried to ignore the thought. We were temporary.

Chapter Thirteen

Dwayne

Mary still seemed off. She'd lost her color and some of her shine that morning.

The car bomb was dramatic, and she could use sleep. Hopefully, that was all that was wrong, but my heart ticked, like there was something unsaid that needed to be.

I hoped I was wrong, but after we ordered our groceries and kabobs at my computer, she still seemed forlorn. So I kissed her cheek and hoped she would open up. "You are safe here," I told her.

Her gaze went to my nose, but she sucked in her lips as if she would seal them shut. I waited as she blinked and finally glanced up at me. "I am worried I put you in danger."

"Nothing to worry about." I took her hand in mine, and our knees brushed together as I turned my chair toward her. "Arthur would have a death wish if he came here."

She let out a snort. "There is no predicting."

I traced her soft thighs that covered the sacred altar she'd let me taste. "Sweetheart, I was a SEAL. My security team, who delivered the crib, were also SEALs. His wife works for the CIA. My house is equipped with the best security system in the country, and I won't let anything happen to you or Bruce."

Her face turned a little pinker as she said, "You know how to make me feel safer." Her eyelashes fluttered, and my lips tingled to kiss her. However, a jarring noise interrupted the moment, and she sat back. "But your phone is ringing."

I glanced at it. Fucking Mark. I had waited all day. He had info we needed, so I stood up and said, “I need to take it. Get me when the delivery arrives so I can show you how to unlock the door.”

She stood up as well, but she tilted her head and asked, “Opening is complicated?”

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“I’ll need your fingerprint, but no, it’s not. I’ll also need a body scan for the first time.”

She tapped the desk and sashayed to the door. “Get your call.”

Maybe she didn’t sway her ass on purpose, since it seemed like her normal walk, but the way her cheeks bounced always caught my eye. I called out as she neared the door, “Be right out.”

She closed it, and I pressed the button and checked the door was fully closed. “Mark, what did you find out?”

His gruff cough made my skin crawl. “Couple things. Are you sitting down?”

“I can be.” I followed directions. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Mark kept his words slow but clear. “Arthur Waterstone went missing.”

I leaned back in my chair. The police should have acted faster. “And Wanda?”

“Left after a meeting with the board.”

My body tensed up. This made no sense. I rubbed my forehead, like that might help me process what I’d been told, but nothing did. My mom had tried to counsel Wanda and would take her call. I swallowed. “Is Wanda directly involved with the sales?” I asked.

“Yes. The computer you hacked for us confirms.”

“Fuck,” I said and stood up to glance out my window. The beach always calmed me down. “Where is she now?”

“Unknown.”

The lapping waves weren’t helping. My gut was twisted like I had betrayed my family.

“Her illegal contracts have helped her amass a small fortune, so she could charter a flight anywhere,” Mark continued.

Shutting her down now meant I retooled the entire company that followed all the laws. I glanced at the door and asked the more important question: “So they are both missing?”

Mark then said, “Arthur’s confirmed as her front man these days. She hired him because of some of his prison contacts. And his police record is full, including felony murder.”

“Well, that’s fucking awesome,” I said through gritted teeth.

Wanda worked with criminals who knew how to kill. I’d been lucky I smelled the residue, or Mary and Bruce would have been torn from me.

Mark had no idea the storm inside my brain.

“I’ll email you everything now so you can hand it over to your lawyers,” he said.

I turned and saw the mail pop up on my screen as I said, “Thanks.”

“Cheer up, Thunder Thighs. Your girl is safe in your home.”

Fair point. I let out a sigh and almost smiled as I said, “Yeah, she’s here.”

“Well, fuck it, when everything is done, you get to run your own company, but for now, you keep her there and sign off on the papers.”

“Okay,” I said. I had no argument with the plan. I’d been assigned to stop the sales. Taking control was the only answer, but when I hung up, I closed my eyes.

My brother’s ghost had been hovering over me since the day he died, but right now, he seemed more human and like he had made a horrible mistake when he almost married the wrong woman.

So much so my stomach even cringed a little, but I picked up my phone and decided I needed to make another call. “Mom, hi.”

She gave a small laugh then said, “It’s the middle of the day. What’s going on?”

I went still as I said, “Look, if Wanda calls you or comes to see you, don’t answer her.”

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I put her on speaker and texted Mark, asking for protection for my mother's house in San Francisco.

"Why?" Mom asked.

Mark texted a thumbs-up. I nodded and said, "I'll explain later. But there is no redemption for what she did. I'm taking full control."

"I'm on your side."

"Thanks, Mom. You always were." I said, massaging the back of my head. I'd been oblivious, too, and even now, I wanted to see the best in others. I'd taken Bruce to my meeting with her.

I finished my conversation and slammed my phone down. I was done, though I quickly read the email. I signed electronically and then stormed out of my office.

I headed toward the kitchen, and the sight of Mary's back while she was on her phone relaxed me. She turned around, and her eyes widened. "Dwayne?" She then said into her phone. "I'll check in later, Joseph. Bye."

Her brother. Good. I kissed her, and her light touch sent my heart skipping.

I deepened the kiss and held her sexy body next to mine.

Damn, she still set me off. When the kiss ended, she smiled and asked, "What was that for?"

“Because you’re safe, and we’re going to be fine.”

She left my embrace and wiggled her hips as she headed to the door and pointed to my cameras. “Well, how does this security system work?”

Soon, I would have her again. Something about Mary made me hunger in a way no other woman had. For now, I showed her a panel, typed in a code, and then held out my arm to direct her fingers. “Put your hand here.”

“Okay.”

The system gave me a green light, so then I typed in a little more, and I told her, “Now, don’t move for your scan.”

She went rigid. “What’s the scan for?”

The green light appeared just when the doorbell rang. I quickly explained, “It’s measuring your shape and body to match your fingerprint.”

She hugged her waist like she was nervous, but then she pressed her fingers on the plate, and the door clicked open for her. “Okay, next time you can open the door much faster.”

We both headed out the front door as our groceries also appeared. I tapped her back and said, “Grab the kabobs so I can get the bags.”

We headed in and the doors locked behind us and we both headed to the kitchen. She held up the kabobs and said, “This smells good.”

I motioned to the plastic plates I’d unloaded, though I was sure my mom had sent better ones. “Let’s put the groceries away first.”

She helped me with the vegetables, but halfway through, her son cried. She said, “Bruce is awake.”

I nodded and continued putting the food away. “Good timing. He can join us for dinner.”

She let out a small sigh and said, “Right. Everything is fine.”

My skin prickled. Again, I thought there was something else. I didn’t ask, but she headed to the bedroom, and I said, “We’ll just sit tight and ignore the rest of the world until we’re safe.”

I finished with the food and set up our dinners. A nice evening alone together was just what we both needed, or at least I did. Unlike my brother, it seemed I had picked a good woman—if she would have me.

I thought I was falling harder for her than she was for me, so she needed time.

Chapter Fourteen

Mary

My son in my arms was the only reason I could breathe. If I didn’t have him, I would have never stepped on the plane.

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We finished our dinners at the kitchen counter. I sat on a stool, and Dwayne had found his office chair, which was too short for the counter, but he sat across from us anyway.

I put my fork down and hugged my son in my lap. The next day, I would see what he had in the garage and direct the setup.

It was the least I could do. The real truth was that if he hadn't shown up in my life, I would be dead. Arthur had dismantled everything I thought about myself, and the girl I was beside him wasn't anyone I was proud to be.

If not for Dwayne, my son would be dead too.

I'd thought the past year of being on my own, with Bruce, was me learning to be strong, but now, that seemed to be another lie I'd told myself.

Dependence ate at my skin like I had a bee sting that I needed to soothe, fast. I put my son down so he could play with some of the toys and took our empty plates to wash. As I passed Dwayne, his phone rang again. I handed it to him. "Dwayne, your phone."

"Thanks." He took it from me and mouthed, "Security."

I used the dish soap and cleaned up, which was easy for takeout, as Dwayne jumped out of his chair and asked, "What the fuck? Can I talk to him?"

He paced, and his eyes were wide when he stared at me and asked into his phone,

“He’s where?”

I had goose bumps, but I finished the dishes and turned off the water.

“What the... fine. I’ll tell Mary.”

My stomach twisted as he hung up the phone. I gripped the edge of the counter like that might hold me, and I prayed this wouldn’t be bad as I asked, “What happened?”

Dwayne brushed my arm and shoulder. “Your brother is in the hospital.”

Tears streamed down my face, and I shook. Dwayne hugged me closer and said, “Wanda and Arthur—“

“This is my fault.” I shook my head. “I need to talk to Joseph.”

Dwayne backed up, and I grabbed my phone from my back pocket. I opened my contacts and he was at the top, but I accidentally hit the video call.

My heart raced and I wanted to scream. But I held still because Bruce laughed at a mirror he held like it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen, and I never wanted his childhood to resemble my own.

My brother answered, and his face was bruised and black and his lip swollen. “Mary.”

Dwayne glanced over my shoulder, and for a second, I closed my eyes. He looked like I had after giving birth. I absolutely didn’t deserve Dwayne now, but I focused on my brother and said, “You look bad.”

Joseph had a hospital gown on and sat up in his room. “I’ll be fine. They fucked up

my launch, but everything will work out. Stay safe, sis.”

This was on me. I had caused this because I believed the wrong guy. My skin crawled. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, and this is not your fault.”

Once again, he was trying to make me feel better. I ignored how my chest caved in. “If I—”

“No. Stop. Protect Bruce and don’t blame yourself. This is on me.”

Damn, he knew me, but like when we were little, he took the blame for me so he would be the one punched. Nothing had changed. I sniffled and said, “It is not. You never picked the wrong girl...”

“Let me talk to Dwayne,” he said.

I wiped my eyes and handed him the phone. I rocked on my feet and wished I was steady and smarter. I heard my brother say, “Dwayne, make sure she’s safe. I didn’t tell anyone where she went, but I trusted you with my sister. Don’t make me hate you.”

“She and Bruce are safe,” Dwayne said and pressed his hand to the small of my back.

Yet if I stayed there, I would put him in danger. If I left, I would put Bruce in danger. My heart felt like it was punctured and bleeding out, so I said goodbye to let Joseph get better. Then I let Dwayne hug me.

His strong arms around me made me feel safe and wanted. I pulled back and blinked back tears when I said, “This is my fault.”

“No, it’s not.”

I was weaker near him, and if I was depending on him, then I hadn’t learned anything I preached about. I turned away from him. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into my mess.”

“Mary, it’s my mess. My brother started the company Arthur works at, and he and my almost-sister-in-law are selling illegal weapons.”

I turned back to face him and backed away.

“I went to Pittsburgh to discover who Wanda hired,” he went on. “I even knew you were involved with him and intended to talk to you before we ever met.”

“What?”

“From the first conversation, I knew you were innocent and not part of anything illegal, which is why I need to wrestle control of my company out of Wanda’s hands.”

Fuck. If I would have kept my hands to myself, then maybe he would have stopped all this faster. “So I distracted you, then, from your mission.”

He didn’t budge at all. “Arthur was gunning for you, even without me there.”

He was right. “Maybe you could have stopped him before he blew up my car if we...”

I broke and couldn't see. I collapsed on the couch. I had invited a monster into my life, and all of this was because I made bad choices.

Maybe I was doomed to repeat that, though I'd tried for my son's sake to be better.

Dwayne's strong hand massaged my back. "Mary, Bruce sees you're crying."

I sat up fast and tried to smile so my son could see me. "I'm scared."

Dwayne was on his knees next to me. "It's okay to be scared. I was scared on every mission I ever went on as a SEAL."

I raised my eyebrow and asked, "Yeah?"

He nodded. "My brother died on one of his. I could have easily shared the same fate."

I rocked in my seat and hoped he would understand me when I asked, "Then why did you do it?"

He shrugged like his actions didn't matter, but we both knew they did. "Because I was there for my team, and I signed up to serve."

Brothers were important. I'd not be this strong without having family even though my father had done a number on Joseph and myself. "Why did you sign up, though? Your brother had died. I don't understand that decision of yours."

He took my hand and said, "I was eighteen, and I had always looked up to Devon. He was the best, and then he... failed. He left me his company shares and warned my mom and me about Wanda. I was the one who didn't listen when I had the chance."

My eyes narrowed, and I squeezed his hand. "He didn't fail. He died."

He let out a small sigh like he lived in a memory and then said, “I was eighteen and cocksure of myself and thought he’d failed. He’d always fixed my messes when he could, and at the time, I thought I could make up for his mistakes. If I hadn’t trusted Wanda to stay in touch with my mom, Arthur wouldn’t have a job or a means of hurting you.”

“That’s a stretch.” He’d saved me already, and even when confronting Arthur, he’d not been angry, just sure of himself. I’d never met anyone like Dwayne. “You don’t seem to have a chip on your shoulder.”

“After my first mission, I realized the real stakes, and he died a fucking hero out there. I was proud he was my brother then, but I think I needed to see that for myself.”

We had opposite backgrounds. Joseph had been the only good person in my life until Bruce, and I’d run away from my brother. I curled up my legs closer to my chest and said, “I don’t know what to do right now.”

Dwayne, like he was someone with all answers, just said, “It’s okay. Nothing is happening. Your brother will be fine. The only decision you have right now is what movie you want to watch on TV.”

A movie on TV? Seriously? I fucked up my life and Bruce’s and everything. I jumped up as my body tingled everywhere and needed release, so I pointed to his other door. “I’m...”not good enough for you, but I couldn’t bring myself to say that. Instead, I bounced and asked, “Is it safe to go on your back porch to look at the ocean?”

Dwayne then reached out for Bruce’s hand and said, “Sure. We’ll all go.”

My son took his hand and held his palm out for me. I took it and he swung between

us as we went to the beach to breathe the salty air. “You said your security team knew your brother.”

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“It’s why they approached me the day I hung up my uniform,” Dwayne answered and made my son laugh when he picked him up. I pressed my fingers to the door panel, and it unlocked for us. I opened it, and the sea air was nice as Dwayne said, “They trusted I could help them build a case against Wanda to stop illegal weapons being sold while I fought for control to ensure no more weapons of mine got into the wrong hands.”

My cousins and family had been my guardian angels. My son let go of us to dig in some sand in the yard, and Dwayne dusted off some of his chairs. “Yeah?” I asked.

I sat, and he folded his hands in front of him and said, “I have been bored out of my mind for weeks until you came in my life.”

My neck tingled and wondered if boredom had been what drew me to Dwayne, but I brushed that thought away fast and intended to ignore it and asked, “Were you?”

His dimples came out when he said, “The party where we met changed me. It was like I met a good woman who would change my life for the better, in that one moment.”

Sweet words. I wanted to believe him. I lowered my head. If he would just focus on his job and not on me, everything would be different. I swallowed and asked, “Do you regret it?”

He leaned closer like he would share a secret. “No. I was talking about when I met you.”

I pressed my hands to my chest and stood up fast. “Don’t.”

He followed me. “Don’t what?”

I paced around, but I was weak and not helping myself or Bruce when I gave away all my power. My pulse raced with anxiety. “Don’t say I’m a good thing in your life.”

His eyes widened like I’d shocked him. Then he said, “You’re the woman I waited my whole life to meet.”

Just like that, raindrops. I glanced up and asked, “Why should I believe that?”

“Because it’s true.”

Another woman would probably hold him tight and never let go. Seriously, it was the worst day of my life. I swallowed, and he grabbed Bruce fast. He held the door open for me, and we rushed inside. As the door closed, he said, “Don’t worry about it. Pick the movie.”

My head pounded. If I didn’t stop myself, I would be weak and pathetic and never change the way I’d wanted. I rocked onto my tiptoes and heels then said, “I need a shower. Watch Bruce for a few minutes?”

He motioned toward his bedroom and said, “Of course. Take your time.”

“Thanks,” I said and grabbed my bag.

Hopefully, the shower would help cool me down. At that moment, I had crazy thoughts of grabbing Bruce and running. It wasn’t smart, but I’d worked the whole year to be strong and independent. Now we were under attack because I hadn’t been, and I refused to go backward and depend on Dwayne, even if he was the perfect guy.

Chapter Fifteen

Dwayne

Mary had chosen a slapstick comedy. The way her face contorted when she laughed made me chuckle. Bruce crawled onto my lap and cuddled up close.

The moon was out now, and the rain was pelting against the glass windows. I used my phone to close the blinds and turned toward Mary. She sat absolutely still, but her eyes were open. I bumped into her and said, “Bruce fell asleep.”

She blinked and stared at me like she’d just woken up, but she jumped up and said, “Let’s put him in bed.”

I carried him into the nursery and tucked him in the crib. Mary adjusted his pillow and kissed his forehead. As she came up, I asked, “Are you feeling better?”

Her eyes narrowed at me, and she whispered, “We need to talk.”

I pressed my hand on her lower back and said, “Whatever you need.”

“Good,” she said, but as we left the room, she sped up so I wouldn’t touch her. I followed behind her, and a moment later, we were alone.

Her face was pale, and she hugged herself. I headed to the kitchen and showed her a wine bottle, but she shook her head no. I put it back, and she pointed to the couch. I joined her and asked, “So what’s going on, Mary?”

She didn’t have one breath but three fast exhales, and she turned away from me as she said, “I can’t ruin your life.”

Ruin? I swallowed, unsure what to do, but I quickly said, “You’re not.”

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She jumped up and walked toward the back of the giant room toward the beach view and clutched her stomach again. “We were supposed to be a one-night stand.”

I massaged the back of my head and quietly said, “I never thought that.”

She twisted her neck to stare back at me. “I did.”

I let out a small sigh and followed her to the closed blinds. “Well, I’m glad you changed your mind.”

She squeezed her eyes like her thoughts were hurting her. “I shouldn’t have. If I hadn’t, you’d not be stuck with us.”

My eyes widened. I would never think of her as a burden. “I’m not stuck—“

She let out a small yelp like I argued and she’d not hear me. Then she said, “And maybe what Arthur had done wouldn’t have been so deadly if he’d known I fought my own battles.”

This wasn’t about me. I opened the blinds so she could see the rain if she wanted. “What are you talking about?”

She pressed her forehead onto the window and said, “You answered the door, and you probably frightened him.”

My mind raced to the day before and how I’d stared down at the small guy with the bad attitude. I pressed my back against the nearby wall. “I read his rap sheet with the

police. You're lucky to be alive."

Tears rushed out of her eyes. "I know that. I'm embarrassed you saw my bad choices in black and white like that."

Fuck. I wasn't good at comforting a woman. This wasn't my training. I squatted. "Did you want him back in your life again?"

She rubbed her temples and stood back. "No, but it should have been me that told him to get out."

Okay. If that was how she wanted to play that moment, I tilted my head and asked, "Why didn't you join me at the door and kick it closed, then?"

Her face turned red. "Because I'm weak near you."

That wasn't the word for her. I stood up. "You're not."

She pivoted toward me and pointed like I'd insulted her. "Don't fucking tell me what you think I need to hear."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm not. You're sweet, good, and strong as hell, rebuilding a life for Bruce like you have."

She squared herself up as she stared at me, but she put her hands down. "I don't know... because I think tonight, I should sleep on the couch, so we don't get confused."

Today had been traumatic. I gave her space but stepped away from the wall and asked, "Are you sure you want to be alone in a place you don't know?"

Her hands curled into balls at her side. “No, but I can’t depend on you.”

“Got it,” I said. Arthur had screwed with her head. I couldn’t change her past, but I tried to figure out a solution. “How about I pay you to decorate my house?”

Her entire body went white as she said, “I’m not a whore.”

I put my hand in my pockets and rubbed the back of my head as heat rose in my cheeks. “I was talking about the house, not sleeping with me.”

I lowered my head as I knew that was the wrong thing to say.

“You’re only offering that because you see I’m upset.”

She saw through my offer, but I said, “Partly true, but I can set you up with a budget so you can make this place livable.”

Why did I suffer from saying stupid things? The way her lips pressed together told me I’d been wrong and stupid. She lashed out at me. “Because you intend to stay in Virginia once I’m out of your hair.”

I snapped my fingers automatically. I hadn’t planned out my life beyond keeping her safe, as the company had never been on my radar until now. “Actually, I’d have to move to Pittsburgh when I take control of the company, but I swear I’ll pack whatever you pick out to take with me.”

“That’s a lot of work.” She rocked back and forth as she said, “Besides, you’ll get a fancy place like my brother, where I also shouldn’t go and visit.”

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Shouldn't? I didn't understand her at all. I asked, "What are you talking about, Mary?"

She pressed her hand to her heart. "I am not the woman you need."

I took a small step toward her and said, "Let me decide that."

She covered her lips while she stared at me. For a moment, neither one of us said anything, and then she said, "You're not really seeing me."

In battle, panic never helped make a good decision. I held my palms faceup and said, "I have two eyes that are pretty sharp, according to my former superiors."

She went up and down on her tiptoes, then crossed her arms and shook her head. "You're not getting it, Dwayne."

True. I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not getting what?"

She inhaled and then said, "I need to stop sleeping with you."

What? I lost sensation in my hands and feet. "For tonight or forever?"

"Forever." She lowered her head and headed back to the kitchen. "I can't be responsible if something happens to you. It would be my fault."

"Nothing happened to me, and I can take care of myself." I followed her across the room. "Nothing happened to you or Bruce. Don't think of sneaking out and putting

you or that boy in danger, Mary.”

She flipped around my empty home with both her hands in the air, like I’d proven some point. “There you go. You’re perfect and sweet and amazing, and I don’t deserve that. I’m barely hanging on by a thread.”

Maybe if she would say everything, I would understand. When I made it across the kitchen counter from her, I asked, “What are you talking about?”

She squared her shoulders and said, “I’m breaking up with you, and you still care about my son’s safety and my own.”

I flinched, but I got it now. She wasn’t into me like I was her. A future relationship was all in my imagination, and that dream had just been trampled. I put my hands behind my back like I was in the military again. “It’s my job, Mary. I get today was trying for you, but don’t run out on me. I promised your brother and myself.”

She lowered her head, and her shoulders slumped. “I don’t deserve you.”

I leaned on the counter and brought myself to eye level with her. “Since when is love about what you deserve?”

She gripped the edge of the counter. “Don’t tell me you love me. I can’t handle that.”

“Okay.” She absolutely wasn’t on the same page as me. My heart twisted—a balloon about to pop. I stood up and said, “Look, you take the bed. I’ll sleep on the floor out here as that’s preferable to a couch.”

“Why?”

“I slept on dirt as a Seal. I’ll wake you if I hear Bruce.”

She squeezed her eyes shut like I'd hurt her, but she backed up and said, "Dwayne, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Mary." I headed into my room to grab a pillow since I had two. She followed me in. I held it and grabbed the extra blanket from my closet. "I'd never force you into anything you don't want."

I headed to the door so she could be alone, but then she said, "For the record, I want you to find a woman who loves you unconditionally."

Damn, she knew how to tighten the screws near the valves of my heart.

"I wanted to be that for you, but I can't be."

"Good night," I said and closed the door.

It was fine that she didn't love me. I would handle that, but inside, I needed to deflate and find a way to cover up the wounds she'd pounded into me. I would live with rejection as long as she stayed safe. Maybe one day, Mary and Bruce might be happy on their own and remember me. It was all I'd have left.

Chapter Sixteen

Mary

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I closed the bedroom door and tossed myself onto his blue comforter and covered my head with his pillow. It smelled like his sweat, which, unlike most men's, was a sexy smell like adrenaline and sweet chocolate chip cookies that were freshly baked.

I licked my lips, and the memory of the first time he kissed me in that ballroom hit me.

Damn, heat stirred in me even now, and my mouth watered.

I sat up and tossed the pillow. I wasn't ready to sleep anyhow, as adrenaline raced in my veins. I massaged my temple and forehead, like that might somehow get Dwayne out of my head.

I glanced up at the ceiling and wished my skin wasn't so prickly.

I was shaken by the ring from my phone. I tugged it out of my back pocket and saw the name of my cousin who owned the shelter I worked at. She was somewhere across the globe with her billionaire husband. I answered, and instead of hello, I asked, "Indigo, where are you these days?"

"Japan," she said, and it sounded like she closed her door and then slowed down. "I heard about why you didn't come in. Did I call too late?"

The clock on my screen read a little after nine. I closed my eyes and wished she was there. She'd been my rock when I checked into the shelter and let me rest without telling Joseph for a week, though our family was always close. She owned the shelter I worked at. I crossed my legs and said, "No. You're in New Zealand, which must be

nice, but I want to say I took a few days off.”

“You’re safe, though, and Bruce is okay.”

Thanks to Dwayne. I tugged my ear and ignored the heat in my face. “We’re fine, just scared.”

“Joseph said you’re staying with your new boyfriend?”

The butterflies in my stomach grew fast and furious. This wasn’t good. I cringed, but I spit out the torturous words that felt like fire on my tongue. “He’s not... my boyfriend.”

“Fine. Your new man, and he has a security team in place?”

My hands fell to my sides, and I glanced at his blue comforter. He’d slept under this. “Yeah, Cole Securities.”

“One of the best in the world,” she said, like his job excited her. “I’m glad you’re safe. Can I get you anything?”

Maybe I was projecting. I was in his house and bed because Dwayne was good. I pressed my eyes together and focused on her question. She’d done enough for me in the past, but I slowly opened my squinting eyes and asked, “How about advice?”

“On what?”

I let out a long sigh and stood up. “How did you open up to Jacob? You were the most independent woman I’d ever met, and now you seem so different and happy.”

“I... was scared to love Jacob. Is that what’s happening with you and your new

man?”

My face felt tingly, like something was pressing against me, though I was alone. I paced around and said, “No. I told Dwayne we were never going to be anything serious.”

“Because you’re scared?”

Damn, those words shot straight through my chest and pierced my heart. I took a deep breath and said, “I got to go.”

“Don’t be scared. It’s okay to fall in love and depend on a good guy. You have to trust your own judgment because you know what a bad guy looks like now.”

“Okay,” I said, and I knew my voice cracked a little. But I had no other answer. I’d told him that because he was wonderful and I was a disaster. I was a train wreck that had landed in his house.

“Well, if you need anything, we’re family.”

My cousin’s house had been the only safe place Joseph and I had as children. We were functioning and better because we were taken in and showed that not everyone hurts children.

Her mom had been my inspiration. I turned and continued stalking the white walls of the room. “We’ll talk soon.”

We hung up, but my stomach still had butterflies. I tried to shake it off. She was wrong about me. I wasn’t scared to fall in love. I was being safe. I rocked on my feet in the corner and then continued for a few minutes.

Then my son screamed.

He was in a new place. I rushed out and darted through the house. Luckily, I didn't see Dwayne on the couch, just his pillow and blanket.

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I ran to his bed and saw my son standing in the crib. I patted his back and said, “Bruce, it’s okay.”

His face scrunched up, and he screamed, “Dada.”

His father? He didn’t know his father. I swallowed and assumed he was just vocalizing, but I pressed my hand to my heart and said, “It’s Mama, sweetie.”

He threw his hands up and said again, “Dada.”

Dwayne knocked on the door. I turned around and goose bumps grew on my body. He was shirtless and in gym shorts, and he smiled with those dimples and asked, “Does he need milk?”

Bruce practically jumped in his crib and shouted, “Dada!”

My heart raced as I met his brown eyes, but then he tapped the wall and left. I tried to catch my breath. Had my son meant Dwayne?

He returned with a bottle and handed it to him. I clutched the crib railing to hold on as I said, a little breathlessly, “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He winked at me and stepped away.

My son threw his arms out at him and screamed, “Dada.”

Tears rushed out of my eyes. Dwayne had been the only guy in our apartment other

than Uncle Joseph. I sniffled them back and called out, “I think he’s calling for you.”

He pointed like he was asking to pick him up. I nodded, and he hugged Bruce, who instantly stopped crying. Dwayne rocked him as he said, “He’s a good kid.”

For a moment, he and my son stared at each other, and Bruce closed his eyes.

Seconds later, he was out again. Dwayne put him down, and I fixed his blanket, leaving the bottle. I didn’t argue, and we tiptoed out of the room. Once Dwayne shut the door, I swayed on my feet and said, “He’s the best.”

Dwayne glanced at me then stepped back and said, “Good night.”

My throat constricted. I had no right to call him back. I had broken up with him to save him from me.

My son had called him Dada. The knot in my stomach wished that was true.

I rocked for a moment as he closed the door down the hall of the spare bedroom he used as his gym.

My pulse was still wild, so I rushed back to my room and closed the door. Once I knew I was alone, I said to myself, “I’m going crazy here. If I go out there and apologize, then I’m weak.” My eyes misted up as I paced the room and said, “But if I don’t go out, I’m making myself miserable.” Dwayne made my body quake in ways I wasn’t sure I could handle. Near the door of his closet, I said, “I don’t know what to do.”

Every part of me wanted to rip my clothes off and chase him into that spare bedroom.

Being his made me feel alive.

But I would make myself a liar and just couldn't. I sighed and tossed my hands in the air. "Fuck it. Let's write a list."

This was one of the therapies the women in the shelter were offered. I glanced in his closet and saw an old-fashioned yellow lined-paper pad and took it from the top shelf and found a pen in my bag.

I then curled up on the floor near the window and started two columns. In the first, I wrote, Pros, where I would write all the great things about being with Dwayne.

1. He's amazing.

I underlined it. Seriously, he made me laugh. He stood at my side, listened to me, and my son even loved him. I would never find another like him.

My lips curved into a smile from just thinking about his face.

2. He's protective.

The way he stood up for me, paid attention to details, and held me made him one in a million.

Damn. My body was trembling for him even then. I wrote.

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3. He's... I then crossed that out and wrote without thinking. I love him.

"Fuck," I said out loud as I stared at the words.

If I ever said that out loud, I'd doom us both. I would never be the strong woman I'd worked so hard to become. I folded the paper in half like if I hid it, then it wouldn't be true.

But I swallowed and then wrote the second line, Cons.

This was better. I could focus on the negative until I got out of there.

First line of negatives wasn't easy, but eventually I wrote, He's big and muscular.

Sure, that was probably many people's positives, but the bigger the guy was, the more it probably hurt if he hit, though Dwayne was the opposite of Arthur.

His quiet strength and confidence had protected us.

I crossed it out and tried again. I free wrote, and the next line just came out: He gets to me.

True. I hid in this room and broke up with him because I'd started to believe in him and me. I'd imagined us falling in love, being happy, and that could be bad.

Next line. I let my thoughts flow freely from my pen to the paper. I'm afraid.

That wasn't about him but me. I took the paper and crumpled it into a ball. No one ever needed to see it. I dropped the crumpled paper beside me as I said, "This list-making shit is stupid. I'll write him a note to give to him. That's better."

Good. I snapped my fingers like I'd made a final choice. Perfect.

He would not find either message, so I was allowed to be honest.

So I wrote,

Dwayne,

You in my life has been like a dream I couldn't ever imagine. Your kiss sets me on fire. And sex is so hot, I fear I may never stop wanting you. For the rest of my life, I'm going to ache for you and dream of you. I've never met anyone like you and will likely never find anyone similar.

However, it's good we broke up. I can't lose sight of who I am. I need to be strong and live for Bruce.

So I'm sorry, but it's probably better this way. You deserve to find a woman who's whole and can make you happy. When this is over and it's safe for my son, we'll disappear. But I want to tell you that I fell in love with you the first second I met you.

Love,

Mary

My tears hit the paper and made a small circle in the corner. I folded it and wrote his name in cursive like my aunt had taught me. Then I let out a sigh and said, "I'll never give this to him. I can't."

I stuck it under the pillow. I would sleep better at least knowing I'd tried to find the right words, even if I would never say anything out loud.

The moment I did, there was a knock at the door. I stiffened as he opened the door. If he could read my mind, he would kiss me right now, and all my reasons would be tossed out the window. But instead, he peeked his head in and said, "Mary."

I ran my hand through my hair and ignored how my lips tingled. He wouldn't kiss me. I was being silly. "What's going on?"

His face was hard and unreadable. "I just got word that police have a lead on Arthur and are tracking him now."

I lifted out of my spot and nodded at him. "Good. Maybe this will be over tonight."

His shoulders relaxed, and he opened the door a little wider. "For your sake, I hope so. I just wanted to let you know."

For a moment, neither of us moved, but then I pushed my hair behind my ear and said, "Thank you. We don't deserve you."

Dwayne stared at me, and for a moment, I swear the flash in his eyes whispered he was hurt, but he said, "Mary, it's not about deserving. Fucked-up people get power and adoration. Good people can go homeless or get killed by a car. All we can do is live our lives to the fullest, every day."

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Damn, he knew how to get deep inside my soul and read the real me. I swallowed, but still, neither of us moved. Then he waved his hand in the air and said, “Well, good night.”

My gut twisted, and my feet were still stuck to the spot where I’d been for another second. He’d seen right through me, and I wasn’t sure what happened next.

If I chased him and told him I was sorry and that I loved him, what if he didn’t believe me?

I fell back on the bed and took out my paper. Then I inched myself back to the window and found my spot to finish.

P.S. I wanted to tell you when you came in my room, but if I did, I’m afraid I’d never learn to be independent. That’s probably stupid to you but it’s been my goal since checking into a shelter. I can’t be that girl I was, ever again. I’m sorry.

Done. I refolded it and closed my eyes. I’d throw the paper in the trash in the morning, but for now, I would sleep with the dream I was somehow different and that I was truly his, forever.

Chapter Seventeen

Dwayne

No amount of working out could clear my mind. Earlier, when Bruce had called me “Dada,” my heart melted. Soon, Mary and her son would disappear, but for now, I

needed to keep them safe.

I showered in the bathroom then headed to my office.

The moon was high in the sky, but I couldn't sleep. I slumped in my office chair and turned on the monitors, but then my phone rang. She never called this late. I answered on the first ring, and she immediately said, "Dwayne."

My body stilled and my mind raced as I asked, "What's going on, Mom?"

She then said, "One of your brother's old friends, Jackson, explained about Wanda and what she'd done. I've spoken to the board. I had no idea Wanda had turned out so bad or why you chose to shield me."

Huh? She was in California, the same as Jackson Cole, but no one had mentioned she'd have a guard. I sucked in my cheeks as adrenaline rushed through me. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Jackson and Catherine are coming back. We'll talk later."

My hair stood on end, and I stood up and called out, "Mom."

But she hung up on me. My temples throbbed, but I flipped through my contacts and dialed up Mark's business partner. It rang. "Jackson, answer your phone."

However, I just got voice mail.

I closed my eyes, said a small prayer for her safety, and then grabbed my phone as I said, "I can't ignore this." I pressed the button to call my regular contact, and the moment I heard a click, I didn't wait for hello. "Mark, my mom is with Jackson. What the fuck is happening?"

“Thunder Thighs, she’s safe with him, and we’re in Pittsburgh. Just sit tight and trust the experts.”

Once again, they sought to protect me from my own problem. I closed my eyes and put my fists on the table. “You should consult with me first. But why did Jackson and Catherine pick up my mom?”

“I’m at the police station,” Mark said then lowered his voice and continued, “There’s a threat there, too, but she’s at their house, safe and sound. Give me an hour, and we’ll call and explain more.”

“Fine,” I said and pressed the red button. Our mom was sweet, baked cookies every Saturday morning, and sang in the church choir on Sundays. Taking her out of her routine was a big deal.

A knock sounded on my door, and I opened my eyes and stared at sweet glowing-like-an-angel Mary. She slipped into the room and approached me. “Is everything okay?”

She didn’t want me. Maybe my brother had ended up with the wrong woman because he’d never gotten a good one to keep him either.

I stood up, and luckily the desk was between us. I had goose bumps, but then I glanced at my computer and gave myself a mission. “No. Look, do you have Arthur’s phone number?”

She massaged the back of her head. “Maybe. Why?”

I took out mine and found Wanda’s contact info. “I can’t sit and do nothing. I want to try to track his number on my computer.”

Her eyes went wide. “Did something happen?”

I let out a long-held breath, nodded, and sat in my chair. “My mother was picked up and put under security.”

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She leaned forward. “Seriously?”

I opened one of my programs and typed in Wanda’s phone number to trace her. “Wanda and Arthur are my probabilities, so I want to see where they are and triangulate our position and my mom’s.”

She reached in her pocket and grabbed her phone. She handed it to me with a number showing, and a spark rushed in my veins. “Sure. Is there anything else I can do?”

I was a sucker. I ignored the sense and typed in Arthur’s phone number in my computer, too, and I tried to smile but failed. “I’m happy you’re here and safe.”

She walked around my desk, invading my space. “That’s it?”

I glanced up at her. I couldn’t have her. I would not push. She’d told me to leave her alone, so I held my hands on my lap and asked, “What else do you want me to say?”

She knelt down in front of me and said, “Nothing. It’s me that needs to apologize to you.”

I reached for her hand, and her big brown eyes still sent my pulse soaring. My lips tingled, but before I could say anything, my phone rang. I sat back and squeezed her hand. “Wait. I need to get this, but I want to hear you.”

“Okay,” she said, and she stood up and sashayed around the desk to sit.

My gaze followed her every move, but I answered. “Mark.”

“Look, Arthur isn’t home. The police didn’t find him to arrest him.”

I put him on speaker phone and then texted him the link of the program I started as I said, “His phone is pinging that he’s at a bar. I forwarded the trace I started.”

“Good,” he said, and I set up a second text message and included Jackson’s number. Mark’s phone beeped he had the message as he asked, “What about Wanda?”

I reported what my mapping software read, “She’s in California. Looks like she’s in a car near the airport.”

And then I texted that info I’d promised.

Mark said, “Her warrant took longer, and she was airborne, but it’s active now. Jackson put your mom under protection for the night until she’s caught.”

I tapped the desk, and I saw Mary scoot closer to me. “What else can I do?”

“Trust us,” he said, and I pressed my hand to my temples. “Keep tracking. And in the morning, all will be resolved.”

The morning was too far away. Part of me wished I’d flown my mom here, too, so everyone I cared about would be there. “It’s hard to sit on the sideline.”

“Work out your ass, Thunder Thighs, but stay home.”

“Fine,” I said and sat back in my chair. We then said goodbye and hung up.

Mary jumped out of her chair, returned to my side, and then sat on my desk as she asked, “Is your mom okay?”

Her legs that close to me sent the memory of claiming her as my own in that hotel bed through my mind, replaying in vivid color. I ignored that and said, “She’s all I have, and I’m worried, but Jackson is a professional.”

She lowered her head and said, “I get it.”

I scooted away, though I watched the dots of the phones move as I said, “Wanda knows I’m attached to you. She met your son, so I’ve put him in danger. You were right to pull the plug on us.”

She scooted closer to me and said, “I wasn’t.”

My breath caught in my throat. “What?”

She stood up, and our legs touched. “I was wrong. I was scared of how I started to feel about myself near you.”

I shook my head. We’d gone too fast, because suddenly I had found a woman and believed in instant love. “You were smart.”

“No.” She pressed her hand to her heart like she was pledging allegiance to the flag and then said, “I was denying my heart and maybe yours because I needed to be independent, and I was scared to feel more. I was never looking for love.”

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Love? Damn. I could feel goose bumps as I thought that maybe I hadn't been wrong. "Yeah?"

At that moment, Bruce screamed. She tore a piece of paper out of her pocket with my name on it. She shoved it in my hand and said, "Look, I wrote you a letter. Read it, and I'll be right back in."

I stood up to go with her, but the tear on the corner of the paper caught my attention. If this was more heartbreak, it was best to be alone. I held it up and said, "Okay."

My pulse raced, but I opened the paper and read the words. I reread that she loved me, twice. I wished she would say that out loud.

My heart grew, and I headed to the door to follow her, but she flew back into my office and right into my chest as I reached for the door. I stepped back. "Mary?"

Her eyes were wide like saucers. "Yeah?"

No-holds-barred time. My skin was alive, but I took her hand and said, "I've been in love with you since the first time I laid eyes on you."

She had a smile that brought color to the darkest day. She batted her eyes. "Why me?"

I inched closer. "Because you brighten up the room and my life and make me see everything in color. Being with you is like sunlight in life, and without you, I'm lost."

She cupped my cheek. “You’re not lost. You’re the best man I ever met. All the walls around my heart disappear when you come close to me.”

What few walls I’d built around my heart crumbled in one fell swoop. She loved me. I would wait for the words. I kissed her fingers and said, “Thank you for the letter.”

She reached for my hand. “Oh, I need that back.”

I whipped my hand behind me. “You’ll have to pry it from my cold dead hands.”

She wrapped her arms around me but couldn’t reach. Then she bounced on her feet and said, “Or maybe I can kiss you until you hand it over.”

I smiled at the idea, but I said, “That won’t work.”

She leaned up higher on her toes. “Let’s try that.”

I closed my eyes and lowered my head to kiss her. Her breath was warm and inviting, but my phone shrieked. I stepped back, put the paper in my pocket, and answered fast. “One second.”

California was three hours behind, but I answered on the first ring when I saw the Cole Securities number and said, “Jackson, what’s going on?”

“Wanda was arrested. Your mom is fine. We’re just waiting on Mark’s team and Arthur now.”

I let out a loud breath. Half the battle was done. “Can I talk to her?”

“Here,” Jackson said.

I heard her small breaths and didn't wait for hello. "Mom, are you good?"

She sounded calm as always. "Devon's friend here is nice. I'm glad you're taking over for your brother now. I've been helping Jackson since I arrived with calling the board, so the paperwork for ownership is pretty much done."

Maybe I should have involved her sooner. Mary came closer, and I stared at her. "Soon, I want to introduce you to my girlfriend, Mom."

"I look forward to meeting this mystery woman. I hope she's better than Wanda."

"She is." My mother meant to ask Mary questions about herself to formulate her character, but my mom meant well as she wanted to protect me. Mary was sweet and in my arms right now. "Talk to you soon."

I realized she was reaching for my pocket, so I moved my hip out of her grasp.

"She's safe?" she asked.

"Wanda's been arrested. The company is pretty much mine now. All that's left is for Arthur to be located."

Her face reddened. "That still scares me."

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I held her by her hips. “Nothing will happen to you or Bruce.”

She closed her eyes and then squeezed me into a hug. As she let go, she said, “I trust you. Now, where were we?”

Again, she reached for my pocket. I laughed and stopped her hand from reaching inside as I said, “You’re still not getting this back.”

She then reached out and tickled me. No one had tried in years. I wiggled and laughed. She then said, “Oh, you don’t know all my methods, Dwayne.”

She continued, but I pushed the paper into my boxer briefs and then reached for her arm pits. She yelped as I said, “I’m a fast learner.”

She stopped, so I did, but then she said, “One of the many things that makes you adorable.”

This time when I smiled, I was sure my dimples appeared as I couldn’t hide them when I asked, “You’re not regretting writing these words?”

She shook her head and said, “No, but I still feel outclassed.”

“You’re not,” I said and pressed my forehead to hers.

She traced my abs and chest as she asked, “Can you forgive me?”

Adrenaline shot through me as I focused on her lips, but I asked, “For what?”

“For how I acted earlier?”

I hugged her and didn't care if she felt my hard-on. “You needed to work out your feelings. I'm glad you chose me.”

“Likewise. Now let's go to bed.”

Soon, she'd have the strength. I believed in her. She'd proven to me a good woman makes life complete. Instead of following her instructions, I claimed her lips. She kissed me and made me feel whole. She loved me, and I loved her, and nothing else would matter.

Chapter Eighteen

Mary

The sunlight warmed my face, but instead of the sexy wall of muscles I'd fallen asleep with, now I had my squishy adorable son next to me as Dwayne blocked the edge of the bed with his eyes closed.

I let out a small laugh. I blinked and vaguely remembered how Dwayne had kissed my forehead a few minutes—or maybe an hour—ago and said he'd get my son.

But my son was awake, sucking on his bottle and now staring at me.

A smile broke out on my face, and Dwayne's brown eyes opened. I breathed a little easier. “Bruce between us wasn't how I expected the day to start,” I whispered.

His dimples showed, but before he could say anything, we were interrupted by his phone. He sat up. “Be right back.”

I stood up as well, as Bruce needed a diaper change.

I cleaned him up, then we headed out to the living room, where I tossed the diaper away. Bruce used the couch to stand, but Dwayne's face was white as he waved for me to come, and he grabbed Bruce. I followed and asked, "What's going on?"

He took us to the office and said, "Look, keep Bruce in my office. The door, window, and walls are bulletproof."

I pressed my hand to my fast-beating heart and a second later took my son from his arms. "What? Why?"

Dwayne kept his voice low. "Arthur is here."

I hugged my son, who put his head on my shoulder. "He can't get Bruce."

He gave me a curt nod and his phone. "Keep him safe and hold the line for the police."

He stepped back into the hall. "What will you do?" I asked.

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He winked at me with all confidence, and he pressed speakerphone as he said, “Oh, I have security measures. Trust me.”

Someone on the line typed, but I whispered, “I’m scared.”

Dwayne returned, kissed my forehead, and said, “He’s got terrorists as clients, but he’s not used to being told no. I’ve seen his type.”

I heard his words, but it was like I was living in an alternate reality. He stepped back. “Okay, but still,” I said.

“I love you,” he said and closed the door.

I needed to tell him the same. I rested my head on the closed door, locked it, and said, “That’s why I need you in my life.”

I heard the officer speaking to someone, but their voices were muffled. Suddenly, a female voice came on the phone and asked, “Are you still in the house?”

“We’re still in.” I sat on the floor and watched my son as he used the chairs to help him balance. “Arthur Waterstone is outside, and I think he’s here to kill me and my one-year-old.”

The woman sounded more concerned. “Are you safe?”

I swallowed. It was best to be honest, so I said, “We’re locked in the office, but my boyfriend is closer to the door. Please hurry.”

My son put his head on the carpet and sucked down his milk. I refused to move an inch while he drank himself to sleep.

Finally, I heard his light breathing and inched closer. Then I knelt down, kissed his cheek, and whispered, “Bruce, stay asleep, sweetheart. I’ll be right back.”

I inched over to the bulletproof window and peeked out. Men I didn’t recognize were near the door.

Dwayne was alone. I had to warn him.

I grabbed a letter opener, squared my shoulders, and then unlocked the door. I heard nothing, so I popped my head out. Dwayne was at the kitchen counter with a tablet surrounded by weapons and wearing black Kevlar. I trotted over, ignoring the guns that were bigger than my arm, and said, “There are people out back. What are you doing, Dwayne?”

His eyes widened as he asked, “Where is Bruce?”

I swallowed and said fast, “Sleeping. The police are coming.”

He showed me his tablet and explained the various screens. “There are six men. Two are trying to pry open my garage. One is at the end of the street. Two more are at the back door.”

My gut twisted, but what held me still was Dwayne’s calmness. I also pointed to the only man I recognized onscreen. “And Arthur?”

He pointed behind him to the front door. “He’s right there.”

I pressed my hand on his shoulder and asked in a quiet voice so no one would hear

us, “And how are you just watching this so calmly?”

He showed me a phone-like device in his hand. “Oh, I have weapons aimed at all six of their heads.”

I let go of him and honestly couldn’t move for a moment. “Weapons?” My pulse accelerated.

“My security is advanced, and I have clearances.”

I pointed to the microphone on his tablet and asked, “Can I talk to Arthur?”

He nodded. “Sure. Hit the camera and then the talk button.”

Maybe I was crazy, but my insides were practically on fire. A moment later, I coughed to announce myself and asked, “Why are you here and not fleeing the country? How stupid are you?”

His thin lips pressed together as he banged on the door. He stopped when he said, “On no planet do you get to live some fairy tale while I lose everything, sweetheart. Not when you brought this trouble to me, you heartless bitch.”

Sirens screeched behind him. I stood absolutely still, gazing at Dwayne. “Arthur, sounds like the police are here. Good. But let me tell you that while I didn’t bring Dwayne into your life directly, I’m fucking glad he’s here with me. Goodbye.”

Dwayne gave me a half smile and tapped my arm to support me. “Good going. Head back in with Bruce until this is over.”

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I slipped the tablet in front of him, but the sirens still blared. He muted it. “Sounds like it’s getting bad out there,” I said.

“Go,” he reminded me. I was still holding the mail opener, but I guessed I wouldn’t need it. I slipped in and waited behind the door.

Maybe in the future, I would get my son something better to sleep on than the floor, but he seemed comfortable on the rug.

Outside the door, everything was silent. We could be sleeping as far as anyone knew.

The sun was already above the ocean now, and my stomach ached like I was hungry for breakfast.

A knock tugged me out of my reverie, and I jumped up as Dwayne let himself in and said, “It’s quiet now.”

“And the weapons?” I asked, as the last thing we needed was my son near anything like that.

“Locked away,” he said, and I breathed easier. He motioned with his head to follow him. “Bruce seems calm.”

At least he hadn’t said anything judgmental about a parent letting her son sleep on the floor. “He usually is.”

He waved for me to join him. “Come. The police want your statement.”

I took one look at my son and decided to scoop him up. He was still sleeping, but if he woke up to sirens, I would never forgive myself. A few moments later, I followed Dwayne out of the room.

I then looked at his shoulder and could see the Kevlar was ripped. I reached out to touch him. “You were shot.”

“I’m fine. The vest worked.”

I loved him. I wanted to throw my arms around him and hold him tight. But he led me to the front door, where police cars were lined up along the street outside. One woman asked me, “You and your son are good, ma’am?”

I rocked Bruce, who woke up. “Yeah, Dwayne’s house is like a fortress. I didn’t hear anything in the office.”

She nodded. “Good. The six men have all been arrested, and with federal charges, they aren’t likely getting out in our lifetime.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Dwayne placed his hand on my back and soon directed us back inside.

Once we closed the door, the house was quiet again. The walls must have been soundproof, but I didn’t ask. We walked over to the kitchen counter, and he said, “So it’s over.”

I put my son down, and he crawled over to the couch. “Is it?” I asked.

Dwayne took out the coffee pot. “I have a decision to make now, Mary.”

I followed him in and grabbed the eggs from the refrigerator to make breakfast.
“What?”

He took out the milk, and we brushed against each other near the open door. “If I move to Pittsburgh, will you and Bruce move in with me?”

For a second, the egg container shook in my hand, but then I strengthened my grip and glanced up at him.

We were serious, and my heart widened. Dwayne was the man I’d wanted all my life. Bruce held out his arms for Dwayne and shouted, “Dada.”

He rubbed the boy’s head and said, “I’ll get him a bottle.”

He reached for Dwayne, and Dwayne picked him up. Once he did, my son calmed down, and I walked beside them both as I met his gaze and said, “Dwayne, yes. I love you. I never want to live without you.”

I froze. It hadn’t been that hard to say.

“I love you too.” He winked at me as my son hugged him, but as we reached the refrigerator, my phone rang. He fed my son and said, “Now get your phone.”

I showed him my brother’s name and then answered. “Joseph, Arthur was arrested.”

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I pressed speakerphone, and he said, “Good. I’m out of the hospital, but when you come home, call me, sis. I want to see you and Bruce are good, in person.”

I jumped up and down a little. He was fine. I met Dwayne’s gaze. I had two men protecting me now. “You’re always looking out for me,” I told Joseph.

“We’re family, sis.”

True. And the Steel family stuck together and helped each other. I said goodbye.

“Will he be upset if you move in with me?” Dwayne asked.

I laughed and knelt down with them as he put Bruce down in the living room, and I said, “After I tell him about your security system, he’s going to want your contacts for his computer business.” I kissed Dwayne’s cheek. “I’ll pass along Mark’s business card.”

My breasts stood at attention in my bra as the heat of his gaze dug under my skin. I guessed breakfast was now second on his list.

“Now come here,” he said.

My eyes widened. “In broad daylight?”

He took my hand like he was about to lead me to the bedroom. “Bruce is busy with his toys...” He let me go and grabbed his phone off the kitchen counter. “Wait. Let me get my camera.”

I turned around and pressed my hand to my heart. Bruce was wobbling, but he was standing and putting one foot in front of the other without the couch. Tears formed in my eyes. “He’s walking,” I said.

Just like that, he fell on his butt, but Dwayne snapped his fingers beside me. “Got it.”

I let out an audible breath and rewatched the moment. “I need to send this in the family group chat.”

He forwarded it to me, and I sent it in the Steel family group chat. Once my phone made the sent sound, I turned it off, and he grabbed my hips. “Then we can celebrate, alone, for a few minutes.”

Leaving my son wasn’t my normal, even if he was safe, so I said, “Okay, he won’t notice once he’s sleeping.”

“I get it, but I need you soon, Mary.”

My eyebrow quirked. How Dwayne loved me still struck me as crazy and amazing, but I tilted my head, playfully crossed my arms, and said, “I still need my letter back.”

He took it out of his pocket and said, “Not going to happen, but I still love you.”

“Me too,” I said, but I reached for it. He put it down his pants, but I didn’t care and reached inside for the paper.

To stop me, he kissed me. And then I forgot everything else. In that one moment, it was just him and me.

Chapter Nineteen

Dwayne

A Month Later

The sun was almost setting now. I'd left my new home with Mary practically at the crack of dawn. She'd locked herself in the bathroom when she woke up with me. And I swore she'd been sick, but she came out swearing she was fine and telling me to go.

Her texts throughout the day about our date that night had made my memory fade until I parked in our garage. The ring in my pocket jingled, so I knew the diamond I'd picked out was still there. Now I stepped out, fixed my tie, and pressed the elevator button.

We'd moved into a penthouse in her brother's new condo building so family would be close.

The doors closed, and I heard light music. My heart thudded as I realized the windfall I just received. The lawyers for Cole Securities transferred ownership outright to me, and I'd be a damn fool to turn away the potential money to earn.

Plus, staying in Pittsburgh meant Mary and I and Bruce now lived together. And I toured my engineering facilities and manufacturing plant and the legal contracts. It was more than I ever expected to make, and it was because my brother left his company for me.

I owed Devon and in a way Wanda for building this company, though Wanda was happily in prison awaiting trial.

As I opened the door, Bruce waddled over to me, and I scooped him up in my arms. I forgot my day and focused on the warm, squishable boy in my arms. Joseph was sitting on our couch, but I didn't see Mary at all. I put my shoes away, bouncing

Bruce.

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The bedroom door behind me opened, and I pivoted around. Mary breezed out of the bedroom in a blue dress that fit her perfectly, and her hair was up like it'd been the night I met her. I couldn't breathe. Bruce wiggled out of my arms, and I took a few steps closer and kissed her cheek. She brushed her hand to my cheek and asked, "So, how did it go?"

I spun her around so I had a full view. "You look amazing."

Her face reddened a little, but she shook her head and said, "Thanks, but you didn't answer the question."

I'd already committed to running the company, but she was beaming at me, clearly wondering how my day had gone, but instead of answering her, I said, "Having a legal team explain my responsibilities and contracts for me made understanding my job easier."

Her brother laughed as Bruce raced into his arms, but Mary crossed her arms and asked, "But did you like running it, or are you going back to Cole Securities?"

I turned her around and discreetly pinched her ass as I said, "I belong here, with you, especially in that dress of yours."

She patted my chest with the tie around my neck still and said, "We met when I was super fancy."

Tonight was on, then. I was luckier than my brother ever was because I had Mary in my life. I let my gaze trail over her body. Her breasts were like orbs that I ached to

suckle right then, but I only said, “You’re beautiful, no matter what you’re wearing or doing.”

Her brother then huffed from the couch and said, “Okay, both of you, leave. Bruce doesn’t need to learn all the mushy stuff this early.”

I called out as we headed to the closet, “Thanks again for babysitting, Joseph.”

Bruce clung to him as Joseph said, “You literally moved into my building so I get to see you both all the time.”

“I needed a babysitter I trusted,” Mary called out as she slipped her matching blue shoes on.

I chose my shinier black shoes for the night.

Joseph carried Bruce over and walked us to the door, saying goodbye.

Mary pressed her lips together and stared at me. My skin prickled as I thought that maybe something was going on, but she didn’t say a word. We made it to the front lobby with the all-black marble fountain in the middle, and she just sailed beside me. When we stepped out, her mouth dropped. “You got us a limo?”

Maybe whatever she had to say wasn’t that bad. I swallowed and scooted behind her into the limo as I said, “It seems I run a well-funded company.”

She relaxed in her seat but held her belly like she’d eaten already. “And you’re splurging on me.”

Was that her big secret? She’d made me promise a place that offered small meals. So my gaze narrowed as I said, “Even frou-frou French dinner doesn’t hurt the bottom

line.”

Her eyes widened as she asked, “Champagne?”

I nodded as the limo stopped in front of the restaurant we had reservations at as I said, “I’m a classy guy.”

She patted her head like she wanted to massage her scalp but then didn’t want to ruin her hair. My mother used to complain about pins when I was a boy, but I could be wrong with my guess. I didn’t ask and offered my arm as we slipped out of the limo. However, as the door closed behind us, she sucked in her breathe and tugged my arm. “I can see that. And I’m impressed, but can we go somewhere else?”

My gut twisted, but I nodded, and she directed us to walk away as I asked, “What are you thinking?”

She pointed to the reservoir we’d strolled the first night I showed up in Pittsburgh while she said, “The park.”

I glanced up. The full moon would make it slightly lighter, but I’d keep her safe when I said, “In your heels.”

She let out a sigh and said, “If we walk in the grass, I can take them off.”

I tugged my ear and then nodded. “Sure. Do you want dinner?”

She tilted her head. “A slice of pizza and being alone with you.”

If she ate, all she had to do was tell me. I kept my hand on her lower back but pointed to the wine store across the street. “Easy to please, but how about a bottle of wine?”

Her eyes widened like I'd caught her, but she quickly shook her head. "Sounds much better than sitting across from you at a table, but no thanks."

I pointed behind us. "The restaurant had white tablecloths and classy music."

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We crossed the gates of the park, and she closed her eyes and held my hands and said, “Listen, birds are singing, and we need to talk.”

Adrenaline rushed in my veins. Something was wrong. “We do?”

She trembled a little and held my chest like she needed me to balance. I cupped her hips but then I saw a tear fall down her cheek as she said, “Yeah. When I met you, I was certain I’d never fall in love with another man.”

A tear leaked off her face, and I ignored the ice I felt in my veins. “Mary, I’m glad you took a chance with me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, and for one second, I thought this was horrible. “Me too, and I need to tell you something.”

“What’s going on, Mary?”

She wiped her face and held her stomach again as she said, “This morning when you went to tour the gun company, I wasn’t feeling good.”

Oh. I pointed to the street and said, “We can reschedule everything if you want to go home. I need five minutes to get the limo.”

She reached out and took my hand in hers. “No. That’s not it. I need to tell you something.”

Maybe she knew already what was wrong. I widened my stance, unsure how to fight

off disease for her but asked, “What? Is it bad? Are you sick?”

She turned away from me. “No. Last time, I didn’t know... but let me spit this out.”

Her face was white and I kept my voice low. “You’re scaring me.”

She clutched me tighter as she said, “I hope not. I’m pregnant, Dwayne.”

For a moment I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe. I’d never once thought... I’d be a father, though with Bruce I hoped I was doing well.

But Mary’s womb growing because of me made my chest swell like I’d won something. I hugged her and said, “You are!”

Her face regained its color as she nodded and said, “Yeah.”

I tugged her closer and smiled. “Come here.”

Then I kissed her, and her lips were sweet, like cream cake.

For a second, my kiss hardened, like I’d walk her to a tree and fuck her there, but I let her go.

Her cheeks were red as she asked, “You’re happy?”

I went down on one knee and held her hand. “Will you marry me, Mary?”

She pressed her hand to her heart. “You don’t have to ask because I’m pregnant.”

I squeezed her hand and found the ring box in my pocket. Then I showed it to her as I said, “I’m not... look. I had a plan to give it to you during dessert.”

She tugged me up and squeezed my shoulders as she said, “If you’re talking ice cream, that sounds great.”

I traced her smooth skin and said, “That’s not an answer.”

She let out a small sob, and her eyes were misting. “Dwayne. I just didn’t want you to see me crying again.”

Too late for that, but I kept that to myself. I kissed her thumbs and said, “I don’t want to ever make you cry.”

She took out the colorless princess-cut diamond and slipped the platinum ring on her finger. “These are happy tears. I love you and want to marry you more than anything.”

I hugged her and said, “Good. I love you, too, and we’re going to be a family.”

Mary and Bruce made my heart grow. I was blessed she was in my life, and I would treasure her forever because that epitomized who Mary was to me. She was better than gold or the company. She had my heart, always and forever.

Chapter Twenty

Mary

Every time I stood outside that restaurant, my skin prickled and my stomach flipped like I was afraid they would kick me out.

I don't know why. I'd never eaten there or gone beyond the golden doors.

Today was different from the night Dwayne had asked me to marry him.

He held my son in his arms and reached for the door but I said, "I'm nervous."

He kissed my cheek and led me inside.

The black marble counter still had a maître d' behind the podium. He took Dwayne's name and directed us to follow him. Dwayne stayed beside me and said, "My mother will like you."

We made it to the window that overlooked the river, and a woman in a purple dress that had Dwayne's dark brown eyed gaze stared back at me. I held my now-showing belly and said, "I'm..."

"Mary, is it?" She came over and held my hands.

I nodded and then said, "Dwayne has told me all about you, Ms. Jensen."

She pressed her hand on my back and said, “Call me Desiree, or Mama Jensen, if that makes you more comfortable.” She glanced past me, and her smile grew wider as she asked, “Now, is this Bruce?”

“Yes,” I said. For a moment, I wondered what I would do if I were her and I were meeting some woman Bruce brought to meet me. One day, I’d be in her shoes.

Dwayne held Bruce and the chair for his mother as she said, “I bought you a present. In the summer when your mom has her new son or daughter, maybe all of you will come to my place in California for a visit. We’ll all go to the beach.”

“Thanks, Mama,” Dwayne said and pushed her seat in.

A staff member brought us a highchair for Bruce, and Dwayne held out my chair and let me scoot in.

Once Bruce was settled, Dwayne took a seat next to me when Destinee asked, “Mary, what do you think?”

I held my unborn baby in my womb like he gave me strength, too, and said, “I’m happy. I was scared to meet you.”

She reached out, took my hand, and said, “Look, if Dwayne ever gives you trouble, call me. I’ll straighten him out.”

He pressed his hand on his heart like he was offended. “I’m a good son, Mom.”

She nodded. “You are, and you both seem happy, which is all I ever wanted for you.”

Then a waiter came and took our orders. It didn’t matter, though. Dwayne took my hand, and I knew he treasured me, which was all I ever wanted from a man. But with Dwayne, I had that and so much more. He was perfect for me.

THE END