



One Shot

One shot at love,
one chance to
make it right

G. J. Harvey
USA Today Bestselling Author

One Shot

bj harvey
USA Today Bestselling Author

OceanofPDF.com

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Lauren Clarke

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BJ Harvey

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Dedication

*To Lauren, you help make me a better writer
and I love you all the more for it.*

*And Skyla, you're the bestest writing buddy,
partner-in-crime, and sounding board.
Don't leave me or I'll find you!*

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Prologue

Present Day

I have tingles, and not the kind that feel great in all the right places. The ones I'm feeling right now are the hair-standing-up-on-the-back-of-your-neck, someone-walking-over-your-grave kind of feelings that you get when something bad is about to happen.

Unable to ignore them any longer, I turn around from my stock take sheet and come face to face with my worst nightmare.

Lana fucking Mason, childhood best friend turned high school nemesis and arch enemy, and...

A man stands beside her, his eyes as wide as mine and—if I'm not mistaken—he looks kind of pissed off. *At me.*

And just like that, this moment has just gone from bad to worse.

Hold on! I'm the one who should be annoyed, with *him*. It wasn't me who did a disappearing act three months ago, and now he's here, standing with *her*. Of all the fish in the sea, he had to go for the smelliest, rottenest one.

"Kenzie," she says, all saccharine sweet, like she wouldn't choke on the first dick that came close to her perfectly-made-up lips. "Long time no see."

Forever wouldn't have been long enough, Lana.

"We were in town running errands and thought we'd stop by. I wanted to let you know what I've been up to." Without preamble, she holds out her hand as if she's the Queen of Sheba and I'm a lowly minion at her bidding.

But that's the last thing I care about, given that I'm being blinded by a huge, shiny rock on her *ring* finger.

What in the ever-loving fuck?

I don't get a chance to hide my surprise, or the fact that my eyes dart to Millen, his jaw twitching like crazy, his grey eyes that I remember turning molten with lust now blazing with some unreadable emotion.

Why is he angry at me when he must've known that I'd be here?

Lana turns her head and beams at him all doe-eyed and vomit-inducing, reaching out her arm to Millen before returning her attention to me, positioning herself to deliver the final death blow.

Then she says them. The words I don't want to hear—let alone believe.

“I have amazing news. First, my daddy just bought this place. And second, meet Millen, my *fiancé*...”

Yep. Dead. Done. The see-ya-later, don't-let-the-door-hit-your-ass-on-the-way-out kind of done.

Then Drew walks through the front door. Drew who warms my bed most nights. *Finally, a friendly face.*

However, one look at Lana's expression and I know this moment has just gone from bad to plain awkward. It's like the universe is making a joke at my expense.

Drew's already big smile grows impossibly larger when he spots the two people standing in front of me.

“Mills!” he says, pulling Millen into a man-hug the likes of which I've never seen Drew hand out before. He turns to the she-bitch and wraps his arms around her too. “Lans.”

Lans?

“What are you guys doing here?” Drew asks.

“You know them?” I blurt out, my brain unable to engage quick enough to care about putting a filter in place.

Millen's eyes snap to Drew then back to me. "You know Drew?" he asks at the same time as Lana juts a hip to the side and asks Drew, "You know Kenzie?"

"Millen is my best friend from college," Drew happily informs me, and his smile falls at the same time that all of the blood rushes from my face.

Awkward, meet Mortifying. Also here are Shame, Embarrassment, Anger, Disgust, and over in the corner there is Complete and Utter Confusion and her friend I'm Going to Have to Move to the States and Join a Women-Only Commune with Cats and Unlimited Batteries.

With nothing else to say—at least, nothing that wouldn't take a bottle of Jack and a *whole* lot of time—I decide to just go with the flow and revert to my old trusty auto-pilot because seriously, what else *is* there for me to do?

"Soooo, would anyone like a drink?"

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Chapter 1

Three months ago

Leaning against the back wall of the Shining Light Bar and Brasserie, I breathe it all in. A warm summer night in Davis, CA. The students are out, the non-students are out, and everyone is co-mingling without incident. That's not to say things won't get rowdy later on, but that doesn't usually happen until closer to last call when too much liquor has been consumed and too many people have missed out on finding themselves a willing bedmate for the night.

Boys and their drunken bruised egos equal flying fists, a litany of fucks, and—more often than not—Bruno, my trusty bouncer, throwing them out on their asses. Worst-case scenario, I just call the cops.

But I love my job. It's the people—the new faces, the old ones, the shared experiences, the life stories, the words of wisdom and even the words of warning. Then there's the drama some of them can bring, and I love that too.

Some people—mainly my mother—think I'm wasting my life away in my hometown, seeing the same people day in, day out. Then again, I haven't cared for her opinion since I was fifteen years old and found out she'd been having an affair with our neighbor, Harris Mason, for five years.

The sound of a glass smashing against the bar's wooden floor snaps me out of my thoughts. I lift my head and meet the gaze of my assistant manager—and best friend—Gaby. With rolled eyes and a mock salute, she grabs the dustpan and broom and rounds the end of the bar in search of the mess.

As if compelled by some higher power—or by the sheer overwhelming pull of his pheromones—I look through the crowd to the open entryway. Bruno and my boss Jeff are carding everyone coming in and then I see *him*.

The man who's captured my attention is like a high-pressure weather system moving in, impossible to ignore. He's magnetic. The air around me becomes electric, as if every ion has been jolted to action.

Trying hard not to be obvious, I discreetly glance in his direction every so often while wiping glasses.

The tailored black shirt he wears succeeds in showcasing every delicious angle of his obviously athletic body, one he no doubt puts a lot of time into. Dark denim jeans—again a perfect fit—hug his hips and thighs in a way that all pants should on a man.

Whisky-colored hair cut short on the sides and back is styled in bed-head tousle that few men could pull off and still look hot, but he's definitely at the top of the class for that achievement.

There's no way he's a student and definitely not blue collar either. He's a man everyone wants to know, a man everyone needs something from, a man that men want to be and women need to be with.

All this from a quick-study bar manager half a room away.

Everything about him screams at me like a big red neon fucking sign, but I shut it down.

Long ago, I made a rule not to sleep with patrons. As a brunette, curvy, not-too-bad-on-the-eyes woman working in a bar where there are copious amounts of alcohol and cocky male college students with a point to prove, there are always offers. Especially after last call on Friday and Saturday nights.

There hasn't been anyone who's piqued my interest quite like this before. I've never been intrigued or impressed enough to take it further. But now I'm thinking about it. Oh *boy*, am I thinking about it.

I tug at my collar and busy myself, doing a sweep of the bar, pouring shots and topping up drinks from the few regular old-timers. When I'm

done, I quickly scan the room, compelled to give myself just one more chance to appreciate him.

Then I spot him—well, his back anyway—standing with a group of guys in a far corner. I lean forward on the bar, not really giving two shits whether anyone realizes exactly what I’m doing or not.

“Well this is interesting,” Gaby says, sliding in beside me, her arm on the bar, her chin in her hand, her eyes pinned to the same ass as mine.

I turn toward her. “That ass—I mean, guy—over there...” I tilt my head to the side in his general direction. Gaby’s eyes don’t move as she continues checking him out. “Nice. Pert, round, definitely grab-worthy. But why are *you* looking at it?”

“I don’t know,” I reply distractedly, sliding my gaze his way, allowing myself just one. last. look.

Then the real fun begins. A party bus of fraternity boys turns up for their first stop of the night, and I very quickly forget about the intriguing guy and his hair, his hips, his thighs...

Some time later with my back to the bar as I put some money away, I feel the air change again.

Glancing in the mirror above the register, he stands behind me on the other side of the bar, one arm braced on the wooden bar-top, his eyes focused on my legs and slowly—but ever-so-surely—moving up my body. It’s as if time stands still as I slide the till closed and turn around, coming face to face with him for the first time.

His slate grey eyes burn into mine and despite seeing his lips moving, I hear nothing. I’m too busy taking everything that is him in to realize he’s talking to me.

The corners of his mouth curve up, and I come back down to earth. My eyes widen, my cheeks burn—I’m completely caught and uncharacteristically lost for words.

This is not acceptable behavior for a thirty-two-year-old woman working in a position of responsibility. I blindly reach out onto the counter

in front of me, finding purchase on a damp bar rag. I wipe indiscriminately, wanting to look as if I'm actually doing something.

His smile deepens, and a double dimple pops out on one side. My belly flips. What is it about this guy—this stranger—that has me acting like a giddy teenage girl who's never seen a hot guy before? Next I'll be giggling and texting my friends about the cute boy I met.

I shake my head and plaster a smile on my face. "Hey, what's your poison tonight?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I can wait, sweetheart. I'll just sit here and watch you polish the bar until we can see our faces in it. Although, it would still pale in comparison to the reality of you standing in front of me."

Well, that clears my head of any pre-pubescent thoughts. Tilting my chin, I smirk and stop my fake cleaning efforts. "Smooth talker, twelve o'clock," I mutter.

He chuckles, and damn, if that doesn't do things to me too. "It's not smooth when it's the truth, is it?" he asks, quirking a brow.

"Believe me, I've heard almost every possible pick-up line known to man and the best ones are always from sweet talkers like yourself with their sexy, butter-wouldn't-melt smile backing them up."

"You sound a bit cynical there. I thought the customer was always right?"

My lips twitch. He's funny *and* cute. My goddamn kryptonite. "That's just a lie we tell ourselves to get the job done."

Both his brows go up before he laughs again, this time curling his finger at me, beckoning me closer. I rest my weight on my hands, leaning forward and fighting back a moan when I catch his cologne. Whatever it is, I want to bathe in it. When I'm closer he moves in so his mouth is just by my ear. Whoa. This guy puts the S in smooth. First he dazzles me with his grin and witty comebacks, and then he reels me in.

"Knew I could make you come with one finger," he says, low and rough, and dammit, I feel it *everywhere*. I try to move back, to recover at least *some* balance in this exchange, but his fingers press into my arm,

stopping me in my tracks. It's then I feel an electric shock when he touches me. *Literally*.

Jumping apart, my wide eyes meet his. "Let me guess—you're going to say you're *currently* happy to see me?"

"Actually, I had no power over that," he says. I snicker, the pun actually pretty funny, and he soon joins me with that deep chuckle of his. "But I wish I had. It would be a great story to tell our grandchildren one day. How I made their grandma fall for me with the mere touch of my hand."

I place my hand over my heart, gasping in mock offense. "I'll have you know, Mr. Smooth, that our future pretend grandchildren probably wouldn't believe you. They'd think you were making it up."

"Any future pretend grandchildren of ours would know never to doubt the words coming from their pop's mouth."

"Pop, huh?" I'm smiling *way* too much. How am I standing here talking about fake never-gonna-happen grandchildren with a complete stranger I've just met? Comfortable silence falls between us, and it's like the rest of the world—and the full bar we're in—don't exist.

Unfortunately the growing line of people behind him means this entertaining exchange must now come to an end.

"So, a drink?"

"Damn, she shuts me down. And here I was thinking I was winning the game," he says. He shakes his head and shoots me the most pathetic attempt at sad puppy-dog eyes I've ever seen—and I get them a lot in this place. "A whiskey—"

"Let me guess. Three fingers, because—"

"Whiskey *sour*, actually." I nod, impressed with his drink of choice.

I grab a tumbler from the glass rack and use it to scoop ice from the bucket beside me, doing the same to a metal shaker. I know he's watching me—I can virtually *feel* the intense attention he's giving me. It's heady but distracting so I block it out, concentrating on the task—or drink—at hand.

“With egg white or without?” I lift my eyes to his for my answer. He scrunches his face up, telling me all I need to know. “Scotch or bourbon?”

“You need to ask?” he says with a raised brow.

I turn and grab a half-full bottle of bourbon from the back of the bar, then pour it into the ice-filled shaker, adding the other ingredients before putting the lid on and giving it a hard and fast shake, glancing up to see Mr. Smooth’s eyes focusing exactly where I thought they’d be given all the jiggling and moving from side to side.

Straining his drink into the glass, I add a lemon wedge and pause with the cherry on the tip of my fingers over the glass. “Cherry or no cherry?”

“Cherry, please. I’m a sucker for the details. I’m very *thorough* like that.” Smart-ass, smooth talker, sexy smile, gorgeous eyes, and he’s *thorough. Stick a fork in me. I’m done.*

“So, are you really going to continue on with your night and ignore this *spark* between us?” he says, rubbing his palm on his shirt and reaching over to touch my bare arm, giving me another static shock.

I pat the top of his hand. “You’re a big boy. I’m sure you’ll get over it.” I can’t help but grin.

His brows narrow and his teeth sink into his bottom lip as he shakes his head at me. “You’ve won this round, Beautiful, but I’m a persistent man. I will be back to try again,” he warns.

“And I’ll be right here, ready and waiting for another verbal sparring win.”

“I always *rise* to the challenge, so expect to see me a *lot* tonight.”

“When you need more drinks?”

“For that too.” And with a sexy, knowing grin that hits me right down in *that* spot, he turns and disappears back into the crowd.



The rest of the night passes relatively quickly. Surprisingly, Mr. Smooth doesn’t come back for round two and I catch myself seeking him out

whenever I get a break in patrons. Soon enough, it's last call and the crowd has thinned out a bit from its peak.

I'm cleaning up the bar when he returns—alone—his friends nowhere to be seen.

“You're back.” I meet his eyes while continuing to close down the bar.

“I couldn't walk out the door without saying goodbye.”

I take in all six feet of him. His hair is still perfectly tousled, like he runs his hand through it out of habit. His eyes are gentle, yet still full of something unknown that calls to me.

It's not just a physical attraction at play here, and it's a bit unnerving given that I've never had a man affect me this much before.

I decide an offense is the best defense when it comes to Mr. Smooth. “Does that usually work for you?”

“What?” he says, his on-point panty-melting smile hitting all the important and hard-to-ignore parts of my body.

“The charm, the grin—all of...” I wave my hand up and down, “. . . that.”

“Is it working on you?” His voice drops down to that low, deep rumble and I all but melt onto the floor. I lean forward and rest my elbows on the bar.

“Do *you* think it is?” I challenge, raising a brow.

His eyes scan my face before slowly—calculatedly—moving down my throat and my chest, pausing at the open V of my black shirt just as a wave of heat rolls over me. Never have I been more thankful for a padded bra than I am right now.

He looks back up to my face and if ever there was a cockier, more knowing look, I wouldn't believe it. “I think so.”

I try hard to hold back a grin, knowing it'll only encourage him, but the longer his eyes stay locked to mine, the more I feel my resistance waning.

A woman down the bar grabs my attention and the moment is broken. His eyes follow mine before looking back.

“I need to go,” I say, walking backwards but not turning away from him.

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere, Beautiful. I’ll still be here when you get back. “

I tilt my head. “Beautiful?”

“Yep. Since you haven’t given me your name, I’m going with that.”

“You haven’t given me your name either.”

“So what name are you calling me then?”

“Who’s to say I’m calling you anything?”

“Because you’ve been checking me out all night just as much as I’ve been watching you. So fair’s fair. What’s your name?”

“I’ll give you mine if you give me yours,” I say with a wink, fully jumping that line from undecided to ‘hell yes, I’m in, take me now.’ There’s no way I can ignore this *thing* between us. It’s weird and strange and I can’t explain it, but there’s this invisible string pulling me to him.

After the woman leaves, I quickly scan the room and see only a few stragglers are left and Gaby busy wiping down tables. I make a decision on the fly and drop my apron onto the counter, watching as I round the bar and take a seat on the stool next to him.

He offers his hand and I reach out, sliding my palm against his. “Millen Ross.”

“Kenzie Sharp.”

He flexes his fingers but does not let go of my hand. “Hmm, Kenzie. It suits you.”

“Glad you approve, Millen,” I reply, easing my hand free.

“You still didn’t say what you were calling me.”

I tilt my head, my lips curling into a smirk. “Didn’t you say you were leaving?”

His eyes narrow and drop to my mouth, and the need I see in them reaches deep inside me. “The only way I’m leaving is with you after closing.”

“You’re cocky,” I reply, surprised at the steady tone in my voice. I actually sound unaffected when I’m anything but right now. All I can think about are all the things Millen could do to me, and wonder about what his definition of ‘thorough’ might include.

“I’m right.”

“You think?” I reply, my lips twitching as I fight back a grin.

“I know.”

“Right,” I say, sliding forward on the barstool until my legs are inside his next to me. Placing my hands on his thighs, I flex my fingers against his jeans and I see that tell-tale flash in his eyes letting me know that I definitely have all of his attention now.

I take a deep breath and steady myself, telling myself that if it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen.

“*What will be, will be,*” my dad always says.

“You said you’re always up for a challenge?” I ask and he nods, his hands moving to my hips, distracting me to no end, but I will myself to keep going. “If you really believe that there’s this *thing* going on between us, whatever it is, then prove it.”

He cocks his head to the side and furrows his brow. “Prove it?”

“Yep,” I say, leaning deep into his space. He does the same and now we’re closer than ever to each other. “If you really want to get to know me, and not just horizontally...”

He smirks and damn, if it doesn’t make me rethink my life choices. “There are many ways I could learn more about you, Kenzie, and only one of them involves a bed. There’s the floor, the shower, the kitchen—”

Without thinking, I slap my hand over his mouth, bringing us even closer together. *Stick to your guns, Kenz.* “If you’re here for a worthwhile

time, not just a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am time, then you'll be here, on that stool tomorrow night."

His eyes widen but then soften, the heat still simmering but what's shining back at me is understanding and respect.

I drop my hand from his mouth, his perfectly kissable lips begging to be claimed come into view.

"Alright. I'll do it. You better be ready to get to know me, Kenzie Sharp," he says, sliding his stool back a bit and standing in front of me. I arch my neck to look up at him, trying not to focus on the fact that his crotch is a lot closer to me than his face is.

"Be prepared for more verbal sparring." He gently grabs my biceps and dips his face down to mine until he's everything I can see. "But Kenzie," he rasps, lowering his chin so his lips brush against my cheek ever-so-softly. "Also be prepared to leave with me tomorrow night, because I like what I see and I know that any time spent with you will *always* be worthwhile." He touches his forehead to mine and I swear a whimper escapes my throat before he stands up straight, grins at me, and walks out the front door.

Something tells me I *might* be in a little bit of trouble here. Whether it's good or bad, I guess I'm about to find out.

Chapter 2

Mid-afternoon Saturday I'm standing at the park down from my house, using a tree trunk to stretch out my tired legs in preparation for the grueling torture of the five miles I'm about to run.

The best thing about working late nights is the sleep-in the next day. For a habitual night owl like myself, it's honestly a perfect fit. A bar manager at thirty-two is definitely not where I saw myself when I was an idealistic, wide-eyed college freshman leaving home for U of C Irvine with the hopes of a law-enforcement career thirteen years ago. After graduation, I moved to San Francisco and joined the SFPD and thought *that* was when my life would start. But a few years in and I was struck by the overwhelming realization that being a cop wasn't for me.

As someone who has always valued happiness over any preconceived notion of what I *should* do, I packed up my car and came back to Davis where my father welcomed me home with open arms.

Five years on, I'm loving my life, making the most of everything the world has to offer, enjoying hiking in summer on my rare days off, traveling in winter to go snowboarding, and going on torturous runs with my best friend.

"I hope that stripper pole routine isn't a sign of things to come, Kenz. 'Cause those legs of yours may go for miles, but Grandpa Davis over there looks ready to have a coronary if you keep it up for much longer," Gaby says behind me. I look over my shoulder to where she's standing, looking like a pocket-rocket-sized gymnast. At five foot two, Gaby makes me look like an Amazonian tree woman.

"I bet that's not the only thing that's being kept up," I say with a smirk. She moves to my side to get a better look at the old-timer's line-up sitting on the park bench twenty feet away from us, just like they do every day.

“Oh look. Old man Lucas and Santa’s brother, George, are here today too. I bet if we make out they’ll have smiles for days.”

I shake my head at her. “Get your mind out of the gutter, short stuff. It would only take a grope.”

“And you’d know this how?”

“Because George told me last week after his third gin and tonic.”

Gaby giggles and nudges me with her shoulder.

“Well, before I get ideas to do something truly outrageous, we should get moving. I want time to grab something to eat before we’re due at the bar.”

“And you need time to make yourself look good for your barstool decoration tonight?”

I contemplate feigning confusion, but it’s Gaby and there’s no way I could hide anything from her. She’s known me since I was six years old and her brother, Hamish, pushed me into the mud just to see up my skirt. He was a pervert back then and he’s still a pervert now—it’s just he’s more of the pants-and-Grindr variety now. My gay husband whenever I need him, he’s the peas to my corn, and the cream in my coffee.

Gaby and I head off, our feet hitting the pavement in steady strides.

“He was very nice to look at, wasn’t he?” I muse.

She grins. “I couldn’t find a single fault. Even that little crook in the bridge of his nose was cute.

“And I thought *I* spent too much time looking at him.”

“Oh you did, and Bruno noticed too. But you never look at the clientele longer than a customary two-second scan, so it’s a relief to see you get bitten by the lust bug.”

“Take it back. He’s intriguing to me, that’s all.”

“And hot.”

“Well, there’s that too,” I reply with a laugh.

“And he’s coming back tonight.”

“That’s yet to be determined. I issued the challenge. Whether he rises to meet it is a whole other matter.”

“Bet he doesn’t need to hang out at the park to get things looking up.”

“You do know that everything out of your mouth is an innuendo of some sort, right?”

“I’m sorry, I thought my name was Gaby Wallace and therefore every second word *had* to have sexual connotations, otherwise Hamish would disown me.”

“That’s very true.” I nod, taking a right turn behind Gaby. Her legs may be a foot shorter than mine, but by God does she make up for it in speed.

“In all seriousness, though. He interests you, right?”

“I think so. I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve had someone live up to the hype of what their look promises.”

“You’re not even talking about sex are you?”

“Nope. I’m talking about the flirting, the chemistry—the way he played me in the best possible way and got my body reacting to everything he did with barely a touch.”

“Okay, stop talking. If you keep this up, I’ll need to run faster in order to get more time at home to rub one off before work.”

“Like you wouldn’t do it anyway.”

“Like you wouldn’t either.”

“Well, I need a clear head when it comes to him.”

“What’s his name anyway?”

“Millen Ross.”

“That’s a hot name. I can just imagine calling it out as you’re about to come. *Oh Millen. God, Millen.*” I shake my head and Gaby being Gaby, she grins. “It’s hot. I may not be getting any P in V action but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.”

“I like the thought of making him work for it. I don’t usually pick up guys at the bar.”

“I know you don’t and I love you for it—it means I get first dibs. That doesn’t mean you *can’t* though. Is he even from around here?”

“I have no clue. I know nothing about him other than he’s handsome and wicked, he has the sexiest bedroom eyes I’ve ever seen and knows the right words to say to get me ready to jump him over the bar without dirty talk, and when issued the challenge of the chase, it seemed to encourage him more.”

She speeds up, her strides coming double time as she starts to pull away from me.

“Gabs, what the hell?”

“Time’s a wasting. Step it up, Sharp.”

I come up beside her, my legs burning in the best possible way as sweat starts to pour off me in the afternoon sun.

“Because I *have* to take care of myself before work otherwise I might just jump the bar—and him—before you decide if you even want to. And that would break the best friend code of ethics. Therefore, me plus my best battery-operated friend equals a good time for me and more opportunities for you to jump his bones. It’s an easy win for both of us.”

“You’re terrible, Gabs.”

“I’m a realist. I keep it real so you don’t have to.”

“Right. Let’s get you home then.”

“Yes, to the diddle cave I go.”



A little after six p.m. I’m walking through the back door of the bar, hoping I’ll find Millen waiting on a stool for me. A little part of me shrinks back in disappointment when I don’t see him there.

Millen seemed to be looking to score last night, but a player wouldn’t come back for another go tonight. It’s one of the reasons I decided to

challenge him to prove himself. It was worth the risk of him not coming back because if he's truly interested in getting to know me and vice versa, then he'll be back. If not, then I may have missed out on some hot sex, but that's nothing I can't give myself if I'm so compelled.

That's definitely not something I need a man to do. I am woman—hear me roar.

“He's not here?” Gaby says, not hiding her disappointment as she drops her purse in the drawer behind the bar and looks around the room.

“It's early, Gabs.”

“Yes, but the early bird gets the worm, or in this case, the early worm gets the bird.”

“Are you two going to be able to get any work done tonight or are you going to sit here and peck over some guy's carcass if he doesn't come when commanded?” Bruno asks, appearing on the other side of the bar in front of us with a quirked brow and his tree trunk arms crossed over his chest.

“Oooh, I like that idea. A guy that could come on demand. You always read about the men doing it to the women in those romance novels, but imagine if you could make a guy last for at least three of your orgasms before he even came once,” Gaby muses, and just when I think she's joking, I see that she's actually scratching her head with a thoughtful look on her face.

“Your brain scares me,” I reply.

“It's a magical place. Anyway, any big bookings tonight I should prepare for?” she asks, all jokes aside, her business face firmly in place. This is why I love this woman—she can switch it off on the turn of a dime. She's also one of the hardest workers I know and always has my back, often realizing I need her to do something before I have a chance to ask.

“Let's get started then. The busier we are, the less time I'll have to think about that empty stool at the bar.”

“Exactly. Now, summer rock or indie grunge? What kind of mood are we going for with this early crowd?”

Surprisingly, I don't give Millen another thought as the night passes, a constant stream of customers keeping us busy enough that it's not until after ten that I realize I need to take a break.

I walk over toward Gaby, who's leaning into the bar and talking to a couple of guys we went to school with.

"Gabs, I'm just going to take ten minutes in the office. Is that okay?"

"Sure is. I'll keep an eye out for You Know Who."

"No need," I say, walking backwards. "If he was going to show, he would've done so by now. I guess the challenge was too much for his fragile male ego to take."

Gaby's wide eyes and knowing smirk don't register until I hear Millen's voice coming from beside me just as I reach the end of the bar. "I don't think there's anything fragile about my ego, but I'd be happy to go to the office with you and prove just how big and *durable* it really is."

"Damn, Kenz. He's got you there," Gaby says with a laugh.

"He *wishes* he had me."

"She's right, I do, but I don't think you'd appreciate me having her in the middle of the bar."

"You never know, big boy. She's been known to do a lot of things with a few drinks in her."

I groan, my neck getting sore from the tennis match going on between the two of them. "Hello, I am still here, you know."

"Could never forget that, Beautiful."

Narrowing my eyes at him, I shake my head, trying to hold back a wry smile. "Why don't you call me by my name?"

"Whenever you do that little grin of yours, I can't help but think how beautiful you are. It's kind of your thing now," he says with a shrug.

I stand there watching him, waiting for him to look away first, wanting to actually get one over on him instead of feeling off-kilter whenever he's near, but he doesn't even flinch. If anything, his smirk gets bigger.

“Are you two going to get a room, or just get it over and done with right here? Because if this gets any hotter, I’m gonna need a cigarette and a recovery nap.”

That snaps me out of it. I jerk my head around exorcist-style toward Gaby, and at the quirk of her perfectly shaped brow, I burst out laughing.

Holding my hands up in surrender, I back away from the bar and toward the back hall. “Alright, I’m going.”

“We’re going, you mean,” Millen says, brazenly inviting himself along on my break. “If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Oh, so *now* you ask if I mind?” My lips twitch, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

“Damn, you’re trouble.”

“And here I was thinking the same thing about you.” My back hits the door leading out back which stops me in my tracks and brings Millen in close, that damn lust-inducing cologne of his working its magic and muddling my intentions.

Just as his chest is about to meet mine, he throws his arm up above my head, pushing the door open. “After you...”

I turn around and lead the way, needing the breathing space to clear my head and cool my jets, knowing that a ten-minute break will never be enough time to get to the good stuff.

“How was your day?” he asks as he comes up beside me, his hand resting gently against the small of my back. It’s not the first time he’s touched me, but damn, if the feeling isn’t amplified by the fact we’re soon to be completely alone in my office.

I rethink the office idea, wanting to limit the temptation. This guy is a stranger to me. I know almost nothing about him except he’s persistent, sexy, good with his mouth—verbally, I have no way of knowing about any of his other talents in that respect—and a man of his word. He said he’d be here and despite my earlier misgivings about him giving me lip service to save face, he met my challenge of coming back in.

The least I can do is give the man some of my time. “Shall we—”

“I was thinking we could go out onto the roof. I could do with some fresh air.”

“Sounds good,” I say, pushing open the supply room door. Without thinking, I grab his hand and link our fingers, leading him with me to the fire exit and up the stairs to the roof. He takes over, walking us toward the bench swing in the far corner. Letting go, he swings his arm out to the seat and sits beside me shortly after.

“So tell me about yourself, Millen Ross. You’re definitely not from around here.”

“Nope. I’m staying at the hotel down the street and I saw a table and chairs up here this afternoon when I was looking out the window.”

I chuckle and grin up at him. “At least you’re honest.”

“Always.” His expression morphs into one of complete and utter sincerity. His grey eyes bore into me as if to drive it home.

“Good to know. I happen to believe it’s the only way to be.”

He drapes his arm across the top of the seat, brushing my shoulders and sending tingles straight through me. I tense for a second, part of me half expecting the arm move to be followed by a jump of the let’s-get-it-on variety, but it doesn’t happen. The warmth of his body next to mine seeps into me and I relax against him, the feeling so natural you’d think I’d known the guy for more than twenty-four hours. In fact, I’ve only spent thirty minutes actually talking to the guy.

“You’ll never find anyone as honest as I am. Well, except Gaby. She’s as straight as an arrow with anyone and everyone. Sometimes inappropriately so.”

“I got that.”

I turn and see his lips twitching. “She’s awesome though. There isn’t anyone else unrelated to me who would fight to the death for me like she would.”

“A good friend then.”

“The best.”

“Everyone needs people like that in their life.” He looks out to the horizon, the lights of Main Street twinkling against the dark night sky as the bass from the sound system below us shakes the roof.

“So what about you then?”

His fingers toy with the end of my ponytail, a move that would normally seem a little too familiar from an almost-stranger, but with him, it’s nice. Maybe *too* nice. “What about me?”

I rest my cheek against his forearm and meet his eyes, our faces way inside each other’s personal bubble. “Tell me something about yourself so I don’t feel weirded out at being so comfortable with you so soon.”

His eyes flash then soften. Whatever this is between us, it’s definitely not one-sided and knowing that, I relax into his side.

“I love watching documentaries, especially true crime,” he says.

I drop my hand to rest on his leg, needing a connection with him. “I studied criminology and criminal justice at UC Irvine,” I reply with a wry smile.

His eyes widen, his lips curving up in a slow grin. “You don’t say? So how does a—”

“How does a woman headed for a career in law enforcement end up running a bar?”

“Pretty much,” he says with a laugh.

“I tried it, being a cop.” I mindlessly trace slow circles on his leg. “It was fulfilling until it wasn’t me anymore. I have enough trust issues as it is without needing to deal with the worst of the worst in people too.”

He lifts a brow. “You didn’t like your life so you made a change?”

“I walked away and moved back home from San Francisco to Davis,” I reply. His eyes flash with something unknown, his expression unreadable. The only thing I know is that I might die if he stops playing with my hair, or if he moves his hand resting on my hip. He’s looking at me as if I’m the sun and he’s just coming out into the light.

I study his face, his tan skin, the shallow laugh lines at the corners of big grey eyes that hold so much depth, I'm sure I'd get lost if I looked long enough. There's a flash of mystery in them, hidden behind a smoke screen that no doubt keeps his secrets under lock and key. Secrets I find myself wanting to discover. Secrets I want to know as much as I need my next breath.

His gaze grows hooded as I continue watching him, his strong jaw that I want to cup in my hands, the light five o'clock shadow I want to feel against my fingertips, against my skin, between my legs.

I want this man. I want him without knowing anything about him, but desperately needing to.

He inches his face closer to mine, his breath fanning against my parted lips. The strings I felt pulling me toward him continue to tighten—it's almost as if it would be impossible for me to pull away. That's if I'd even want to at this point.

Millen's hand glides up my side, his thumb grazing the side of my breast. My body hums under his touch, arching into him, needing more. "When do you need to go back?" he asks.

"Probably now," I whisper, my eyes caught in his. I never want to escape.

His gaze drops to my lips then back to my eyes, his breath quickening as his hands frame my face, his fingers flexing against my jaw. "Come home with me tonight," he murmurs against my lips, a sliver of air the only thing between us. Something stops me from closing that final distance.

"Come to dinner with me next week," I whisper, fighting the urge to trace his mouth with the tip of my tongue. To give myself a little taste of what I know is going to come later.

His eyes widen infinitesimally before he smiles against my chin, his forehead dropping to rest against mine. "You're gonna be the death of me, Kenz. Just when I think I have you figured out, you surprise me."

"I—"

"I like it," he says, robbing me of words.

I don't know what this intense connection between us is all about and it may have taken me by surprise, but, in order to understand it, I need to get to the man behind it.

"Let me take you home tonight," he says, his voice a low rasp.

Pulling back slightly, I'm stopped when his strong hands tense, holding me in place. "Just take you home, make sure you get there safely." He shifts back, pinning me with his penetrating gaze. "And definitely kiss." His eyes darken and drop to my lips once more. "Because if I have to wait a week, I'm likely to lose my mind."

How can I say no to that? "Just to my door," I reply, moving back, partly to get out of this addictive force field I've found myself in.

He puts his hand over his heart and shoots me a smirk full of dirty promises my body eagerly wants to accept.

"You're trouble, Millen Ross."

"Funny," he says, standing up and holding an arm out toward me. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

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Chapter 3

I'm an idiot. Plain and simple.

The rest of the night, all I can think about is touching Millen again. I find myself watching him when he's not looking, hearing his laugh across the bar as he chats with one of the regulars. My eyes drift his way just to watch his head drop back as his deep chuckle washes over me.

This isn't normal. This *can't* be right. How can a man I barely know reach inside of me and twist me inside out without doing *anything*?

By the time last drinks are called, Gaby has a knowing glint in her eyes that means I'm in for it.

When the last customer walks out the front door, she bends down and opens the drawer under the bar, pulling out my purse and handing it to me. "I'll close up. Bruno's already agreed to stay behind and help out. Your chariot awaits." She winks at me and tilts her head to the side where Millen is nursing the last dregs of the soda I served him thirty minutes ago.

I raise my brows. "You sure? I should be the one telling you to go."

"Yes, and you do it all the time. But it's not every night you have a hotter than Hades guy wanting to take you home." I open my mouth to protest her assumption—God knows why—but she stops me in my tracks. "And don't deny it. He's been watching you like a starving man in desperate need of a long, cool drink, i.e. *you*, all night. Don't make the man wait any longer or he might start humping the barstool. Get. Go, and call me tomorrow with all the juicy details."

Biting my lip, I pull her in for a hug. "Nothing's going to happen but I love you anyway," I whisper.

We pull apart and she grins at me. "Make sure you at least get a cheeky grope of his ass, because I swear you could pop pennies off it and he

wouldn't feel a thing."

"You're shocking."

"That's why you love me. Now, scoot," she says, pushing me to the edge of the bar.

"Okay, okay, I'm going. Sheesh. I'll be speaking to your manager, lady."

"Yeah, yeah, I bet you'll tell her how truly *horrible* I am for making her leave early. Hey, hottie," she says, calling out to Millen. "Make sure my girl gets home safely. I want to know she's tucked up tight in bed before curfew."

"With pleasure." He shoots me a wicked smirk as he stands, waiting as I round the bar and move over to him.

"Don't encourage her. I'll never hear the end of it," I say, reaching his side.

Holding his hands up in mock supplication, he protests innocence while his amused eyes promise anything but. "I'm just doing what she told me to do." He wraps an arm around my back and pulls me to his side, bringing his mouth to my ear. "Home to bed."

Those words on his lips in that husky whispered tone send a wave of something very good coursing through me.

"Let's go then," I reply just as quietly, patting myself on the back for masking just how affected I am.

"Lead the way," he says, and yes, Kenzie Sharp leaves her place of work hand in hand with a guy who's taking her home. For the first time in a long time, I'm playing hard to get, and Millen seems to revel in my resistance. Who would've thought?

"Where are we going?" he asks, turning right as we reach the sidewalk. He leads me toward a gunmetal grey BMW, beeping the locks and opening the passenger door.

I drop my purse onto the seat and lean back against the car, bracing my hands on the metal frame and looking up at the advancing man crowding

me in. “Do you know the area?” I ask, biting my lip to hold back a smile.

“Nope.” His eyes darken and in the dim light of the parking lot, I wonder just how wise this plan of mine is to keep him coming back for more without getting the ‘more’ he wants.

“So I could say anywhere and you wouldn’t have a clue where it was then?” My breath catches in my throat when he presses his body into mine, bracing his hands on the car roof and dipping his head to run his nose along the exposed line of my collarbone.

“How do you do that?” I rasp, locking my knees to stop myself from melting at his feet.

“Do what?” he asks, this time brushing his lips against the curve of my jaw, bringing his mouth closer toward mine without going in for the kiss I now desperately want.

“That.”

“God, I could so easily slip my hand down your pants right here, couldn’t I? Would you let me kiss your moans and feel you come apart against my hand as I wrung every last ounce of pleasure out of you?” He punctuates every word with a grind of his hips against mine. My hands shoot out to grab his hips.

God, I want to kiss him. I *really* want him to do exactly what he just said he could do. Because there’s no point denying that right now I’d totally let him do that. Right here in the parking lot of my place of work, not caring if anyone came upon us...

That thought snaps me out of it. As much as I’d love to let him do anything he wants to me, it can’t be here.

I open my mouth to say exactly that when he beats me to it. “You’re turning me into a caveman. You know that, right?” he says, brushing his lips against my cheek and pulling back, his eyes still burning hot.

“I don’t think it’s me.”

“Oh, it’s definitely you. I better get you home before I forget about doing the right thing and go ahead and do the thing we both want.”

“Are you sure that’s not the right thing?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re trouble.”

“And you’re such a good boy,” I reply with a sly smile.

“If only you knew how much I wanted to kiss that grin off your face right now.”

“If only you knew how much I really wanted you to do that,” I reply. He smirks and shakes his head at me, his eyes roaming my face. “You do know that all this touching and talking is like the world’s most potent foreplay.”

That earns me a groan. “In the car, before I forget about being a gentleman.”

Lifting my hand to my chest, I feign shock. “You’re a gentleman?”

“Only in public,” he says, his dark eyes zeroing in on my lips again. “It’s when we’re alone that you should be worried about.”

“He says as I’m about to hop into his car,” I mutter as I lower myself into the passenger seat.

“You’re probably safe while we’re in the car too.”

I open my mouth to reply but am met by the car door being shut and after twenty seconds, Millen taking the driver’s seat beside me. “We should go, because my self-control is wearing thin.”

I’m glad I’m not the only one. I give him my address and a few moments later we’re pulling down the main street, heading toward home.

“You’re not from around here I take it?” I ask once we’re on our way.

“You got that, huh?”

“Well considering I’ve lived here for all but the six years I was in San Francisco and I’ve never seen you around, I’m pretty sure you’re not a local.”

“I live in San Francisco; I was in So-Cal before that. Grew up in Madison County, Arkansas and moved to San Diego when I was ten.”

“Well, color me surprised,” I tease. “I was guessing you were big city born and bred.”

“It was the shirt and tie yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“There wasn’t a tie by the time I saw you.”

He meets my eyes and grins. “So you did see me first.” Dammit—walked right into that one.

“I saw you when you were talking to Bruno.”

“The bouncer?”

“Yep.”

“Good guy. Scary as hell though.”

I laugh because Bruno may be big and gruff but he’s a big teddy bear on the inside. “He’s good people.”

“I got that impression.” Comfortable silence falls between us as the car passes through the main part of town and heads into suburbia.

“So, Millen Ross, if I’m letting you know where I live, you’re going to have to tell me another thing about yourself.”

“Am I now?” he says with a quirked brow.

“It’s the least you could do.” I shoot him a huge smile and don’t miss the growl that rumbles in his chest as he pulls up to a red light.

“That smile will get you anything you want, Kenz. But you know that, don’t you?”

“Perhaps,” I reply, running my tongue along my bottom lip, earning me a groan. The light changes to green and he takes off again.

“What would you like to know, devil woman?”

I look out the window and think about what I could ask, wondering whether there’s anything he could tell me that would be a deal breaker other than him already being involved with someone. Or a serial killer... a con man...

Out of those, there’s only one other thing that’s important.

“Are you single?”

“Do you think I would’ve come back to see you tonight, stayed till closing talking to an old guy about his days working on the railway, and be driving you home to bed if I was seeing someone?”

“You have *no* idea what some people are capable of.”

“I do, but that’s another story for another day.” The car slows down and he turns into my driveway, pulling to a stop and shutting off the engine.

He spins in his seat to face me, his hand reaching over the center console and tangling his fingers with mine. “I’m not involved with anyone, and I don’t want to be seeing anyone other than you right now. That’s why I will be right here, next Saturday night to take you to dinner, because I like the way you make me feel and I want the chance to make you feel the same way. If that’s dinner and conversation, followed by whatever it is you want to do after, then that’s what we’re going to do.”

I lean into him until my shoulder touches his, liking his restraint, liking his words, and liking the curve of his lips as he says them. Lips that every part of my being wants to touch, to taste, to lose myself in after the last few hours of what has been the most torturous foreplay known to man.

Reaching up, I run my fingers over the coarse stubble covering his jaw. His eyes flare, amping me higher on this roller coaster ride I’m reaching the precipice of.

His gaze drops to my lips then back to my eyes as his hands frame my face, his fingers flexing against my jaw. Without another word, he moves in and brushes his mouth against mine, flicking his tongue against my parched lips before easing back. His gaze searches my face, as if to seek approval.

By the time we pull apart we’re both breathless, my entire body alive and wanting more from this man, needing another kiss, something to keep this feeling I never want to end.

He tucks a stray tendril of hair behind my ear, a knowing smile curving his mouth. “Now I promised to get you tucked up in bed, but I think I’m gonna have to stop at your door.”

My brows scrunch together and I avert my eyes, not wanting him to see my disappointment...

He traces my jaw with his thumb then gently tugs my lip free and moves in until he's all that I can see. "If we're alone inside your house, my plans for being a gentleman and going at your pace will go right out the window."

Now I wish we were about to walk through my front door. "Okay," I whisper.

"Good choice, but don't think for a minute that I don't want you. The thought of my empty hotel room pales in comparison to taking you to your bed and taking my time."

"Okay," I repeat, the words barely audible as the breath in my lungs decides to take a holiday.

His hands fall away and we both shift back, me needing the space to clear my head because another kiss like that and I'd be pulling him from the car and dragging him to my bed. The fire in his eyes tells me he's contemplating doing the exact same thing. "Give me your phone," he says gruffly, extending his arm.

I grab it from my bag and give it to him. A few moments and finger presses later, he hands it back to me, wrapping his hand around mine.

"Now," he says, lifting my fingers to his lips, not breaking eye contact, he brushes his lips against my skin. "You have my phone number and when you text me during the week to confirm our date, I'll have yours."

"Wha—"

He presses his index finger against my lips and gives me an utterly irresistible smile. "You wanted me to prove myself by turning up tonight—"

"Which you did," I mumble against his finger.

His grin widens, his eyes softening as he moves his hand to my jaw. "Fuck, you're adorable. Yes, I did. So now, this is your way of showing me that you're interested. I've got to head back home so if I don't hear from you, I'll know you've had second thoughts, without needing to have any awkward face-to-face conversations."

“I don’t need to think about it.”

“Take a few days. You might find you just like looking at asses you can pop pennies off—”

“Oh my God,” I reply, turning away. *I’m going to kill Gaby next time I see her.*

“You can, by the way.”

I furrow my brows. “Can what?”

“Pop pennies off it.” That sexy smirk of his—dimples and all—will be my undoing one day.

“I’m gonna kill Gaby,” I mutter.

He chuckles and lifts his other hand up to cup my cheek. “You’re cute when you’re flustered.”

“No one’s cute when they’re flustered,” I huff.

“You are,” he says, kissing me softly and touching his forehead to mine. We sit there like that in his car, parked in my driveway, just breathing each other in. “I’m serious about texting me. Think of it as my challenge to you.”

“You want me to prove my intentions?” I whisper, shocked and kind of impressed at how he’s turned my play back on me.

“Maybe my ego needs to know you’ll be thinking about me once I drive away.”

I look deep into his eyes. There’s a flicker of amusement there but I sense some truth in that statement. He needs proof that it’s not just him feeling this too. “I can do that.”

“Good,” he says, giving me one last kiss, a long, slow, re-stoke-the-fire one that sets the blaze right back up to scorching again. “But now I’m forcing myself to walk you to the door otherwise we’ll never get out of the car.”

His half-smile gives away his desire to do exactly that but we have next Saturday. He’s showing me he can—and wants to—respect my wishes even if I’m seriously reconsidering why I made them in the first place.

That was all before he kissed me.

But we have a week to rue the day we both decided to torture ourselves. I'm sure I can survive until next Saturday.

Watching him from my lounge room window, I wait until he's just about to pull out of the drive before I press send on the text message I'd written while I watched him walk back to his car.

Me—I don't need a few days, I don't even need a week, so I'll tell you now: I'm sure about whatever this is and want to explore it more. Pick me up at six p.m. Saturday.

Then I send one more for good measure.

Me—And pack a bag.

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Chapter 4

Before I know it, it's 5:58 p.m. Saturday night, and having scheduled myself off for the night—and the next day—I'm footloose and fancy free.

I should be nervous about tonight. And yet after meeting Millen twice at the bar, and that kiss, I'm bouncing with anticipation by the time I hear a car pull into my driveway. With one last look in the mirror, I quickly grab my black blazer from my closet, slip my phone into my purse, and walk toward the front of the house.

I've gone for a sexy, sultry, you-know-you-want-me-but-I'm-gonna-make-you-work-for-it look: smoky eyes, a midnight blue satin bustier, and dark-wash skinny jeans, finished off with black wedge heels. All of it is aimed at knocking him on his ass at first glance.

He knocks on the door just as I reach the entryway and without hesitation—not even a few seconds to play it cool—I turn the handle. My plan to floor him goes out the window because it's me that's cut off at the knees at the sight of him. A week was definitely too long. He's sex on legs in a perfect Millen-sized package.

His hair has that run-your-hands-through-it-and-grip-it-tight look. His grey button-down is open at the neck, tucked into tailored slacks that taper at the hips and drop down to shiny black wingtips. His cuffs are rolled up to the elbow, showing off his tan that only highlights exactly how hot this guy is.

Hot is always good. What makes Millen beyond the realms of hot is the wide-eyed, gaping-mouthed look of wonder on his face. He doesn't say a word, his eyes speaking volumes as they roam my face to my chest, down to the tips of my toes and back again, a laser beam of heat following the path.

When he finally meets my gaze, his jaw is twitching and there's a war being waged behind his eyes.

Without warning he moves, crowding me until my back meets the wall, his body crushing me from chest to thighs. "Jesus, you smell fucking amazing," he groans, burying his face in the crook of my neck. "With this outfit and everything that's you, I swear you're trying to test me."

I rest my hands on his waist, my fingers biting in when he places a soft kiss below my ear. "I know we're going out for dinner, but exactly how hungry are you?" His voice is a delicious rasp vibrating against my skin, making me tremble not just with his words but the intimation behind them.

Deciding two can play this game, I slide my hands up his back, turning my head so my lips brush against his skin. "For food or the after-dinner entertainment?"

He drops his forehead to my shoulder, a breathed out "fuck" escaping his lips.

A corner of my mouth is curled up when he lifts his head and turns to look at me. "Damn, you're beautiful."

My lady parts convulse in delight at his words because there's nothing better than having the man you like/lust/want to shackle to your bed, call you beautiful. When a man like Millen Ross says it, you prepare to drop to your knees and offer the appropriate method of worship. My cheeks heat, and I fight the urge to look away.

"And when you look like that," he says, wetting his bottom lip, "it makes me want to see just how far that blush goes."

Woman. Down.

"We're going out to dinner, but first I have to do this." Dropping my purse to the ground, I drive my fingers into his hair, lift up on my toes, and crush my mouth to his. The moment the tip of my tongue touches his, it's on like Donkey Kong. My grip on his hair tightens, his hands start to roam, and I'm lost in the feeling of his lips on mine, his hard body pressing against me, and the pinpoint accuracy of our hips as they roll against each other.

Needing to stop this before I give the neighbors a show, I drop my hands to his shoulders and gently push back. He moves and leans against the doorframe. His eyes are blazing when they meet mine, our breathing fast and shallow, trying to capture some desperately needed air.

“As much as I don’t want to stop the direction we’re going in, I really do want to take you out for dinner. And you’ve been driving for an hour and a half, I think I should feed you before you run out of energy.” His eyes that were just starting to calm down spark to life again, a lascivious grin appearing on his face.

“Oh, I’m liking the sound of this more and more. Do continue.” His attention drops to my lips as I run my tongue along them. “Damn, your lips look amazing after I kiss you. I can’t wait to see them after you’ve—”

I rush forward and cover his mouth with my hand, his mouth turning up into a smile beneath my arm. “If you say it, I’ll wanna do it and then we’ll never get fed.”

“That too. But first, food.” I slide my hand into his before he leads me down the steps and into his car. Shutting the door behind me, he rounds the hood and takes his place behind the steering wheel.

I turn in my seat and look at him, my heart racing. *Why does he have such a profound effect on me?*

He’s thoughtful. He’s considerate. He *listens*. If that kiss affected him anywhere near as much as it did me, he’ll still be walking around with a battering ram between his legs—yes, I felt it—and still had the wherewithal to ignore strongly calling basal instincts and do what I wanted—to have dinner with him. An adult conversation over a meal—how truly grown up is that? And he *wants* to do it. Well, it’s probably his second choice right now, but he catapulted it—and me—into first place without a moment’s hesitation. *One big gold star for him!*

He doesn’t hide his surprise when I direct him to park outside my favorite restaurant in town, a small hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant, home to what I refer to as the world’s best burritos.

Turning toward me, he looks out at the front of the building then back to me, raising a brow as one corner of his mouth curves up. “I’m not usually

speechless, but—”

I place my index finger against his lips. “Stop right there. Didn’t your mom ever teach you not to judge a book by its cover? Or in this case, the food by the look of the restaurant?”

His mirth falters for a minute, so fast I might’ve missed it if I wasn’t watching him, but he recovers quickly, that sexy smirk of his distracting me. “Yes, but there’s judging and then there’s considering whether I want to live past tomorrow. I’m currently weighing up my options.”

“Oh shush, you.” I playfully shove his shoulder before linking my fingers with his and giving them a squeeze. “I promise you, this place has the best food in town. Would I lead you astray?” His eyes darken and drop to my lips as he leans forward, making his intentions clear. “Nuh-uh, buddy. If you kiss me again, I might not want to get out of this car, and considering my dad also loves this restaurant, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he comes out any minute with his weekly takeout order. The last thing I need is him seeing me half-naked with a strange man. He’s had more than his fair share of seeing that already in my thirty-two years.”

Millen’s head jerks back and tilts to the side. “There are so many parts of that sentence I want to explore but one of them is *not* meeting your dad with my tongue in your mouth.”

“Good choice.”

“Something tells me there’s a story there I should know about.”

“Of course,” I reply with a laugh.

“You, half-naked in a car, on a public street? There’s a lot there that interests me.”

“Again, not surprised.” I reach for the door handle but a gentle squeeze of my fingers stops me in my tracks.

“You may have chosen the restaurant but let me be the man I was raised to be and open your door.”

I purse my lips and look down at our joined hands. I can’t hide how happy him saying that makes me.

He gives my fingers a gentle squeeze and lets me go. Getting out of the car, he rounds the hood and opens my door for me.

When I'm standing by him on the sidewalk, he shuts my door and beeps the locks. Slipping his hand into mine, he leads me into the restaurant.



Once we've been shown to our table, the waitress takes our drink order and leaves us alone with our menus. Looking around the room, I'm surprised at how quiet it is for a Saturday night. Normally the place would be buzzing, but surprisingly there are still quite a few tables spare.

Thankfully it means we won't need to shout in order to converse with each other—always a good thing for a first date.

“Do you realize that apart from the two times I've been in your car, we usually have a giant piece of wood between us?” I say, opening the menu in front of me despite always ordering the same thing every time I come here.

When Millen doesn't say anything, I look up to be met by a huge smirk and a raised brow. “Huge?”

That dirty mind of his will be my undoing.

“Well, I wouldn't say *huge*...”

“Ah, but I heard it. I'm sure the couple behind us did too. Maybe we should go ask them.” He's beaming now, and it's contagious.

“That won't be necessary.” I shake my head, unable to hide my own grin. “I meant the bar and the table.”

He holds his hands up in supplication. “Hey, you said wood. How was I supposed to know you were keeping things above board? I mean, for all I knew, you could have been trying to seduce me.”

“Nah, not before the mains. I always feed my dates before sweet talking them into bed.”

“Is that right?” he asks, his voice laced with an edge of *I don't know what*.

Deciding not to focus on something I can't analyze now, I forge ahead, holding my hand over my heart and gasping in mock horror. "I'll have you know, I'm a good girl. I even have the girl scout badges to prove it."

"You're good, alright," he murmurs, his darkened eyes telling me he sees straight through me.

The waitress returns with two bottles of Victoria. When we both order a "Super," which is a burrito with everything but the kitchen sink in it, she takes our menus away and leaves us alone again.

"Cheers," he says, lifting his beer bottle into the air between us.

I match him, pausing before touching the glass to his. "What are we toasting to?"

"To good food, better beer, and the best company."

Nodding in agreement, I clink my bottle against his before taking a sip.

I don't bother ignoring how normal this feels. It's a first date, but it's like it's our tenth. I was nervous before he turned up but the minute he kissed me—the minute he touched me—the butterflies disappeared, leaving a wave of warmth in their place. "I'm impressed, by the way."

"Why's that?" He reaches over and slides his fingers with mine.

"You know your beer."

He laughs. "That surprises you? I spent four years in college in Texas. I know my beer. I know my *Mexican* beer, and I especially know my tequila."

"Lots of trips south then?"

"Just a few. As a Ross, you only get those few years free from the family business so you make the most of them."

"As a Ross?"

"Remember when I said we moved to the West Coast?" he asks, and I nod. "We moved when my grandfather bought out his competition. Soon after, my father took over the company, publicly listed it, and—"

“Do you mean *the* Ross Corporation?” I gasp. The company isn’t just some run-of-the-mill family business. It grew from a small ma and pa boutique distillery to a multi-million dollar empire, expanding into not only production of a wide range of different spirits but also distribution and international exports.

“One and the same,” he replies, taking another drink. I’m momentarily distracted by the reflection of the lights on his wet bottom lip, remembering what it felt like to be kissed by him, the way he took control from the first touch. He chuckles, breaking me out of my daze. “You alright there, Kenz? You don’t seem the type to be seeing dollar signs at the mere sound of my father’s company.”

“You’re right, I’m not. I was just a little... distracted.”

“Oh?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Hey now, quid pro quo. You said I’d never find anyone as honest as you are.”

Dammit. I narrow my eyes at his twitching lips. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“Yep.”

“Trust me to find a guy with the memory of an elephant.”

“Yep.” His grin widens as he leans toward me. “Tell me what distracted you, Kenz.”

“Your lips, okay?” My cheeks heat. I swear I’ve never blushed more than I have since I met Millen. His gaze drops to my mouth and lingers, my tongue darting out before I even know it’s happening. A growl rumbles in his chest and his eyes flash as his fingers tense in mine.

Clenching my legs together and desperately needing to focus on something less physical, I change the subject. “So you work for your dad then?” *That* breaks the moment.

“Yeah,” he says with a nod, his thumb picking at the beer label. “I’m in management.”

“Management, huh?” I do air quotes with my spare hand.

He chuckles. “Yeah. One of those jobs, but one where I *actually* do the work instead of sitting back and resting on my family name.”

“I see. So a real man then.” I can’t hold back a smile

“Indeed,” he says with a grin.

“So does all of your family work for the company?”

“I’m the only child in the country. My younger sister, Ashley, left for Europe as soon as she could, so it’s all on me.” His smile falters for a second, so quickly I almost think I’m seeing things. “Enough about me. What about you?”

“Well, you know I went away for college.”

“And you came back.”

“I did,” I reply, taking another drink.

“Your parents?”

“Dad lives here, obviously.” I wave my hand around the restaurant. “Given he’s probably the main reason the owner of this place, Mr. Martinez, can take his wife to Anguila twice a year.”

“He’s a fan of Mexican food then?”

“He’s a fan of any food he doesn’t have to prepare himself,” I say.

Millen’s responding smile is so endearing, it’s also contagious. “A man after my own heart.”

My eyes widen. “You don’t cook?”

“I *can* cook. Having the time to cook is a whole other question.”

“Because of work?” I ask, lifting my beer bottle to my lips.

“Yep.”

Then I remember him spending all of last weekend here. “You stayed an extra day last week...”

His smile turns knowing with a flash of wicked. “Let’s just say I had someone who piqued my interest and put a line in the sand for me. I always

love a challenge.”

“And I’m that challenge.”

“You’re the reward.”

Holy Jesus, words every woman wants to hear. “And once you get the reward?” I ask, my confidence wavering and my voice failing to hide it.

Millen’s eyes soften as he gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “That’s one of life’s big questions, isn’t it? What happens when you get the one thing you want?”

Whoa. That doesn’t sound like a one- or two-night thing. That sounds like a whole lot more.

We sit there in silence, our eyes locked together, his full of total utter honesty.

“So,” he says, breaking the moment. “Tell me three things about you most people don’t already know.”

“There’s a conversation starter,” I mutter with a laugh.

“It’s our first date. That’s what happens when you want to get to know someone.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows another mouthful of beer and I can’t help but stare. *Is it getting hot in here?*

“Right, three things. I hate olives, I love TV crime dramas, and…” I bite my lip and tilt my head, looking over his shoulder as I think about the final thing. “I despise liars.”

He does a double brow lift at that. “That’s not at all what I thought you’d say.”

“It’s pretty deep and meaningful. I’m not sure that’s a first-date topic.”

“As long as it’s not about how you hate the male race because they’re all lying, cheating assholes, then I think we’re good,” he says, leaning back in his chair and chuckling quietly.

It only takes a moment for me to decide between brushing over the topic or laying it all out there. I choose the latter. “I believe in being completely honest with people. It’s one of my core values. Probably stemming from the fact my mother cheated on my father for years with our

next door neighbor and I saw first-hand what that kind of betrayal can do to a man.”

“And a woman?” I don’t miss the unasked question.

“I only made that mistake once. A college boyfriend who thought out of state meant out of mind.”

“Any relationship—be it long or short—deserves respect; that means fidelity. Otherwise, why bother being in a relationship at all?”

Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner. “To me, there’s no other way to be. If people know what you want, what you stand for, what you expect from them, then they can either be with you or not... I can’t control what other people do, but I damn well make it clear what my deal breakers are.”

“Cheating?”

“Cheating, lying, not being honest about themselves, their feelings, their intentions...” Needing to do something, I turn my hand over with his. “I always said I’d never stand for being cheated on or—in turn—be the woman a man cheated with. I’m the one who has to look herself in the mirror every morning and live with the things I’ve done. Right now, I can. I wanna keep it that way.” I shrug, racking my brain over how this light conversation suddenly took a deep turn.

Millen’s look grows intense, his expression totally open and honest. “I like that,” he states plainly, just putting it out there. No bullshit.

My lips twitch, and I find myself looking down at our joined hands and smiling. He slides his fingers out of mine and reaches across the table, placing his thumb under my chin and tilting my head up until I meet his gaze. “God, you’re beautiful,” he says, his eyes roaming my features. “I mean that, Kenz. Not just to look at either. You’re fucking stunning in that respect, but I’m not sure I’ve ever met a woman who is as upfront as you are. You don’t hide anything. And in my life, there are a lot of secrets and half-truths, broken promises and closed-door deals.” His eyes darken but he catches himself and schools his features, cupping my cheek in his hand. “Whatever happens here, wherever this thing between us goes or does not go, I won’t ever lie to you. There is no Mrs. Ross waiting for me back in San Francisco other than my mother. There’s no girlfriend. There isn’t even

a current hook-up. Right now, the only woman I'm pursuing in my life is you. And hopefully, you're happy to keep it that way while we figure whatever this is going to be out."

Talk about laying it all out there. I spot the waitress coming up behind him with our food.

"Saved by the bell," I breathe with a sigh.

He drops his hand and makes room for our plates as the waitress places them on the table in front of us. "Enjoy. Let me know if you need anything else," she says cheerfully.

"I've got everything I need right here," Millen replies, his legs tangling with mine.

Picking up my burrito, I take a bit, locking my gaze with his across the table.

"Mmmmmm," I groan, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as the foodgasm I'm experiencing takes hold.

Mid-bite I look over at Millen. He hasn't touched his food. Instead he's leaning back in his chair, one forearm resting casually on the table, his gaze fixed on me. It's intense. Penetrating. It's hot as fucking hell, so hot I put my food down to stop myself from dropping it when I jump the table and hop into Millen's lap.

"Never thought I'd say this, but I kind of wish I was that burrito." He reaches out, wrapping his hand around his beer bottle and lifting it to his lips.

"Is that your way of telling me you have lots of sauce too?"

Suddenly, my chest is sprayed with beer as he splutters and chokes. Another woman might be disgusted that she's now wearing beer down her front but seriously, it's funny as hell and I can't help but laugh at the look of absolute shock—morphing into mortification—on his face.

"Oh shit," he says, grabbing desperately at the napkins on the table before standing up, reaching over and drying my chest off without hesitation.

I laugh harder as I watch the concentrated look on his face as his hands navigate the curves and valley of my drying cleavage. “Is this your way of skipping first base? The ol’ ‘spit your drink over your date and have to dry it up’ trick? Because, seriously, all you had to do was ask.”

His hands freeze as my words register, his eyes snapping to mine. With twitching lips, he gives the area one last rub down—this time with more calculated movements—before dropping his arms and examining his work.

Placing the napkin on the table, he leans in and braces an arm on the back of my seat. “You’re on to my plan. I might have to up my game.”

I tilt my chin, bringing my face—and lips—closer to his. “If you up your game, then I think I’ll be in more trouble than I am right now.”

He dips his head and dropping his voice. “And how much trouble is that?”

My fingers grip the edge of the table to stop myself from putting on a show for the staff... “Let’s see. You got me half turned on just with your hello in my entryway, you got me all the way with your gentleman act, and now, despite spraying your beer all over me, I’m letting you grope me in public and holding myself back from jumping you. So Trouble is my middle name right about now, and if you’re not careful, I’m fully prepared to say ‘screw it’ and have this burrito to go so that it can be a mid-round snack when I *do* get you home.”

“You’re that far gone already?”

“I was done for the minute you had me against the wall.” His eyes flare with heat and without any romantic preamble—thank God for that—he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and holds me in place as he kisses the living hell out of me right there in the middle of my favorite restaurant.

Unfortunately for me, it’s over far too quickly for my liking, and I’m soon left sagging against my seat, struggling to recover.

Now he’s the one looking across the table smirking at me as he picks up his food and starts eating, his satisfied gaze all I can see. “I have a question,” he says, in between bites.

“Mmm-hmm.” *Should I get this burrito to go.*

“Kenz?”

Making my decision, I throw my arm up and call over the waitress, asking her for a doggy bag. She looks at Millen, then back to me, shooting me a knowing grin before carrying the plates away and leaving us alone.

“You do know I didn’t even get to have a bite?” he says, quirking a brow.

“That’s because you were too busy watching me eat mine.”

“I’m a little obsessed with your mouth.” I bite my lip, secretly loving the way his eyes dance with amusement. He knows he’s getting to me.

“I meant kissing, but don’t let me hold you back. Feel free to do anything you like with it,” he adds with a wink. He shifts his chair back and stands, holding his hand out to me. “Absolutely *anything*, Kenz.” He dips his head and brushes his lips against mine.

Somehow, I manage to follow his lead as we walk toward the front of the restaurant where he pays the check, grabs our takeout, and walks out the door.

On the drive home, the butterflies come back. When Millen pulls his car into my driveway, I’m about ready to burst out of my skin.

First meeting. First kiss. First date. Check, check, and check.

Now, it’s time for the real fun to begin.

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Chapter 5

“Do you want me to come in? I didn’t want to assume anything so I can easily go check-in to the hotel,” he says, turning the ignition off and turning toward me.

I reach over and fist his shirt, pulling him in so our lips are touching and he’s everything I can see. “If you think for one minute that I’m gonna let you leave me now, you’ve got another thing coming.” I flick my tongue out and run it along the seam of his mouth. “Because after an hour of foreplay over dinner, you can bet your ass you’re paying up now.”

He shifts his head and quirks a brow. “And what payment methods do you accept?”

I release my hold on his shirt and sit back in my seat, my hand going to the door handle. “That’s for me to know and you to figure out.” Purse in hand, I hop out of the car before he can tell me to wait. I stop in the doorway to lean down. “Oh, and bring the food. We might build up an appetite.” Walking toward the house, I fight the urge to look back over my shoulder. The door slamming shut and the car alarm beeping, followed by quick footsteps behind me, tell me everything I need to know.

I’m pushing the key in the lock when his big hand engulfs mine, the heat of his body warming my back as his mouth comes to my ear. “There’s no way I’d choose an empty bed over anywhere with you.” He opens the door and walks me inside, closing it behind him and taking my keys off me, throwing them on the hallway table.

“You better take me to your room before I strip you off and taste you right here...” He bends me over, forcing me to brace my arms on the side table. He grips my hip, roughly releasing the button on my jeans. Undoing the zip, he pushes his hand inside, his fingers gliding over the wet satin

between my legs. His other hand cups my breast, his thumb and forefinger delving inside my top and rolling my nipple.

“Oh God.”

“Now, Kenz,” he growls.

I stand straight and turn around, looping my arms around his neck and lifting up on my toes to crush my mouth to his.

“Good choice,” he mumbles, his thumb reaching beneath my silk thong, finding my now aching clit without delay.

He slowly—achingly so—pushes a finger inside of me, and I moan against his tongue. My back meets the entryway wall as he shoves his leg between mine, pressing hard against my core. My entire body now at his bidding, I’m breathless, completely awash in sensation. Closing my eyes, I give in to the pleasure and just let him take me.

His mouth trails down my neck, nipping and biting, licking and sucking, as his fingers continue their beautiful torture.

“Jesus, so fucking sweet,” he rasps against my skin, his impressive length pressing against my stomach with every roll of his hips. My breaths come quick and fast as his hand picks up speed, the rough pad of his thumb stroking my clit with renewed determination.

“I wanna hear you say my name when you come. I want that so fucking bad, I’ve been dreaming of it all week. Your moans, your cries, your body trembling as you fall over the edge.”

“Fuuuuuck...”

“Give me that, Kenz. Let me hear you.”

I whimper my assent, words escaping me as he spears two fingers deep inside me in perfect rhythm with every roll of his thumb on my clit. Blinding light flashes behind my eyelids as I catapult headfirst into a leg-buckling orgasm, my body thankful for Millen holding me up as I sag against him.

He slows his strokes, not stopping completely until my moans turn into wrung-out whimpers.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire fucking life.” He gently grabs my chin, turning my face until his mouth collides with mine and he shows just how much he meant that with his tongue and teeth. I swear I’m halfway to multiple orgasms with just that kiss, and his fingers are still buried deep between my legs.

I drag my hands through his hair, pulling his head back to meet his eyes. He moves his hand away and braces it on the wall by my head. “Unless we’re going for two and oh in the entryway, let’s take this where I can support my own weight and get my hands on you.”

He quirks a brow and his swollen lips twitch. “You can’t support your own weight?” I look down to where I’m straddling his leg then back again. “You’re a good seat, but I think you’d make a better mattress.”

His gaze goes molten. “Let’s fix that.” He lowers his leg, bends down, and throws me over his shoulder in the blink of an eye. Ignoring my squeal, he takes long strides down the corridor toward the back of the house. I hold on to his hips—not missing the chance to check out his ass up close and personal—and am just about to bite his pants when he jerks to a halt. “You better tell me which room otherwise it’ll take longer for me to get my mouth on you.”

My body shudders, a mini-orgasm threatening to take hold at just the thought of that. If he’s even half as good with his tongue as he is with his fingers, then it’s doubtful I’ll be able to move—let alone walk—by morning.

He lets go of my hand and turns to face me, cupping my cheeks and kissing me as he walks me backwards into my bedroom. I grab hold of his waist and let him take my mouth as if he owns it. Because right now, he’s owning every part of me—or he will be shortly.

He drops his arms to my shoulders, slipping his fingers beneath my jacket and sliding it slowly down my arms. His hands slide across my skin, sending delicious shivers to all my really good places. Not once do our lips part.

I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensations he arouses in me. My body, still thrumming from my orgasm, craves everything he’s giving me.

Everything he's about to give me.

He stops as we reach the end of my bed, and I give myself a high-five for leaving my bedside light on. I can see the hunger etched into Millen's expression as he pulls back and pins me in place with a simple stare. Scrap that—there's nothing simple about the look in his eyes. It's pure, unadulterated lust laced with a desperation to touch me if his tight grip on my ass is anything to go by.

“You're hell on a man's self-control, you know that?” He nips my bottom lip and presses my hips against his, making me feel every inch of his “control” against my stomach.

I drop my head back, exposing my neck to his roaming mouth, his hand sliding up my side to cup my breast over my top. “Too. Many. Clothes,” I murmur between breaths, I'm being tortured from the outside in, too much more and I'll self-combust.

“Let's fix that, shall we?” His low whispered voice in my ear brushes over my skin, electrifying my senses. He lifts his arms to my chest and deftly releases the hooks lining the front of my top one by one, his tongue, teeth, and lips devouring my throat as he dips his mouth to kiss the swell of my breast. “I've been wanting to do this all *fucking* night.”

I dig my nails into his shoulders. He lowers himself to his knees, holding open my top to just look at my naked breasts. The longer he stares, the harder my nipples peak. Soon, I'm squirming in place as he continues his torturous perusal.

His eyes drop to the waist of my jeans. I desperately try to kick off my pumps.

“Don't you dare,” he says with narrowed eyes. “Those shoes... *God...* they've been torturing me all night.”

I guess he likes my shoes then.

“Those shoes are the work of the devil.” He sits on his heels and runs his hands down from my ass, over my thighs, caressing the back of my knees, eliciting a barely audible whimper from me. He doesn't miss it though if the sexy grin he sends my way is anything to go by.

He lifts one of my feet onto his knee, his fingers gliding over my ankle as he deftly undoes the clasp on my shoe, and gently pulls it off before doing the same to my other foot. Soon, I'm standing barefoot, breasts bared, jeans on, looking down at the sexiest man I've ever met who's on his knees looking up at me.

We stay like that for a few seconds, just watching, taking each other in. His gaze roams my face then drops to my chest.

"A girl could get used to this." I grin at him and love the flash in his eyes at my words.

"A woman like you *should* get used to this. You *will* get used to this if I have anything to say about it." He leans forward, sliding his hands back up my body, his cheek resting against my inner thigh as he continues to rise, lifting his head until he's running his nose along the seam of my jeans, and fuck, if I don't finish off that mini orgasm I had earlier at just that one move.

"These need to come off," he murmurs, slowly standing, his mouth trailing my torso until he's level with my bust. I'm desperate for him to do something—*anything*—to quell the ache that's been building all night. He doesn't make me wait long.

I cry out as soon as his lips wrap around my nipple. His tongue pulses against my skin, driving me insane. My hands tangle in his hair, undecided whether to hold him in place or pull him up to kiss him. I choose the latter, tugging his head and crashing my mouth against his. He steps forward so the back of my knees hit the mattress and I fall onto the bed, bringing him down on top of me.

Positioning his forearms on either side of my head, he kisses me again, harder this time, rougher, more demanding, and oh, how I let him take everything he wants and more. I roll my tongue against his. I drag my teeth against his bottom lip when he pulls away, drawing him back in. We stay there, kissing as if it's the only thing in the world we were born to do.

Millen rolls to my side, his eyes molten as he lets his hand roam over my chest until his fingers are lazily toying with my nipple. "I still have a problem," he says roughly.

I look down to the sizeable tent in his slacks. “I see your problem and I think I have a solution.” I bite down on my lip to hold back a giggle, especially when he shakes his head at me.

“Not *that*. That problem will be fixed as soon as I can solve the other one, which is your pants.”

I jerk my head back into the mattress. “My pants?”

“They’re still on.”

I lift a brow and turn my face toward him. “They’re undone...”

“That’s not off. That’s no closer to you being naked.”

“You should get right on that then.” I’ve got a stupid grin on my face now—I can’t help it.

“Bossy, aren’t you?”

“Slow on the uptake, aren’t *you*?” I retort.

“That does it.” He crawls down my body, half hanging off the bed. He deftly slides his fingers inside the waist of my jeans, expertly dragging them down my legs and taking my underwear with him.

I lift myself up on my elbows. “Bold move...”

His hands push my legs apart, his tongue swiping my clit as his reply.

“Ahh... fuck...” My head digs into the bed, my back arching as he devours me whole. Licking, sucking, spearing, damn near worshiping me with a reverence and—it must be said—attention to detail rarely seen.

“Soon,” he mumbles against my skin, the vibrations shooting me higher as another climax threatens to turn me inside out. “I wanna hear you say my name again. This time while my tongue is buried inside of you.”

“Jesus! Keep talking like that and you’re guaranteed to make me do exactly... that. Is that tongue patented? Seriously, you know what you’re doing down there, Millen Ross.”

“Too much talking, not enough moaning,” he says before upping the ante and bringing one finger, then two, into play.

My hips gyrate in time with the targeted swipes of his tongue. He moves up and down, around and around, before gently running his teeth against my now super sensitive bundle of nerves and sucking it between his lips. He's not letting up even for a minute and I'm *far* from complaining.

Then it's upon me, another orgasm more forceful than the one before. My entire body tenses, an automatic self-preservation measure that I fight as I ride the wave of pleasure to its peak. I cry out his name, my hands dropping to his head and holding him in place.

He doesn't let up for a single second, and just as my body starts to relax, he starts at me again, this time not easing into it. He eats me like a starving man, and it's not until I've screamed so loud my voice is hoarse that he slowly brings me down to Earth and stands, giving me a reprieve. His lips are wet, his chest rapidly rising and falling, his eyes still blazing with hunger... need.

I prop myself up on my elbows as he works the buttons of his shirt, his gaze meeting mine with a sexy smirk as he throws his top on the floor and gets to work on his pants.

"Wait," I breathe, jumping off the bed and stopping him from removing his briefs. Black Calvin Kleins. Tight. Fitting. Perfection. I leave my hand on his hip and dip my fingers inside the waistband. Leaning up on my toes, I cup his face and bring my mouth to his. "I want to do it," I rasp. "It's my turn..." *Kiss*. "To drive you..." *Kiss*. "A little crazy..." *Kiss*. "It's only fair..." This time, I trace his bottom lip with my tongue before driving it into his mouth to get the full Millen kissing experience. Millen's kissing ability has ruined me for all future kisses. They're like a drug to me—I'm an addict who will never get enough.

He lifts his hands in surrender. "I'm not gonna stop you, Kenz. But I'll warn you," he says, his voice dropping an octave, "I'm fighting the urge to lay you down and take you right now so if you push me too far, you might find I push back."

I tilt my head and lick my lips. "You're not the only one who likes a challenge."

His eyes flash as I lower myself to my knees in front of him, my hands going to either side of his hips. Slowly, I ease the fabric down his legs, unveiling his hard length as I go. Leaving them mid-thigh, I'm unable to resist the temptation to taste him for the first time.

I trace the head with the tip of my tongue before running my mouth down the underside of his cock to the base. I cup his balls and massage them as I lift my head and, eyes locked on his, engulf the entire length of him in one slow glide.

"Jesus," he mutters, reaching down to tangle his fingers in my hair. I continue to slide his cock between my lips, deep throating him like a pro, loving the grunts and groans he makes whenever I graze my teeth against his exposed head. "You're gonna finish this thing before I even get inside you if you keep that up."

I slowly pull back, releasing him with an exaggerated *pop*. Sitting on my heels, I look up and meet his eyes, taking his offered hand and standing in front of him. "So..." I say, licking my lips and taking in his toned chest. It's not one of those sculpted spends-every-minute-of-the-day-at-the-gym types of bodies. He's got more of a runner's body. And right now, it's ticking all my boxes and then some.

His expression is one of hunger. Before I can say another word, his arm is wrapped around my waist and I'm being backed onto the bed.

He doesn't take me slowly. He impales me at first thrust. Then he repeats it, over and over. His mouth on mine, his hands braced on the mattress, his hips pistoning in and out as if there's nothing else in the world he was meant to do. All I can do is hold on to his shoulders and enjoy the ride.

"You feel this, Kenz. I know you do. You, me, *us*... everything... all of it... None of it matters when we're together... just... like... this."

"Oh God. . . "

"All week, all I could think about was you, this, being inside you..." He continues to hammer into me. It's raw, carnal fucking, but it's also so much more. His eyes stay pinned to mine. There's not a moment when we're not looking at each other. It's an unspoken, unexplainable connection

that I cannot—and will not—escape from. It’s intangible. “I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

This is not just a hook-up. This is not just sex. This is more than anything I’ve had before and maybe will again.

I run my hands to the back of his head and pull him down, kissing him slow and long. I feel the tell-tale spark of pleasure deep inside me, my belly tightening and my legs tensing, preparing for the potential obliteration of my very soul with my forthcoming orgasm.

Millen bites my lip, easing back so our foreheads are touching. “Now I wanna feel you come all over my cock. Let me hear you, Kenz.” He’s breathing hard, matching my own pants as I grip him harder, pull him closer, and lift my hips, pushing against his thrusts.

“Millen... God... fuck...” I moan. My orgasm courses through me, my entire body going rigid just as he drives into me deep and groans his climax into the crook of my neck.

A few moments later, he pulls out of me and rolls onto his back, curling his arm around my shoulders and taking me with him. Resting my head on his shoulder, I lean into his chest.

Not knowing what to say, I say the first thing that pops into my head. “So... that was fun.”

His eyes widen before he tightens his hold on me and bursts out laughing. He dips his chin and brushes his lips against mine. “That was more than fun, Kenz. You better get some rest now, because I’m not sure I want to let you leave this bed.”

“Even for our dinner we haven’t eaten yet?” I ask. As if on cue, my stomach growls rather embarrassingly.

“Looks like I need to feed my woman. Food and rest, then we start all over again.”

And that’s exactly what we do. Food, rest, then an hour later, round two.

Chapter 6

The first time you sleep with a guy, the morning after can go many ways. It's never like those rom-com movies though. The ones where the guy rolls over and welcomes his perfectly made-up lover into his arms with the promise of another go around.

Normally, I don't have guys staying over in an effort to avoid any awkwardness.

Millen Ross stays the night. He doesn't sleep—much—which means I also don't get more than a few hours' sleep at a time either.

The man is insatiable. If we hadn't run out of condoms at five a.m., I swear he would've continued to use me as his personal sex slave well into the daylight hours. Not that I'm complaining.

Sex has *never* been like this with anyone else. It's not just the act—it's the connection we have. It's like a palpable thing, indescribable but addictive all at the same time.

Lying next to him, my thigh draped over his, my arm resting on his hip, I stay there, awake but with my eyes closed and biting my lip. That's because I've been woken by Millen's fingers working miracles on my very over-used lady parts, getting right on down to seeking that first orgasm of the day.

"I know you're awake, Kenz."

I struggle to regulate my breathing. His thumb and my clit have become well acquainted during the past ten hours, and Millen knows exactly how to get my engines firing on every single cylinder. Hell, even ones I didn't know I had.

"Can't... talk... too... good..." I whisper, a smile curving my lips. I keep my eyes closed, taking in the feelings he's eliciting from me. I

whimper, my fingers biting into his hip as he rubs the heel of his palm against me while covering my throat with good licks, nips, and kisses.

My breathing quickens, my most-sought after climax teasing me on the horizon. Then he *stops*, pulling his hand away and moving out of reach.

My eyes slam open. Reaching down, he props up my head with his pillow and gives me the sexiest, dirtiest grin I've ever seen—and that's saying something—before he makes his move. He swings his leg over me, placing himself on his knees, straddling my chest, putting his hard, pulsing cock right there within mouth's reach.

"I think you know what to do with this," he says, his eyes blazing.

"An even better idea would be for you to do to me what you want me to do to you," I say, my eyes glued to his cock, my tongue darting out to lick across the head.

"*Fuck.*" He braces himself with one hand on my headboard, the other in my hair—not pushing, not directing, just resting there as I lift my head and take him in mouth. I hum against him as I glide down his length, my lips brushing the base before retreating and repeating. "I *definitely* like this idea better right now..." Needing something—*anything*—to quell the ache this hot-as-hell morning wake-up is causing, I reach down between my legs and take matters into my own hands. As if he senses it, Millen turns his head, watching my fingers roll and glide over my clit, his pelvis now rocking into me.

"That's it," he says, quickly moving to my side and spinning his body around so his head is where my hand is. "I can't resist this anymore."

"Kenzie for breakfast?" I muse, wrapping my fingers around his shaft and giving a slow languid stroke up and down.

"Best meal of the day." And then he gets to work. By *God* does he do it well. I thought I was well and truly spent after last night—and earlier this morning—but now that he's got me primed and ready to go again, I swear I could stay in this bed forever, as long as he was in it with me.

Twenty glorious minutes later, I'm standing in my kitchen wearing a tee and panties, cradling a cup of coffee in my hand and leaning my hip

against the counter. Staring out the window, I mentally prepare myself for the awkward “see you later” speech that can happen after first dates and the first times sleeping together.

Millen walks into the room, freshly showered, looking none the worse for wear, and dressed in only his pants and nothing else. I silently curse the god who created a man who can fuck all night—and do it so, so well—and come out of it looking even better than he did before.

He walks right up to me, not hesitating for a single moment before framing my feet with his legs and bracing his arms on the countertop on either side of me. I face him, still holding my cup between us. Dipping his head, he runs his nose along my collarbone, kisses my throat, then stands straight again, meeting my eyes.

“Hey,” he says, a knowing glint in his eyes. *What is it with this guy? He can read me like a book.*

“Hey. Coffee?”

“If you want me to...” His expression goes serious, his gaze full of sincerity with a flash of confidence.

I bite my lip and look at the cup in my hands before returning my gaze to him. “It’s all the way over there,” I tilting my head toward the coffee maker, not looking away from his addictive grey eyes.

His lips twitch. “Should I go get some?”

I put my cup on the countertop and turn back to him. “That would involve you moving.” I lay both hands on his bare chest and gaze up at him, catching the flash in his eyes at my words. *Well, that’s one way to put yourself all the way out there, Kenz.*

“You could share yours?”

I gasp, jerking my head back at the proposition. “Right. One thing you should know about me, Mr. Millen Ross, is that my first morning coffee is sacrosanct. Nothing and no one gets between me and that first cup of delicious caffeine.”

Now his lips don’t just twitch; he’s out and out grinning at me. “Sacrosanct?” he repeats.

“Absolutely. This cup is the coffee gods’ sacrifice to me. It’s of utmost importance that I respect their offerings.”

“Of course. You wouldn’t want to offend the coffee gods.”

“I’m glad you understand this.”

He lowers his chin, bringing his face—and mouth—closer to mine. “Do you think they’d mind if I distracted you from your coffee for a few moments?” His eyes are warm, his perfectly kissable lips now just a head tilt away, and screw the sacrifice—it’s my turn to do without.

“I could be... persuaded...” I say with a wry smile, my gaze drifting down and fixating on his mouth.

“One more thing before I kiss you, and maybe more than kiss you, because I’m me, and you’re you, and it seems neither of us can control ourselves around each other.”

“My curtains are open,” I whisper as I move my hands to the counter and hoist myself up to sit on it. Parting my legs—an invitation Millen doesn’t miss and takes up immediately—I lean back on my elbows and look up at him.

“I’m not adverse to putting on a show,” he says roughly, his eyes roaming over my top and down to my now exposed underwear. He laughs, totally ruining the mood. “Do your panties say ‘Eat Organic’?”

Biting my lip, I beam up at him. He leans over me, pressing me back into the counter. “I had an organic breakfast. I highly recommend it. In fact...” He grinds his hips between mine. “I think I should eat organic all day. Maybe all night.” He drops his mouth to mine, giving me a delicious sweep of his tongue before pulling back. “That’s if you’ll have me.”

“You wanna spend the day with me, Millen?” I ask, a coy smile playing at my lips.

“I thought you’d never ask.” And with that, he kisses me.

Then he *more* than kisses me and it is spectacular.



The rest of the day—after the countertop shenanigans—is spent giving Millen an amateur tour of Davis. We walk around the university campus, have a look at the arboretum, and wander around the farmers’ market.

Gaby calls mid-afternoon, and when I tell her Millen is still with me, she suggests a Sunday night barbeque.

Sitting around the table with Gaby, Bruno, and our workmates Sadie, Sam, Dinah, Mark, Dalyn, and Jake on the bar rooftop, we partake in a few drinks and a late lunch.

“So, Millen, what do you do when you’re not hanging around this neck of the woods?” Bruno asks, leaning back in his Adirondack chair.

“I work all around, but I’m based in San Francisco.” Bruno’s brows lift up, his eyes drifting to me before returning to Millen.

“Sales?” he asks.

“Operations, logistics. I’m VP of my family’s company.” Millen’s leg, pressed up against mine, tenses. I turn to look at him and see his expression—while still open—is tight.

“What company? I was born and bred in San Francisco.”

“Ross Corp.”

Bruno whistles, expelling and breath as his eyes widen. “Nice. So you’re no stranger to hospitality and entertainment then?”

“Nope,” Millen replies with a laugh. He lifts his beer bottle and takes a swig, finishing the bottle. He gives my leg a squeeze. “You want another?” He turns toward me, his eyes warm, his look soft. *Damn, I could get use to that look.*

Millen’s thumb starts tracing circles on my bare thigh. An elbow nudge from Gaby snaps me out of thoughts of dragging the man downstairs to reenact a dirty supply room fantasy. “I thought I was the bartender?”

“It’s your day off,” he says with a grin. “Besides, you need to conserve your energy.”

“Do I now?”

His attention drops to my mouth. Lifting his hand, he sweeps his thumb across my bottom lip. “The things I wanna do to that mouth.”

“Things you’ve already done,” I whisper.

Leaning his forehead against mine, he sighs, his expression unreadable for a second before he quickly masks it. “Things I wanna do again.”

I pull back and down my beer, handing him the empty bottle. “Only if you get me another drink.”

“You’re trouble.”

“And you’re a troublemaker.”

“When it comes to you, there’s nothing else I’d rather be.” Grabbing my bottle, he stands and turns to the group. “Anyone else need a refill?”

“I’m not driving so I’m not gonna say no,” Bruno says, holding up his empty.

“And I’m never one to turn down a man serving me,” Gaby adds with a wink.

“I see trouble is contagious in this group,” Millen says with a laugh.

“Dude, you get these girls plastered and that’s when the fun *really* begins. They’re part hilarious, part concerning, part fucking crazy.” Bruno laughs at his rather accurate assessment of all the girls in the group, the rest of us soon joining in.

“I look forward to experiencing it,” Millen murmurs before walking away for drinks duty.

An unexpected wave of warmth rolls through me at his words because at no time today have we talked about whatever this is that’s going on between us, or where it may go. Today was about the two of us spending time together and getting to know each other outside of the fantastic sex.

I love that he stayed and spent the day with me. I love even more that he wanted to come along tonight to hang out with my friends. He’s comfortable with us, and in turn, my friends are comfortable with him, something that’s always a good sign when introducing a new man into one’s life.

But the man still has his secrets. I know where he lives, I know where he works, I know he's good with his mouth, hands, and cock, but I don't know much else. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? It's not beyond the realms of normal, but it definitely has me eager to find out more about him.

"So, give me a quick one-minute rundown of events before he gets back," Gaby says from beside me, drawing the attention of Sam, Sadie, and Dinah in the process.

"Wondered when they'd start picking at his carcass. Ladies, he's not exactly dead and gone yet," Mark muses.

"Yeah, but then again, we're not used to seeing Kenzie with them the morning after," Jake adds from where he's manning the grill. The smartass grin he's shooting my way earns him a glare.

"He'll be back any minute. We'll talk about it later."

"At least tell us if the sex was good," Dinah says.

"He *looks* like the sex would be good," Sam replies.

"No. He looks like he *invented* sex. He probably wrote *The Art of Sex* from his high-rise bachelor pad overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge while sleeping on his mattress made from hundred-dollar bills."

"Twenties, actually. But still the most comfortable bed I've ever had."

A squeak escapes my lips as everyone turns to see Millen standing with an amused smile and a handful of open bottles of Corona.

"But I can't take the credit writing a sex manual. Although, I will say—since I'm pretty sure you're grilling Kenz for information about our date—that yes, she took my virginity, and it was a very, very special night that I'll treasure forever. Any more questions?"

"Oh, I like him. He can stay. He's almost as much of a smartass as you are, Kenz."

"Which is still less of a smartass than me, so I approve too," Gaby adds.

After handing out the drinks, Millen sits beside me in the bench swing. He drapes his arm over my shoulder and maneuvers my body until I'm

pressed into his side, my hand braced on his chest and my head tipped up. “Are you alright there?” I ask, brow raised.

“Almost. I’d prefer your ass in my lap and that skirt around your waist, but this will do for now.”

“I’m glad I could accommodate you then.”

His eyes dance with amusement, a look which is as sexy as it is contagious. We may be surrounded by my friends but right now it feels as if we’re in our own little bubble.

He drops his head closer to mine. “I really wanted to kiss you like this last weekend.”

“I really wanted to kiss you here too.”

“This is sort of our place now.”

“Oh, is it?”

“Well of course. It’s where you used your womanly charms to win me over.”

Now *that* is interesting. I didn’t win him over till that second night on the roof. I jerk my head back slightly so I can get a better look at his eyes. “It wasn’t the challenge I issued that first night?”

“That had a lot to do with it, believe me, but you were more yourself when we were up here. You were honest, and open, and were just being Kenz. It’s when I realized there was no bullshit with you. You say it like you mean it and if people don’t like that, then it’s their problem, not yours.”

“It’s the only way to be.”

He wraps an arm around my hip, pulling me into his lap like we don’t have eight of my friends and workmates as an active—and very nosey—audience. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you, Kenzie Sharp.” His eyes are open, unguarded, and so soft and warm, I’d imagine it’s like a pyroclastic lava flow inside those grey orbs right about now.

How can I resist that? How can I resist *him*?

“You keep talking like that, Millen Ross, and I’ll start thinking you like me.”

“You can start thinking that whenever you like because it’s true.”

Dipping my head, I run my hands up his chest to rest on his shoulders and brush my lips against his. His hands go south, one stopping at my hip, the other dropping down to cup an ass cheek. “You saying you wanna go steady with me?”

“I’m pretty much telling you that you’ve been off the market since last week, and you’ll continue to be while we get to know each other better.”

“Sounds like you’ll be coming back soon.”

“You can bet your ass I’ll be coming back. Next weekend, in fact. You just say the word, and I’ll be here.”

“No life back home?” I tease.

“No *you* back home.”

Well then. Game, set, match to him.



“Kenzie, wake up, beautiful. I’ve got to go.”

“Hmm...” I moan, not wanting to open my eyes because that would mean the man leaning over me, presumably dressed, is leaving.

Actually, I might not be able to move. Is after-sex paralysis a thing? If not, it should be.

“I wanna kiss you before I leave.”

“Kiss me with my eyes closed.”

“Then I don’t get to see you.”

“I’ll pull the sheet off and you can get a *real* good look at me. I’ll even let you take a photo so it’ll last longer if you let me keep them closed,” I grumble, like a petulant child...

He laughs and I smile up at him, slowly opening my eyes. “Hey, you.” He runs his hand up my arm to my shoulder, his touch leaving goose bumps in its wake.

“Hey.” I’m groggy and pliant, and that’s all he needs to finagle me into a sitting position across his lap. I scrunch my forehead. “You have this thing about having me in your lap.”

“I like you there. It makes me think of good things.”

“Dirty things?” I ask, my interest definitely piquing at that idea. He chuckles and nuzzles my neck, his mouth leaving a trail of soft kisses across my skin.

“I wish. I wanted to ask if I could call you during the week.”

I push back on his shoulders, pulling his face away so I can see him. Cupping his jaw, I bring him in close so he doesn’t miss a word of what I’m about to say. “You can call me from my driveway, from your house, from your work, in a minute, an hour, a day, even a week, and I’d be absolutely fine with it. I *want* to see you again. If my vagina has anything to say about it, I *need* to see you again.”

“I think my cock and your vagina had a meeting of the minds.”

“They definitely had a meeting of some sort.”

“Why am I dressed again?” he asks.

“Because it’s...” I look across the bed to my alarm clock and see it’s only six a.m. “Um, *why* are you leaving so early? This hour isn’t even human. It’s for extra-terrestrials and heathens.”

“Fuck, you’re cute.”

“No, I’m a woman who works in hospitality and enjoys sleep, *especially* in the mornings.”

He shakes his head and smiles at me. It’s a “you’re adorable, but potentially crazy” look that I’ve come to recognize over the past few days. “I really have to go.”

I sigh, my shoulders sagging in defeat. “I know.”

“Hey,” he says, turning my head so I’m looking straight into his eyes. *No escape now, Kenz.* “I will be back.” He dips his chin and kisses me, soft and slow and oh so fucking sweet, before pulling back slightly. “There’s no

way in hell I could have a weekend like the one I've had with you and *not* come back for more. I've never met a woman like you before."

I lean in close and return the favor, kissing him soft at first, then deeper, harder, wetter, and definitely with way more enthusiasm than I should probably be putting out there just as he's about to leave.

He growls into my mouth when we finally move apart. "You can't kiss me like that when I have to go. I'm gonna have a hard-on from here to Sacramento."

I giggle because I can just imagine how uncomfortable that's gotta be. "Sorry?" I say, feigning innocence. His eyes narrow and he shakes his head, kissing me hard and fast before spinning me around and laying me back down.

Pulling the covers over me again, he runs his fingers from my temple down along my jaw, his eyes locked with mine while he does it. "I'll call. I've got a full-on week ahead of me but I will call."

"Okay."

"I will. There's nothing that could keep me away."

"Alright. I believe you," I say with a giggle.

"You go back to sleep. I'll lock the door behind me."

"Okay," I mumble. Millen leans his forearm into the pillow and brings his face right in close to mine.

"Hey, Kenz?" he whispers.

"Yeah?" His proximity makes sleep the last thing on the mind.

Staring deep into my eyes, he kisses me gently and pulls back. "I like you." He dips down and kisses me again. This one isn't quick. We make it last, drawing it out as if neither one of us want it to end.

When we finally part, I can't wipe the smile off my face. "I like you, too."

"Thank *fuck* for that," he says with a chuckle. He touches his index finger to the tip of my nose before standing straight again. Walking across

the room, he picks his overnight bag up off the floor and stops at the bedroom door, turning to shoot me a sexy grin.

But I can't end it like that. I'm compelled to say something else. Something more. "Millen?"

"Yeah, beautiful?"

I drop my voice to a whisper. "Best weekend ever."

His grin widens. "And we're just getting started."

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Chapter 1

Thursday morning, I'm walking through the doors of the bar at nine a.m., still a bit bleary-eyed and definitely in need of caffeine.

"Hey," I call out, the rest of the gang already seated at the bar. Only my owner is behind the bar, pouring coffee. "Give me ten of those, Jeff," I say, taking the last available stool next to Gaby. He nods and sets about fulfilling my outrageous request.

"Why are we here?" Gaby whispers under her breath.

"Beats me. The monthly staff meeting isn't for another two weeks."

"Ask him then." She plasters a ruffled smile on her face just as Jeff reaches us.

"Ladies," he says, handing us a steaming cup each. "Sorry for the short notice."

"Couldn't give your manager a head's up, Jeff?" I tilt my head and lift a brow. "You know, since I'm the face of management?" I say, trying to keep a straight face and failing miserably.

"Shit, I'll miss your smartass remarks."

What? I jerk my eyes to Gaby, my mouth agape. "What do you mean *miss?*"

He doesn't answer me. Instead, he leans against the back counter of the bar and addresses the group at large. "So," he says, clapping his hands together. "There's good news and bad news."

"Never a good start," Gaby mutters.

"The bad news first, just to rip off the Band-Aid. I'm sick." The girls in the group gasp, the sound filling the air. A quick look around shows Mark, Bruno, and Jake looking a bit shell-shocked. Jeff just powers through

it as I freeze in place, his words and their meaning stealing my breath. “I’ll try and answer the questions I know you’ll ask all at once. Is it serious? Yep. Will I get better? Probably not. Is it gonna stop me living my life? Fuck no, because I’ve always been a live-life-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kinda guy anyway, so that’s not gonna change. If anything, it’s just given me a kick up the ass to get out there and actually *do* all the things I’ve always wanted to do.”

Dinah opens her mouth. “But—”

“The good news? I’ve found a buyer for the bar and they’ve assured me that it will be business as usual for the foreseeable future. So over the next few months, there will be a transition behind the scenes but as far as everyone else is concerned, nothing has changed.” He scans the line, meeting everyone’s eyes as he goes before stopping on me. *I can’t lose it in front of everyone. Stay strong...* “Don’t you dare, Kenz. You’re the strong one. If you start, then Gaby will, and we all know she’s a drama queen from way back who’s far too pretty to cry over me.” His voice goes rough and he looks down at the floor for a few moments, his chest rising and falling as he takes in a few deep breaths. “Right. So that’s done. Now get out of here. I’ve got some things to take care of, and we don’t open for a few hours yet.”

Typical Jeff, business mode. All is right with the world.

Once outside, I hug everyone goodbye before walking with Gaby to my car.

“What *was* that?” she asks, breaking the silence.

“I know, right?” I unlock the door and, as expected, Gaby hops in beside me.

I giggle as I start the car. “Not walking home today?”

“God, no. We need sugar and trash TV. I’d say alcohol, but we’re due on at four so there’s no chance of that happening.”

“Glad to know you’ve planned my day for me,” I reply wryly, pulling out of the parking lot and driving home.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her lean against the door and face me. “Like you had plans,” she scoffs. “Other than watching your phone like

a hawk.”

I react, just how she wants—defensively—before I catch myself. “I have not... oh ha ha, very funny.”

“So.” She beams, turning forward again. “Heard from him yet?”

“What, you mean since you last asked eight hours ago?”

“He might’ve called for late-night phone sex for all I know.”

I snort and shake my head. “At two o’clock in the morning?”

“Stranger things have happened, Kenz. So that’s a no then?”

“Nope. But I’ve been distracted by Jeff’s news this morning. It’s like a slap in the face with a wet fish.”

“Eww, dude. Nobody wants a wet fish to have anything to do with their face. Why would you even go there?”

“It’s just a thing people say... isn’t it?” I scrunch my brows together, wondering who the hell comes up with these things other than my Dad.

“You’re asking me? My mind has gone from the sea into the deepest, darkest recesses of the gutter right now,” she says with a giggle. “I mean, fish, slapping, face—there’s only so much a girl can take.”

“Thanks for that. Now that’s all I’m gonna think of whenever I hear my dad say it.”

“You’re welcome. Glad to be of service,” she says. “Go on then. Tell me about the epiphany you’ve had because of Jeff.”

I turn into my driveway, park my car, and kill the engine. “It’s made me think that life is short. I’m wondering why the hell I need to wait for him to call. I’m a perfectly capable modern woman who knows how to use a phone. Maybe he’s waiting for me to make that first move.” It could be true, right?

“You mean like the third or fourth move, right? ’Cause you made the first move by challenging him that night, then he made the next move asking you out.”

“Well, the third would’ve been Saturday night when he did that thing...” I bite my lip, replaying the entryway antics in my mind before Gaby interrupts the festivities in my head.

“Yeah, yeah. Shut up. Don’t get started on the ‘I had the best sex of all time, all weekend’ speech again. You’ll make my vagina file for divorce. She’s already a tetchy bitch at the best of times now.” She reaches over, putting her hand on my arm. “So I take it you’re not going to wait for him? You’re gonna go after him?”

“Telephonically, yes. I don’t see the harm in sending a short text so he knows I’m thinking of him.”

She bites her lip, a slow-growing smile appearing on her face. “He’s gonna call, Kenz. I have a good feeling about this one.”

“I had a *lot* of good feelings about him too,” I say. She rolls her eyes, knowing exactly where I’m going with this. “And—”

“And on him, astride him, beneath him... I get the point, show-off,” she says with a sigh. “Now, are we gonna sit in the car all day talking about your sex life and my lack of one, or are we going to stuff our faces until we can’t move and watch *Days of Our Lives*?”

I stare at her, trying to keep a straight face and failing miserably. “Oh, alright then.”

“*Then* you can text him,” she adds, grabbing her handbag and literally jumping out of the car like the energizer bunny that I know and love.



Later that night, I take a quick break in the office. Leaning back in my chair, I wonder if I’ll have a job next month, then my thoughts return to Millen. I twirl my phone in my hand and try to come up with the right words to say in a text.

No woman wants to come across as *that* girl but then again, normally I’m not the kind of girl to chase either.

Millen has me wanting things I haven’t thought about for a while. He has me considering more morning-afters, more Sunday afternoons, more in-

betweens. Something that doesn't have a shit show in hell of happening unless someone makes a move, whatever number move we're now up to.

Surely there's nothing I could say that would be devastating at this point. Maybe I should've just let Gaby text him for me.

Ah fuck it, what's the worst that could happen? One text won't bring on the apocalypse.

Me—Hey. How's your week going? My boss announced he was selling the business today so there's new management on my horizon. Hope you're well.

I move my finger to push save but instead push send. "Fuck!" I spit out, trying to backtrack like a fool and wondering why the hell no one has invented a way to recall texts already. Imagine the drunken messages that could be avoided with a backtrack function. Hell, they could even call it Back Text. An automatic text-reversal service. Maybe I should patent that shit right now.

The office door opens and Gaby pops her head in. "We've just had a big group come in. Some urologist conference is in town and they're in the mood to *partay*," she says with a grin.

"I just sent the lamest text in the history of sad, unfortunately socially inept communications. I should never have done it. Modern woman, be damned." I stand up and move around the desk to where Gaby's standing, hands on hips, a grin on her face.

"So... did he text back yet?"

"Oh God, it's never gonna end is it?"

"Nope," she says, bouncing down the hall and holding open the door leading back into the bar. "But you knew that. As soon as you started this thing, you knew I was gonna make you finish it. You forget that I saw that first meeting. I was damn near blinded by the sparks flying between you. I also saw you two trying to eat each other's faces off on the roof with not a care in the world. I cannot proclaim to know the inner workings of the male mind, but I will say that if ever there was a time where I could categorically say without a shadow of a doubt that a man was *into* you, it's now."

I quirk a brow and purse my lips, struggling not to burst out laughing. “You know, if this bartending gig doesn’t work out for you, you might just have a future as a motivational life coach.”

“Fuck that shit. Then I’d have to be Little Miss Sunshine and Roses ’n’ Shit all the time. Sometimes a chick has to get bitchy.”

“Oh, you’re good at that too.”

“Why, thank you. Now stop worrying about the boy, because the boy *will* text back. If he doesn’t, he’ll be forever known as the world’s biggest idiot.” She gives my shoulder a squeeze and grins. “Now let’s go serve the dick doctors some alcohol. Just think of the stories we might hear once they have a few Blowjobs in them.”

For the record, dick doctor stories are always the best stories. Especially *drunk* ones.

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Chapter 8

Two weeks later, and there's been no reply to that one text. It's radio silence central at the Sharp residence.

I've buried myself in work in order to distract myself from falling down the rabbit hole of self-doubt and second-guessing. Whatever Jeff has needed help with, I've been there. So much so that he's virtually handed over complete managerial control to me in the interim while he finalizes the sale of the business. At least that's one thing to take my mind off Millen. Hot yoga, running ten miles a day, and randomly deciding to start repainting my living room and kitchen have also been worthwhile distractions.

But two and a half weeks later with no promised call, and I'm done. There's no mistaking the message that's now been received loud and clear.

There's nothing left to do but put it down to one of life's experiences—the usefulness of which I'm still coming to grips with—and move on. What I've yet to decide is how to give myself closure on this brief yet still somewhat memorable chapter of my life.

Halfway through a typically busy night at the bar—which is soon to be renamed The Masonry, thanks to the new owners—and a lull in the crowd enables that closure to smack me right in the face. I need to call him. I need to unload all of these unanswered questions that've been bouncing around my brain since mid-last week when I lost the last smidge of idealism I was desperately holding onto.

“Babe, you look like you're a million miles away. Why don't you go take a break? We're quiet. Get some fresh air or something,” Gaby says, sidling up beside me.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts before turning my head. “What?”

She gives me a shoulder nudge and nods toward the back door. “Go. I’ll hold down the fort.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” I lie, trying to hide my scrambled emotions behind smartass comments.

“Kenz...” she growls. “Don’t hide that shit from me. We’ll be fine. Dinah and Mark are behind the bar; Bruno’s got the door. The place won’t fall down if you’re not here for a while. Besides,” she adds, biting her lip, “this zombie look you’re rocking might scare the customers away.”

That gets my attention. “Is it that bad?” I say quietly.

She wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into her side, resting her temple against mine. “Babe, you need to call him and find out once and for all what happened. There aren’t enough renovations, workouts, and mid-week blow-outs that’ll help you. Call him! If he answers, ream him out. If he doesn’t, leave a message and move on. You deserve far more than to be someone’s out-of-town booty call.”

“I know,” I say. She snorts and I jerk my head back to look at her, meeting her skeptical gaze. “I do. I set the rules of interactions and the depth to which I’ll allow such interactions to go.”

“Man, that sounds dirty,” she replies.

“Yep,” I say with a grin.

“*That’s* the Kenzie I know and love.”

“Right, I’m gonna do this.” I open the drawer behind the bar and pull out my phone, swiping a bottle of Corona from the beer fridge below. “I’ll be back, and whatever happens, it’s probably best I clock off for the night.”

“Fine with me, babe,” she says with a grin. “This has been two weeks coming. I’ll drive you home after closing.”

“Thank you,” I reply, looking her straight in the eye.

“I’ve got your back, Kenz. All of us do. Besides, how many times have you been there for one of us?”

“Go girl,” Dinah says, walking up behind Gaby and leaning a hip into the bar. “Guys like that are assholes. They bump and grind, then leave

behind.” Her smile fades when Gaby growls under her breath. “Not that we thought he was like that. He acted like he was here to stay at the barbecue,” she says quickly, looking more than a little uncomfortable. “Oh look, duty calls.” She scarpers away quicker than I’ve ever seen her move to serve a customer.

“Go,” Gaby mouths, her eyes soft and full of understanding.

“I’ll be back.” I move through the crowd to the swinging door and disappear down the back hall, taking the stairs two by two leading up to the rooftop.

I spot the swinging chair and it seems wrong to sit there, so I pull myself up on a concrete step right by the edge of the roof, looking over the sidewalk and main street below.

Cell in hand, I take a swig of my beer and take a few deep, calming breaths, resolution and peace settling deep inside me. I bring up his number, sliding my thumb over the keys before pushing send.

The phone connects, the ringing tone echoing in my ears with every chime. My heartrate speeds up the longer it takes for him to answer, but that’s nothing compared to the seizing in my chest when I hear his voice message start to play.

“You’ve reached Millen Ross. I’m unavailable right now. Please leave a message with your name and number, and I’ll return your call as soon as I am able to. Thanks.”

When the beep sounds, I release the huge breath I’ve been holding, and looking out over the lights of my hometown, I find the closure I’ve been seeking without realizing it.

“Hey, it’s Kenzie. I’m not sure what happened or when the miscommunication occurred but whatever we had, it seems we had different ideas about the road it was leading down. You didn’t really have enough time to learn much about me, but there are a few things I hold dear. One of those is my self-respect. So this is me keeping a promise to myself to not let myself be treated anything less than what I deserve, and I sure as hell don’t deserve to be ghosted when you said we were just getting started.” I take a

deep breath and it's on the exhale that resignation sets in. *Time to finish this.* "I hope you're well and I wish you the best... uh... Goodbye then, I guess."

One last look at the swinging chair, the nighttime sky, and the stars shining at me in it, and I walk out the door, slamming it shut behind me in what could only be one of most symbolic gestures of my adult life.

One thing's for sure. There aren't going to be any hearts and flowers—figuratively speaking—in my future.

Hope is a bitch. It gives you a sliver of a chance, makes you see things that aren't there. Hope lets you hallucinate, turns you into a starving fool in the desert falling for that oasis on the horizon.

Actually, it's not hope's fault. It mine and mine alone. I took a man for his word when really, he was only saying what I wanted to hear.

My plan is to dust myself off and get back on with my life. I'll deal with the changes at work, with Jeff leaving, and anything else life decides to throw my way, but anything that might have been between me and Millen is now dead and buried.

By the time I make my way back downstairs to the bar, I'm in need of a drink... or six.

"Babe..." Gaby says as she studies me. "Take a seat and I'll make you a cocktail."

"Screw that. Line up shots. She needs at least three to start her off—maybe a shot in lieu of our dick doctor friends," Dinah shouts from behind her.

The three of us look at each other before crying out, "No one says no to a blowjob," and collapsing into a fit of giggles.

"Don't mind them. They act like they're a few cans short of a six-pack when they get together like this," Mark muses. I look up to see him talking to a total stranger I've never seen here before. That's nothing new, of course—we are a very busy bar and there'll always be new customers. Unlike the last sexy asshole who caught my eye and took me for a ride—in all meanings of the word—this man strikes me as kind, his eyes soft and

caring. That's not to say I don't miss a glimpse of heat simmering underneath.

"Mark, don't tell the customer that. He'll never want to come back," Gaby says with a laugh.

"No risk of that happening. Not coming back, that is. You guys are fucking funny. I might just sit back here and watch the show," the sexy unknown man says, joining in on the conversation.

"Stick around all night. They're probably just getting started. Especially if Kenz is gonna start drinking." Mark grins at me, the sexy stranger also smiling.

"Talking about shots is not making the shots, Mark. I'm off-duty but that won't stop me busting your ass for slacking off."

"Three BJs it is," he announces, spinning toward the liquor rack and grabbing bottles of Baileys, Kahlúa, and Amaretto. Placing them on the bar in front of me, he sets out making the shots.

A few too many shots later, I'm nursing a margarita *and* another blowjob shot Dinah placed in front of me a few minutes ago, when the guy with the nice eyes comes back to the bar, putting in another order with Mark for a round of beers.

"Still here then?"

"Yep," I answer over-enthusiastically, figuratively patting myself on the back for not slurring.

"How's the blowjob?"

My eyes bug out of my head. "What?" I say with a laugh.

His lips twitch, and he nods to the shot in my hand. "The drink."

Ohhhh. "Right. Yes. It's good."

"And how's your night going?"

I may be a little drunk, but is this guy coming on to me? "I've had better, probably had worse. Tonight is registering at about a three right now if I'm honest."

Mark brings the man his drink, raising a brow at me and smirking when I wave him off. The stranger's eyes dance with amusement at our exchange. "Off duty drinking with the staff?"

"He's my employee who just happens to also be a friend with a heavy hand when pouring my drinks."

"Your ride home?"

Ohhh. This guy is definitely feeling me out. "Nope," I say, picking up my blowjob and deep throating it like a champ. Dropping the shot glass back down on the bar top, I lift my head to meet his gaze. "That would be Gaby's job."

"And Gaby is...?"

"I'm Gaby, and she's drunk, so you might wanna try your luck elsewhere, champ."

The stranger doesn't seem put off my best friend's defense.

"I'm simply chatting to the management." He winks at me, shooting me an adorable smile.

Unfortunately for him, it reminds me of Millen, the one person I *don't* want to think about right now.

"Sorry, buddy. Nothing against you, but she's totally not in the market for another man right now," Gaby says.

His eyes widen, and he switches his attention from Gaby back to me. "Another man?"

"Long, sad story," I mumble, smiling brightly at my best friend and batting my lashes at her, silently begging for another drink. "No more Blowjobs though."

The stranger chokes on his mouthful of beer. "So many creative ways to talk about blowjobs."

If I was sober, this conversation would be funny. Since I'm straddling the line of being drunk, it's totally hilarious, and I burst out laughing, dropping my forehead onto the bar and giggling my ass off.

“She’s had a bad day,” Gaby explains. I sit up straight and glare at her, thawing when she slides another margarita my way. “Last one, babe. Wouldn’t be a good look to get caught serving a drunk patron when she’s my boss.”

I lift the glass up and toast her. “Good job, Gabs. Remind me to give you a raise.”

“I would,” she says, walking backwards towards the other end of the bar, “except you don’t pay my wages.”

“Good point,” I reply with a giggle.

“Wanna tell me about your bad day?” the man with the really nice, broad shoulders says. Nice eyes, good body, awesome personality... I *seriously* don’t need another man like this in my life right now.

Unfortunately, this reminds me of Millen’s square shoulders, his angled jaw, and the smile he shot my way that night we met.

Why the hell can’t I stop thinking about him? He played me, good and proper. Thoroughly so. I made him work for it, thought it would weed him out if he was just looking for a quick lay. I’ve got to give it to him—he was in it for the long game, even going so far as to drive back to town for our date and spend the weekend with me.

Let’s be honest—he only stayed the weekend in order to get his fill of me. When Monday morning came around, he was all “see you soon, I’ll call, I like you... yadda, yadda, you got played, I got laid.”

Fuck it. Closure is overrated but I know what *will* put the final nail in the Millen coffin, for me anyway.

“Hey,” I say, turning to the man standing beside me, watching me with seemingly avid fascination. “Can you hold this for a minute?” I shove my drink his way. Placing my hands on the bar, I hoist myself up until I’m sitting on it before twisting around and standing, grabbing my drink on the way up.

“Shit! Kenz!” Gabby shrieks, rushing to stand behind me, presumably preparing to avert certain disaster. The sexy stranger just stands there, a smirk playing on his lips. He nods at me, as if to spur me on.

I hold my glass in the air and give off a loud whistle, grabbing the attention of the crowd in the bar. “I’d like to make a toast.”

“Show us your tits, gorgeous,” some random guy from the back of the crowd yells out. It’s probably the last time he’ll say that though, since I catch Bruno making a beeline his way.

Ignoring him and his request, I return my attention to the raised drink in my hand. “Back to my toast. My name is Kenzie Sharp and I am the manager of this fine establishment. Thank you for your patronage, and please forget anything I may say from this moment forward. *Especially* if my new boss asks.” The crowd starts laughing, making me smile.

“Get on with it, Kenz,” Mark calls out, sounding bemused.

I wave him off. “Okay, okay. Lift your glasses and join me in toasting the crushing death of hope. In this very bar, no less.” I grow solemn, focusing on my glass and biting the inside of my cheek, swallowing down hard. “Here lies hope—gone and forever forgotten. This is dedicated to the ones who sweet talk their way into your bed and ghost you like the two-dollar whore they played you to be. Cheers!” I down my drink in one long pull, forgetting for a moment that I’m wearing heeled boots while drunk and standing on top of a bar. I lose my equilibrium, my legs wobbling as I stumble, trying to regain my balance.

Unfortunately for me, I fail at this endeavor, Gaby shrieking as I slip and fall sideways toward the floor.

But I never hit the floor, mainly because I’m caught in the arms of the sexy stranger, saving me from a bruised butt in the morning.

Still recovering from the shock of the fall and muddled by alcohol and adrenalin, I open my mouth and say the first thing that comes to mind. “Well, that’s one way to get to first base.”

Luckily for me, my Good Samaritan drops his head back and bursts out laughing. “Good thing I was going to ask you out to dinner then, isn’t it?”

“I’m not looking for a relationship. Like, *really* not looking for anything to do with commitment and promises and hope. Therefore, dating

is a *big* no-go zone for me right now.”

“I’m persistent. I’ll wear you down.”

“It’ll be a wasted effort,” I reply, putting my feet on the floor and steadying myself against the bar.

“We’ll see.” And something about the shining gleam in his eye tells me he’s a man of his word.

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Chapter 9

Three months later

That stranger with the nice eyes and sexy smile... he wasn't joking when he said he was persistent.

It took a month to wear me down and agree to a coffee with him. Dinner never happened, mainly because dinners can be misconstrued as dates, and I'm *definitely* not in the headspace to date. I wasn't then and I'm still not now. That's not to say I wasn't ready for something of the no-strings, hot, sweaty, and naked variety.

And Drew? He took my suggestion like a champ—unsurprisingly so—and now, well now, he knows the alarm code to my house and where I hide my spare front door key.

Hours like mine don't mesh well with hours like his, as a hospitality and catering supplies manager. Yep, he may have been in the bar that night for a drink, but he admitted he was also there to get the lay of the land with an eye to approaching the manager about his company's products.

It just so happens he's now *sleeping* with the manager. Conflict of interest be damned. Sex is sex, and my personal life is exactly that—personal.

I'm not naïve. I see the way Drew looks at me, the way he touches me, the way he works hard to spend time with me beyond the horizontal arrangement. The thing is, that thing that I felt with Millen—that spark, that zing, that stomach-fluttering giddiness—is just not there with Drew. Maybe if I'd met him beforehand, things might be different. No, they *would* be different.

But sometimes Fate can be a spiteful bitch and Destiny can join in on the party to add to the inevitable heartache.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Putting down my clipboard, I reach in and pull it out.

Drew—I'm in the area and thought I'd call in to say hi. If there's no one around, it could even be more than that if you want ;) Be there in five.

Me—We've just opened for lunch. There's no chance in hell of you getting more, but you're welcome to swing by anyway.

Not so much unexpected, but my feelings for Drew are still as platonic as they were when I first met him in this very bar.

I return to the stock take, finishing it up, grateful for the menial task to distract me from thoughts of impending doom. It's not so much a dark cloud hanging over me, but more like suppressed resignation that maybe this is how my life was meant to be. I'm definitely counting down the three days of work left before my 'weekend' of Sunday and Monday off.

The front door opens and because I expect it to be Drew, I don't look up straight away, not wanting to lose count of how many bottles are currently in the liquor rack.

As if a switch has been triggered, the atmosphere in the room goes weird. Almost wired. It's palpable, the air buzzing with some unknown feeling that I have no way of explaining short of the fact that I have tingles.

Not the kind that feel great in all the right places. The ones I'm feeling right now are the hair-standing-up-on-the-back-of-your-neck, someone-walking-over-your-grave kind of feelings that you get when something bad is about to happen.

Unable to ignore them any longer, I turn around from my stock take sheet and come face to face with my worst nightmare.

Lana fucking Mason, childhood best friend turned high school nemesis and arch enemy, and. . .

A man stands beside her, his eyes as wide as mine and—if I'm not mistaken—he looks kind of pissed off. At me.

And just like that, this moment has just gone from bad to worse.

Hold on! I'm the one who should be annoyed, with *him*. It wasn't me who did a disappearing act three months ago, and now he's here, standing with *her*. Of all the fish in the sea, he had to go for the smelliest, rottenest one.

"Kenzie," she says, all saccharine sweet, like she wouldn't choke on the first dick that came close to her perfectly-made-up lips. "Long time no see."

Forever wouldn't have been long enough, Lana.

"We were in town running errands and thought we'd stop by. I wanted to let you know what I've been up to." Without preamble, he holds out her hand as if she's the Queen of Sheba and I'm a lowly minion at her bidding. But that's the last thing I care about, given that I'm being blinded by a huge, shiny rock on her *wedding* finger.

What in the ever-loving fuck?

I don't get a chance to hide my surprise, or the fact that my eyes dart to Millen, his jaw twitching like crazy, his grey eyes that I remember turning molten with lust now blazing with some unreadable emotion.

Why is he angry at me when he must've known that I'd be here?

Lana turns her head and beams at him all doe-eyed and vomit-inducing, reaching out her arm to Millen before returning her attention to me, positioning herself to deliver the final death blow.

Then she says them. The words I don't want to hear—let alone believe.

"I have amazing news. First, my daddy just bought this place. And second, meet Millen, my *fiancé*..."

Yep. Dead. Done. The see-ya-later, don't-let-the-door-hit-your-ass-on-the-way-out kind of done.

Then Drew walks through the front door. *Finally, a friendly face.*

However, one look at Lana's expression and I know this moment has just gone from bad to plain awkward. It's like the universe is making a joke at my expense.

Drew's already big smile grows impossibly larger when he spots the two people standing in front of me.

"Mills!" he says, pulling Millen into a man-hug the likes of which I've never seen Drew hand out before. He turns to the she-bitch and wraps his arms around her too. "Lans."

Lans?

"What are you guys doing here?"

"You know them?" I blurt out, my brain unable to engage quick enough to care about putting a filter in place.

Millen's eyes snap to Drew then back to me. "You know Drew?" he asks at the same time Lana juts a hip to the side and asks Drew, "You know Kenzie?"

"Millen is my best friend from college," Drew happily informs me, and his smile falls at the same time that all of the blood rushes from my face.

Awkward, meet Mortifying. Also, here are Shame, Embarrassment, Anger, Disgust, and over in the corner there is Complete and Utter Confusion and her friend I'm Going to Have to Move States and Join a Women-Only Commune with Cats and Unlimited Batteries.

With nothing else to say—at least, nothing that wouldn't take a bottle of Jack and a *whole* lot of time—I decide to just go with the flow and revert to my old trusty auto-pilot because seriously, what else *is* there for me to do?

"Soooo, would anyone like a drink?"

Millen glares at me for a little too long before Lana places her hand on his forearm. Turning his attention to her and Drew, he plasters a far-too-fake smile on his face. "Let's do lunch. You want to join us, Drew? We can *catch up*," he adds, sliding his gaze toward me again.

"Sounds good. Go grab a table. I've just gotta say hi to Kenz quickly since she's the reason I came here in the first place," Drew says.

“Oh,” Lana adds, injecting herself into the conversation. “What’s going on here then?” She giggles and looks between Drew and me.

“Let’s go, Lana,” Millen grinds out, sounding more than a little annoyed. Whether it’s at me, Drew, or even his darling wife-to-be, I’m not sure I care right now. I’m too busy over here waiting for the exploding pieces of my brain to smooch back together.

Drew walks to the end of the bar. When I reach him, he leans in and kisses my cheek before pulling back. “Hey, are you okay?” he says quietly, his face soft and his eyes full of concern.

Decision time, Kenz. Fake it till you make it or tell Drew at least some semblance of the truth.

I scrunch my face up and shake my head. “I’m fine. There’s just a bit of history there.” *Well, that’s definitely true. All except the part where I said I was fine.*

“Wanna tell me about it later?” he asks, his gorgeous eyes and heart-on-his-sleeve expression not hiding a thing.

“Sure, Drew,” I say, knowing full well I’ll do no such thing. “But right now I really need to help Dinah with the lunch set-up. I’ll get her to bring the menus over to the table.”

His smile falters but he quickly recovers, standing up straight. “Alright, but remember I’m always here if you wanna talk things out. Okay?”

“Yeah, Drew. I know.”

“It’s not just about the sex for me. We can be friends as well. Don’t ever forget it.”

For the first time in a while, I actually have a genuine smile. “You’re far too nice for the likes of me.”

It’s true. If ever there was a guy who deserves to be happy, have an uncomplicated life, and a woman with an open heart, it’s Drew.

“You say that, but I don’t believe it. One day, I hope I won’t be.” He knocks the bar with his knuckles and walks away, crossing the room to join

Millen and Lana at their table which—unfortunately for me—is in my direct line of sight from where I’m standing.

For the next thirty minutes, I try not to look at them. *Try* being the operative word because I can’t help myself. I hear them talking and laughing, and it’s impossible not to.

Needing fresh air—and to be anywhere but here—I wait till Dinah is back behind the bar and Sadie is on the floor before taking my leave.

“Dinah, I’m just going out back. I’ll be a little while, but come get me if you need me, okay?”

“Sure thing, Kenz. You okay?” she asks, quirking a brow.

“You saw him?”

“Well, duh,” she says with an eye roll.

“Yeah, so no. Not really. But hopefully they’ll be gone when I come back, and all will be well in the world again.”

“You really believe that?”

“Nope,” I say, my voice cracking. “But it’s all I’ve got to go on right now, so let’s run with it.”

“Take all the time you need. Sadie and I will cope.”

“Thanks, Dines.” I turn around and stupidly look over at their table one last time, meeting Millen’s gaze. Forget trying to hold it together—that lump in my throat I’ve been trying to ignore threatens to choke me.

I rush out from behind the bar and through the swinging door. I’m almost at the end of the corridor when the door opens behind me and I freeze. My chest tightens, because if it’s either of the two men I think it could be, there’s no way this will end well.

He comes closer, each step like an echo matching the impending doom I feel in my gut.

“I got your message.”

“Good,” I reply, fighting every urge I have to turn toward him.

“And you were right. You do deserve better.”

“I do.”

“I hate the thought of him touching you.”

I gasp, my mouth dropping open at his admission.

“I’ve known him for thirteen years. He’s supposed to be my best man. I love him like a brother but I *hate* him touching you.”

Oh no he didn’t. I spin around and come face to face with Millen, his face tight, his arms crossed over his chest. “What?” I spit out.

“It’s not right. I love him like a brother and I want him happy. Just not happy with you. *Especially* not happy touching you.”

“How *dare* you?” I grind out, my jaw so rigid my face hurts.

“I hate seeing you with anyone that’s not me.”

My eyes bug out, completely dumbfounded. He’s crazy if he thinks he has any say in who I see.

“You’re a joke,” I spit out, the blood simmering in my veins now boiling over. Lifting my hand up, I poke my finger hard into his chest. “You’re the one with the problem. It’s was *you* who came up to me. *You* that lied and said you were single.” My voice threatens to break but I power through it. “*You* made me become the one thing I never wanted to be—the other woman. And to *her*. You’re such a fucking ass—”

The rest of the word gets stuck in my throat when he wraps his hand around my neck and crashes his mouth into mine. His body crushes me into the wall as he kisses the shit out of me. And—dammit—it’s a good kiss—a scorching-hot, never-to-be-the-same-again kiss.

I tear my lips free and shove him back. I step forward, and my hand darts up. With a resounding crack, I slap him across the face. I try again but before I can make contact he catches me, swings my arm behind my back, pins me in place and kisses me again. I fight him off for a second before giving in. My anger melts away as he tastes me, his tongue plundering my mouth. I grip his hair with my free hand, pulling the strands tight, his guttural groan vibrating through me, setting my entire body on fire.

His hips grind against mine and all of the memories from three months ago come flooding back. The way he took control, the way he played my body as if he'd known me years not hours, and how I thought that night might have been the start of something different, something life-changing.

I match his kiss stroke for stroke, the air sparking with the sheer heat between us. I know in the back of my mind that this will be the last time I kiss him, and I want to take my fill.

A throat clearing breaks our lust-fueled haze, snapping us back into reality.

Millen steps back like a caught schoolboy, both of us turning to find Drew at the entry to the hall, his eyes blazing. We stand there in silence, our labored breathing audible over the quiet hum of the music in the bar.

“Drew,” I whisper.

He cuts his narrowed glare from his best friend to me. “Dinah asked me to come get you.” His voice cuts through me, his tone cold as ice.

“Drew, I—”

“A big group just came in and the girls are getting slammed,” he says, his jaw set tight.

I move toward him. “It’s not—”

He shakes his head, opening his mouth to say something, but he slices his gaze through Millen and stops on me. “I’m going, but you,” he says, pinning Millen with a cold stare, “you should get back to your fiancée. You know, the woman you *should* be kissing.” With that, he turns and slaps his palm against the door, swinging it open and stalking out without another word.

I push past Millen to go after Drew but Millen’s hand grips my arm, stopping me. “Let me go,” I snap.

“We’ve gotta talk, Kenz. I’m going to be around a lot because of Harris, Lana’s father.” Yes, good ol’ Harris. The mysterious new owner, and now I find out—my new boss. But that’s neither here nor there at the moment. I’ve got the same amount of time for Harris Mason as I do for his daughter... and now his future son-in-law. That being none.

“There’s nothing to talk about. That ring on her finger tells me everything I need to know. You played me; I fell for it. My friends even fell for it. More the fool fucking me.”

“That kiss says there’s more to this,” he shoots back, and I stop mid-breath because that kiss was everything I needed and didn’t need in one single moment.

“That was a mistake. It won’t ever happen again. Go back to Lana.” My voice is close to a snarl when I say her name. Just the idea of that woman being involved in any aspect of my life makes me feel physically sick. Wrenching free from his grasp, I move into the office, locking the door behind me.

I lean my back against the wood, knowing my escape is temporary, but any reprieve is a welcome one right now. Bending down, I rest my hands on my knees and try to clear my head and calm my breathing.

Why does he do this to me? Why come back into my life now? He fucking *knew* I worked here—new bar name be damned—and he knew that walking in here would cause a cataclysmic shit storm.

The problem is that despite everything he’s done, everything I now know, and all the things he says he needs to explain, I’m pretty sure I still left a rather large part of me back there in the hall with him.

Universe, it’s me, Kenzie. Can you stop fucking with me now?

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Chapter 10

Drew was gone by the time I went back out to the bar, and I said a silent prayer for a group of twenty professors who thankfully had turned up without a reservation wanting lunch. I made myself scarce when Millen asked for the check and when I came back, he was gone.

I still can't get my head around the fact he was here, let alone engaged. Then there was the hallway incident, which was more of a mind fuck than anything. My emotions have still not recovered, the war between my head and my heart reigniting at the first touch of his lips to mine again. He didn't ask—he took. He shut me up with his tongue in my mouth and his hard body pressing me into the wall. If I wasn't so pissed at him—still shell-shocked from seeing him again—it would've been hot.

The longer I sit here and think about it, the madder I get.

How dare he come crashing back into my life thinking he has any claim on me after what *he* did?

And Drew—there's no way I'm going to forget the look on his face anytime soon. I kept calling him throughout the afternoon but each time the call would go straight to voicemail. Deciding he needed space, I sent a text telling him we needed to talk and to call when he was ready.

After the disaster that was my day, I grab a bottle of wine and make myself at home in the living room.

Halfway through my second glass, there's a knock at the door before a key turns in the lock. I pop my head up in time to see Gaby walking in with a pizza box in one hand and another bottle of wine in the other.

“I've heard Dinah and Sadie's version of events—now I really want to hear yours. Especially whatever happened out back.”

“Hello to you too,” I sigh, dropping back into position. She puts the pizza and wine on the coffee table and heads into the kitchen, grabbing herself a wineglass before claiming the recliner chair next to me.

Turning her head, she raises an eyebrow at me. “When you meet a guy, you text me. When you dump a guy, you text me. When the guy you fell for in a weekend reappears after ghosting you for three months and is engaged to the she-bitch of the century, you text me. So what happened that the girls *didn’t* see?” she asks, picking up a slice and taking a huge bite.

“Pizza and wine? Really?”

“Stop avoiding the subject.”

“He’s engaged.”

“Yep,” she garbles with her mouth full. “Got that much.”

“To Lana Mason.”

She rolls her eyes before looking to the ceiling with a “give me strength” expression. Swallowing her food, she drops the pizza slice on top of the box and grabs my wine bottle, topping up my glass before pouring herself some. Cradling the drink, she sits back and levels me with a narrow-eyed stare. “Okay, okay. Lana comes in all high and mighty like the cat that got the cream. Or the rich guy,” she adds.

“Yes, that too, and spouts some shit about being in the area and how she wanted to let me know that her dad is the new owner of The Masonry-”

“No shit,” she gasps, her eyes wide as saucers. “Now the name makes total sense.”

“Anyway, she’s waving her hand in my face showing me some huge rock on her finger and grabbing on Millen, introducing him as her groom-to-be.”

“I’ve got it. He disappeared off the face of the Earth because he had a frontal lobotomy. It’s the only explanation.”

“That’s what I thought too. Anyway, then Drew wanders in and they’re long-lost buddies from college, and he’s calling them Lans and Mills like they’re all thick as thieves, and I’m wondering when the hell I hit my head

and transported into another universe because Drew has never mentioned ‘Mills’ or ‘Lans’ and—”

“Breathe, babe,” Gaby says.

I take a deep breath and feel the tension leech out of me on the exhale.

“To be fair,” she says, resuming her pizza demolition, “it’s not like you guys do much talking.”

I open my mouth, but stop as I take in her words. *She’s not exactly wrong.* I shrug, she grins, then I continue. “So Lana suggests lunch and of course they accept, then I tried to escape out back but he followed me.”

“This would be Millen, not Drew, right?”

I roll my eyes and take a big gulp of wine, needing the courage. “Yes, Millen. He says he doesn’t like Drew touching me.”

“Drew touched you? In front of him?”

“It was just a kiss on the cheek.”

“He was staking his claim on you. Making sure people knew there was more going on between you.”

“I can’t be claimed.”

“Not anymore there’s not, ’cause his mate Mills had already tapped that.”

I shake my head at her, my lips twitching. “You’re so gangsta.”

“I try. But drink up and continue. I know there’s more to come.”

I take another sip and snuggle down into the couch a bit more, cuddling my wine to my chest. “He said it’s complicated and how he got my message et cetera. Then he kissed me and I pushed him away, slapped him, then he did it again and I... kinda kissed him back.”

She gasps loudly. “And...? God, this is like pulling teeth.”

“Then Drew walked in and saw us up against the wall.” I cringe at the memory.

“This is way more scandalous than I imagined. I love it,” she says, beaming.

“I’m glad someone does because I’m mortified and angry and confused and all of those things.”

“Then what happened?” she presses.

“Drew stormed out, I told Millen to go back to Lana, and I hid out in the office to compose myself.”

“And Drew?”

“Drew left and is MIA. He’s not taking my calls and hasn’t replied to my text.”

She hums thoughtfully then picks up her glass, downs the contents, and refills it before leaning over and upending the rest of the bottle in mine. “You want my opinion?”

“Yep. Anything can help at this stage. I’m about ready to go to the animal shelter and adopt a boatload of cats.”

“Babe, there’s no need to be drastic,” she says, rolling her eyes again. “So, was there anything there?”

My head jerks back, and I scrunch my forehead. “What do you mean?”

“When he kissed you—did you still feel something?”

“What kind of question is *that*?”

“An honest one,” she deadpans.

“Of course there was something there,” I snap. “It’s Millen.”

“Right. And did you feel guilty for kissing him instead of Drew?”

“I…” I stop, realizing what she’s doing. “I felt bad that Drew saw us, but not that I was kissing Millen. I feel like a bitch for kissing another woman’s fiancé though.”

“Even if it is the she-bitch?”

Unfortunately, even if it’s Lana, my answer is still the same. “Yeah.”

“And are you mad at Millen for all of this, or yourself?”

“Myself for putting myself in a position where I fell for his bullshit in the first place, and him for kissing me and making me kiss him back.” My

eyes sting and I look away, blinking rapidly and thinking of unicorns to try and stop the threatening tears.

She leans over and puts her hand on my shoulder, making me look over at her again. “You’re mad because even after he did what he did, you still wanted to kiss him back.”

“Why though?” I ask, my voice high-pitched. I stand up and, wineglass still in hand, pace across my living room.

“How can I still want him when he cheated on her with me? When he lied to me and her... hell, he lied to you guys too.”

“Do you know they were together then?” she says quietly. I spin around and give her a “duh” look.

“Gabs, you don’t just meet someone and get engaged in the space of three months. That kind of thing only happens in books. Besides, Drew knew who Lana was so that makes me think it’s not a new thing.”

“Did you ask him?”

“No, I didn’t have a chance in between telling him to leave me alone, slapping his face, and making out with him while his best friend walked in and caught us. It wasn’t really at the forefront of my mind.” She glares at me, and my shoulders slump. I walk back over to the couch and sit down again, taking another drink and growling at the ceiling. “I’m sorry, okay? This whole situation is just making me...”

“Turn into a total head case?” she offers.

“Not helping, Gabs.”

“I’m trying, babe, but right now, you’ve got more questions than answers and until you find out the truth, you’re gonna drive yourself—and probably everyone else around you—nuts.”

As always, Gaby doesn’t fuck around at getting straight to the point.

“Why do I need to know though? Why does he deserve another minute of my time when I was obviously just a weekend fling to him? A last-ditch attempt at freedom before his impending marriage.”

She levels me with a pointed stare. “Because if it was just a one-night stand, he wouldn’t have hung out with you the next day—or your friends—and he definitely wouldn’t have followed you out back to push you against the wall and kiss you. *Twice.*”

I let out a huge breath and rest my head on my arm. “I wish he’d never come back.”

“No, you don’t. You just don’t want to consider the fact that he represents a huge puzzle that you now desperately want to solve. Do that, and you’ll have the answers to all your questions. You’ll get the truth. Then, and only then, will you be able to move past this. Drew has been a welcome distraction and I think he’s been what you’ve needed. But now...”

“Now, I need to let him go.”

“At the very least, you owe him an explanation.”

“He won’t talk to me,” I reply with a sigh.

“Give him time to cool down, then find him and *make* him listen. He deserves to know that Millen’s the reason you never entertained the idea of more with him. It *is* unfortunate that they’re best friends though. I didn’t see *that* coming.” She takes a drink and puts her glass down on the table. “Now, if I’ve sorted your head out, can we get on to eating pizza and getting a little buzzed?”

I look over at her, and she’s right—I feel like at least a little weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I need answers from Millen. I owe Drew the truth. From there, I’m just going to wing it.

And avoid Lana.



That last plan of attack is thwarted before I can even put it into action. The very next day in fact.

I’m mindlessly travelling down the aisles of the grocery store when I hear the grating voice of Lana behind me. “Kenzie, fancy seeing you here.”

I grit my teeth and turn around, plastering a fake smile on my face. “Hi,” I reply, looking down at the carry basket in her hands. “I’m surprised

to see you here, since you don't live here anymore.”

When the affair between Harris Mason and my mother came to light, it was not long before Lana's father left for greener pastures in San Francisco. Lana lived with her mom until her senior year at high school and thankfully, left to go live with her father.

That doesn't mean she didn't have a good chance to make my life a living hell before she left. She blamed my mother for the infidelity, and soon had most of our class—her followers—believing it to be true.

The shadow she cast over my family—and in turn, me—made my last few years of high school not so fun. I had my loyal friends and that was about it. If ever there was a moment in a girl's life when she did not need the shit that Lana Mason dealt me, it was then. It was a very good day when our senior year started and she was nowhere to be found.

Now that she's here standing in front of me, and I know the things I know about her fiancé—and the fact I kissed him while she was in the very same building—I try to find a part of me that feels sorry for her.

Guilty? Yes. Humiliated? Sure. Sympathetic? Well that's a little harder to conjure up.

But any woman, whether they be the nicest, most honorable human being or a bitch who from all accounts—and personal experience—has not changed a single bit since our teenage years, does not deserve to be cheated on.

“Oh, I'm only in town until this afternoon when Millen drives us back home. He's just carrying out some business. He's works very hard.” The vitriol in her tone has my heart seizing in my chest, a little part of me wondering if she somehow knows about my history with him.

There's no way that he would've told her. Hell, he didn't even tell me, and he still hasn't explained why he lied in the first place. I very much doubt he would've gone back to their hotel room last night and confessed all.

No one would want to incur the wrath of this woman. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

“I’m just here getting supplies for Mom. Then we’ve got dinner with the future in-laws tonight to finalize the wedding plans.”

You know those people you meet who you just have an irrational desire to punch in the face at the sound of their voice? I swear, my need is completely rational right now.

“That’s nice,” I remark, spotting a huge family-sized block of chocolate over her shoulder. Chocolate cures everything, right? It might even hold magical properties and stop me from ramming my head into the nearest brick wall.

She continues speaking as if I’m actually interested in whatever she has to say. “It’s such hard work organizing a wedding at short notice but it’s definitely a *lot* easier when money isn’t an object. Millen just didn’t want to wait so in a month’s time, I’ll be Mrs. Millen Ross. Isn’t that crazy?”

That snaps me out of it. “I’m sorry?”

Her grin turns sardonic. “We’re getting married next month. August 20th. Five weeks’ time. A late summer wedding at my father’s vineyard near Healdsburg. The guest list is *crazy*,” she explains, waving her hand in the air. “But none of that matters, as long as I get to marry Millen at the end of the day. When you know, you know.”

I feel sick, like I-might-vomit-in-the-middle-of-the-grocery-store kind of sick.

“Have you been together long?” I ask against my better judgement, spotting Oreos next to me and subconsciously reaching out to grab a pack or ten. When I adopt my ten cats they won’t care if I’m the poster child for eating my emotions. Cats can love unconditionally, can’t they?

“Oh, yes,” she emphasizes a little too enthusiastically. “We’ve known each other for years.”

“I’m very happy for you,” I say, slapping on an Oscar-worthy smile.

“Drew’s nice, isn’t he? It was a definite surprise seeing him at the bar yesterday. Have you been together long?” she asks, lifting her hand up and studying her nails.

She knows. I swear she fucking knows. If she doesn't, she's at least on a fact-finding mission for Millen. Why else would she bring up Drew?

"We're not together," I blurt out without thinking. Her eyes glint with triumph and if ever I wanted the world to swallow me whole, it's now.

"Oh, that's not what Drew said at lunch yesterday. He said you guys were dating."

Now I don't know what to believe. I know Drew wouldn't overlay things between us, and I don't put it past Lana to shit stir like her life depended on it. Then again, if Drew had any inkling about the way I know Millen, he might've felt the need to save face.

Fucking Lana—now she's got me questioning Drew. What is it about the Mason family and their need to belittle others in order to make themselves look or feel better?

Lana stares, as if waiting for me to speak, and I rush out my words. "Sure. Yeah. Sorry, I'm actually in a rush so I have to get going."

"Oh sure. Me too. I'm dying for a nap." She leans in closer. "Just between us, Millen is *insatiable*. He damn near wore me out last night. I thought for sure there would be complaints from the neighbors."

Kill me now.

"Anyway, nice to see you." She turns her head toward the front of the store. "Ooh, flowers! That reminds me—I must swing by the florist and get some for Nina. It pays to stay in the future mother-in-law's good books, doesn't it?" she says with a wink. "Must go. See you 'round."

She walks past me and I breathe out a sigh of relief for not only surviving the encounter but also not committing a crime in the process.

Unfortunately, she isn't quite done with me.

"Kenzie, you never know," she says, now walking backwards and watching me. "Drew should bring you to the wedding as his plus one. Wouldn't *that* be fun?"

Universe... seriously... what did I ever do to you?

Chapter 11

A week later on the Saturday night, work is packed. Mark, Gaby, and I are all working behind the bar, running around like headless chickens. Sadie, Sam, and Dinah are working the restaurant, which we've had to leave open an extra two hours so far to cater for some medical conference being hosted by UC Davis this weekend. That leaves Jake and Bruno manning the door and Dalyn—bless her soul—playing bar back for the night, saving all our asses and being a godsend.

Drew has been sitting at the far corner of the bar for the past hour, his expression unreadable, but I know that he's here to talk. I wasn't expecting to see him waiting for me tonight, especially after the radio silence since last week's clusterfuck.

I haven't been able to talk to him, firmly ensconced at the opposite end of the bar serving scientist after doctor after uptight professor letting loose.

An hour later, both Mark and Gaby have had their breaks, and I take my chance at getting at least a small respite of my own.

"Taking fifteen, babe," I say in Gab's ear, not wanting to disturb her mid-pour of a ten-long line of shots before catching Mark's eye and giving him a nod.

I walk around the bar and wind my way through the crowd until I reach Drew.

"Hey," I say, sidling up to him. "Wanna get some fresh air with me?"

He turns his torso my way and nods, his eyes shuttered, a guard I've never seen there before now well and truly in place. Sliding his stool back, he stands, notably not touching me, which is totally out of character. Drew is a tactile man, taking any chance he gets to brush up against or lean into me.

Not liking this change even if we can only be friends, I grab his hand and move toward the door, pulling him with me and not letting go. When we reach the sidewalk, I lead him around the corner and down the side of the building until we reach a bench by the back door.

I loosen my grip and he pulls free, bracing his feet in place as I take a seat and look up at him. “You’re a hard man to get hold of.”

“Kenz, I’m not sure there’s much left to talk about.”

“Actually, there’s a *lot*. I owe you an explanation for what you saw.”

A muscle in his jaw twitches and it just serves to make him look hotter. What is it about a strong, stoic man that transforms women into impromptu nutcrackers, wanting to break through the tough exterior to get to the goodness inside?

“Drew,” I say, reaching out and putting my hand on his arm.

He steps out of my touch but before I can say anything more, he takes a seat beside me, resting his elbows on his knees and running his fingers through his hair.

“It’s kind of a complicated story.”

He doesn’t look at me. Instead, he leans back against the table and stares off into the distance. “I caught up for a beer with Mills last night. He told me...”

I scoff, unable to hold it back. “Right. So he told you he lied to me and used me to sow his wild oats before the impending doom known as marrying your mate *Lans*?”

His gaze snaps to mine. “What?”

“I had no idea he was engaged. He said he was single. It wasn’t even a one-night stand. He saw me twice before driving back to town to take me to dinner. He had plenty of chances to tell me.”

He grits his teeth, the soft glow coming from the window behind giving me enough light to see a conflicted expression flash over his face.

Silence stretches between us and it starts to wear on me. I hate this. We’ve never had this kind of awkwardness between us. Drew’s effervescent

personality and confident demeanor always take over.

“I don’t know what more you want me to say. I didn’t mislead you, Drew. I told you that I didn’t have more to give. I was—”

“It’s because of him, isn’t it? I never stood a chance.”

I want to touch him, comfort him, make him feel better. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t help either of us right now.

“I’m sorry, Drew. I almost wish I’d met you first. Would’ve saved me a hell of a lot of trouble, that’s for sure.”

He lifts his hands and scrubs his face, his eyes a puzzling mixture of hard and soft when they meet mine. “You really need to speak to Mills.”

That wasn’t what I expected him to say. “I think my hand slapping his face said everything I needed to.”

“Was that before or after you kissed him...?”

I open my lips to deny it, but I see his jaw tense. *He’s got me there.* “I’m sorry you saw that.”

“So am I, but it explained a lot. Then Millen cleared the rest up last night.”

“I wish you’d have let me explain.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing now?” He shoots me that irresistible grin of his, and it’s almost my undoing.

“There’s nothing there, you know? I’m not a cheater, and I’m not about to become his bit on the side—again—before he gets married.”

“You really need to talk to him.”

I shake my head, focusing on my wringed hands in my lap to avoid letting Drew see the truth in my eyes—how seeing Millen still makes my heart skip, how I was unable to resist his kiss, how I haven’t been able to escape the memory of his body pressing into mine since the hall incident last week...

He places his large hand on top of my joined ones, reaching over and tilting my chin up so I’m looking at him. “It goes against everything I feel

for you to say this and I hate it but let him explain.”

“What are you talking about? I told you about my mom and the affair.”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t do that.”

“Not willingly, but he made me do it. And of all the fucking women in the world, it had to be Lana Mason.”

His brows go sky high. “What’s the deal there? You’re not exactly her favorite person either, apparently.”

A scathing laugh escapes my lips. “Oh right, ’cause she’s oh so fucking innocent.”

“I’ve known her a while. She’s pretty harmless.”

My head jerks back and I study his expression for any sign that he’s joking. Surely, he’s not serious. “Have you *met* her?” I ask, scandalized.

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling as he regards me. “She’s okay. She’s ambitious, I’ll give her that, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“Pity about the lack of personality and morals,” I mutter, making him laugh harder.

“I’m not sure morals have anything to do with it. She apparently had her eye on Millen for a while. Since before he left for college, I hear.”

“You’ve known him for *that* long?” I ask, wanting to ignore the fact that Lana left town around the same time she must’ve met Millen.

“Please tell me they haven’t been together since then,” I whisper, feeling sick to the stomach at the thought.

“Oh God no. Millen was anti-attachment in college. There was not a single pair of panties left intact after we’d finished our time in Texas,” he replies with an infectious grin.

I can’t help but smile back at him, a comfortable silence stretching between us. “You’re not like that now, though. You’re the nice guy.”

“Just what a guy wants to hear from a gorgeous woman he wants to keep sleeping with,” he mutters.

“Oh believe me, there’s nothing I’d like to do more.”

“Let’s go then,” he says, jokingly grabbing my hand with a tug. “I’m sure we can squeeze in a quickie in my car before you have to go back.”

I giggle and lean into him, loving the warmth of his body radiating into mine. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me in even closer. Turning his head, he presses his lips to my temple and leaves them there.

Tears prick my eyes and instead of fighting them, I let them fall for the first time in a long time.

“Hear him out, Kenz. You can deny it as much as you like but it’s the only way you’ll be able to move on from this.” His voice is low, rumbling in his chest and vibrating through my body.

“I know,” I say with a sigh. “Doesn’t mean I can’t be angry with him.”

“He deserves a bit of anger, maybe some consideration, and definitely—more than anything—an open mind.”

I pull back and look at Drew, scrunching my face up. “What does *that* mean?”

He grins at me, shaking his head at the same time. “It means, when he comes to see you—which he no doubt will—let him explain. Let him tell you what happened. If I can understand, I’m sure you can too.” His expression goes serious. “But remember this, Kenz. Once you have closure from him, I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

My eyes fill with tears again but that doesn’t stop me from smiling over at him. “You would have to be the most stubborn man I’ve ever met.”

“Oh beautiful, you have no fucking idea, but give me the sign, and I’ll have more than enough fun proving you right.”

Drew stands and holds out his hand for me. Placing my palm in his, I let him pull me up, and together we walk hand in hand, back to the bar. My heart a little heavy, my eyes a little sore, and my head? Well, that’s more messed up than ever.

Chapter 12

It's a little after three thirty in the morning when I turn into my cul-de-sac and see Millen's car parked at my curb, a stretched-out body behind the steering wheel.

My anger toward him hits me like a freight train. How *dare* he turn up at my house and wait for me to get home? Where's his fiancée? Why isn't he with *her*?

I shut off the car and hop out, clicking the locks as I hoist my purse over my shoulder and quickly walk up to my porch and through my front door. His car door slams shut and steps on the concrete path soon follow.

I should lock my door. I should keep him out and continue living in my world of denial where Millen is the worst man on Earth who played me like a two-dollar whore.

Instead, I have a moment of stupidity where I keep walking into my house, dropping my purse on the couch and continuing until I'm in my kitchen, pulling down a tumbler and my bottle of Glenfiddich and pouring myself a healthy dose of courage, which I'll no doubt need.

I refuse to look at him although I know he's now inside, the click of my front door lock echoing through the empty hallway.

Again, we're in the same space, alone, with nothing and no one to stop us doing anything. *Except his doting fiancée waiting at home...*

"Kenz..." he breathes, and just the sound of his voice has my heart skipping and my breathing speeding up to double-time. Then I remember how humiliated I felt when Lana joyously introduced me to him.

"Why are you here, Millen? Shouldn't you be with Lana?"

He ignores my words and crosses the room, stalking toward me and closing the space between us. He presses forward until my back hits a wall

and I literally stop breathing.

“I know I shouldn’t be here. My life is ordered. Everything is organized and planned. Fucking invitations have been sent out, deposits paid. All of it.” He doesn’t ease into it—he lays it all out there for me, no fucking about, no preamble.

I muster all the strength I have in me, shoving his shoulders back with my hands and ducking under his arm, desperate to get much-needed distance before I go postal on him. But then this whole clusterfuck of a situation overwhelms me.

I lift my chin defiantly; my voice not as strong as it should be, mirroring my wavering resistance to this man. “You need to leave. I don’t want to see you.” That’s a total lie, and the softening of his expression says he knows I’m full of shit.

He lifts his hand between us, his palm cupping my jaw as his thumb sweeps across my lips. “I’ve finally got you alone with no chance of interruptions. We need to have this out.”

I splutter, my mouth dropping open. Then I remember the humiliation, the hurt, and confusion and the second-guessing, all caused by this man.

Squaring my shoulders, I push my arms between us and shove him back, unsuccessfully. He barely moves.

“When someone asks you to leave, you do it. It’s not a yes or no answer, Millen. It’s a pretty straight forward request to get the fuck out.”

His steel eyes stay fixed on me. How does he do that and look hotter than he should? He presses into me, and I lose the ability to think straight. “I don’t want to see you, Kenz, but I need to. It’s like this burning ache inside of me. I see you, and I want to be near you. I lie in bed at night thinking of you and needing to touch you. Every time I can’t have you, can’t touch you, I fight the urge to drag you off and sate this need to kiss you, to do more than kiss you...” His hands grip my hips, his arms wrapping around my waist, holding me in place against him and his hard everything. Whatever this string is that connects us, it’s unbreakable. It’s a force unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. The harder I push away, the

stronger the pull back to him is. Whenever we're in the same room I feel powerless, unable to stop what we both know is going to happen next.

It's like the giant elephant in the room. A big Dumbo in the corner I try to ignore but ultimately know I'll have to acknowledge. Him, me, us together... I'm going to become the thing I vowed I'd never be. The person I never wanted to be. The thing he said I wasn't, but we both know I'll be regardless.

His voice drops to a low, sexy rasp, the same tone that won me over that first night together. It has me melting into him when I should be running in the other direction. "You completely and utterly intoxicate me. You just have to breathe and I'm reeled back in." He leans in closer until he's all I can see, all I can feel. My resistance is wavering but I know I need to stay strong, for myself and my sanity.

He says, "You don't even have to do anything to make it happen because I'm a lost cause when it comes to controlling anything about the way I feel about you."

"This is wrong. This is crazy. This is—"

"This is something bigger than the both of us."

"You should go. You *need* to go," I whisper, desperation dripping from those three little words. My eyes beg him to step back and walk out the door just as my heart—and body—scream the exact opposite.

"You're right. I should stay away, but what I should do and what I'm going to do are two totally different things." He dips his head and brushes his lips against mine with a tenderness I've only ever experienced with him. "I want to do all the wrong things right with you."

The words are like a wrecking ball, smashing through the hard shell of my resolve and exposing my Millen-sized soft spot, the one I was trying to protect all along.

He rests his forehead against mine, looking deep in my eyes, conflict and a warring conscience reflecting back at me. I fight to keep my hands at my sides, my fingers curling into tight fists, my nails digging into my

palms. He's everywhere. He's everything I shouldn't take but desperately want to have, and still I breathe him in.

I dig deep for one last shot, a last-ditch effort to stop the inevitable. "You can't have something you're not free to have, Millen. We can't do this. Your ring on her finger—"

"This?"

"Us..."

"There wasn't supposed to be an us, Kenzie. I didn't think that far ahead. I didn't expect to meet someone—meet you—and get completely sidetracked." He looks down between us as he brings his hips closer, pressing into mine.

"But it did happen, Millen," I say, exasperated. "As much as you try to fight it—ignore it, even—there was an us. That was until you ghosted me then walk into the bar with a fiancée."

He sighs. "You were a complication I didn't see coming."

"A complication that's easily fixed by you turning around and walking out the door." My eyes drop to his mouth of their own volition. Why can't I control myself around this man?

"Fuck it," he mutters before grabbing my head and smashing his mouth to mine.

I jerk my hands to his chest and shove him back, my gaze narrowed as my anger passes the point of no return. I said I'd never be the other woman but every part of my being pulls me to this man.

Is this how my mom felt? Did she have this same feeling of helplessness? If give in to temptation, I'll be going against the most important thread in my moral fiber.

The air in the room changes, the rumble in his chest telling me he's done with waiting. His breaths come hard and fast, his steely eyes pinned on mine, his expression determined...possessive.

I know if he kisses me again, it won't stop there. There's no way I can resist him a second time. If I cross that line, nothing will stop him—us.

He closes the distance between us, pressing me back with his body until I'm crushed against the wall. I lift my hands and grip his biceps, fully intending to push him away as he lowers his head. The moment his tongue touches mine, I'm gone, done for, incapable of anything but feeling, touching, breathing. My nails bite into his skin through his tee, my head immobile from the tight grip he has on my hair. Unable to hold back, I moan into his mouth, my hips lifting to grind up against the hard ridge in his jeans.

Tearing his mouth from mine, he jerks my head to the side, exposing my throat to his lips as he licks and nips his way down to my collarbone. Needing more, *craving* more, I push him back, catching him off guard. With space between us, I drop my hands to his belt, roughly pulling it free and lowering the zip.

He strains his neck to latch his mouth onto my skin, growling against it, sucking hard, no doubt leaving a mark that'll be tough to hide. I don't care though—my only thought is getting all barriers between us out of the way.

Releasing the grip on my head, he drops a hand down to his hips, roughly tugging his pants and underwear to his thighs. Then his fingers grip the front of my shirt, ripping it open and sending the buttons flying. Cupping my breasts with his hands, he unhooks the front clasp of my bra, pushing it apart and wrapping his lips around my aching nipple.

"Fuck," I moan, knocking my head against the wall. I don't register the pain, far too consumed with the feel of Millen's mouth and the warmth of his body threatening to burn me alive.

I make quick work of lifting my skirt up. Widening my stance, I part my legs, needing him to touch me there.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I score my nails down his back until I grip his ass, pulling it hard against mine, loving his groan vibrating over my skin at the contact.

"I need to be inside you," he mutters, grazing his teeth against my stiff peak and burying his face in my neck. "I'm gonna bury myself so fucking deep you'll feel me for days and remember I was there."

I can't think straight when he talks like that. My sole focus is touching him, feeling him, taking out all of my anger and frustration *on him*.

His hand drops between my legs. Yanking my underwear aside, he grips his cock and parts me with the tip as he runs it up and down before catching my entrance, bending his knees, and driving himself home.

I cry out at the intrusion, the room filled with the sound of our skin slapping together. His fingers grip my hips like he never wants to let go, the push and pull no doubt leaving marks.

Just that thought makes something inside me snap. I hook my leg around the back of his thigh and wrap my arms around his shoulders, thrusting against him, the act turning almost violent with anger, frustration, the desperate aching need to punish him growing with every curse and grunt he mutters against my neck.

“Shit, I can't. This is... this will...”

“Fucking take it, Kenz. Feel me. Feel what you do to me.”

The words are my undoing. I tug his head back and attack his mouth, my teeth digging into his bottom lip as my climax consumes me. One hard, deep thrust later, he's groaning long and loud as his hips start to slow, his movements controlled as he glides in and out, bringing me back down to Earth.

Reality hits the moment he pulls out. It's one thing to do it when I was none the wiser, but now I know he's unavailable and I couldn't stop myself from taking everything he gave me and giving it right back.

Needing space from the powerful force that is Millen, I shut myself away in my bathroom. I quickly pull off my work clothes and clean myself up before throwing on some clean underwear, some yoga pants, and a clean tee.

Making my way back toward the living room, I half expect to find it empty. I come to a stop when I see Millen perched on the arm of my couch, his head down, his hands hanging loosely in front of him.

“I didn't expect that to happen,” he says, lifting his eyes to meet mine.

“You and me both,” I say, truthfully, my voice as flat as my soul right now. “But it did, and I didn’t think it was possible, but now I actually feel sorry for her.”

His brows bunch together. “Why?”

I ignore the question, instead deciding to get answers of my own. “Why her? It would almost be forgettable if it was anyone else.”

“Kenz...”

“She hates me almost as much as I hate her. She blames my mother, and I blame her father for the decimation of both our families.”

His face softens and I almost wanna punch that adorable look right off his face. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, you do now,” I reply tersely.

His voice drops, regret and resignation dripping from every word. “It’s complicated.”

I throw my hands the air with a scoff, unable to hide my frustration at this entire situation. How did a simple meeting in a bar lead to *this*? “I bet it is.”

“It’s not like that,” he continues, getting up from the chair. Hearing that, I’ve had enough. I stand and storm toward him, stopping when we’re toe to toe, chest to chest, so close it’s as if we’re breathing each other’s air. How does he manage to rile me up with very few words?

“Oh please, explain to me how it can be anything but exactly what it looks like. Three months ago, you were here, flirting with me, charming me, unable to ignore this super intense connection between us and sharing what I thought was the best physical experience of my life. Then you disappear and I get that—hell, *I* was even a little freaked out about the feelings I had after just one night together. But now you’re back, and all I really want... what I *need* to move past all of this...” I flick my hand between us. “. . . is for you to just tell me the fucking truth. If I was a regret, tell me. If I was a last-ditch fling to make sure you were doing the right thing, yes, it’ll hurt but fuck, I’ll probably come around and accept that.

You made me become the other woman and turned me into the one thing I told you I never wanted to be.”

“I’m sor—”

“Please don’t. Sorry is a word that’s easy to say but not so easy to show.” My voice cracks, my throat tightening despite everything in my being wanting to stay strong and show no emotion.

I swipe at my eyes and drop into my arm chair, knowing I’ll lose it completely if I look at him. That won’t do either of us any good.

His feet move and the front door clicks open, my heart seizing in fear that this could be it.

Then there’s nothing. No lock closing. No footsteps—just total silence. When he doesn’t say anything, I almost think I’m imagining it. Lifting my head, I’m pinned in place by the look of absolute determination in his eyes.

“I meant what I said, Kenz. Back then and now. I will explain it all, but I can only leave if I know you believe me.”

“What?” I bite my lip, not sure whether I want to hear whatever he’s about to announce.

“Everything I felt, everything you felt, everything between us—it was real, as real as me standing in front of you right now. It was the most real I’ve ever had in my life, and it’s something I’ll never forget.”

“Why’d you do it then? Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you come back?” I take a deep breath, knowing that when I ask the next question, I won’t be able to hold back. “Why are you engaged if what we had was so real?” I throw my questions at him like rapid-fire bullets, not giving him a chance to explain but continuing to shoot. *Offense is often the best defense.*

“Because I had to,” he replies, and it’s as if the world stops spinning. The room is deathly quiet. Of all the things he could’ve said, *that* was not what I’d expected to hear.

What do I say to that? I sit there, staring at him like I did the first time I saw him, like the first time he sunk inside me and tilted the axis of my entire world.

The look on his face does me in, and before I know it, I've crossed the room, stopping in front of him. Unable to stop myself, I reach my hand out and place it on his forearm.

"I need you to tell me what that means," I say softly.

"If I've learned anything from all of this, it's not to fuck around and think about maybes or what ifs. It's better to live in the now than not live at all, and when it comes to you..." He moves in closer, and I'm mesmerized by the determination in his steely grey eyes.

He crowds me in, his chest pressing against mine, the heat of his body threatening to engulf me whole. Dropping his gaze to my hands, he tangles his fingers with mine and slowly glides up my sides, our linked hands grazing the sides of my breasts. He doesn't stop until both of my arms are above my head, his one big palm imprisoning them. "I can't stop touching you, and I don't think I ever want to."

"Just walk away, Millen. It would solve everything."

My breathing comes hard and fast now, my eyes unable to look away as his lips lower to brush mine. "When it comes to you, I'll do anything you want... except that. *Never* that. I need to make sure I'm the only man who gets to touch you..." He presses his hard cock into my stomach, and I have to bite back the responding whimper threatening to escape my mouth.

"The only man who *ever* gets inside you." He grinds his hips up as he drags the tip of his tongue over my jaw and down my neck before sinking his teeth into the groove of my shoulder. My entire body trembles against him as his lips curve up against my skin. "Come away with me..."

I pull back and meet his eyes. "Millen..."

"Three days. You and me. No outside world. Just the two of us. Give me three days, Kenz."

"Where would we go?" I ask.

"Leave that up to me. Just be packed and ready on Friday morning next week. I'll take care of the rest."

"Why, Millen? You've given me no reason whatsoever to trust you. You appear out of nowhere after vanishing into thin air, and now you're

asking me to go away with you knowing you've got a fiancée waiting for you at home, a woman who hates me just as much as I despise her."

He steps closer but I stand my ground.

"None of this is what you think, Kenz. I'll tell you everything you want to know, but I need to escape my life for a while. I need to get away from it all, and I want to do it with you." He shifts so one of his hands rests on my hip, holding me to him. "I thought about you every single day. You don't know how much I wanted to see you again. Lana told me we were going to her dad's new bar, but I didn't know it was the same one until we got there. Then I knew I had to see you, even knowing it could hurt you. I want to make up for that. I *need* to make up for that." He dips his head so his face is all I can see. "Three days, Kenz. That's all I'll ever ask of you. If you send me away after that, then I'll never bother you again."

My gut twists at the thought. This was a man who I had grown to outwardly hate and inwardly crave.

"That's all?" I ask with a raised brow. Can my head—and my heart—handle three days with Millen Ross? Today has proven I can't resist him, so can my conscience cope with giving in to a taken man with a waiting fiancée left at home?

Before I felt like the decision was out of my control; now, it's as if he's giving me the option. Realigning my moral compass, so to speak.

Somehow, I think it's too late for that.

"It's the last thing I'll ever ask of you. I need you to understand."

"You could just tell me now."

"I want seventy-two uninterrupted hours with you and only you in the middle of nowhere. Nothing getting in our way. No job, no family, no friends, no fucking expectations. Just you and me."

I take a deep breath, my answer escaping my lips before I can even think. "Three days."

"That's all I want, Kenz. I want to make this right."

I nod, my throat so tight I don't trust myself to speak.

“There’s one last thing,” he says, a quizzical expression morphing his features.

“What’s that?”

“I won’t be inside you again until you admit it’s me and *only* me you want.” My mouth drops open. Did he just... There’s no way I heard that right. Needing to take back control of this conversation, I decide to offer my own terms because I may have already compromised myself by succumbing to Millen earlier, but I have to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Especially if he’s not going to explain himself.

“No sex, no kissing, no touching. Separate beds, separate rooms,” I state, knowing that I’m probably fighting a losing battle.

He doesn’t reply. Instead he breaks the rules by placing a soft kiss on my neck and stepping back, letting me go and leaving me bereft. Lost in sensation my silent words of protest stay frozen on the tip of my tongue. Instead of saying any of them, I simply watch as he walks straight out my front door without another word.

What the hell did I just agree to?

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Chapter 13

What the actual fuck am I doing?

I'm sitting here, staring at my packed overnight bag reconsidering the decision to go away with Millen. The same thing I've been doing every day since last Sunday morning when he walked out my door. Countless times I've picked up my phone to tell him I won't go—can't go—but I always stopped short of following through with it.

I shouldn't go. It's stupid, it's pointless, and it goes against every fiber of my moral being.

Then again, I already broke the code when I gave in and slept with him last weekend, didn't I?

I told him there'd be no sex, no kissing, not even any touching, and he said he wouldn't be inside me again until I admitted he was the only man I wanted. The only power I have over him right now is the fact he doesn't know I already know that.

Now I'm a nervous wreck waiting for his car to pull into my driveway to whisk me away to a destination unknown.

I look at my phone for the millionth time and see it's almost ten o'clock, meaning he's due at any time.

I go through to my texts, quickly tapping out a message to Gaby.

Me—I really shouldn't do this.

Gaby—You'll be fine. Just remember not to touch him. You swore on the sacred bottle of wine with me.

Me—That's the problem. Have you seen him?

Gaby—I have and I'm 51% sure you can resist him... maybe...

Me—NOT helping, babe.

Gaby—You need to know what happened. You REALLY need to know why he can't stay away from you but COULD stay away back then.

Me—I don't even know where I'm going. What if he's taking me to some secluded cabin to kill me off?

Gaby—LOL. If he was gonna do that, he would've done it last weekend during his early morning stalking mission.

Me—Maybe we need a check-in thing, you know? Where I have to text you by a certain time to let you know I'm okay?

Gaby—Now you're just being paranoid. I've met him, I know where he works, and unfortunately, we know his bitch of a fiancée. You'll be fine...

Gaby—Shit. I shouldn't have mentioned her. He said he'd explain everything. He said he had to marry her, right? That must mean it's a sham, surely? Therefore, it's not technically cheating if it's not real.

Me—A sham marriage is not his or her style. There could be a lot of reasons why he "had to."

Gaby—Shit, maybe she's pregnant and he's doing the honorable thing?

Me—If she's pregnant, she's not showing and going by the wine bottles in her grocery cart last week, definitely not. It would've had to have been a goal-in-one, so to speak. Like, an out-of-my-bed-straight-into-hers kind of deal.

Gaby—Deep breaths, babe. I've got your back, whatever happens. I'll be ready and waiting to talk—or drink—it out on Monday night.

Gaby—Keep your legs closed and your heart safe and you'll be fine.

I hear his car pull in. An undeniable flutter deep inside me that's impossible to ignore leads the way as I stand, grabbing hold of my bag and making my way out of my room and down the hallway. He's knocking at the door by the time I get there. I open it and see him wearing a fitted tee and the best pair of jeans I've ever seen on a man in my life. No shit, these jeans look like they were made for him. Tapered at the hips, falling into a straight leg down to his sneakers. My breath catches and it's only when he clears his throat that my glazed eyes lift to meet his narrowed ones, his jaw twitching as he takes me in.

“Hi,” he says, tension written all over his face. “We have a bit of a drive ahead of us.”

My forehead scrunches up in confusion. “I don’t have a clue where we’re going. You never told me.”

“Well we do, and you answer the door wearing what must be the hottest, shortest sundress that makes me want to push you back inside and break my vow not to touch you faster than it would take me to slam the door behind me.”

“You said you wouldn’t...” I whisper.

“I know,” he says through gritted teeth. “I swear this weekend is going to be the death of me.”

“Why don’t you just leave me here then? Save yourself the trouble,” I snap, shocking the both of us if his wide eyes are anything to go by.

“Not gonna happen, Kenz. Hand me your bag. My mother would slap me around the ear if she knew I made a woman carry her own luggage.”

“How would she feel about adultery?” I snap. He doesn’t respond, he just grabs my bag off me, and storms off toward his car. “Lock the door, too.”

“Yes, sir,” I mutter under my breath, my mood transformed from nervous to annoyed in the blink of an eye at the ill thought-out comment of the man I’m supposed to spend the next three days with. *What was I thinking when I agreed to go away with him?*

Two and a half hours later, we’re pulling into the drive of a huge lake house in Carnelian Bay on the shores of Lake Tahoe.

Without saying a word—somewhat the norm for the entire drive here—Millen hops out of the car, opening the trunk. I get out in time to see him lifting our bags. I take the chance to check my phone, disheartened to see only one bar of reception showing on the screen. Just in case I don’t get the chance, I quickly send Gaby a text while watching my brooding travel companion make his way to the front door of the house.

Me—We've just arrived at a house on Lake Tahoe. I pissed him off by wearing a dress. He annoyed me by saying he wanted to rip it off. Fun times.

Gaby—Open mind, closed legs, protected heart. Remember?

Slipping my phone back in my pocket, I make my way toward the house and through the open door. I stop in the entryway, a large open-plan living area with a log fire on one wall, wall-to-ceiling windows lining the length of the house, and the glistening blue water of the lake commanding my attention.

I can't see Millen anywhere, but I can hear footsteps moving around upstairs. Deciding that space is probably the best thing right now, I walk over to the glass doors and turn the handle, finding myself on a wide sweeping deck that wraps around the entire front of the house.

I'm leaning against the railing, my head resting on my hands when I feel him close to me. He's not touching me, as he promised, but warmth radiates off his body onto mine. Any frustration I had with him from the drive disappears. "The view is amazing."

"The lake is too," he replies smoothly. I look over my shoulder at him to see a sexy smirk being shot back at me.

"Is this place yours?" I ask, returning my gaze to the water.

"It's been in the family for as long as I've been alive. Obviously, it's been renovated a few times, but it's always been a part of my life. Summers, holidays—you name it, we were here."

"And now?" I ask, desperately wanting to know why he would bring a woman who is essentially his mistress to the family vacation home where he'll no doubt be spending future holidays with his soon-to-be wife.

"No one knows we're here. There's no distractions, no chance for interruptions, and I get you all to myself for three days."

"With no touching," I add.

"Minor detail," he whispers right by my ear causing my entire body to shiver, a tremble I'm sure he'd feel if he was any closer.

He straightens, the cool breeze sweeping over the skin of my back giving me goose bumps that I'm sure aren't entirely the wind's fault. He moves to my side, mimicking my pose as he looks over the water. "I put your bag in the master bedroom. It's upstairs and at the end of the hall on the right."

I turn to face him. "Millen, no. It's your house; you should be there."

He reaches out to cover my hand but stops himself just in time. "Let me give you this. It's the best room and has the best view of the lake from the balcony up there. I want you to have that. The sunrise over the trees is something you'll never forget. I promise you."

That heart of mine I'm supposed to be guarding does a little flip, and I know I'm getting reeled back into the sticky web that is Millen Ross.
Immediate subject change needed, stat.

Thankfully, he must read my mind. "Have you ever been jet skiing?"

"What?" I ask with a surprised laugh.

"Well, have you?" he presses.

"No, can't say I have."

"Then at least I can get you wet in *some* ways." His coquettish grin is infectious, and I can't help but laugh. *This* is the Millen I know. The smooth talker with the deep grey eyes that bear into my very soul and make me want to forget what I've promised myself and give in to my needs.

"I'll show you to your room and once you've changed, meet me down at the boathouse by the beach."

"Millen, I thought we could talk. You said you would—"

"And I will, Kenz. I promised you I would, but it was a long drive. I haven't been here in at least six months, and I want to be there to see you ride a jet ski for the first time. Will you give me that?" he asks. His expression is so sincere, I can tell just how much he wants this with me.

"Okay. But I'll warn you now, I'm not exactly the most coordinated woman on the planet."

He grins at that, chuckling under his breath.

“Oh, and I only bought a bikini. A very *small*, very *revealing* bikini. Fair warning.” He’s definitely not laughing after *that*. I smile to myself at his answering groan behind me as I walk into the house.

Serves him right. Unfortunately for me, I wasn’t lying about the bikini and I’m starting to wonder who’s going to be tortured more—me or him?



After spending the afternoon alternating between the water and the beach and providing comic relief in the form of many clumsy attempts at using the jet ski we retire to the front deck for a dinner comprised of a couple of beers and a delivered pizza.

So far, he’s kept to my rules and has been a total gentleman. I’ve actually noticed that he’s been a little subdued, not at all like the Millen I knew.

As for me, my nerves over what he might tell me tonight are threatening to take over. My entire body has been tense since the minute he walked out here with the food.

I’m looking over the water, mesmerized by the twinkling lights on the horizon when he breaks the silence that’s stretched between us.

“I love it here.”

Tearing my eyes away from the view, I turn my body toward him, curling my legs up onto the seat in the process. “It’s really beautiful here. I bet it is magical in winter.”

“It’s pretty damn cool.”

“Cool as in cool?” I make the hang-loose sign with my fist and jiggle my head from side to side. “Or cool as in cold? ’Cause I know this is on the border, but we’re technically still in California, aren’t we?” I add with a grin.

He rolls his eyes but his lips are twitching, drawing my attention to them, which is really what I *don’t* need right now. Answers. That’s what he said he’d give me. An explanation. Something.

Anything. I decide I need to bite the bullet and prompt him.

“Millen...”

“Just give me a minute. I want to remember this, right here, right now. That look in your eyes. Everything that is you in this moment. Us alone, no chance of anyone disturbing us.”

“Well, maybe Gaby... but I’ve been ignoring her texts all afternoon,” I say with a wry grin. His gaze drops to my lips and that invisible string I felt between us since the moment we met tightens as the seconds pass. To avoid doing what’s been crossing my mind ever since he picked me up, I look back out at the view.

“I’m not in love with Lana,” he says, his tone forlorn. The words are heavily weighted, even if they don’t make much sense to me.

In fact, they make no sense at all.

“You said you’d explain everything but I’m not gonna sit here and listen to bullshit, Millen. You don’t seem like the kind of man to marry for anything less than love.”

His head jerks back as if I’ve struck him but instead of feeling guilty, my anger boils over. I slam my beer bottle down on the table in front of me and jump to my feet, my fight-or-flight instinct battling for supremacy as I take the two steps to the railing. Gripping my fingers around the bar, I squeeze until my fingers ache.

“I’ve never loved her, but marrying Lana is an unfortunate obligation I must fulfil.”

I spin around and spear him with a furious gaze. “What?”

“Before I go there, I need to give you some background. Five years ago, my mom was diagnosed with cancer. We threw everything we had at her treatment. There was nothing we didn’t try, no specialist we didn’t fly in to see her. But even the most successful companies have limits. We reached ours, and then had a few deals go south.”

My mouth drops open as my brain stutters, trying—and failing—to hold onto my anger.

“Okay, I understand that but what does it have to do with—”

“With Harris?” he asks and I nod. “Five months ago Mom found out the cancer had come back. She didn’t tell us until a few days after I got back from my weekend with you.”

The first missing piece of the puzzle I didn’t think I’d ever solve slots into place as if it was destined to be there. My anger vanishes, my heart aching for the man in front of me. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper, tears pricking my eyes.

His slack expression speaks volumes. I still feel as if there’s something he’s not saying.

“How does Lana fit into this? A marriage is not usually part of a business merger,” I say, sitting back down on the end of my seat, resting my elbows on my knees.

He looks down at the ground and runs a hand through his hair before meeting my gaze. “The first time was rough, really touch and go—we weren’t sure she’d get through it.”

“But she did...”

“Yeah, and we figured we had time to recover and rebuild parts of the company that we’d neglected to invest in and grow. A few months before I met you, my father approached Harris with the idea of a merger in the hope that by joining forces and diversifying, we’d weather the storm and come out stronger on the other side.

My chest is tight, confusion and sadness battling each other for supremacy. “That all makes sense but I don’t get why any of that results in a marriage.”

“Harris felt the arrangement would be more... palatable... if it came about due to the joining of our families.” He clenches his teeth and looks out over the water, his shoulders dropping when he looks back my way. “Dad also didn’t want to place any further stress on Mom by letting her realize the *extent* of our financial difficulties so Mom doesn’t know about the deal and doesn’t know my engagement is not real. There’s nothing else the doctors can do for her treatment-wise. It’s spread to her lungs and kidneys now. They’ve given Mom six to nine months.”

“When was that?”

“Five months ago,” he replies. His eyes bore into mine, begging me to understand.

I reach over and put my hand on his leg, not giving one thought to my own no touching rule. He jolts, obviously not expecting that, but soon laces his fingers with mine, giving them a gentle squeeze.

My mind is racing. I get that he wants to give his mom peace before she passes, but surely he knows she wouldn't want him to marry a woman for monetary gain.

Surely...

“Millen, I'm not a mom, but I can imagine that any mother only wants the best for their children. She'd want you to be happy, not marrying someone out of necessity. She'd also hate that you're all lying to her.”

His grip tightens, and I know I've hit a sore point. He lets me go. I pull my hand back, wondering how I can make him realize this or if it's even possible.

There has to be something he's still not telling me. I purse my lips, racking my brain as to whether there is any way we can overcome this huge—mammoth—barrier in our way.

“There's more going on,” I say, tilting my head and studying him. His jaw tightens, his posture going rigid. “Harris would understand you not wanting to go through with the wedding. Unless you do?”

“No! I thought I could and put you out of my mind but I couldn't.”

“What does Lana get out of this then?” I ask, having my suspicions but needing them confirmed.

“She's always had feelings for me, since before I went off to college. She seems to be fully on board with this marriage idea. She gets to marry me and in going through with it, I help save my family's company and give my Mom a happy memory before she passes away.”

“You're shitting me, right?” I shout, moving to my feet again. His chest jerks back as if I've hit him. “Those are *not* reasons to get married.”

My voice rises an octave, my anger palpable now.

“I’m getting married to give my mother peace. The business benefits are an added bonus in my father’s eyes.”

“You’re not a pawn, Millen. What about you? What about *your* happiness? You can’t always live your life for everyone else. Sometimes you have to choose yourself.”

“I could be happy... eventually...” he says, like getting married is just something you do.

“Yeah, you could. Without someone you actually *want* to be with.”

He stands, throwing his hands in the air. “You don’t think I want to marry a woman of my choosing? A woman I love, a woman I want to spend the rest of my life with? I made a promise and I have to goddamn keep it.” His tone is rough, his voice loud.

I take a step toward him. “Yeah, you keep your promise. Marry Lana, go live your happily-ever-after. Don’t worry about *me*. The woman who fell for you in a weekend then had months of self-doubt and humiliation because when you promised me you’d call, you fucking didn’t.”

He opens his mouth to answer but stops. “Kenz...” He reaches for me but I move back, knowing I’ll give in if he touches me now. I can’t give in. Losing him again would ruin me.

“Why are we here, Millen? Why did you want three days with me? One last fling before you’re stuck in a loveless marriage? Hey, maybe Lana will let you have a mistress. She seems to have forgiven her father for doing it.”

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

“Yeah. I bet you and Lana had a good laugh about it. ‘Poor Kenzie, getting fucked over by a Mason just like her mother.’”

His eyes flash and he grits his teeth, his expression morphing with anger. “I’m nothing like her father,” he growls.

“Right. Well considering your *fiancée* took great pleasure last week telling me about how you wear her out, I’m not so sure about that.”

His eyes go wide. “She what?”

“Yeah, she was so worn out she had to go take a fucking nap. I couldn’t exactly say, ‘Oh yeah, I know how that is. I could barely walk after spending most of a weekend in bed with him.’”

“I haven’t slept with her since before I went to college. It’s not like that between us.”

“Yeah right. She’s going to be your wife. Why wouldn’t you sleep with her now?”

“Because I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. Three fucking months and I get hard just thinking about you. So I had to stop doing it. I knew I couldn’t have you so I had to walk away.”

“You couldn’t just blow me off with a text rather than ghosting me like a mistake you wish to forget?” I shout. We’re both breathing heavily now, and I know I’m going to cry if I stay out here for much longer.

“I’m obligated, Kenz. It’s my family’s legacy. Everything my grandfather and my father have worked for.”

“What about being happy? What about meeting someone, falling in love, choosing the woman you want to be with?”

“She’s standing right in front of me. I fell for her in a weekend.”

My heart explodes and shatters into a million tiny pieces at confirmation he fell for me too. Fuck you, Universe. I knew you were a spiteful bitch but this is taking it too far.

“I can’t do this, Millen. I need space. You’ve just laid it all out for me but it feels like I’ve been run down by a double-decker bus and dragged fifty feet, heart first.”

His shoulders slump, his hands slack in his lap, resignation evident on his face. “Sounds about right,” he says quietly, his tone flat. “Seeing you with Drew felt the same way, except it was an eighteen-wheeler hitting me head-on.”

“There’s nothing between Drew and I. Not anymore. You ruined any chance of me wanting more with anyone else,” I say. His chest rises and

falls, a gush of air escaping his lips. “Drew is the one who told me to hear you out. It was your best friend—something I did not know, by the way—who despite his feelings for me, knew that there was something more going on between you and me.”

“I’m not hiding this, Kenz. Not from Drew and definitely not from you.” There’s a gritty edge to his voice that reaches deep inside me. But I’m too far gone to acknowledge it.

“Just from your fiancée, right?” I snap, the venom dripping from my voice. I’m emotionally drained. There’s nothing left in the tank. “I’m sorry, but you’ve just told me you fell for me in the space of two days yet three months later, you’re planning a wedding to a woman you don’t love for the most honorable if not reasonable of intentions.”

His body is tight, his face a mirror of emotion. He’s showing me everything, hiding nothing. It’s the most open I’ve ever seen him. The most honest. There’s none of the sexy swagger I’ve come to expect. His eyes are rimmed red. It feels like we’ve gone through twelve rounds of constant blows.

I desperately want to touch him, climb into his lap and comfort him. I want to be the woman he needs, just be there for him while he lets it all out, but I can’t. That damn guard I’ve erected around my heart still stands tall, albeit a little battered and bruised. I feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, my self-respect on one side and my near desperate need to give this man everything I can before he makes inevitably the biggest mistake of his life on the other.

Turning around, I move toward the doors leading inside.

“Do you love me, Kenz?”

I freeze mid-step, my chest so tight I can barely breathe.

I don’t turn around. I know if I do, I’ll lose the already loose grip I have on the tears stinging my eyes.

I don’t answer. I *can’t*. So I walk away, running through the house and up the stairs until I’m safely behind my bedroom door and I can finally take

a breath. Sliding down to the floor, I wrap my arms around my legs and drop my head to my knees.

Footsteps get louder then stop on the other side of the door. A soft thump vibrates through the wood, and I imagine Millen's forehead resting there.

"This isn't over, Kenz. It can't be over." I can hear the desperation in his voice. "There must be a way because God wouldn't be so cruel as to take away two women I love at the same time." He loves me. Why does it hurt so much to hear the words I so wanted to hear? "I'll give you tonight. But tomorrow, we're going to talk. We'll find a way."

His words course through me, making the ache in my chest infinitely worse.

There can't be a way.

I'm not sure I'd survive it if there was.

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Chapter 14

After spending a good twenty minutes in the shower, I crawl into the bed and bury myself under the covers, head and all, typing out a text to Gaby. Her words from last week ring in my ears.

When you meet a guy, you text me. When you dump a guy, you text me. When the guy you fell for in a weekend reappears after ghosting you for three months and is engaged to the she-bitch of the century, you text me.

I figure finding out the guy you fell for is going through with a sham of a wedding after he told you he fell for you too is a pretty damn good reason to call her. More so, I need to hear Gaby's straight-talking words of wisdom right now.

Me—Can you talk? Let me know when you're free and I can call.

Ten minutes later, she replies to call her back, so one press of my speed dial and twenty seconds later, I'm welcoming my best friend's voice in my ear.

"Hey, babe. What's up?" she says. I can hear the low thrum of music from the bar in the background.

"Roof or office?" I ask.

"Roof."

Why does that damn rooftop remind me of the man who's sleeping not fifty feet away from me? "I swear, when this is all over and done with, we're performing an exorcism on that rooftop... and getting rid of that damn swinging chair."

"Oh dear. What happened?" She's not being a smartass either. After twenty-five years of friendship, she can read my mood better than anyone I know.

I give her the gist of the situation and end with “. . . and then I barricaded myself in my bedroom like a coward while he stood on the other side of the door.”

“Babe...” One word, four letters, but so much meaning behind it.

“Then I had a shower, put on my sexy PJs I brought with me and—”

She bursts out laughing.

“What?”

She’s still giggling as she tries to explain. “Let me get this straight. You went away with this man after telling him there would be no touching, no kissing, and definitely no sexing, yet you wore the strappy red bikini all afternoon in front of him *and* the only clothes you took to sleep in are a barely-there satin cami and matching shorts?”

“What? It’s all I could find.”

“Riiight...”

“It’s true!” I say, sounding a little bit too defensive.

“I think you protest too much and you totally knew that you’d be touching, kissing, *and* sexing him this weekend.”

“Not going to happen,” I mutter.

“Why do you sound like you’re in a small dark room somewhere?” she asks.

“’Cause my head is under the covers.”

“Your version of putting your head in the sand then?”

“Pretty much.” I sigh, pulling the comforter back so I’m no longer in my magical protective bed fortress.

“Kenz, from what you’ve told me, he’s doing everything he can to make everyone else happy and being pretty selfless about it too. What he didn’t expect was to see you again and for it to hit him like a ton of bricks.”

“He said an eighteen-wheeler.”

“Whatever!” she says, sounding exasperated. “I know this is hard for you, Kenz. Really, I do. But put yourself in his shoes. The deal was

probably effectively done before he met you so there were plans in place and everything—bar the wedding—and then he calls into a bar late one Friday night and boom, there you are looking all hot and sexy behind the bar. Then he flirts, you flirt back, you challenge him—and he likes it—so he stays in town and comes back, gets a taste of you and wants more, so he comes back again and you both fall deeper into whatever it is between you before he leaves. Then reality hits him and rather than drag you into it, he probably felt like it would be easier to walk away, live with the memory of the time you spent together—maybe his one last happy moment for a while—and goes ahead with the plans because really, what other choice does he have?”

“What do I do with that?”

“What I would do and what you would do are probably totally different things.”

“And that would be?”

“If I had one last chance with the guy I was in lo—”

I interrupt, not wanting to hear her say the word. “Don’t say it, Gabs. Don’t do it.”

She carries on as if I haven’t said a thing. “If I had one last chance with the guy I loved, I would make it the best damn forty-eight hours possible. The situation sucks, I get that. Now you have a decision to make. Do you make the most of the time you have left with him now or be with him and try and find a way to *stay* with him?”

“I’m not a cheater.”

“Nope, and you weren’t one last week when you ended up naked with him against your living room wall. But this is not a ‘man sneaking around behind his wife’s back’ scenario. It’s not your mom and Harris carrying on an affair. This is Millen giving himself three days with the woman he...”

I feel the tell-tale lump in my throat returning and I swallow down hard to hold it back. “He just wants to be with me.”

“Yep, which is funny, because you wouldn’t be there unless you wanted the exact same thing.” *Talk about a Gaby truth bomb.*

“You’re pretty smart, you know?” I say, a genuine smile on my face as I stare up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, only with everyone else’s love life. Never my own.”

“Amen to that,” I agree. Gaby has always been happy playing the ‘single and ready to mingle’ role, especially in the last few years. One day, I hope she meets a guy that knocks her on her ass—figuratively speaking—so I get to pay her back for all of the straight-talk she’s given me these past few months. She had it once and it was taken away from her. She definitely deserves to have it again.

“I better get back downstairs before Dinah continues over pouring like she has been all night and we lose half a shift’s worth of tips to cover it.”

“Jesus, please go stop that.” The manager part of me has a little freak-out at the thought.

“And Kenz, my advice from before? I’m revising it. Forget about the closed legs part.”

“Bye, Gabs. See you Monday.”

“Dinner, donuts, and a debrief, sure thing. Try and sleep. Or better yet...”

“I’m going now,” I say with a quiet laugh before hanging up, cursing her for putting the idea of doing anything more than staying in this room into my head.

I drop my phone on the bed beside me and continue to stare up at the ceiling, staying that way for the next few hours as the sleep I desperately want—and need—never comes.

Three hours later and picking up my phone for the tenth time, I groan and throw it back down when the time shows a little after midnight. I should be numb with sleep by now but instead I’m lying on my side, staring at the wall—only because I thought I needed a change of scenery from the ceiling.

I’ve been running Millen’s words over and over in my head, trying to understand why he’s going through with this. Surely his mom would understand. Surely *everyone* would understand.

Then my mind highlights the one thing that Gaby said that made the most sense. *“If I had one last chance with the guy I loved, I would make it the best damn forty-eight hours possible.”*

What now seems like one of the most important decisions in my life is whether I choose to enjoy these last two days with Millen, making the most of it and giving up a part of my soul in the process... or do I take the time we have left here to make him realize just how crazy his plan is and how much better life would be if he *didn't* go ahead with the wedding and instead, stayed with me, gave *us* a chance to see what could be?

Who am I kidding? I knew my answer the minute he told me he loved me.

Throwing back the covers, I get out of bed and walk out into the hallway, silently making my way down the corridor until I reach the other end of the house. I hesitate the moment my hand finds the handle, my heart pounding so hard in my chest I swear it's echoing through the quiet house.

I take one final deep breath and push the door open, a sliver of moonlight shining through the curtains leading the way to the shadow of his sleeping body.

When I reach the edge of the mattress, he startles, his eyes opening and snapping straight to me. He lifts onto his elbows, the covers falling down to reveal his shirtless torso.

“Kenz?” he says sleepily.

“Shh,” I whisper, pulling back the covers and sliding onto the bed and into his side.

“What are you—”

I wrap my arms around him and bury my face into his chest, tangling my legs with his and sighing in relief when he reciprocates. “I need you to hold me, Millen. I just need *you*.”

His body goes still, and for a moment I'm scared he's going to pull back. Instead his grip tightens and he kisses the top of my head, resting his lips there.

“Anything you want, beautiful,” he says, and that’s how we stay as I sag into him and finally welcome the elusive sleep I couldn’t find without him.

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Chapter 15

I wake up hours later with sunlight sneaking through the curtains and warmth at my back. I sink into Millen's arms which are wrapped around me, closing my eyes and relishing how comfortable I am, physically and emotionally, in this moment.

After the revelations of last night, the last place I thought I'd want to be was in his bed but I think it was inevitable. I always knew I'd be touching him, wanting to kiss him and do a hell of a lot more than that too.

As if he reads my mind, his breath fans across my neck as he places a barely there kiss against the skin. My breath catches, and the arm around my waist tenses.

I run my hand down the length of his arm and lace my fingers with his, giving a reassuring squeeze so he knows I'm okay and we stay there like that for a long time. Neither of us push for anything more than what we're doing as I slowly drift back to sleep.

I'm woken up again by a gentle tug on my hand. Rolling me onto my back, Millen leans over me and braces an arm on the bed. He lowers his head and softly presses his mouth to my lips.

I open for him, groaning at the first touch of his tongue to mine. I glide my hand around his shoulder and pull him farther over me so his body covers me, parting my legs so his hips fit inside.

He lifts his soft, sexy eyes to mine. "Best feeling in the world is waking up next to you. Only done it twice and I swear they're two of the best mornings I've ever had."

"You've already got me here. No need to sweet talk me," I say with a wry smile.

"I've got you here but do I have you?"

“For the next forty-eight hours, I’m all yours,” I say, running my hands up his neck to glide through his unruly bedhead.

His eyes flash, a muscle ticking in his jaw as I scan his face.

“Millen, don’t think. That’s the only way that we’re going to get through this. Don’t think. Don’t try and work out why and how, or worry about what’s going to happen after we leave this bed. The only way...” I swallow, my throat tightening as I don’t follow my own advice, “. . . the only way we’ll get through this is to live in the now. This moment, this time in our lives, and how I feel when you touch me. I want to commit everything we do while we’re here to memory so that neither one of us have a single regret when we leave.”

He furrows his brows and opens his mouth but I beat him to it.

“That also means not wasting a single second of the time we have left with each other.”

“We should—”

I cut him off with my mouth, jerking his head down as I lift mine up, crashing our lips together. I know that if we talk right now, all the niggling doubts and thoughts of self-preservation that kept me awake last night will come back with a vengeance.

Holding him to me, I devour his mouth, moaning as the realization of just how right this feels rolls over me. Needing more, I plant a foot in the bed and flip him over, his fingers biting into my skin when I grind down on his cock.

“Too many clothes,” he groans, delving his hands inside my pajamas and gripping my ass, pressing my pelvis hard against him.

I drag my lips over his jaw and down to his ear. “Feel free to do something about that then.” I nip his throat and he shudders.

He makes short work of my shorts and underwear, throwing them somewhere on the floor. Then my back hits the mattress and his mouth is on mine, and this time it’s *hungry*...



We spend the rest of the day out on the lake in the family's jet boat, setting anchor and alternating between swimming and lying about. It's a nice escape from the truth of the situation I not only found myself in, but *chose* to stay in and—after last night and today—can admit to firmly entrenching myself in.

Millen then takes me to his favorite Italian restaurant in town that he always visits when he's in the area and even still, I begin to believe that this could be what our lives would be like together. I've all but forgotten about the people left back at home—Lana, his mom, Harris being my boss, and Drew's broken heart—when the universe decides it is time for a reminder. Time for reality to hit us square in the face with a closed fist.

His hand is in mine across the table and we're in our own little world when I spot a group of women coming toward us.

“Millen Ross, is that you?” a shrill voice asks.

He snaps his head up and jerks his hand out of mine faster than I can blink. “Melanie...”

“We got the invitation in the mail. I can't *wait* to see the great Millen Ross finally walk down the aisle,” she says, all but ignoring my presence. My heart races, my cheeks heating as mortification threatens to overwhelm me.

How could I have been so stupid to think that we wouldn't run into someone he knows? Someone who apparently is invited to his *wedding* and therefore knows he shouldn't be sitting in a restaurant, holding hands with a woman that's not his fiancée.

I feel sick, my stomach rolling as my dinner threatens an encore performance. I feel dirty and it's more than obvious that we're both guilty as hell of everything she's no doubt assuming. While the cat's away, the mouse has definitely been playing.

Melanie finally moves her eyes to me, her gaze full of judgement as she looks me up and down. “Having dinner with an old friend while your bride-to-be lives it up in Vegas?” she asks, the insinuation crystal clear.

“Yes, and you’re being rude to my friend, something I don’t appreciate.” He looks angry, his jaw tight and his shoulders tense.

“Right,” she says slowly, drawing the word out. “Oh well, we’ll leave you to it. See you in a few weeks then.” With a final scathing glance my way, she waves her manicured fingers in the air and spins on her heels back toward the maître’ d. “I think we will eat out on the patio after all,” she says before walking to the doors leading to the deck.

My eyes are glued to my clenched hands on the table in front of me, my chest tightening as the walls start to close in on me.

“Kenz...”

I lean toward him. “Can we please go?” I beg, having had enough embarrassment in the past five minutes to last a lifetime.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his eyes apologetic.

“I know you didn’t *mean* for it to happen but you must’ve known it was a possibility. It’ll be best for everyone if we just leave, okay?”

“Okay.” His tone is flat, but there’s no missing the change in his mood. He lifts his hand, calling over the waitress and asking for the check when she arrives.

Once she’s left, I move my chair back and get to my feet.

“I might go wait by the car,” I say, not wanting to make any more of a scene.

Millen stands with me. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I’ll see you outside,” is all I say, my throat closing up.

His brows furrow as he studies my face. I beg him with my eyes to let me go. He reaches out for my hand but I instinctively flinch, not wanting anyone to see us touching. *How could a wonderful day turn into such a shit night?*

Five minutes later, Millen wordlessly opens my car door, closing it behind me once I’m safely seated inside. When he slides in beside me, the air in the car becomes stifling, the tension thick as he starts the engine and pulls out of the parking lot.

Arriving back at the house, I go to open my door but he shoots his hand out and gives my knee a gentle squeeze. I stay there, rooted in place as he exits the car and rounds the hood, holding my door open for me a few seconds later with his arm outstretched.

I tangle my fingers with his and let him help me out, not stopping him when he presses me against the side of the vehicle. He wraps his arms around my back, burying his face in my hair as we just stand there, neither of us saying a word. The tension slowly leaches out of my body, his warmth filling the places left behind. When I melt into him, he exhales loudly, as if he'd been holding his breath waiting for me to give in.

“Let’s get you inside and I’ll make the last thirty minutes of our night disappear.” Without giving me the chance to argue, he gently pulls me up the stairs behind him, not stopping until we’re standing in the living room. “Give me one minute.” He gives me a quick brush on the lips before walking through the dining room into the kitchen, turning only a floor lamp on, giving the room a soft glow.

I sit on the large leather couch at a loss for words, not sure whether to be angry, sad, embarrassed, frustrated, resigned, or a combination of all of the above.

Walking back into the room, he hands me a half full glass of red before moving over to the mantle. He puts his own wine down and puts his cell phone into the docking station, touching a few buttons before taking a drink and turning my way.

He stands in front of me and holds his arm out, his slate grey eyes molten and soft. I look up and take him in, the man who has taken me through a whirlwind of emotions in just the past two days, let alone the last four months. Even after all of that, I can say without an ounce of doubt that I would do it all over again if it meant being right here, right now with him.

“Dance with me,” he says, his voice soft and low and all kinds of right.

How can I say no to that? Putting my hand in his, I let him pull me up. I loop my arms around his neck, resting my head on his shoulder just as “Happier” by Ed Sheeran starts playing over the speakers.

“I’m going to *make* it work, Kenz,” he whispers into my ear. “Tonight, I had plans, and those plans are not getting screwed by anyone. I won’t let anyone make you feel any less amazing than I think you are, like you make me believe I can be.”

“Millen...”

“I want to stay right here, like this, with you.” His words are just what I need in that moment, pushing the what ifs and if onlys out of my mind. Ed sings of being happier with me and loving me forever and it’s as if Millen is pouring out his soul through the song.

It’s just the two of us standing alone in our own little bubble, one that nothing and no one can penetrate as we sway from side to side in each other’s arms.

He moves his hands between us and cups my cheeks. “I can’t change the past but I’d love the chance to shape our future. You came into my life for a reason, Kenzie Sharp, and if I have any say in the matter, that’s exactly where you’re gonna stay.”

Lacing my hands behind his head, I lift up and pull his mouth down onto mine, letting my lips and my body say the words that escape me.

Because in this moment, here with him, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Chapter 16

“Wake up,” a rough sleepy voice says in my ear. A gentle kiss on my neck soon follows.

“Mmm... don’t wanna,” I mumble.

“Yeah, ya do. I was going to make you breakfast.” His breath brushes against my skin and I fight not to open my eyes. Instead, I grunt and roll over in his arms, burying my face in his throat as I plaster my body against his side.

“Food is overrated,” I mumble, wrapping my arms around him and burrowing myself deeper.

“Kenz...”

I place a gentle kiss on his chest, nuzzling my face there before dragging my hand up back to his hair. “How about we stay here and you have *me* for breakfast?”

He chuckles, the vibrations coursing through me. “Is that what you want?”

“Yep.” I run the tip of my nose up to his throat, resting my lips against the thrum of his pulse. “I may not be nutritious, but I’m a hell of a lot more fun.”

“And a whole lot better for me,” he adds, rolling over onto his back and taking me with him, leaving me lying naked on top of him. I lift my head and meet his amused eyes. “Tastes better, too.” I spread my legs so I’m straddling him, sitting so I’m pressing hard against his pelvis. His gaze darkens, a wicked smile curving his lips.

“You make a good point.” He bucks his hips, causing my eyes to roll as I bite back a moan.

“I think you’re the one making a point. One that needs a more thorough investigation.” I lean down and rest an arm on the bed, bracing myself over him, my breasts grazing his chest as I gently touch my lips to his. “Ladies should always go first.”

He glides his hands up my body before resting his arms behind his head. “Dine away,” he replies with a grin.

Never one to turn down an offer so enticing, I ever-so-slowly drag my body down his, licking, nipping, and sucking as I go until I’m on my knees between his spread legs. With one last glance up at the beautiful man above me, I set about driving him wild.

I dip my chin and drag my tongue from base to tip before wrapping my lips around the head and taking him deep into my mouth. His answering groan and the twitch in his cock are gratifying, spurring me on. I grab hold of his hips, my fingers biting into his skin. Something about this time together feels different—maybe it has nothing to do with the two of us and what we’re doing, but instead what may happen once we leave here.

Needing more, I glide a hand down between my legs while holding out the other one to Millen. I circle my tongue around the underside of his cock, a move that he’s said always tests his control. His eyes darken as he tangles his fingers in mine so I can place his palm on the back of my head. His gaze threatens to burn me alive when I guide my head down, urging him to take control and make me take him.

With a growl, he complies and relaxing my throat, I take him deeper, my lips stretching wide as I take him root to tip again and again. Stroking myself, my fingers glide through my wet core, my own orgasm barreling toward me at warp speed. That’s not what I want, though; I want the man beneath me to lose it and come in my mouth. I stop playing with myself to concentrate on the task at hand—or mouth—and cup his balls with my hand, gently tugging and rolling them until his thigh muscles tense and his fingers in my hair tighten. Now I know he’s close, I go in for the kill and scrape my teeth across the sensitive head before driving myself deep and swallowing around him.

He groans long and low, his body succumbing to the pleasure as he pulses into my mouth, making me moan in satisfaction.

Once he recovers, he doesn't waste any time in getting me where he wants me, pulling me up so that my knees frame his head. My hands shoot out to grip the headboard at the first swipe of his tongue at my core. Then my mind goes blank. The only coherent thoughts going through my head are how I wish I could start every morning this way, especially if it involves breakfast in bed like this.

We lie in each other's arms after we've finished having fun. Millen goes quiet, his arms loosening around me. The mood somehow changes from playful to serious. A quick look at his face finds him deep in thought.

"I'd like to take you home with me today," he says, breaking the silence.

I go still, his words sinking in. "Home?" I dare not meet his gaze for fear I'll see something I won't like.

"To San Francisco. I want to introduce you to my mom."

My heart breaks and melts at the same time, something that should not be possible. If ever there was a time for him to put his money where his mouth was, Millen is right on cue.

I meet his eyes, my breath catching in my throat at the vulnerability I see. He's worried about my answer—he has to be.

"I also want you in my apartment. I want to feel you, smell you, *sense* you in every room when you're not there."

My heart flips, all thoughts about the complicated mess I've now firmly invested myself in melting away. Because I want that. I want him to want me there. I hadn't admitted to myself until now just how much I needed him to show me that this is more than a pre-marriage fling. He said he loved me, but actions speak volumes. The bigger the move, the louder the message.

"I'd love that. Are you sure?" I bite my lip and avert my gaze. His index finger lifts my chin and my eyes move back.

“I meant what I said, Kenz. I’ve got you where I want you and there’s no way I’m letting go now. Will it be difficult? You can bet your ass it will. Can we get through it?” He lowers his head until our foreheads touch. “Every damn moment I spend with you is more important than the last and as long as we’ve got each other, we can get through anything.” His last few words are a harsh whisper, the conviction behind them unmissable.

“Maybe it’s too fast.”

“I wasted three months without you. There’s no way I’m wasting any more.”

“But the business thing?”

“Let me worry about that.” His tone is resolute as if there’s no argument to be entered into.

I put my hand over his heart and lean up on an elbow, looking down at him. “I love that you’re so sure about this and about us, but I don’t want you to risk everything for—”

He jerks up, pushing me onto my back and leaning over me. “Listen to me, Kenz. I’ve never met anyone I’d be willing to give it all up for. I’ve gone along with this arrangement for far too long and I know my mom will understand me getting cold feet. All she has to do is spend a moment with you to know that I’ve met the woman she always wanted me to be with. So don’t think about what I’ve given up to be with you—think about all the ways we’re going to be happy once we can finally start our life together.”

I grab hold of his shoulders and pull him down to me, smacking him on the back as I bury my face in his neck to hide my tears. “Stop being sweet,” I mumble against his skin.

He chuckles and presses his lips to my temple. “Stop being cute then.”

“I’m not cute.”

“Even when you cry.”

“I am not.”

“Says the woman plastered to my body, crying into my throat, being cute.”

“Stop it,” I moan impatiently.

“Make me,” he whispers, leaning his weight into me.

“How ’bout *you* make me.” And those are the last words I say that don’t include the phrases “Oh, God,” “yes,” and “harder” for a good long while after that.

Waiting outside the front door while Millen locks up the house is bittersweet. Reality beckons once we leave here and past experience has taught me that nothing worth having in life comes easily.

I look out over the lake, the irony not lost on me. There are going to be some murky waters to wade through in the near future but Millen has made it clear he wants to be with me. I have to trust in that.

It’s also made me warm and melty inside, something Gaby will no doubt have a field day with.

“Kenz?” Millen asks, his chest hitting my back, reminiscent of when we first arrived here three days ago and I desperately wanted him to do just that. In fact, as soon as I crawled into his bed that first night, it’s been game on with the whole touching thing. It’s as if he’s reassuring himself that I’m real and I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.

He wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder. “Do you know how important you are to me? You represent so much—the life I *want* to have, the kind of love I want to have. Everything I want is wrapped up tight, right here, right now, and I don’t ever want to let go.”

The words are on the tip of my tongue. Those three pesky words I at first denied but are now impossible to ignore.

I even open my mouth, willing them to come out, but it’s as if there’s an invisible barrier there stopping them in their tracks.

When the time is right, the words will come.

Until then, I’ve got a long drive to mentally prepare myself to meet Millen’s mom.

God help me, because the universe is on holiday, probably preparing to screw me over again.

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Chapter 17

Four hours and a lot of chewed nails later, Millen pulls up to the curb outside a giant three-story house that at one glance looks like at least six of mine combined.

“Wow,” I breathe, looking out through the windshield at what might just be one of the most beautiful houses I’ve ever seen. The outside is a buttercup yellow, six of the eight road-facing windows showcased with ornate Juliet balconies painted black.

“It’s just a house,” he says, and snapping my head his way, I’m met with a wide smile.

“That is more than a house. It’s a modern-day castle.”

“There’s no moat.”

“That you can see,” I reply, making him laugh.

He reaches over and grabs my hand. “You okay with this? I know you weren’t expecting it as part of our weekend away.”

“As long as she’s not Lana’s biggest fangirl, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

He shakes his head. “She isn’t but she is trying to be. We’ve been friends with the Mason family for a long time so she’s known Lana since she first came to live in San Francisco.”

I snicker. “Lana has that effect on people. Well, except in my case, it’s a mutual understanding that we’re never gonna be best friends.”

“Was that ever a possibility?”

“Not on your life.”

“Good to know,” he says wryly. He lets go of me and turns to open to the car door. Feeling a rush of unexpected panic, my hand darts out to

squeeze his forearm, stopping him in his tracks. He turns to look at me, surprise and concern filling his features. “What’s wrong?”

The last four hours of consuming thoughts have led to this moment. There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that I was meant to be with this man. Everything I’ll ever want and need, I know Millen would move heaven and earth to give me. But he has to be sure of what he’s giving up. He has to be sure that I’m the woman that can give that back in return.

It’s something I haven’t been able to verbalize until now but parked outside his family home, this is the do-or-die moment. If ever there was a time to give him one last chance to reconsider, it’s now.

“Please tell me that I’m not walking toward my impending doom. That you’re absolutely, one hundred percent sure you want to do this. You gave me seventy-two hours and said you’d walk away if that was what I wanted. Now I’m giving you an out. If you want to—need to—walk away, for your mom, for your family, your business, for yourself, I’d hate it but I’d let you go. If that’s what you needed.”

He doesn’t react straight away. Then he does, slamming his seat back before leaning over me, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me into his lap. His big hands frame my face as he pulls me down so we’re chest to chest.

It’s as if the whole world around us freezes, the Earth no longer spinning on its axis, the two of us the last two people on the planet not stuck in suspended animation.

“Do you love me?” he says, his words a harsh whisper reaching straight into my chest to form a tight fist around my heart.

The three words I haven’t been able to say may now be the most important ones to ever come out of my mouth. This is a true now-or-never moment that may very well determine my future happiness.

His molten eyes bore into mine, matching the burning desire I have to tell him what he wants to hear.

“Yes,” I say, swallowing hard, my gaze locked with his. “I know I always will.”

His expression softens instantaneously, his lips crushing mine barely a second after I get the words out. It's a hard and fast kiss that's more meaningful than all of those that've gone before it because in this moment, we've sealed our fate, wherever that path may lead us.

"As much as I wish I could show you just how much hearing you say that means to me," he says roughly, "I really do want you to meet Mom, and I wanted to come see her before I go back to Davis with you for a few days."

My head jerks back at his announcement. "You're coming back with me?"

His lips twitch, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Well, I may be rich, but shipping you back home in a taxi for the ninety-minute drive might be a *bit* too extravagant."

I shove his shoulder gently. "You know what I mean."

"If you'll have me, I'd like to come home with you. Spending more time together that doesn't *just* involve being horizontal."

I giggle at that because of all the times we've been together, we've definitely *not* always been horizontal. Naked, yes. In a bed, hardly. "And I'd like to meet your dad, if that's a possibility, because he's the most important man in your life, and as someone who wishes to at least compete with him for that position, I think it's a good idea I size him up." He waggles his brows and I burst out laughing, dropping my forehead to his shoulder in the process.

I lift my head and place a gentle kiss on his neck, before whispering "yes" in his ear. His replying squeeze of his arms around me gives away how much it means to him.

Sitting up straight, I look down at him, a genuine smile on my face, my previous nerves all but disappeared. "Let's do this."

"For the record, she's joint first in the role now." The warm, melty feeling that washes over me is obviously evident in my expression because his eyes go soft. With a light brush of his lips against mine, he places me

back on my side of the car then hops out. After opening my door, he leads me hand in hand toward the front of the house.

Millen doesn't knock. He simply enters a code on to a pad next to the door and walks right in, dropping his keys on a side table in the huge entryway, and walking down a short corridor lined with photo upon photo of Millen and his parents.

Sitting on the couch in what I assume is the living area is an older, still handsome, and somewhat commanding man who couldn't be anyone but Millen's father. Leaning against him with her back to his side, her feet resting up on the extraordinary long black leather couch, is a frail, fragile-looking, yet still stunningly beautiful woman with hair the exact same color as Millen's. His mom.

My heart breaks for her. She's no longer the bright vivacious woman in those photographs and it's evident that she's losing the battle no one wants to ever fight, especially when you've beaten it once already.

His dad's eyes narrow in on me, dropping to my hand holding tightly to Millen's. Instinctively, I pull away, something that does not go unnoticed by the man beside me as he tries in vain to not let me go, or by his father, who breathes a visible sigh of relief.

"I didn't think you'd be home," Millen says to his dad.

"I wanted to spend the afternoon here," his father replies tersely, not taking his eyes off me. I'm compelled to pull my hand away from Millen but when I try, his grip tightens.

"Millen," his mom breathes, her melodic voice laced with a weakness not suited to her.

"Hey Mom," Millen replies, moving toward her and sitting on the edge of the sofa. He reaches out and gently brushes away a tendril of hair back behind her ear. "How are you doing today?"

"Better than yesterday, probably better than tomorrow," she replies with a sardonic smile. Turning her attention to me, her face softens. "And who's this lovely lady?"

“This is Kenzie, my... friend. Kenzie, this is my mom, Nina, and my father, Bradley.”

“Hello, Kenzie.” Her tone is still sweet as she studies me. “It’s been a long time since I’ve met any of Millen’s *friends*.” Her expression is friendly but I don’t miss the flash of suspicion she quickly hides.

“Mom...” Her son warns, the smile playing at his lips contradicting his voice.

She winks at me before looking at him. “Millen, if a dying woman can’t tease her son, what else is there to do?” As the words leave her mouth, the air in the room thickens. Millen’s expression drops.

His dad stiffens—more so than when I walked in—and carefully eases away from his wife, giving her arm an affectionate rub before standing and addressing Millen.

“Can I have a word?” he asks.

Millen’s back straightens. “If it’s business, I think it can wait.” His voice is tight, the anger dispersed amongst his words unmissable.

“I’m afraid it can’t. I’ll meet you in my office,” Bradley says curtly before walking out of the room.

My wide eyes meet Millen’s annoyed ones, conflict warring with concern hidden beneath.

Nina reaches out and pats the couch beside her. “Come sit with me, Kenzie. You can tell me about yourself and where my son has been hiding you.” My shift between her and the man at my side is something she doesn’t miss. “I promise I don’t bite. Well, not first, anyway.”

Millen’s eyes go to the door that his father left out of.

“You better go,” Nina says quietly. “Besides, you won’t be long, and it’ll give me a chance to get to know Kenzie.”

“Yeah, okay.” He closes the distance between us and gives my hand a squeeze. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he says quietly before letting me go and moving to where his mom is, leaning down and kissing her cheek. “Be nice, Mom.”

“Oh, stop. You’ll scare her off.”

“Impossible,” he says with a laugh before shooting me one last meaningful glance and following his father.

“Now, Kenzie. Take a seat. Knowing those two, they might be a while. Especially since I know it’s not business they’ll be discussing.” There’s a knowing glint in her eye.

I’m nervous all of a sudden. What do you say to a woman you know—and who knows you know—is dying? That you’re sorry for what she’s going through? Do you say it straight out? Do you allude to it? Or do you ignore the fact and act as if this is a completely normal meeting of the parents when in fact it’s anything but.

So I choose to take the least obvious road, that being to address the elephant in the room.

“So…” I say, meeting her soft, wrinkled eyes. Eyes I love only a little less on her than I do on her son.

“So,” she replies, her lips twitching before we both laugh.

“This isn’t exactly how I thought this would go.”

Her replying smile is wide and bright. “You’re not exactly the woman I thought Millen would bring home today. Maybe you’re the type I had hoped for—the kind that puts a spark in his eye I haven’t seen for many months now—but you’re not the woman currently wearing his ring on her finger.” Her choice of words surprises me but I don’t let it show.

“And you’re not anything like what I was worrying myself sick about on the way here.”

Her lips tip up. “Millen sharing horror stories again?”

“Oh, no. Millen kept telling me it would be fine. But given what I know—and not knowing what I was walking into—a woman in my situation will always go straight to the worse-case scenario.”

Her expression falters for a millisecond before she catches it, her eyes drifting to the door where her husband and son disappeared out of. “These are trying times.”

Instinctively, I reach out and cover her hand with mine, surprising her as much as myself. “I’m so sorry to hear about that.”

“I was too but when faced with your own mortality, you realize what’s truly important. Life is fickle; it can chop and change without warning. It’s what you do with the time you have left that becomes more important than anything else.” She takes a deep breath and returns her attention to me. “And seeing my son happy is definitely one of those important things.”

Tears prick my eyes but considering I’m with the other woman in Millen’s life who he loves more than anything, I don’t hide it. I want to reassure her that I’m the person to do that. “This isn’t exactly a typical situation though, is it?”

She laughs, turning her hand in mine and squeezing my fingers. “A typical life is a boring life, Kenzie, and something my son has never ever been is typical. He’s strong-willed and determined, but loyal to a fault and since he was old enough to know better. He’s always put this family first.”

“I guess me turning up on his arm today is a surprise then?”

“Not exactly. I’ve known something has been troubling him for a while, and I’m not just talking about my illness. He came home a few months ago a different man, one I haven’t seen for a long time, since the first time I got sick. I was relieved but that was fleeting. Then he announced his engagement to Lana and I was thrown for a loop.”

It hits me that my gut feeling about Millen not giving me the full picture of the business side of things was absolutely on the money. There’s a piece of the puzzle I don’t have, one that is perhaps—purposefully—*not* being shown to me or his mom.

My expression must give me away because Nina’s hand tenses in mine as I ease my arm away from her. My chest tightens, my entire body frozen in place as the full picture becomes a sharp landscape, one with details Millen may have been too close to see.

“It was a shock, but I’ve tried to understand and get to know Lana better. Now I’m wondering why he’s bringing another woman home to meet me.”

I smile at her. “I can see how that might be confusing.”

“So how did you and my son meet?”

“The history of Millen and I has been somewhat... complicated.”

“I bet,” she says without an ounce of disapproval.

“He met me in Davis before he found out you were sick again.”

Regret covers her face; her eyes growing wet.

“Nina?”

“I just want him to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I tilt my head and shrug, deciding that I owe her the truth since she’s being so forthcoming with me. “After we met, he came back home and found out you were sick again.” Millen’s words about reducing the stress on his mom ring in my ears so I choose what I say next carefully. “I think what happened from there snowballed out of his control until he walked back into the bar I work at and saw me again. What’s happened since then is probably something a mother doesn’t want to know about.”

Amused eyes sparkle at me. “He went from one out-of-control situation into an entirely different, but somewhat better one that led to you spending the weekend at the lake house and coming home to meet the parents?”

“Something like that,” I murmur, looking down at my lap.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” she replies, grabbing my attention.

“Maybe not.”

“But I like to think *nothing* is impossible.”

I can’t help the small smile that plays at my lips now. I know now where Millen gets his personality from. “I hope you’re right,” I whisper.

Nina smiles back but winces as she does it. She puts on a good front but I can tell from her strained features that she’s in pain.

“Is there anything I can get you? Anything I can do to help?”

Her eyes grow gentle and she lets the mask slip, something that’s as gratifying as it is hard to see. “A glass of water would be good. The kitchen

is at the end of the hall on the right. Would you mind?”

I stand and look down at her. “Do you need anything else? Medication? Painkillers?”

“I’m all dosed up in that regard.”

“Alright,” I reply. “Just send a search party if I’m not back in ten minutes. Your house is as beautiful as it is large, and I fear I may get lost.”

She grins and shakes her head. “I can see why my son loves you.” My breath catches and her eyes are all knowing. “I’ll die happy and at peace knowing he’s being taken care of by a woman who loves him as much as I do.”

I crouch in front of her and give her hand a squeeze. “*That* is something that I can promise you I’ll do. As long as he’ll have me, as long as he needs me, I’ll be there.”

“Good. That’s all I want.” Her eyes shine up at me. We need to stop this before we both lose it. Decision made, I move back to my feet and shoot her a grin.

“Remember. Search party, ten minutes.”

“You got it.”

I take a left out of the room and—following the directions Nina gave me—locate the kitchen at the end of the hall. I locate the glasses surprisingly quickly and open the refrigerator, finding chilled water waiting for me.

It’s when I’m walking back down the hall that I hear Millen’s dad raise his voice, the tone unmistakably angry as he addresses his son. “Millen, we don’t have a choice in this. There are contracts in place, *legal* obligations we cannot get out of.”

“That’s not my problem, Dad. You signed them. You put us in this position. Harris will just have to suck it up.”

“You’re wrong about that. You’re a Ross—you’re going to take over the company one day. This is most definitely *your* problem.” He sighs.

I stop outside what I assume is his office door, imagining him pacing the room, dragging his fingers through his hair as Millen sits there taking the lecture but not listening. One thing I do know about Millen Ross, he is as stubborn as he is determined, and when he told me he was choosing me and the life we could—would—have together, I believed him.

“Look, have your fling, get it out of your system. It’s what men like us do. I’m sure she’s a nice girl but in four weeks you *will* be marrying Lana Mason, come hell or high water.”

“I’ve made my decision, Dad. I choose Kenzie. You may not like it, but I’m a grown man who has put this family and the company first for far too long. I never wanted to marry Lana. She’s a friend, but she’s not the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. When we made the arrangement five years ago, I never imagined I’d meet a woman who would make me the man I want to be. The man I *need* to be. Kenzie is the one I want to be with—the one I *will* be with.”

My heart swells while simultaneously clenching like a vise. Millen never said there would be more financial ramifications for this decision than just not getting the company the funds it needs. In choosing me, he’s going against his father, against his business, and setting himself up to face a formidable foe in Harris Mason.

“And what about your mother? She doesn’t need the stress this would cause.”

“Considering Kenzie hasn’t come running in here demanding we leave immediately, I imagine that Mom is getting along with her just fine. Mom would want me happy, as should you.”

“You could marry Lana and still keep seeing that woman. Women like Lana Mason understand situations like this.”

Millen splutters, a chair scrapes against the floor as I assume he moves to his feet. “*Women like Lana? Can you hear yourself right now?*”

“Millen, this will destroy us. Our reputation, our future expansion—*everything.*”

“It wasn’t me who put all the Ross Corp eggs in the Mason vineyards basket, Dad. Sorry, but I’m not going to do it. I *can’t* do it. I hurt Kenzie once and I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to her. Now, if we’re done, I’m going to get back to the living room and check that Mom is okay.”

I scurry down the hall, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping on a conversation that may’ve been about me but that I had no business hearing.

Unfortunately, the only thing running through my mind for the rest of our visit is everything I heard. Millen’s words. His father’s insistence. My racing heart, and the deep-seated feeling that we may have won the battle but we’re definitely far away from winning the war.

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Chapter 18

The drive to Millen's place is a quiet one. I imagine his father's words are on constant repeat in his head. Similarly, my mind is reeling from the revelation that Lana pushed for the agreement to go ahead and also the fact that there are legal contracts in place. Ones that—if broken—could cost the business a lot of money.

He's doing this for me. He's risking his financial future and that of his family business to have a shot at a future with me.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. Not that he's willing to turn his back on his obligations, but the pressure I now feel to make this work between us. I love him and he loves me, but as we pull into the driveway of a beautiful two-story Victorian house, I wonder if that's enough. Is love enough to overcome a huge pile of crap that's inevitably going to be dumped in our lap?

A gentle squeeze of my leg grabs my attention. "We're here."

I turn my head and meet Millen's concerned eyes. "Sorry, I'm a million miles away."

"Let's get inside. We can have some dinner and relax." He reaches out and links his fingers with mine, his voice dropping to a soft whisper. "I want you in my house. I want to feel you in my space whenever you're not there."

"You can feel me anywhere."

He flexes his hand, tightening his grip. "Keep talking like that and we'll end up giving my neighbors a show."

"Hey, I'm all for a little exhibitionism if need be."

He growls and I beam at him. "You're trouble," he says with a grin as I shrug nonchalantly.

“And we’re still in the car.” I lean forward and lightly press my lips to his. “Take me to your space. I want you to feel me in more than just your house, and I’d rather have more room to move than your car allows.”

“Would hate to keep you waiting,” he replies with a salacious grin, and after grabbing our bags from the trunk, he leads me up the front stairs and into his home.

Half an hour later I’m curled up on the couch, watching Millen move around his state-of-the-art kitchen. When he offered to cook me dinner I realized that there is still a lot we don’t know about each other. We’ve shared our hopes and dreams, we’ve said I love you, but he’s never cooked for me. At the lake house, we ordered in other than the one night at the restaurant.

So over a glass of wine and plates of lemon chicken, I decide to launch into a well overdue deep interrogation of the gorgeous man sitting opposite me. “First girlfriend?”

His eyes light with amusement. “Are we talking about Jacqui Grey in kindergarten who I kicked sand at because I liked her hair, or do you mean my fifth-grade kiss with Shayna in the janitor’s closet at school because of a dare?”

Grinning, I tilt my head and bring my glass to my lips. “Do you still kick sand at girls you like?”

“I win them over with my charm and *stunning* personality now. It works every time,” he says with a sexy wink.

“Does it now?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He stretches out his leg under the table and trails his foot along the length of mine sending tingles to good places. I will not be distracted, though; I want to know the little things about this man. The ins and outs, the ups and the downs—although right now, it feels as if we’ve both been through a lot of those lately—and what makes him *him*.

“How about you then?” he asks, still slowly gliding his foot back and forth against my leg. “Who was your first girlfriend?”

He gets me with that question, the wine in my throat catching in surprise as he throws his head back and laughs, all the while I'm choking on my drink.

After getting myself under control, I reply, "First boyfriend was when I was aged seven and his name was Kyle. He had nice, kind eyes, and he helped me clean up the yogurt I'd spilled at recess. First *kiss* was Tyson Newman at summer camp when I was thirteen."

"And where is the great Tyson Newman now?"

"Last I heard he was a professional stuntman working in L.A." Millen's head jerks back and his eyes go wide.

"Well I didn't see that coming," he says, making me giggle.

"Me either. My turn now. Favorite color?"

"Guess..." he says, his jovial mood helping to silence the uneasy roar whirling around inside of me.

I look around the living and dining area, taking in the charcoal back feature wall running the length of the room and the American Oak furniture clocking it that is obviously custom designed. I take in the big soft grey sofa and the large glass and chrome coffee table. Everything I'm seeing is grey or some form of it.

"Grey like your eyes, the same ones I love to look at." My words are meant to make him smile; instead they turn his gaze to molten slate.

His foot that was behaving begins to move north up my calf, my breath catching when he does.

"Your favorite color is blue."

"How did you know?"

"Because the first night I got you naked, your lingerie was an electric blue."

I find myself subconsciously slumping in my seat, wanting more of his touch, but thankfully—or maybe not, who knows—the rational part of my brain kicks back into action, reminding me of the need to actually talk to Millen rather than succumb to his lustful charms.

“And your house is a cacophony of blue shades from your towels to your sheets to the throw pillows on your *blue* couch.” His attention to detail and the fact he remembers all of that is endearing.

“Favorite vacation spot?”

“It’s a tie between Côte d’Azur in the south of France or Bermuda,” he replies. “And you?”

“Since I’ve never been farther than Mexico, I’d have to say Cabo.”

His eyes are now soft and warm, melty even, and of all the looks he’s given me, this is a definite favorite. He’s free and easy, relaxed and comfortable—one could almost say happy.

It’s unfortunate that I’m about to kill the mood with a necessary admission.

I drink the last of my wine and return my glass to the table. “I need to tell you something,” I say quietly.

His expression straightens, his shoulders tensing. “Is this a sit-opposite-you kind of thing or a let’s-move-to-the-couch-so-we-can-be-close one?”

I push my chair back and stand, watching him closely as he does the same. Reaching out, he grabs the bottle of wine and pours me another half-glass. He gives the glass to me and grabbing his own, he leads me hand in hand over to his couch.

Once we’re settled, his legs stretched out in front of him with his feet resting on the coffee table and mine crossed over his lap, I take a drink for courage, and with his attention set, I come clean. “I overheard you today, in your dad’s office.”

His eyes widen while his head jerks back. “What did you hear?” he asks tersely, the muscle in his jaw ticking as he clenches his teeth together.

I reach out and put my glass on the table before moving back into Millen’s side, resting my head on his shoulder and looking up at him. His arm wraps around my waist, holding me in place, and cocooned in his arms, I take a deep, fortifying breath. “About the contract, the legal side of things.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to know about that.”

Now it’s my turn to tense, my eyes narrowing on him. “Why not? If we’re going to get through this and thrive on the other side of it, we have to be honest with each other about everything. And I mean *everything*, Millen. I don’t want there to be any doubt or regret between us and that includes regretting things we should’ve said but didn’t because we didn’t want to make it harder than it already was.”

The arm around my waist tightens, his appreciation of my words evident. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I should’ve told you everything about it.”

“To be fair,” I say with a tight smile. “You did say there was a business contract. I just didn’t think about the ramifications of you *breaking* that contract.”

“I’ll handle it, Kenz. There is nothing—*nothing*—that will stop me from moving toward my future with you. I can promise you that.”

“I don’t want you to say that if you’re not sure.” I know I’m putting myself out there. I’m opening myself up and showing him that Millen-sized soft spot I’ve admittedly been shielding since he came back into my life. It may have only been a week and a half, but a girl has to be one hundred percent sure of the man she’s letting all the way in there and that’s exactly what I’m doing.

Gliding his hand up my back, he cups the nape of my neck, pinning me in place, and everything in me says he’s about to rock my entire world.

“Kenzie Sharp, I’d never say anything like that unless I was resolute in my decision. When I left you lying in that bed, all I could think about was you. Your taste, your smell, the feel of your body cradled against mine, the way you made me feel something so intense, so unreal after one weekend. Even though I chose not to come back, everything that’s happened in the time we were apart is all on me. I missed out on three months with you. I’m the one that put us in this position so it’s going to be me that gets us free and clear.”

“Millen—” I whisper, my next words catching in my throat.

“You’re so steady. It’s like nothing can shake you, and even right now when I should be so far from relaxed, you’re here being honest and open and showing me everything that makes you *you*, wanting to make *me* feel better when it’s me who should be comforting *you*.”

He lifts his head. Hooded eyes roam my face. “Just having you with me is all the comfort I need. You make me feel invincible.” He takes a deep breath, and it’s his next words that sink me once and for all. “Loving you makes me the luckiest damn man in the world and I promise you, there won’t be a day goes by that I’ll ever forget it.”

“You make it seem like I’m perfect,” I reply with a small sardonic smile. “I just wanted you to know what I’d heard and although I didn’t understand how hard it would be before, I *definitely* get it now and I want you to know I’m mindful of that and I’m with you all the way.” I release a big sigh and lean into him, resting my forehead against his. “I love you more right now than I thought I could... or would.”

His lips twitch. “It’s because of the wine, right?”

“No...” I say with a smile. I curve my hand around his neck and hold him in place. “It helps, but no. It’s just you.”

“And it’ll always be just you, too.”

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Chapter 19

Due to work commitments and his mother's health deteriorating, Millen and I have only been able to catch up on the phone over the past two weeks. He spent two days with me after that night at his house but had to get back to San Francisco for meetings. I don't doubt his commitment to me—to *us*—during that time. It's just that the less he talks about the wedding plans and the steps he's taking to stop them, the more anxious I become.

It's now ten days out from the wedding and there's a slow-growing knot in my chest that gets bigger and tighter as each day passes. There's been no public announcement, Millen hasn't said anything about it—I haven't asked either—and the closer it gets to the wedding date, the more my anxiety threatens to overwhelm me.

It's because of this that I'm in a daze and on autopilot when I go into work early Thursday morning to catch up on paperwork. I don't realize the office door isn't locked when I turn the handle and open it, freezing in place in the doorway at the sight of Harris Mason sitting behind my desk.

“Um...”

He looks up at the sound of my voice, his eyes crinkling as he smiles at me. “Kenzie, hi,” he says. Pushing the chair back, he stands and walks over to where I'm standing, his arm outstretched.

As I was raised to never forget my manners, I shake his hand, quickly letting go and dropping my arm back to my side. “Hi...” I reply, not hiding my confusion.

He shakes his head as his grin widens. “I guess you're wondering why the normally absent owner is sitting in your office.”

“You could say that.” I walk over to the brown leather tub chair facing the desk and drop my purse on the seat. “You're probably the last person I expected to see, to be honest.” My tone is flat, not overtly disdainful but

given the history between my family and this man, he shouldn't expect a friendly welcome. He may ultimately be my boss, but he was also instrumental in the destruction of my parents' marriage. It's been years, but even still, he doesn't deserve a raucous welcome in any way, shape, or form.

Then again, am I really in a position to judge the actions of someone who chooses to be romantically involved with someone promised to another? Fake or not fake, an engagement is a promise, is it not?

I take a moment to study him. He's aged well, his face definitely older and more refined, his hair an even mix of salt and pepper.

"So what can I do for you, Mr. Mason?" He chuckles and takes a few steps back to lean against the desk.

"Kenzie, you're not a child anymore, and we effectively work together. Harris will be fine."

"Okay, Harris. What can I do for you?"

His smile falters as it must dawn on him that there will be no niceties or catching up of any kind between us. He's not only my boss, he's also the father of the woman expecting to marry the man I love, and it may be a cliché, but the apple doesn't fall far from the tree when it comes to Harris and Lana. They're both ruthless in business by all accounts and—if recent events and relations are anything to go by—in their personal lives too. Lana may not have lived in Davis for a few years but she visits often and reports from mutual friends have her using men for her own personal gain. When it comes to Harris, he's now married to wife number four, having divorced from Lana's mother once news of his affair with my mother came out.

"I just wanted to check how things were going. Keeping tabs on my investment, so to speak."

Standing stock-still, my fingers threaten to turn white as they tightly grip the chair. I struggle with my fight-or-flight reflex, the need for self-preservation winning the war over whether I value my employment at this bar.

“What do you think of your investment then?” I nod toward the books on the desk, mentally patting myself on the back for the even tone of my voice.

“The takings are good. The restaurant is doing extremely well, and I can tell that you run a tight ship. I’m very happy with how it’s all going, Kenzie.”

“Good to know. Does that mean you’ll go back to being the ‘silent’ in silent owner?”

He studies me, his brows furrowed as he looks down to the desk for a few moments before lifting his eyes to meet mine. “I’m trying to redeem myself for the sins in my past,” he says quietly. My head jerks back and I frown at him.

“Why now? The damage was done years ago. You should’ve done something about it back then. You didn’t apologize when it happened—you never wanted to try and fix what you and Mom broke. Maybe if you had, then she wouldn’t have—”

“Kenzie, you were young. There were things you didn’t know, things you don’t need to know. I may have played a part in it, but—”

“You had a five-year affair with your best friend’s wife, Harris. That’s more than a part—that’s a god damn leading role.”

“It’s not something I’m proud of and it’s not something I’ve done or will ever do again.”

“Well, your first effort was rather spectacular.” In this moment, he’s not Harris Mason, my boss—he’s the man who destroyed my father’s world hand in hand with my mother. It wasn’t just Dad’s life that he altered. It was mine too, and all the anger I’ve felt toward Harris and my mother is boiling over.

“Kenzie, I just want you to know how sorry I am. There are too many good things in life to look forward to. I don’t want the mistakes of my past to hold anyone back, and I’m including you in that too.”

I scoff, shaking my head at the audacity of this man to think saying sorry will atone his actions and clean the slate.

“Lana said she saw you. Did you know she’s getting married? I bet she’d love to reconnect with you properly. Once the wedding is out of the way, of course.”

My eyes threaten to pop out of my head like in the Looney Tunes cartoons. Ten days before the wedding date and he has no idea that there’s not going to be a wedding. If he was anyone else, I’d almost feel sorry for him. I don’t, though. There’s not a chance in hell that I’d ever want to “reconnect” with Lana.

Before I can tell him that he continues, as if this is a normal everyday conversation. “At least the wedding is close. We wouldn’t want her showing in her wedding photos.”

My head jerks back so fast I’m surprised I’m still standing. Glad I’m still holding on to the chair, I tighten my grip as my legs threaten to buckle beneath me.

“I’m sorry?” My voice is a rough whisper. My heart is in my throat as I anxiously wait for him to explain what he just said. It doesn’t make sense. There’s no way she could be...

“I was surprised too. Lana and Millen have known each other for years and it was only a few months ago that they got engaged. At least they’re getting married. They shouldn’t be creating a family together without a solid foundation.”

Hearing Millen’s name cross Harris’s lips is my undoing. The inner dam controlling my emotions collapses under the weight of Harris’s joyous announcement, the devastating consequences of which he would have no idea of. I lift my head, meeting Harris’s gaze straight on as I square my shoulders and make a snap decision that might just be my dumbest-one yet.

I can’t control myself or my emotions, and I don’t think I really want to. Everything I’ve been tearing myself apart about since Millen came back into my life comes to a head.

Actually, the second. The first was trusting anything Millen Ross said to me during the past three weeks, especially the part about him not sleeping with his fiancé.

“I quit,” I announce, watching the beaming smile on Harris’s face fall as quickly as the plans for my future.

He opens his mouth and shuts it again, shock giving way to confusion.

“This is me giving my two weeks’ notice.” The burning in my eyes tells me I need to get out of there. I’ve just won the fight, now my body is desperate for the flight.

“I’m taking the day and I’ll be back in at noon tomorrow to work my shift. Two weeks today, I’m gone.”

He stands suddenly, moving toward me. I hold my hand up, and he stops mid-stride. “Kenzie, you can’t leave me in the lurch. It takes time to find a good manager.”

“Gaby can hold down the fort once I’m gone. Your investment will be in good hands.” I don’t say that Gaby, Bruno, and probably everyone else will likely want to walk straight out the door with me.

“Is it money? Do you want to renegotiate your contract? I’m sure we can talk this through,” he says, sounding almost panicked. I guess the last thing he wants to deal with right now is running a bar he probably only bought as leverage against Millen’s dad.

“No, Harris. It’s time for a change. You said not to let mistakes hold you back? This bar represents a big ol’ clusterfuck of a mistake that I want—no, need—to move on from, and I have to do it now.” His expression morphs into one of resignation. Throwing his advice back in his face was the best thing I could’ve done.

Now I have to get out of here.

“I’ll be in tomorrow. I’ll get Gaby to cover for me tonight,” I rush out, grabbing my bag and moving to the open door, freedom just a few steps away.

“I hope you find happiness, Kenzie. I really do.”

I don’t say anything; I don’t even look up to acknowledge his words. Instead, I keep my eyes on the prize, in this case? Getting the fuck out of Dodge.

Sitting at home twenty minutes later, having survived the harrowing drive home through tear-filled eyes, my phone lights up and Millen's name flashes on screen.

I cancel the call.

He rings straight back.

I cancel again.

After the fifth attempt, and three unanswered, unread texts, I send a message to Gaby, apologizing for dropping her in it at work and promising to explain everything later, knowing full well that she'll be walking through my door the minute she's free tonight. Then I power my phone down, hoping to escape the lancing pain spearing through my chest every call he makes.

Harris wants me to find happiness but his revelation has ensured I'm not going to find it anytime soon, a thought that detonates my heart. There's no way I'll ever be able to find that happy with Millen Ross. Lana Mason just made sure of that, once and for all.

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Chapter 20

Two days later, I'm staring off into space as I count down the hours to the end of my shift when I look up and meet those same steel grey eyes that mesmerized me four months ago. His entire body is tense as he makes his way through the early Saturday crowd. I've been screening my calls since the scene with Harris in the office, my heart still shell-shocked from the bomb dropped on me two days ago.

I walk around the end of the bar, not wanting to make a scene in front of everyone, and stop short when he pulls me into him, his arms snaking around my back.

"Hey." His voice is tight as he brings his mouth to my ear.

Something's different, though. It's gentle, as if I'm crystal and he's the bull about to obliterate me. It's his touch, the way he's holding me, and the fact he isn't letting me go.

Needing space to get my wits about me, I pull away and step back. His brows narrow, his expression darkening. "Kenz, what's going on?"

"Not here," I grind out, leaving absolutely no doubt that he's not my favorite person right about now.

"Let's go then," he says and before I can argue, he's wrapped an arm around my waist and he's leading me down the hallway, not stopping until we've climbed the stairs to the roof of the bar. The moment the door slams shut behind us, I jerk free of him. The anger, the doubt, and the completely fucked-up thoughts that've been racing through my head for the past two days all fight for supremacy inside of me.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" he asks, not beating around the bush.

"Why?" I splutter.

“Do you know what it’s been like knowing you’re far away when all I want is to be near you all the fucking time? Work, Mom, the wedding, all of it, I’ve wanted—no, *needed*—you so much more than you could know. Especially—”

“But now things have changed.”

His head jerks back as if I’ve struck him, and I know I’ve caught him off guard. If he was coming here to tell me the truth about Lana, then I’ve just beat him to the punch.

“Can we sit down?” he says, taking a step toward me.

I put my hand up to stop him, knowing I need distance if we’re to have this out properly.

“You know...”

“Yep,” I reply, the word clipped. In no way is this situation okay, and he needs to know that.

“How?”

“Harris was in the office on Thursday,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “What was he doing here?”

“Checking in on his investment apparently. Why now of all times, I have no idea.”

Millen turns his back and walks to the edge of the roof, bracing his hands on the wall and dropping his head. Silence stretches between us, a low hum from the bar beneath and the distant sound of patrons on the sidewalk below the only noise. Without warning, Millen straightens and roughly rips his hand through his hair. Facing me, he stalks forward, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he stops in front of me and reaches up to cup my cheeks.

The logical part of my brain is screaming at me to pull away, to get off this roof where there are so many *good* Millen memories likely to pull me back into the love-tinted bubble I’ve become used to existing in these past two weeks.

Then the anger hits me and I jerk free from him, stepping back until I'm out of reach. His eyes narrow on mine. "Kenzie, this doesn't—"

"That's the thing, Millen. It does. It changes *everything*. You lied. If not just to me, but yourself."

"I—" He moves toward me, and my hand darts out to stop him.

"You said you didn't sleep with her," I screech, my voice echoing into the night, no doubt carrying down to the street.

His head drops, his shoulders falling just as hard. There's no denial though. That secret part of me still holding out hope that it was physically impossible for him to be the father withers away and dies at his silence.

"No denial then? No 'Kenzie, it's complicated?' C'mon, Millen. I think I deserve at least a little bit of fight, don't you?" I retort scathingly.

He turns and walks over to the bench swing, sitting and covering his face with his hands, his arms resting on his legs. Scrubbing his face, he lifts his eyes my way. "It *is* complicated. Actually, it's all kinds of fucked up."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know," I say, my voice tight. Somehow, I'm keeping my shit together, and I have absolutely no idea how. Inside, my broken heart is being hit over and over again with a battering ram, the shattered pieces now ground to a fine dust.

Tears sting my eyes and I give up trying to stop them. Everything I thought we had, everything we had to look forward to once we'd gotten over this "hump" is now impossible. The road block is no longer temporary—it's a ten-foot steel-enforced wall.

"The night after I came into the bar with Lana, after the hallway and Drew?" he says, his voice rough. He sounds as resigned to his fate as I am. I nod, urging him to continue. "I went back to my hotel and got drunk. I was stuck, confused as hell about my feelings for you and the intense reaction I had to seeing Drew touch you. So I got stuck into a bottle of whiskey, and Lana came to my door to say goodnight."

I don't want to hear this. I don't even want to *think* about it. "Please don't—"

“She made a pass at me, and I stopped her. Then she said she needed a drink. I don’t remember much after that but I know that I woke up the next morning in my boxers and alone in bed. Lana didn’t say anything about it after that so I was sure that nothing happened.”

“Well *apparently* something did,” I snap, unable to stop myself.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I hadn’t slept with her. I was sure I was right in that belief.”

I stare at him, looking for any discernible hint that he’s not telling me the truth. He had nothing to lose when I asked if they’d slept together. I knew they had years ago but he swore to me that this time, they hadn’t. I still don’t know what Lana had to gain by telling me what she did at the grocery store, but when it comes to Lana Mason, who knows how her mind works? She’s all about appearances and looking better than everyone else around her, doing whatever it takes to make sure that happens.

I can’t fault him for what has happened. There’s no basis for me to do so. I may be justified in being angry about the situation but I can’t be angry at Millen for telling me what he believed to be true at the time.

“There’s not much more to say then, is there?” I take a deep breath and stay true to my plan to always be upfront and honest, to both myself and to him. I stare into those deep grey eyes I love and swallow the hard lump in my throat threatening to choke me.

I take a handful of the dusty remnants of my splintered soul and throw them up in the air, letting the pieces fall at will. “I thought fate bought us together,” I say softly, my voice breaking. “Maybe the plan was to give us a taste of bliss before reality decided to kick our ass.”

He launches toward me, long strides closing the distance until he’s standing as close to me as he can. “Did you ever think that maybe—just maybe—fate led us together because—” He lifts his hand and cups my chin, pressing his thumb against my mouth.

“Please don’t say it. Don’t tell me this will all be okay. Don’t say we can still be together when you know there’s nothing else I’d rather do.”

He rubs his finger across my skin as his other arm wraps around my back. His eyes fixate on my mouth before lifting up to meet mine. “I want to stay with you. For tonight and all the tomorrows like we’d planned. I choose *you*, Kenz. But it’s you that has a decision to make now. One I wish you’d never have to even consider. I want you to choose me. I need you to trust that I’m going to make this right. Nothing has to change.”

“I’m not a homewrecker, Millen.”

“You can’t be a homewrecker when there isn’t a home to wreck,” he shoots back, his grip around my back tightening.

“I wish I could choose you. I wish I could tell you what we both want to hear. But it’s not just me and you and even her now. You have a duty, and as much as it kills me to even say this, as much as I wish it could be any other way, I have no choice.”

His voice drops to a rough whisper, his eyes filled with regret. “Please don’t say that. I want you, Kenzie. I *need* you. If there’s any choice to be made, it’s you. It’s *always* going to be you.”

I have no words. Everything I want to say sticks in my throat. Knowing this is going to be the last chance I have with him, I need to make it worth it.

Raising my hands, I cup his jaw. Tears fall as I bring my lips to his, a sob echoing between us, the sound of my heart being ripped apart at the seams roaring in my ears. His arms wrap around my back, tugging me hard against him and tightening to the point of pain as he deepens the kiss, pouring everything into it.

I cling to him as if it’s the only thing I can do. Because it is. After tonight—after this kiss—there will be no more tomorrows. Everything I thought we’d have together has now been taken from me, gone in the blink of an eye and the appearance of that pink line of the pregnancy test. A Mason wins again. It’s just that this time, it’s me they’re tearing apart instead of my parents.

When I pull away from Millen, his entire body sags.

“You need to go, Millen. You need to go ahead and marry Lana, fulfil the contract, and be with her and your baby. Your child doesn’t deserve to be stuck in the middle of whatever will happen if you don’t go through with this.” I take a fortifying breath. “Every choice we make has a consequence, whether it be good or bad, and I deserve not to be anyone’s consequence. This is my way of making sure it doesn’t happen.”

“I’m not giving up, Kenzie. You may have the courage to walk away and do the *right* thing, but I’m not going to accept it. I *can’t* accept it.” His tone is resolute, his determination undeniable, something which hits me deep in the hole where my heart used to be.

“I guess I’m no better than Lana now because it’s me not giving you a choice in the matter. This is done, Millen. It’s over,” I say with a barely disguised sob. “We have to remember what we had and move on. It’s that simple.”

“Nothing is simple. Life isn’t simple.” With tears streaming down my cheeks, I lift up on my toes, rest my hands on his chest, and gently brush my lips against his cheek. “Goodbye, Millen,” I whisper before turning away.

I reach for the door when he calls my name. Turning around, I find him in front of me. His hand curls around my neck, the other grabbing hold of my hair, keeping me in place, his eyes locked with mine.

“If this is the last time I get to kiss you, it’s not going to be a god damn peck on the cheek.” Then he crashes his lips down on mine, his tongue delving deep in my mouth, leaving me with no choice but to grab his hips and hold on for dear life.

It’s not until I’ve walked down the stairs and shut myself behind my office door that I realize, I wasn’t the only one crying.

We took our shot and lost, and I’m left wondering whether we ever had a shot anyway.

Chapter 21

Gaby finds me in the office ten minutes later. She acts exactly how I expect; supportive but also trying to be the voice of reason.

“Why did you do that?” she screeches, her lips pursed as her face goes red. “You let her win. You let the biggest bitch we’ll probably ever have the misfortune of meeting get the guy—your guy.” She paces back and forth across the room, shaking her head and muttering incoherent words I’m either not supposed to hear or angry ramblings she’s trying to process before laying them on me. “You of all people know that you don’t need two parents to make a family. You could be the cool stepmom who totally outshines the nanny, ’cause let’s be honest, there’s no way Lana will be changing nappies and going to playdates. There will be staff, lots of paid minions to do the dirty work for her.”

“Sometimes there are just too many obstacles. He hadn’t even cancelled the wedding yet.”

She sighs and pins me with a ‘are you shitting me’ look. “But he turned up. He drove an hour and a half to see you.”

“You know as well as I do that he only turned up because I wasn’t taking his calls.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And he felt guilty,” I continue.

She opens her mouth to reply but snaps it shut, her eyes admitting defeat. She knows I’m right, and she’s one of the few people who have been with me through all of this, the highs of meeting him, the low of him disappearing, the anger and confusion when he came back into my life, and the clusterfuck that’s been our relationship since then.

Having given up the fight, she walks over and wraps her arms around my shoulders.

“It’ll be alright, Kenz. We’ll get you through this. I promise.”

She stays true to her word too, even holding my wineglass when I wield a bathroom-destroying sledgehammer through my wall in the middle of the night two weeks later.

People do strange things when they lose the love of their life. I’m not sure if it’s normal, since I’ve never been through something like this before, but deciding to start impromptu renovations after a bottle of wine or two is surely up there as a very healthy coping mechanism. If not, it should be.

That is how I ended up soaking wet, staring through a large hole in what used to be the back shower wall with the floor covered in an inch of water. Apparently, you can’t just spontaneously knock out a wall when drunk, or so said my father, when he came to rescue me *and* my bathroom half an hour later. His wide eyes, clenched jaw, and wide stance when he found me standing there like a drowned cat are now etched into my psyche.

The two weeks since I said goodbye to Millen have obviously not been easy. It’s been fourteen days where the pain has not dimmed even a little. There have been a lot of angry days, and quite a few desolate and empty ones too. My only distraction has been my desperate search for a new job.

Millen hasn’t pounded down my door begging me to take him back. He sent me a text the day after I said goodbye. He didn’t ask to talk; he didn’t say he would fight for me. No, his text was far, far worse. It was resigned and although unanswered, acted as a torturous reminder of what we can never have again.

Millen—Rooftops, burritos, sunsets at the lake, Ed Sheeran, and dancing in the dark, and the way your eyes lit up every time we kissed. All of that is what’s getting me through this.

Having been made homeless by my own stupid—albeit drunken—actions, I’ve been staying at Dad’s house for a few days while the water and sledgehammer damage is rectified. He hasn’t asked about my sudden

renovation plans, nor has he pried into why I cry at the drop of a hat, or the calls I've been receiving about job applications.

That was until thirty minutes ago when he came home and announced he's taking me to the same Mexican restaurant where Millen and I had our first date.

He leads me inside, and we're greeted by the same waitress I had the last time I was here. My heart clenches at the memories being thrust at me from all angles. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to come here again without thinking of Millen and the first date that ended before he'd even taken a bite.

Dad leads me to a table, pulling out my chair and seating me before taking his own. I grab the menu, desperate to distract myself from the stinging behind my eyes. It may have been two weeks, but every time I'm reminded of everything we've lost, it's like I'm back in my office again crying against the door.

"Do you know what you want to order, Kenz?" Dad asks, snapping me back into reality.

"Just the usual," I reply, not looking up.

"So an extra helping of hot sauce then?"

My head jerks up to meet my father's narrowed gaze, and I know I'm not getting out of this. He's given me a few days reprieve but this dinner isn't about simply sharing a meal with his daughter. This is going to be an interrogation. I wouldn't be surprised if he's invited Gaby along to turn it into an intervention, either.

After surviving my teenage years on his own, he soon learned to see right through me. I've never been able to get anything past him, neither back then or right now it seems.

Thankfully, the waitress leaves us alone before Dad launches his attack.

"Right, enough is enough. You need to tell me what the hell is going on with you. You've quit your job—and I get that you didn't want to work for Harris anymore—but you've also embarked on impromptu renovations

in a perfectly constructed house, and I'm sick of seeing my normally happy daughter walking around like a heartbroken zombie who doesn't know which way to turn. Tell me what happened and who I need to kill," he says, his voice as menacing as it is heartwarming.

"Dad, I'm not sure you want to—"

He reaches across the table and grabs my hand, giving my fingers a gentle squeeze and staring right at me. "Kenzie Sharp, you know that there is nothing I won't ever do for you, legal, illegal, morally reprehensible or otherwise. I'm the one person you'll always have on your side, whatever you've done, whatever has been done to you. When it comes to you, I'm the person who's protected you from your first breath and will be there until my last." *Dammit*. The stinging turns to burning, the papa bear who has always had my back causing the dam to break as a lone tear falls down my cheek. "Baby girl, tell me what's wrong."

I swipe my hand across my face, wiping my tears away as I take a deep—hopefully calming—breath, preparing for what may just break my father's heart all over again. "The short version is probably best."

"Whatever you like, as long as it helps me get to the bottom of what's wrong so I can do everything in my power to fix it." If it was possible, my heart would be bursting right now.

"I met a man. I fell in love." My voice breaks, but swallowing hard, I press on. "Then he disappeared."

Dad's face morphs from soft to fierce in the blink of an eye.

I turn my hand over in his, giving his fingers a gentle squeeze. "He did come back and I made him fight for me—"

"Good," Dad replies gruffly. "But he obviously didn't fight hard enough."

That brings a smile to my lips. If there was one mantra my father engrained in me it was to always make a man fight for you. If he wants you, he'll show you in his manner, his words, his actions. He made me believe that the man who was truly worthy of me would leave me with no doubt of

his feelings. Through thick and thin, I'd always know that the man I ended up with loved me unconditionally.

The problem with that is, what happens when you find the man who proves you mean the world to him, the man who's willing to turn his back on his company business and walk away from the deal to save it all for you, only to have a landmine dropped on you both that makes it impossible to be together?

How can you overcome *that*?

"We hadn't been together long, either before he went away or when he came back, but I know—I *knew*—he was the man I was meant to be with."

Dad tilts his head, his eyes scanning my face as if looking for something he's missing. "Then what's the problem?"

"It's complicated."

"Then uncomplicate it for me."

"He's getting married to someone else."

"Kenzie..."

"No, it's not like that," I say, my words rushed. "When we met, he was single. When he came back, he was engaged because of a business deal his father agreed to."

"So he wasn't man enough to stand up to his father then? That's no man worthy of you, baby girl," he says gently.

"He did." My defense of Millen is automatic, my sharp tone telling. "He told them he wasn't going through with it. He was doing what he needed to extricate himself from the situation."

"What's the problem then? I don't understand."

"The woman he was going to marry is now pregnant."

Dad goes quiet. His mouth opens and closes like a fish. *He wasn't expecting that obviously.*

"And is she?" he says, matter-of-factly. This is what I love about Dad—he cuts right to the chase.

“She’s got no reason to lie about it. She was already going to marry him so it’s not like she needed to concoct a story to nail him down.”

“And the timing of... everything?” he says cautiously.

“It fits, unfortunately,” I reply quietly. “I know you must be disappointed in me.” Silence stretches between us, my anxiety levels rising the longer he doesn’t say anything. Until he does, shocking the shit out of me.

“Why would I be? What’s something I always told you, Kenz?”

“To always have pepper spray?” I reply with a sly grin.

He shakes his head, his lips twitching. “That’s important, yes, but I meant the other thing.”

I wrack my brain and have a light bulb moment. “To always follow my heart?”

His eyes soften. “Yes.”

“But I was the other woman.”

“Is that true?” he asks, lifting a brow. “Because the daughter I raised would never knowingly do that.”

“When we got together, no.” I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the disappointment I expect to see when I say what comes next. Averting my gaze, I clench my hands together on the table. “When he came back... I knew it wasn’t a traditional relationship but I still went there before knowing the full story. We slept—”

“Baby girl, I may be open-minded, but you are still my daughter. Spare me the specifics, alright?”

My head snaps up, my wide eyes meeting Dad’s stern ones.

“You’re loyal to a fault. You’re kind, generous, and I know you’re a good person because that’s who I raised you to be.” There’s no holding back the tears now as a sob breaks free. “Kenzie...” In the blink of an eye, Dad is next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me into his side, resting his lips against my temple.

We stay like that for a while until the waitress returns with our meals, sliding the plates in front of us and leaving with a smaller-than-usual smile. *Apparently, we're giving off some unfriendly vibes tonight.*

“Dad...”

He turns his head my way and meets my eyes. “There are some things a father never wants his daughter to know,” he says, his solemn expression commanding my attention.

“What?”

“Your mother and I... She was in a relationship when we met.”

A gasp escapes my lips. My idealistic impression of my parents' marriage before the affair now teeters on the edge of a big fucking cliff.

Dad takes a deep breath, and I brace myself for whatever will come next. “The moment I locked eyes with her, I was done for. I made it my mission to talk to her, get close to her, and despite knowing she was with someone else, with Harris, it was like we couldn't stop the inevitable.”

I stop breathing. A proverbial bomb dropping, decimating everything I thought I knew in the process. “Harris and Mom used to...”

“They had been together since high school. Had gone to college together, the whole deal. Then I came along and put a spanner in the works.”

“It doesn't sound like it was all you,” I say quietly, my voice tight.

“These things never are, but it was inevitable.” Harris's words back in the office start to make a hell of a lot more sense. There *was* more to the affair than I knew. *Why is life so damn complicated?*

“Love isn't perfect,” he says gently. “It's how you work through it all that's important. The hard stuff, the obstacles, the highs, the lows, the triumphs, and the tragedies. It's a beautiful pain that's always worth it if you're both willing to work to make things right.”

His words are so poetic, and so very true, but also so not my dad.

Leaning forward, he rests his elbows on the table and steeples his fingers, something he only ever does when he slips into deep-thinking

mode. “And when you find the one who you know is worth it, the one you’d do anything it took to be with, you grab hold and you don’t let go. Because the minute you do, you lose your shot.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah, baby girl?” he asks, turning to meet my eyes.

“I found the one, and it was me that let go because I couldn’t see a way to keep holding on.”

“Life has a funny way of making things right. What I’ve learned is that sometimes, loving and losing can be worth it in the end.”

With tears in my eyes, I stare at my father, wondering how on earth he can still feel this way after loving and losing his own shot at happiness with my mom. “How can you still believe that?”

“Because I have you. That’s worth more than anything else in the world. Even if it does come with middle-of-the-night renovation disasters.”

Lying in my childhood bed later that night, I think back to Dad’s words, his confession, and his determined belief that things always work out in the end.

With that thought in mind, in a moment of weakness, I pick up my phone and read Millen’s text message again, the one that I’ve gone back to a million times over the past two weeks.

Millen—Rooftops, burritos, sunsets at the lake, Ed Sheeran, and dancing in the dark, and the way your eyes light up every time we kissed. All of that is what’s getting me through this.

Typing out my reply, I never once doubt whether I should send it. Regret can be for tomorrow. Tonight is for getting the words out I haven’t been able to say, and after the wedding this Saturday, may never get to say again.

Kenzie—Electric shocks, cocky grins, rising to the challenge, and fighting for our chance. Loving you was the easiest thing in the world to do, and even having you for a moment in time is better than never having had you at all. Love, Kenz.

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Chapter 22

I'm avoiding life's big problems with a glass of wine, a stack of junk food, and the *Grey's Anatomy* binge-watch to end all binges. It's going as well as can be expected, considering it's the night before the wedding. Unfortunately, despite all the best planning in the world, Millen has never been far from my mind.

My phone ringing on the kitchen counter successfully drags me out of my self-imposed pity bubble. Getting up off the couch, I cross the room and check the display to see Gaby's name flashing back at me.

"Hey," I say with an abundance of cheerfulness.

"Kenz, what are you doing?" she asks, matter-of-factly.

"You know what I'm doing, which is everything possible not to think about what I've done."

"Babe, I've kind of got a situation down here. I need you to come in."

My head jerks back. Her tone is careful—*too* much so, in fact—and something Gaby has never been with me is careful. She's never had to be. We tell each other everything—the good, the bad, the embarrassing, the absolute mortifying. We're both open books.

"Gabs, I don't work there anymore. Just tell me what's going on."

"You just need to get in your car and drive. I'll explain when you get here," she says hurriedly as loud shouts come down the phone. "Look, I've gotta go. See you soon."

"Gab—" She hangs up, cutting me off.

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it, wondering what the hell just happened and what could be so urgent that she'd call me in.

Unless Millen is there. No, he wouldn't be. It's the night before his wedding. He's probably out drinking somewhere, lamenting where he went wrong by sticking his dick in Lana Mason and pining after me. That's not malicious of me—it's the bitter part of my brain still furious over what transpired between the two of them.

As hard as I try to move on from it, Dad's words from our dinner have played in a continual loop in my head. Did I give up too easily? Should I have fought harder?

Half an hour later, I'm pulling into the parking lot of The Masonry, parking in the staff parks at the back of the building and walking toward the front where I find Dalyn manning the door instead of Bruno. This makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Bruno *always* has the door. The only time he wouldn't would be if there was a situation inside—very rare—or when he took his mandatory breaks.

"Hey, stranger," Dalyn says, ushering me along to the front of the line.

"It's only been a week, Dal." I walk into his open arms as he envelopes me in a huge bear hug.

"A week is far too long when I've seen you almost every day for the past two years," he says in my ear.

I take a step back and grin up at him. "I'm just a phone call away. We'll still see each other, I promise. I'm just a bit off my game at the moment."

"Anything to do with the scene in there?" he says, tilting his head toward the door of the bar. Biting my lip, I look at the closed wooden door and sigh, trying—and failing—to prepare myself for coming face to face with Millen.

"How drunk are we talking?"

"Hammered. Messy. Uncontrollable, and demanding to see you. Gaby and Bruno managed to get him up to the roof to get some fresh air because we figured it was a better look than letting him cool off out the front."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Why would Millen come to the bar instead of coming straight to me?

I square my shoulders, making the decision to hear the imbibed man out before putting him in a taxi and sending him home. I'll also be sure to give his credit card to the driver because sincere or not, you don't turn up to a bar and make a scene the night before your wedding to another woman. It doesn't matter how much in love with him I am, that shit ain't gonna fly. "I'm going in."

"God speed," he says with a shit-eating grin and a mock salute. He reaches out and pulls the door open for me, ushering me in with a soft hand to the small of my back. If anyone else did it I'd find it a little condescending, but considering Dalyn is like the little brother I never had, I let it go.

I move through the crowd, stopping to give hugs to the old regulars sitting on their stools by the bar. Lifting my hand in a wave to Mark, I point toward the hallway at the back of the bar. He nods, his drawn brows doing nothing to help my anxiety as I walk down the corridor, counting the steps to the rooftop stairs.

Stopping with my fingers wrapped around the door handle, I stare down at my feet and take a slow, deep breath, counting to five as I exhale because I'm going to need all of the resilience I have in me to get through the next few moments.

Determined to survive whatever life is about to throw at me, whether it be a man on the edge or a last-ditch effort to fight for me or something else, I turn the knob and open the door.

I stop mid-step when I'm met by Gaby, Bruno, and a very sad—and sick-looking—Drew sitting around the picnic table in the middle of the roof. With an equal measure of relief, confusion, and disappointment, I make my way over to the three of them, more confused than ever as to what the hell is going on.

"Thank God," Gaby breathes, leaning back in her chair, her hard eyes meeting mine. She's one of the most easy-going people I know, so for her to look as pissed as she does right now, this can't be anything good.

"Can someone explain why I'm here?" I ask. Bruno's jaw is twitching like a crack addict, and Drew's bloodshot eyes aren't telling me anything

other than he's drunk as a skunk.

"I think we'll let the drunk one speak because he's refused to explain anything until you got here," Bruno explains, his voice clipped. He stands and wraps his arms around me. "Listen to him. I have a feeling that you wanna hear what he's got to say. Gaby's going to stay and stop you from wringing the poor guy's neck." He pulls back and looks me straight in the eyes. "Keep an open mind, babe. He's a good man, and he wouldn't be here unless it was important. We've all got your back, whatever happens."

Bruno leans down and kisses Gaby's temple, whispering something I can't hear to her before disappearing back downstairs. My gaze snaps to my best friend, first wondering what the hell is going on between her and Bruno, and then wondering why the hell she hasn't told me about it. I simultaneously want to slap her and high-five her at the same time.

Drew stands up, wobbling from side to side, before finding his footing and walking around the table toward me. Stopping in front of me, he puts both of his hands on my shoulders, probably to keep himself upright. He smells like Jim and Jack had a party and invited Jose along for fun. Sometimes, that can be sexy—usually when you've been indulging in the same way and are too drunk to care. Right now? Not so much. The fingers of his right hand toy with my hair, his eyes glassy and red, his skin a shade of grey that can never be a good thing.

I take a step back, grabbing his hand as I go, and lead him over to the bench swing, but at the last minute decide not to go there. Too much Millen—too many memories. Once he's safely seated at the table again, I take my place beside him. "Drew, what's going on?"

He drops his head into his hands, bracing his elbows on his spread legs. He stays that way for a few minutes, neither of us saying a word.

"I did a bad thing," he mumbles, his hair flopping sideways, blocking his eyes from view. He leans back in the seat and meets my narrowed gaze.

I'm used to dealing with drunk assholes thanks to my many years working at the bar, and having been called away from my pity party for one, I'm even less inclined to placate the man sitting in front of me.

“Please, Drew. You wanted to talk to me and I’m here. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

He doesn’t look away, not for a single moment as he starts speaking, each confession worse than the last.

“I was drunk.

“I was angry.”

“I never thought I’d be that pissed off that I’d do that to my best friend.”

“It didn’t mean anything.”

“I was going to let sleeping dogs lie. You were already with Millen. He said he’d stood up to his father and Harris and he wasn’t going ahead with it.”

I feel Gaby’s hand on my shoulder just before Drew deals the most sickening, heartbreaking blow of all.

“The baby is mine.”

My mouth drops open, his admission hitting me like a sucker punch to the heart. Every word that comes out his mouth after that pummels into me just as hard.

“She got me drunk and seduced me just after all of us were at the bar. He looks down at the ground, then mumbles, “The first time anyway.”

I jump to my feet and walk over to the edge of the roof, squeezing my eyes as tight as my hands are gripping the wall. I whirl around and glare at him. “You decide to tell me this the night before the *wedding*?” I shriek, advancing on him with my arm cocked back, ready to knock him out.

Thankfully, Gaby steps between us, stopping me in my tracks. “Take a moment, Kenz.”

“Fuck that.” I step sideways, pointing my finger at the very sorry-looking man in front of me. “Why are you telling me when you should’ve told your best friend the minute you found out.”

“And say what?” he says snidely, moving to his feet. “Oh, hey. While you were off sleeping with another woman, I stupidly let your *fiancée* have

her way with me and impregnate herself so she could make sure you didn't cancel the wedding?"

"Hang on, when did you find *that* out?" Gaby asks, spinning around to face Drew.

"Millen had told his parents the wedding was off and had told Lana the same, then she announced she was pregnant and I *knew* something wasn't right. So I tried to track her down but she kept putting me off. That was, until I staked her out and she talked to me."

"And she just happened to impart on you her entire plan?"

"No, but I made sure she told me everything, because if I'm going to lose my best friend anyway—and I no doubt will—I'm gonna make damn well sure that gold-digging whore doesn't get her way either." My shoulders tense at his reference to Lana and usually I'd be the first to jump in and shoot anyone down for calling a woman a whore, but when the shoe fits...

Gaby must sense my unease and steps forward. "I think we should all take a minute and sit—"

"Tell me, Drew. What did she say?"

"She tried to get Millen into bed but he turned her down. Seems my best friend has a hell of a lot more self-control than I do, because that was *before* Tahoe, before you'd even taken him back."

Well, shit. Millen was telling the truth.

"But *why* did she then turn to you?" Gaby asks, taking the words out of my mouth.

"She saw you guys on your date at the Mexican place. She's been fixated on Millen for a long time and couldn't stand the idea of you having him when he'd continually turned her down."

"You're telling me this whole clusterfuck is because she didn't like me playing with someone she had already claimed in her *head*? She's more fucked up than I realized," I say with a shake of my head.

"So she jumped you to seal the deal with Millen *before* Kenzie went away with him?" Gaby asks. "But you said that was the first time. Being

drunk and having a woman jump on your dick is a one-time only excuse, Drew. What about the other times?" she presses.

He sighs, his demeanor definitely one of defeat. "Wounded male pride and stupidity."

"At least you're aware of your shortcomings," I snap. My words are harsh, but I'm beyond angry right now. My emotions are on hyperdrive, and I'm warring between wanting to strangle Drew for being so fucking stupid and wanting to hunt down Lana Mason and tear her a new one. If it wasn't so late at night, I'd probably be hopping in my car and doing the latter.

Then the real reason for him being here hits me like a slap in the face. "You wanna make me the bad guy," I say, matter-of-factly. I drop down into the nearest chair and scrub my face with my hands.

"Kenz," Drew says softly. He sits opposite me, shifting forward until his knees touch mine. I look up to see his eyes are fixed, his face gentle as he reaches out and gently squeezes my hand. "You two belong together. He is totally and utterly gone for you. *Any* other man I wouldn't give a shit, but it's you, and you deserve a man who looks at you the way Millen does. Just as much as he deserves a woman like you who will always have his back, even if it means walking away."

It's then I realize that Drew was never on board with the friends-with-benefits arrangement. I now see it was always more than benefits for him. This must be killing him inside.

"Drew..."

He cups my hands in his, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. "Any other man, Kenz, and I'd fight him to the death for you. You need to stop him from making the biggest mistake of his life tomorrow. He was going to walk away from everything for you until Lana screwed it all up. You have to make this right for me. I need you to make it right for *you*."

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull him in for a hug, burrowing into his neck as his shoulders start to shake. We sit there like that for a long time. Gaby leaves us to it, giving me a gentle squeeze on the shoulder on her way past.

Leading Drew down the stairs and out the back door to my car, my mind is racing with all of the possibilities of what may happen tomorrow. What *could* happen if I fight for my man?

Yet again, Dad's words come flooding back to me.

"It's a beautiful pain that's always worth it if you're both willing to work to make things right."

By the time I set Drew up on my couch and crawl into bed, I'm more than prepared to go to war.

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Chapter 23

Sitting in the recliner in my living room, I stare at the street outside, still struggling to wrap my head around Drew's confession from last night. I don't know what to do with it. What *can* I do with it?

A grunt from the couch breaks the silence. Turning that way, I meet the pained, sleepy eyes of the man who possibly waited a touch too late to right his wrongs.

Today will tell me if that's true.

He looks around the room, as if realizing where he is, and then his expression falls. "What did I do?"

I give him a pointed look. "You know what you did, Drew. You made a scene at the bar, demanded to see me, then finally admitted your part in all of this."

"Shit."

"What matters now is what you're going to do to make it right," I say, standing and walking over to my coffee table, handing him the steaming mug I'd made for him a few minutes earlier.

Sitting, he swipes his hair away from his face before taking the drink from me and having a long sip. He leans back against the cushions and looks up at me. "I'm so sorry, Kenz."

"Sorry doesn't mean a damn thing unless you help me fix this."

His brows draw together. "Why do you think I went to the bar last night?"

"Guilty conscience," I deadpan.

"That, and I know the only way to fix this is if you're there with me. There's one person in the world who can stop this wedding and it's you,

only you.”

“Right. So drink up, go shower, and we’ll get on the road.”

“You’ve gotta get dressed too, you know,” he says with a smirk, looking me up and down.

Shit, he’s right. I guess Millen’s tee I stole from him and yoga pants is not exactly suitable “stopping a wedding” attire.

“Good point,” I squeak, moving toward the door. “There’s a towel in the bathroom for you. Now, chop, chop. Body to wash, best friend to pick up—mine, not yours—and wedding to prevent.” I get to the door and stop suddenly, spinning back around to face him. “What time *is* the wedding?” I say, realizing it might be helpful to know exactly how much time is left to save the day.

“Two p.m. But it’ll take two hours to get there once we’re on the road.”

“What about your tux? Don’t you kind of need that?”

His eyes crinkle and he smiles at me, a huge beaming grin that puts me at ease. “If it all goes right, absolutely fucking not,” he says unequivocally.

“Good answer.”



I pull up to the curb outside Gaby’s apartment building, noting with interest that her parking bay is occupied by Bruno’s car. I quickly send her a text announcing our arrival, glancing at the time to see it’s already five minutes to twelve.

“How are you doing?” Drew asks from the passenger seat. For the first time this morning, I take stock of my emotional state. How *am* I doing?

I’m determined. I’m angry—a little with Drew, a *lot* with the scheming bitch who may still succeed at ruining my chances with Millen—and I’m also nervous as all hell.

“I have no idea how this is going to go down,” I admit, turning in my seat toward him. “How do I do this? Am I supposed to just rock on up like in *The Graduate* and scream his name?”

He chuckles and reaches over to give my knee a gentle squeeze. His gaze drops to his hand before he quickly removes it. “I think just you turning up, making that first move to let him know that you’re there to fight for what you’ve got? That will do all the work for you.”

“You think?” I ask, biting my lip. My anxiety is reaching dire levels now. One of the reasons why I asked Gaby to come—okay, demanded she attend might be a more accurate description—is that she’s one of the few people in the world who can calm me down if needed.

“Kenz,” he says warmly. “I’ve *never* seen Millen as gone for a woman as he is for you. He was going to risk it all. He *did* risk it all before Lana got her claws into him. It’s just unfortunate that I now have to deal with the woman for the next eighteen years.”

I raise a brow. “So you’re going to be involved?”

“It’s my child, my son or daughter, and if I have my way, their life will never be affected by the circumstances of their conception. I’ll be there in every single way possible.”

I want to give him a hug but I’m not sure it’s what he needs right now. Words might be better. “I’ll help you in any way I can, Drew. I know things might be weird for a while, but I hope we stay friends.” I realize how that sounds, and at the sight of his twitching lips, I burst out laughing just as Gaby bounds out of her apartment door, Bruno kissing her goodbye and wearing a pair of sweats and a smile. *It seems Miss Gaby has a secret.*

“Howdy-ho, people,” she says, sliding into the back seat and shutting the door. “Damn, you look good,” she says, reaching out and smoothing her hand over my one-shoulder red lace dress. I start the car and pull into the road, turning on my GPS to show me the way.

“You’re gonna knock him on his ass when he sees you in that outfit,” Gaby says.

“That’s the plan. Or at least distract him enough to kidnap him if need be.” I’m not exactly serious but I want to make sure I *look* like I am worth the effort because I don’t want to contemplate the possibility that he’ll turn me down.

I *know* he won't go ahead with the wedding. Whether he'll still want to be with me after I tell him the truth? That's a whole other thing.

"Babe, you're scrunching your nose up like you do when you're about to freak out, so stop thinking about the what-ifs and focus on the what-you-wants. Think about tonight and tomorrow and every day forward when you'll have your man and the she-bitch will have a baby she doesn't even want," Gaby says. My head snaps to Drew as he winces.

"Harsh, but true," he says, his tone flat.

"Sorry." Gaby grimaces, meeting my eyes in the rear-vision mirror and mouthing "oops" to me. I shake my head at her, then focus back on the road and try to center my thoughts. A quick look at the GPS tells me it'll take one hour and fifty-five minutes to reach our destination. The clock says we'll arrive with five minutes to spare.

Fingers crossed the bride is traditionally late then.



Five minutes away from our destination, I have to pull over.

I pull into a rest stop, turning the car off and almost jumping out the door, high heels be damned.

I walk around the hood and over toward concrete bench, checking it's clean before sitting down and burying my face in my hands.

"Babe..." Gaby says gently. "I know you're freaking out, but now isn't exactly the time to do it. We may have gotten here quicker than we thought, but the wedding is due to start in ten minutes and we still need to get there."

Peeking up at her, I see her smiling down at me. There's no one else I'd want with me to stop a wedding other than Gaby. She's the perfect sidekick. *Not that I'm ever gonna be breaking up a wedding again.*

"We *have* to get going, Kenz. I'm not letting you get this far and *not* follow through. You deserve that man, and he deserves you. Lana does *not* get to screw that up for you. She doesn't get a fucked up happily-ever-after, and she definitely doesn't get to steal yours." She holds both hands out toward me.

“What if—”

“Kenzie Sharp, I love you to the moon and back and beyond, but we do *not* have time for what-ifs now. We’re here. We’re going to make sure the man you love knows the full story before he decides whether to miss his chance at true happiness with you or not. If you want your man, you need to get your ass in your car, and I’ll drive while you deal with your breakdown in the back seat.

She’s right, of course. I’m past the point of no return, and if there’s any hope of me getting to Millen in time—before Lana gets there and seals her sour deal—I need to move.

With that in mind, I reach out and put my hands in Gaby’s, letting her pull me up. As I walk to the car, Drew watches me through the window and gives me a small smile, his eyes full of concern.

“Are we doing this?” Gaby asks, taking my place in the driver’s seat.

“Yep,” I reply

“It’ll be alright,” Drew says, not sounding at all confident.

“It has to be,” I reply, and those four words strengthen my resolve.

Five minutes later, Gaby is pulling the car into the driveway, driving way too fast for the gravel road. As we come to a dramatic stop in the middle of the full parking lot, my eyes lock on the black limo parked in front of a small set of stairs leading up to the most gorgeous white chapel I’ve ever seen.

“Shit. I’m totally gonna have to make a scene, aren’t I?” I ask, my racing heart making it hard to breathe.

“It’s now or never,” Gaby says, hopping out of the car, Drew doing the same.

He opens my door, his expression tight. “It’s time, Kenz. You do whatever you’ve got to do. Whatever happens, we’ve got your back.”

When I spot Harris getting out of the limo, I know I have to move and before I know it, I’m storming toward him, no doubt in my mind as to what I have to do.

The minute Lana sees me, a snide smirk appears. Her dress is stunning, a strapless white lace gown that could be nothing but couture. “Good, you’re here,” she says, grinning like a cat who got the cream.

That’s until she sees Drew come up beside me. Then her expression drops, a flash of fear the first crack in her façade.

“Got ya, bitch,” Gaby whispers, flanking me.

“Kenzie, what are you doing here?” Harris asks, breaking the stalemate.

“Righting some wrongs, Harris.” My voice rises and he frowns, looking around the group before stopping on me.

“Look, this is not the time to—”

“Let’s go, Dad,” Lana says, her voice strained. She loops her arm in his and tries to pull him toward the stairs.

“Lana,” Drew says, his tone leaving no room for misinterpretation. His body is tense, his shoulders square, and his jaw set.

“What?” she snarls, scowling at him. “You get Kenzie and I get Millen. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Can someone tell me what’s going on? Kenzie? Lana?”

I open my mouth to back him up but stop short when the chapel doors open.

Millen’s dad comes out first, quickly followed by his sister, Ashley, and his mom, and more mortifying, the rest of the wedding guests. Scanning the rapidly growing crowd, I meet the frowning grey eyes of the reason I’m here.

Any doubts I had about coming here disappear. I now know what I have to do, and there’s no way I’m leaving here until it’s done.

The pain will be worth it, as long as Millen is mine at the end of it.

It’s time to claim my man.

Chapter 24

Millen glares at Drew, his jaw tight as he takes in the scene in front of him. “Nice of my best man to turn up on time,” Millen says, snidely.

Drew frowns, patting down his pockets and pulling out his phone. “Shit, flat battery.”

“How convenient,” he snaps back before stormy eyes lock on mine, Millen’s anger morphing into pain with every step closer he gets. Bradley follows quickly on his heels.

“It’s not like that, Mills. I came here *with* Kenz to stop you. I wouldn’t subject either of you to this without good reason.”

“Right,” Millen says, deadpan. His eyes don’t leave mine as he stops a few feet in front of us. My eyes drift to Millen’s mother. She looks frailer than she did the last time I saw her. Her skin is pale and the way she’s holding herself—with Ashley at her side—makes it obvious that she’s fragile.

I stare at Millen, words escaping me as I take in the tailored charcoal suit jacket framing his broad shoulders. His crisp white shirt beneath contrasts the slate Windsor knot resting at the base of his throat. Matching slacks hug his narrow hips, falling to polished black patent leather shoes.

Being this close to him and sensing him in every part of my being is torture. I want to throw myself into his arms and beg for forgiveness for giving up and not fighting for what I knew deep in my heart was and still is a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

“Babe, can we get this show on the road before you jump him?” Gaby says.

“Can someone tell me what the hell is going on?” Harris says, breaking through my daze.

Bradley enters the fray. “Exactly my question.”

“Millen, sweetheart,” Lana says, dropping her father’s arm and stepping toward Millen. *Not on my fucking watch.* I move as if on autopilot, blocking her advance and stopping her from getting any closer.

“Kenz?” he asks, his voice barely audible. It’s guttural, the roughness reaching inside of me. I square my shoulders, bracing myself for battle. There’s no turning back now.

“Lana, you had to know that the truth would come out,” I begin, shutting out the growing murmurings from the guests behind us.

“The truth about what?” She looks over my shoulder at Millen. “Millen, you can’t believe anything she says. She’s here with *Drew*. For all you know, they’re probably back together now.” She says his name like it leaves a foul taste in her mouth. Funnily enough, that’s exactly the way I’ve felt about her since the moment she walked into the bar with that undeserved ring on her finger. The fact she has the gall to put ideas in Millen’s head to take the focus off her is laughable.

“*I am* here with Drew. But we’re here to stop this farce of a wedding from going ahead, because the only reason he’s marrying you is because of that baby, which isn’t even *his*.”

Millen’s breath catches as the crowd’s murmurings grow louder.

“*Oh my God.*”

“*Does that mean—?*”

“*Wooooow...*”

“*What did she just say?*”

Lana’s eyes snap to Drew who stands frozen in place, his attention locked on his best friend standing at my back. I desperately want to turn around, to gauge Millen’s reaction to the bombshell I’ve just dropped, but I know I’ll lose my courage if I stop now. I need to get it all out at once, inflicting the damage in one foul swoop before facing the fallout left in my wake.

“Bradley, I know there’s a lot at stake right now,” I say, turning toward Millen’s father. “But I love your son too damn much to let him go because of a long-held grudge Lana has with me. It’s turning far too toxic and affecting far too many lives to let it go on.”

“You’re a liar. You’re just bitter because it’s *me* Millen wants to marry.”

Harris turns to his daughter, putting his hands on her shoulders and spinning her to face him. Her furious eyes drag from me, to Drew, then land on her dad’s. “Lana, now is the time for you to tell me the truth. It was *you* who suggested the marriage. *You* who came to me and said an heir would further cement the deal. I was unhappy then, and I’m *really* fucking confused now because I’ve known Kenzie for her whole life and not once has she lied to me. You…”

“Dad,” Lana gasps. “You’re choosing to believe *her* over me?” She puts a hand on her chest. She’s acting like she’s the wronged party here but I totally see through the façade though, as can Drew.

“Lana, cut the bullshit and tell the truth before I do,” Drew says, again looking at his best friend. I still haven’t turned around to see Millen’s face, and he hasn’t stepped out from behind me. If anything, he’s moved closer, my back feeling the warmth radiating from him.

Lana opens her mouth but shuts it again, and for the first time since we arrived, I see a flash of fear in her eyes. Her intricately concocted plan, so close to being realized, is now falling apart in front of her very eyes. But what was she expecting, when she went to such drastic lengths to get Millen’s ring on her finger?

Drew steps forward, and I lose the ability to breathe. “I’m the father. The baby is mine.”

Cue more gasps, even louder murmurings, and a “What the fuck?” spat out from behind my back.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Millen says, moving so quickly I don’t have time to react, let alone stop his fist from flying straight into Drew’s face.

The minute Drew stands straight again, chest to chest with Millen, he takes another punch—to the nose this time—and again, moves back, ready to take another.

“No!” Gaby and I yell in unison, Gaby going to Drew just as I insert myself between the two best friends, and for the first time in three long weeks, I put my hands on Millen’s chest.

“Take a breath,” I say for our ears only. “Take a long, slow, deep breath and think this through. He came to *me* to make this right. He said I was the only one who could do it. Be angry, be pissed as hell, but pummeling him into the ground won’t make you feel better.”

Millen’s eyes meet mine, and I get lost in the stormy whorls of undeniable rage I find in his gaze. His hands go to my hips but not to pull me into him—much to my disappointment. Instead, he pushes me back and walks over to Lana.

He stares at her for what seems like forever, but in reality is only a few moments. He shakes his head, clearing his throat before opening his mouth and delivering the death blow. “You almost cost me everything I’ve wanted most in life all because you didn’t want anyone else being with me. Not once, not once since I’ve met you, have I *ever* felt anything for you beyond friendship. The only reason I agreed to go ahead with this was because Kenz told me I had to do right by the baby, a baby that I’ve found out isn’t even *mine*.” He tilts his head toward me. “What I feel for *her* is nothing like you’ll *ever* experience in your entire life. I just hope that you give up that baby and let Drew raise it alone, because no one—especially that innocent child—deserves to have a toxic mother like you.”

“Millen!” she says, trying to grab his arm as he walks away. He jerks it free just as Harris holds her back.

“Stop it, Lana. Just stop. This is over,” Harris says. He meets Bradley’s eyes, and between the two of them I see a clear understanding that whatever happens on the business side of things, everything will be alright. “I’ll honor the contract, Brad. Nothing needs to change.” Millen’s dad’s shoulders sag in what can only be relief. There was so much riding on this deal—this marriage—and the change I see in him now is so visible, it’s no

wonder he was abrupt and obviously worried when Millen told him he wanted to be with me.

Millen stops in front of his father, resting a hand on his shoulder and talking in his ear. Bradley nods, and with a clap on his son's back, he walks over to Harris and Lana. I watch Millen's retreating back as he walks away from the group and disappears between two buildings toward the vineyard.

"This is done, Harris," Bradley says, his voice low and matter-of-fact. "Please save my family and guests any further embarrassment"—he glares at Lana before continuing—"by leaving immediately."

Harris nods and puts his hand on the small of Lana's back. The instigator of this whole thing now a shadow of her former over-confident scheming self.

It's then that the whole scene in front of me comes into focus. Gaby's busy tending to Drew, but within moments, Ashley is beside them holding a handkerchief to his bleeding nose as Bradley walks over to me, his expression softer than I've ever seen.

"Go to him. He may not be in the right headspace to listen, but you're the only one he'll want to see. My son is loyal to a fault and knows his own mind. I was wrong to push this marriage on him, and I hope in time you'll both find it in your hearts to forgive me." He reaches out and rests his hand on my arm. I can't move, though. I've frozen in place, struggling to comprehend the complete change I've seen in the man standing in front of me.

"I—"

His eyes soften when I stutter, and he gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "It's only been you, Kenzie. It's only *ever* going to be you for him. I saw it back at the house when we met, and yet I still pushed for him to go through with this. Go to him," he says, his lips curving into a sardonic smile. "Besides, it seems I have a cancelled wedding and a shit-ton of food and alcohol to deal with." A small giggle escapes my lips and his grin widens. "There it is." His eyes shine with approval.

"What?" I ask, scrunching my nose up.

“Just one of the reasons you’re perfect for him. Now go see to my son.”

“Thank you,” I rasp, my throat so tight my voice breaks, and just like that, I’m able to move, giving Gaby a cautionary look and getting an encouraging nod from Nina before making my way between the buildings to find the man I love.

When I see Millen’s profile in the distance, a wave of calm washes over me. The worst is over now but there’s still a sliver of fear deep inside, a small voice in my head warning me that I’m not home free yet. He’s going to be angry—and he has every right to be—not just at Drew and Lana, but also at me. I pushed him to go through with this; I turned my back on him and walked away from *us*. As I close the distance between us, my only hope is that he’ll hear me out and find it in his heart to forgive me for doubting him and what we had.

He doesn’t turn around, but his defensive posture tells me he knows I’m here.

“Millen, I’m—”

“I should be happy,” he says roughly, his tone lower than I’ve ever heard it. “I should be pulling you into my arms and kissing you like I’ve dreamed of kissing you every day for the last three weeks. I should…” His voice breaks, and without hesitation, I rush to him and wrap my hands around his waist. My stomach drops as his body shakes.

“It’s wrong to be happy about this. But I am, and part of me hates myself for it. I’d accepted my fate and a life without you in it. My heart was never going to be the same, but I had to go through with it. I thought I had no other choice.”

We stand there, my arms tight around his waist, desperate to be here for him and help him get through this. Hopefully, he will still want to be with me on the other side, ready to pick up where we left off.

Then he tenses and pulls away from me, turning to face me, his expression unreadable.

“How can I trust anyone now? Drew—of all fucking people—slept with Lana. *You*, you doubted me—doubted us—and believed that I could sleep with Lana when I was already so fucking gone for you. I’m *still* gone for you, but now I’m doubting what we had because it was so fucking good...” He shakes his head. “*So right*, and you still walked away.”

“Millen...”

“How can I trust it, Kenz? How can I trust *this*?” he shouts, waving his hand between us.

My heart seizes. It’s put-up-or-shut-up time. This may well be one of the most important moments of my life, one I’ll forever look back on as the turning point. A fork in the road in my journey until a one-of-a-kind man came crashing into it, refusing to let me ignore what was there between us despite the setbacks we faced. He breathes hard now, his eyes wet, and each tear that falls tugs at my chest, further cementing my resolve to make this right.

Taking a deep breath, I close the last step between us, reaching down and tangling my fingers with his, then lifting his hand to place it on my chest. His body jolts, but he doesn’t move away. “My heart stops beating when I’m not with you. It doesn’t start again until I see you, touch you, kiss you.” His eyes widen, and I press on. “The beautiful pain from loving and losing you will always be worth it if it means I get you.” I take a deep breath and continue, “I have to believe that everything we’ve been through, everything we’ve faced, it has to mean something, Millen. I refuse to believe these feelings aren’t forever. We deserve our happy ending.” I move closer, trapping our hands between us, tilting my head up to meet his gaze, tears cascading across my skin. “And since it almost broke us already and we’re still standing today, I can’t fathom anything other than you and me together.” I lift onto my toes and brush my lips against his mouth, tasting his tears, tasting my own, and whisper, “When we’re apart I’m broken. When we’re together I’m whole.”

“I love you more than anything in this world,” he says, stealing my breath.

“And I’m going to spend a lifetime loving you. Tonight, and all the tomorrows,” I whisper, barely getting the words out as a sob catches in my throat.

It’s then that he smiles, a huge blinding grin that I’ll never forget for the rest of my life. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“Promise?”

“With every breath I take.” Then he’s kissing me and it’s the only thing that matters.

I may have taken my shot and lost in the first round, but there’s a lot to be said for never giving up and fighting for your own happiness. Because when you find that person you’re bound to be with, one thing I’ve learned is to hold on and never let go.

Taking my one shot at love will now and forever be the best chance I ever took.

The End

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Epilogue

Millen

There are moments in life when a man looks back and reflects on all he's done and everything he's achieved. He looks at the highs, the lows, the triumphs and the tragedies, the missed connections and the mistakes and takes stock of where he's at.

Looking down at the sleeping baby girl in my arms is definitely one of those moments. Lifting my head and meeting the exhausted eyes of my wife—the woman I love more than anything in this world—is another.

Counting my blessings is something I've done a lot of in the past eighteen months.

Almost two years ago, I took a chance and walked up to the most intriguing woman I've ever seen. I was cocky and arrogant, but I knew what I wanted, and it was her. When she met me blow for blow, I knew I had to have her. When she challenged me to prove myself and my intentions, I knew she would be mine.

Then, as it often does, life got in the way and threw obstacle after obstacle in front of us but in the end, I wasn't wrong.

The day on the secluded beach in the south of France when she took my ring and agreed to be mine forever proved that without a doubt.

Our one-hour-old daughter in my arms—Nina Gabrielle Ross—is the best prize of all in what has been a well-rewarded life so far. A blessing, a tribute to my mother who peacefully passed away surrounded by my father, my sister Ashley, Kenzie, and me just two months after my cancelled wedding.

Looking back at all of this, there's one thing that rings true, one thing that I'll cherish for the rest of my days.

Kenzie Sharp was the best shot at love I ever took and I'll never regret anything I had to do to get to where I am now and where I'll always be—holding the world in my arms and never letting go.

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Coming in 2018

Second Chance

Second Chance (Chances #2)

When life gives me lemons, I always make lemonade.

Living every day like it could be my last, I'm content with the choices I've made and do so unapologetically. With a relationship that makes me happy, and a job that I love, life is good.

But when the man I've just agreed to marry, has his estranged wife and five-year-old daughter turn up on his doorstep, I'm not the only one reevaluating things.

He didn't plan for that—and I didn't plan for my childhood sweetheart to return, wanting me back.

Sometimes lemons can be sour, sometimes they can be sweet, and sometimes, all it takes is a second chance to make things right again.

You just need to get that second chance in the first place.

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About the Author



BJ Harvey is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the Bliss Series. She also regards herself as a smut peddler, suspense conjurer and a funny romance thinker upper. An avid music fan, you will always find her singing some hit song badly but loving every minute of it. She's a wife, a mom to two beautiful girls, and hails from what she considers as the best country in the world—New Zealand.

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