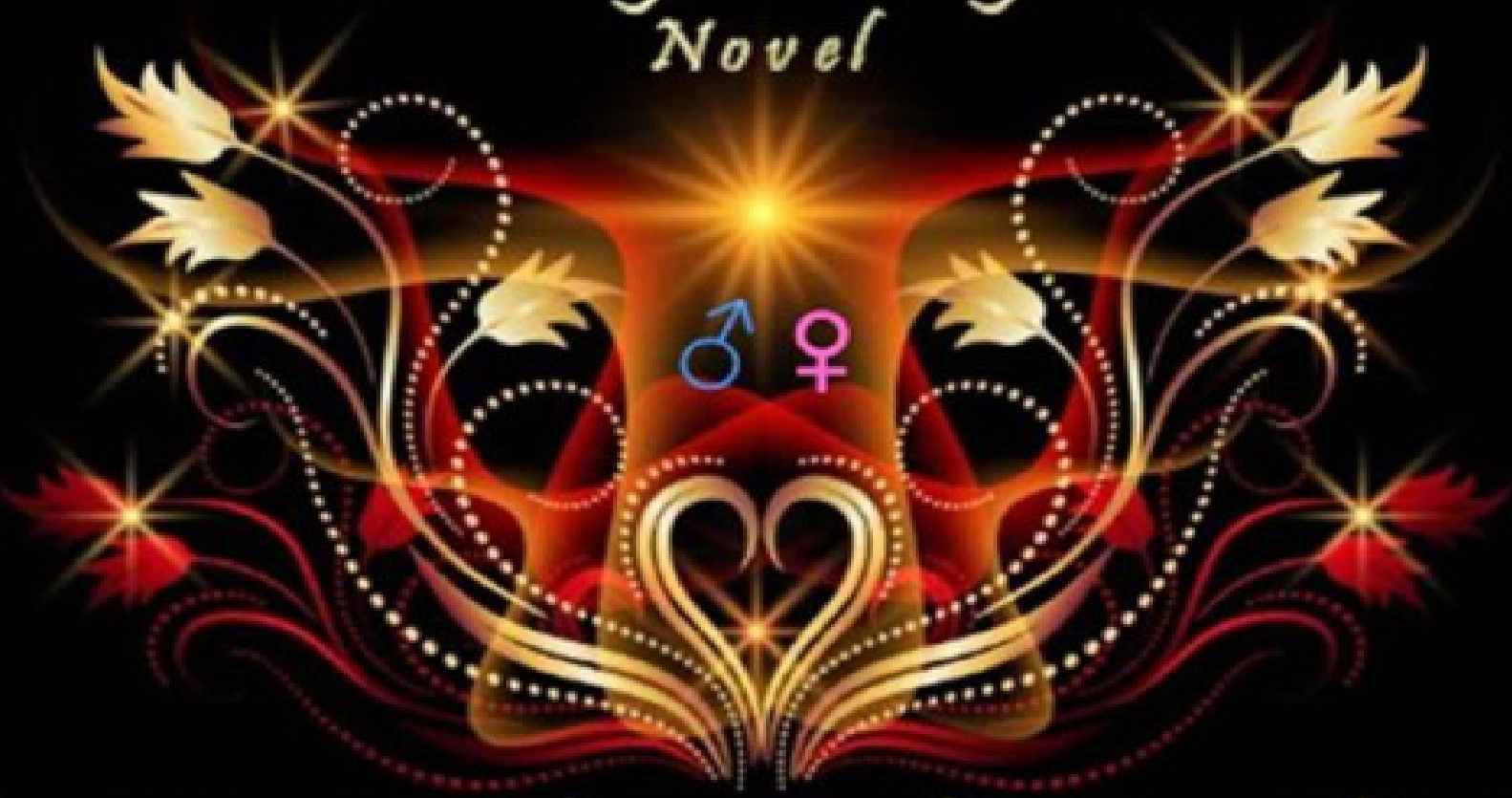


Zane

An
Alluring Indulgence
Novel



Nicole Edwards

Zane

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Dedication
Nicole-Nation,
This one is for you!

Love,
~Nic~

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Prologue

♀ ♂

The rapping of knuckles against the door announced Zane's arrival, effectively causing V to pause in her own kitchen. It wasn't as though he could see her from where he was. Nor could he hear the way her heart began to race, or the little marching band that had taken to running around like ants on crack in her stomach. She was both anxious and nervous to see him again. Although she had repeatedly refused to go to Alluring Indulgence's ground breaking ceremony with him, he wasn't giving up. His appearance on her front porch was proof of his persistence.

Realizing she'd been standing there for far too long, V rushed to the front door, pulling it open to see Zane's sexy smirk shining brightly back at her. No matter how much she tried to stay away from him, one tip of those beautiful lips had her pulse racing and her heart giving up the fight to keep her distance.

"Give me one minute. I just need to get my purse," she told him and turned back to the kitchen. The last thing she needed was for him to come inside because if he did, she knew they'd probably never make it to the ceremony. He'd have her flat on her back and naked in the blink of an eye. For some reason, when Zane was close, her clothes just seemed to fall off.

Glancing one more time in the mirror in the entry way, V smiled at her reflection. Her brain was a scrambled mess of emotions lately; most of them had something to do with Zane and his relentless pursuit of her. She wasn't used to that sort of thing from a man, and quite frankly, she'd gotten so good at turning men down, she wasn't sure how to handle Zane. He didn't seem like he was giving up. And as much as she dreaded going out

with him, she had also been looking forward to it. For days. No matter how many times she turned him down, she always secretly hoped he'd never give up on her. So far, he hadn't.

Reaching for her purse and grabbing her keys and cell phone, V was startled by a loud noise that sounded as though it was right on her front porch. Rushing over to the door, wondering what the hell could have happened, V was frozen in place at the scene playing out right there in her front yard.

Dropping everything in her hands, V raced to the door, the wooden screen slamming against the wall as she barreled through it, a loud noise piercing the air around her. She realized immediately the sound was coming from her. She was screaming as she raced down the stairs, stumbling over the last step and falling to her knees.

“Go back inside, V. Right now!” Zane yelled at her, but V couldn't understand what he was telling her. She heard the words, but she was too distracted, by the four men standing around him, to try and comprehend his instructions.

Jake Sanders.

Oh God!

Her heart began pounding harder, the sound of her own blood beating in her ears and her breaths soughing in and out of her lungs. From where she was, she could see blood on the back of Zane's head, but he was standing on his own two feet, poised like a fighter in a ring as he moved slowly, trying to keep all four men in his sights.

Suddenly there was movement. Lots and lots of movement.

All four men rushed Zane at the same time, each of them holding something in their hands. Metal. They were holding metal bars in their hands and without hesitation they began slamming them against Zane repeatedly as he tried desperately to fend them off. V watched in absolute horror as Zane stumbled to the ground before pushing himself back up again.

“No!” V screamed, pushing back to her feet and stumbling yet again as she tried to get closer. “Stop!”

The words never stopped coming. She kept screaming over and over, trying to get closer, but unsure what to do. For a fraction of a second, she looked down at her hands, wondering where her cell phone was. She needed to call for help, but it was nowhere to be found. Pushing back up to her feet, her adrenaline racing like a freight train through her bloodstream now, V ran directly into the melee, watching as the four men continued to attack Zane with the weapons they wielded over and over.

He was bleeding profusely by the time she got close enough to do something. What? She had no idea. She wasn't armed, and there was no one around to help, no one responding to her screams.

Oh God!

There was so much blood. Right before her eyes, Zane was crumbling to the ground, but she watched in amazement as he tried to hold his own. His fist slammed into the face of one of his attackers, and the guy stumbled back, holding his nose as blood spurted everywhere.

“Go inside!” Zane's voice didn't sound nearly as charged as it had moments before, but V didn't listen to him anyway. She had to do something. She had to help.

Continuing to scream, she ran forward, lunging into one of the guys closest to her and slamming into his back, knocking him sideways. Before her brain could tell her feet what to do next, V felt herself falling, her feet unable to hold her up as she went flying backward, landing with a hard thud on her back, knocking the breath from her chest as her head slammed into the unyielding ground. She tried to get up, but the pain was intense.

Opening her eyes, a wave of dizziness crashed into her. V watched in absolute terrified horror as Zane was beaten over and over again by three of the four men standing in her yard. He wasn't moving. He wasn't trying to get up, and the loud screeching sound was making her brain hurt more.

It was her. She was still screaming at the top of her lungs.

Trying to pick herself up off the ground was harder than she expected, but she managed to make it to her knees, a wave of nausea rushing over her and making her drop her head to the ground. The sound of metal against bone and flesh was too much. The sickening crunch echoed all around her, and she knew they were still hitting Zane although he wasn't moving. She lifted her head enough to see that they were now kicking him, punching him time and time again.

She tried again to get to her feet, but she fell. Her head was pounding from where she'd hit it on the ground, but she had to get to Zane. She had to stop them.

The next thing V knew, there were more people. Her neighbors. Running toward them from all directions and V saw the four men scatter like birds. Somehow she managed to crawl over to Zane, her hands running over his beaten and bloodied body while she screamed his name over and over.

He didn't respond.

Oh, God!

He wasn't answering her!

Vanessa Carmichael was about to go out of her mind. Despite the fact she was the one who called 911, or that she was the one who told the police all of the gory details, no one was telling her anything. Begging and pleading hadn't worked, so here she was pacing the emergency waiting room floor.

Emergency Room.

Surrounded by people she didn't know, some waiting to be seen by a doctor, others waiting patiently for someone or something, V paced back and forth praying that someone would tell her something. *Anything*. The EMT's had whisked Zane away without preamble, leaving her to try and explain what happened to the police. After she refused medical treatment, she answered a barrage of questions, but the only thing she could think about was getting to Zane. They hadn't even let her get her phone while they questioned her.

By the time they let her go, V hadn't even contemplated calling anyone in her race to the hospital. It wasn't until the nurse at the desk asked if she was a family member, did she realize that his own family didn't even know what was going on. When it was painfully obvious they weren't going to let her see him, and they weren't going to tell her anything, she texted Zoey.

Since then, V had answered her phone at least ten times, every time speaking to a different brother or Zane's parents and even one time talking to a man named Luke McCoy, whom she didn't even know. Supposedly, according to the brief phone conversation she had with Lorrie Walker only minutes before, they were on their way to the hospital and she was to sit tight.

Right. As if she could even sit down.

She knew they were close, but they weren't getting there fast enough. They'd left the ground breaking ceremony after her initial text.

The ground breaking ceremony.

Where she and Zane were supposed to be.

Oh God!

Her head was pounding with what the EMT's told her was probably a concussion, but her heart was racing ninety miles a minute from not knowing what was happening to Zane. She didn't care about herself. She needed to know how Zane was.

How bad was he? What were they doing to him? Was he going to be all right? Those were only a few of the questions running at lightning speed through her brain, the same questions that everyone who worked in that damn hospital refused to answer for her.

The other question – where was Zoey?

V desperately needed a distraction before she started chewing off her fingernails. A terrible habit she had broken years ago, but one that was threatening to reemerge with a vengeance.

A loud commotion at the ER entrance caught her attention, and V swung around to see a group of people – a large group at that – pushing into

the small waiting area. Coming in with them were the chaotic murmurs of concerned family.

“Zoey,” V whispered her friend’s name as she emerged from the group of massive males, making a beeline straight for her. Never in her life had V been happier to see her best friend than she was right then.

The second she came in contact with Zoey’s much smaller body, she nearly fell to her knees. Overwhelmed by the enormity of what this all meant, V began sobbing like a baby.

“Honey, I’m here.” Zoey whispered in her ear, holding her tightly against her and running her hand through her hair. Being held had never felt so good, and V was relieved to have someone she knew she could turn to.

The chaos ensued around them, but V didn’t look up, nor did she stop crying as she sent up a steady stream of silent prayers for Zane. Even when the buzz of more Walker males speaking around them, she continued to sob, never speaking, just quietly begging.

Please, God, please let Zane be ok.

Chapter One

♂ ♀

Three Months later... December

“Will you stop hovering, goddammit?” Zane was literally two seconds away from jumping out of the damn bed and showing his brother exactly what he thought of him acting like a fucking mother hen. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“Actually, no.” Braydon grinned, and Zane wanted to punch him. Square in the mouth. “I’ve dedicated my entire morning to seeing your pretty face.”

Just fucking perfect. “Fantastic.”

Just what he needed – a fucking babysitter.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Braydon added in that facetiously ornery tone that made Zane’s hands clench into fists.

He knew damned good and well why Braydon was there. For the same reason, at least one of his six brothers visited him each day – so he didn’t just walk out of the damn prison that was disguised as a hospital. The one he’d been sentenced to for the last three months.

“Well, you should find somewhere to go then before I get out of this bed and kick your ass,” Zane told him.

“I’d like to see you try.” The same cocky grin Zane saw, more often than not, on one of the twins’ faces reflected back at him. Only when Braydon did it, he managed to get under Zane’s skin like no one else.

Zane growled in response to the dare.

Little did his older brother know, but Zane was finally capable of doing just that. Well, the getting out of bed part anyway.

For the last two months, ever since he'd come out of his month long coma, Zane had been working like a maniac, to get his body back to where it was before the brutal attack that left him unable to walk, along with other things. Aside from the multitude of broken bones – all of which had healed nicely during his three month vacation in the hospital – Zane had been diagnosed as having severe Traumatic Brain Injury. And in case the doctors didn't know, that wasn't something to be shared with his six older brothers. They'd had a field day trying to convince the doctors and nurses that he'd been born that way.

After three and a half weeks in a coma, Zane had woken up only to find that he wasn't able to do some of the things he had taken for granted most of his life. Both walking and talking had been on that list if only for a brief time. After two months of rigorous physical therapy and finally, a much anticipated breakthrough, Zane could do pretty much everything he had before the attack. Only it required a little more effort on his part.

Aside from the emotional scars, Zane had healed rather well. A couple of physical scars that were visible with his clothes on would remind him and his family of what he'd been through. Nothing significant. Although the small, three inch scar beside his left eye was a glaring reminder of the payback that was due.

For the last week, he had even been allowed to do some strength training exercises that *weren't* reserved for children or the elderly. And now he was feeling as though he could take on the world. Bench pressing three hundred and fifty pounds again might take more time than he originally

expected, but he was working on it. Not that he would let his therapist know that.

Regardless, Zane was on the path to a full recovery and, quite frankly, he was ready to move on with his life... right out the front doors of the hospital. It'd taken some time to win over Dr. Canton, the frustratingly patient doc who'd been by his side for longer than either of them had probably expected. To his relief, the good doctor had finally told him today was the day. The day they were finally letting him go home. So, yes, Zane knew full well that Braydon was there to ensure he didn't get any bright ideas about running out of the building like a mad man.

The thought had crossed his mind a time or two.

Along with spending the better part of these last few months focusing on his recovery, Zane had also been battling an overwhelming sense of violence – the kind that would certainly get his ass thrown in jail for man slaughter. His temper was only exacerbated by the memories of what that bastard Jake Sanders' buddy had done to Vanessa on the very day Jake and his friends had nearly beaten Zane to death in a surprise attack on V's front lawn.

Don't get him wrong, Zane knew better than anyone that his condition could have been much, much worse. He was more than grateful just to be alive and to have his body and mind in one piece was an even bigger reason to send up prayers of thanks, but that didn't stop the blinding fury that now pulsed right along with his heartbeat.

If it hadn't been for his mother, Zane would've probably gone AWOL by now. The look in Lorrie Walker's crystal blue eyes and the tears that continued to swim in them weakened Zane even more than the combination of tire irons and being out of it for almost a month. So, here he was, wishing

like hell he had managed to control his temper better. At least then his brothers wouldn't know how pissed off he truly was. Not that hiding anything from them was easy. Considering he'd spent the last two months getting reacquainted with his wild and crazy brothers, Zane had also managed to fill up his TMI quota for the year. He was pretty sure Sawyer was out to win the title of the most ludicrous of them all. The man had mental issues.

“You talk to V lately?” Now it was Braydon's turn to ask questions.

“Not today, no.” Zane hadn't talked to V in two months actually. They'd texted back and forth a couple of times, but even those had significantly declined in recent weeks. He'd been lucky yesterday because she had actually responded to two of his texts.

Ever since the day he woke up to find V sitting by his bedside, holding his hand, her tears dropping onto his fingers, Zane hadn't seen her either. That day had been the one and only time he had physically laid eyes on her while he had been in the hospital, although his mother said V had remained by his bedside from the minute his parents gave the hospital permission to let her see him until the moment he woke up.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to speak for the first couple of days that he was awake, but he found a way to communicate as soon as Sawyer offered up his cell phone. For those two days, that was exactly how Zane communicated with everyone. Including V. The only difference was that once he was coherent and finally able to talk, he'd had the honor of talking to every single member of his family, his best friend Beau, and even Zoey, Kaleb's fiancé, on a daily basis. But he hadn't yet been able to say two words to V in person.

And since he came to, she'd become even more unresponsive as each day passed, to the point Zane had stopped texting her altogether. His attempt at interrogating both Zoey and Beau hadn't worked either. Neither of them shared much information with Zane when he asked. The only thing he managed to pull out of Zoey was that V was doing fine and that she felt responsible for what happened to him, which she seemed to be having a hard time dealing with.

Her being responsible was so damn far from the truth, Zane was livid when Zoey had told him, and from what he remembered, he had told her as much. That might explain why V wasn't showing her face or answering when he called. At least he hadn't been stupid enough to leave her a voicemail telling her what he thought. It wasn't V's fault. That bastard Jake Sanders was responsible.

And his pussy ass friends.

It took a couple of weeks after he woke up for Zane to remember what happened. Once he did, the images continued to sneak up on him at the most inopportune times. Just thinking about how they came at him, all four armed with fucking tire irons, still pissed him off. But, Zane wasn't all that worried about Jake and his band of losers. Not a single one of them had shown their face in town since that day, and he figured it would be a long time before they did.

Especially since, word was out that Travis Walker, Zane's oldest brother, was looking for them.

Literally.

But Trav wasn't going to be the only Walker looking for them. As soon as Zane was able to walk out of the hospital on his own two feet, he vowed to apply a little Walker retribution of his own.

As it turned out, that day was today.

“So you haven’t heard that Jake contacted her?” Braydon spoke, and Zane turned to look at him.

“*What?*”

“Kaleb mentioned it this morning. V seems to be blowing it off, but Zoey’s really worried.”

“What the hell did he say?”

“Don’t know for sure, but apparently he got her phone number somehow. Looks like he might’ve been the one behind the texts she was getting, too,” Braydon stated calmly, as though they were talking about the weather, sitting in the guest chair with his attention divided between the silent television and Zane’s face.

“Texts? When did she start receiving them?” *What the fuck?* No one told him anything about any damn texts.

Braydon managed to pry his face out of the television long enough to look back at Zane, but turned back again.

Fucking hell. Having a conversation with Braydon, or Brendon, for that matter, took a considerable amount of effort. Their attention spans were so damn short, it was a miracle they remembered their own fucking names.

“Don’t know. Ask her.”

He would ask her if she would answer her damn phone.

Zane grabbed his cell phone from the rollaway bedside table and ran through his contacts. With surprisingly nimble fingers, he typed out a text.

You better get your ass here to pick me up, or I’m walking.

Zane had had enough of this hell hole. If luck was on his side, Travis would answer the text quickly because it was time for Zane to blow this joint.

An hour and a half later, and not a second too soon, Zane was following Travis out into the brilliant Central Texas sunshine. He didn't look back at the hospital, just continued to move his feet forward. His oldest brother had been kind enough to bring Zane a pair of jeans, his boots, and a t-shirt and for the first time in a long time, he actually felt like himself.

He'd been wearing his own clothes for the last month and a half while he was in the hospital, but never more than sweats or shorts. He figured there wasn't any reason to get dressed more than that because someone was always poking and prodding, or sending him down to the rehabilitation center for a few minutes of "activity".

The weather had changed a bit since he went in. No longer was it oppressively hot. Instead, it was mildly warm, but that's what was to be expected in Texas. They didn't have harsh winters because the severe weather was reserved for the blistering summers. Even in December he didn't need a jacket. However, that could change overnight.

When they approached Travis' Silverado pickup, Zane suddenly missed his own Jeep. It was strange to be outside, and even more so to be climbing into a vehicle. Three months were a long damn time to be cooped up inside of a building, never allowed to go too far because he was pretty sure they feared he'd run.

He would've.

“Need help getting in?” Travis smirked as he moved around to the driver’s door.

Zane grinned, shot Travis the finger, but didn’t say a word.

He never thought it possible, but he had missed his brothers harassing him. Being the youngest of seven, he was intimately familiar with the constant pestering and irritating comments that his brothers bestowed upon him. At twenty four, he’d had years to get used to it, although that was easier said than done. Although, at that moment, Zane didn’t necessarily hate the snide comments he knew would be directed at him. He actually welcomed them. At least for a little while.

“Where to?” Travis asked when they were pulling out of the hospital parking lot a minute later.

“V’s,” Zane said without hesitation. He hadn’t been able to do anything about her avoiding him for the last couple of months, but now that he was out of the hospital, he was the one who would be calling the shots from here on out.

“You sure?” Travis questioned, and Zane promptly hated his brother’s inquisition.

If Zane was smart, he would go home, get his Jeep and head over to V’s without involving his brother. It was apparent that he needed to acclimate to being out in the real world a little while longer before he opened his big mouth. Before he could say anything more, Travis’ phone was dialing through the Bluetooth speaker in the truck at his brother’s voice command.

Shit.

“You get him?” Kaleb’s voice reverberated through the interior of the truck, and Zane rolled his eyes. He was fucking twenty four years old, and it still galled him how much his brothers tried to baby him.

“Yep,” Travis replied.

“Y’all do realize I’m sitting right here?” Zane glared at his brother.

Travis didn’t even bother to look at him, but both Kaleb’s and Travis’ laughter filled the truck.

Zane couldn’t help but smile.

It felt damn good to be back.

♀ ♂

V’s phone rang as soon as she walked through her front door. Glancing down at the screen, she noticed it was Zoey, and she wondered if her friend had forgotten something. They’d just spent the better part of the day cleaning houses, so V couldn’t imagine what else they had to talk about that was noteworthy enough for her to call so soon.

“Hey!” V greeted Zoey when she answered the phone. “Miss me already?”

“I always miss you.” V could hear the smile in Zoey’s voice, but it didn’t help to explain what she was calling about.

“What’s up?”

“Kaleb just told me that Zane got released from the hospital today.”

Wow. V had to sit down for a second. “Already? The doctors think he’s ready?”

“It would seem so. He’s been officially released, and Travis is on his way to get him now.”

“That’s fantastic.” V knew her voice didn’t back up the words she muttered, but she was having difficulty breathing. It truly was terrific that Zane was finally coming home, but V had been dreading this day for too long to actually be excited about it.

“He wants Travis to take him to your house, V.”

The words out of Zoey’s mouth were like a punch to the solar plexus, leaving V feeling even more out of breath than she already was. And a little dizzy.

“No. He can’t come here.”

He couldn’t. Not after what had happened. Not after Jake Sanders and his friends had beaten the shit out of Zane right there in her front yard. V still couldn’t come and go through her front door without seeing the gruesome image playing through her mind, making her stomach churn and her heart ache. In fact, the overwhelming terror was beginning to wear on her.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to stop him.”

“You have to. Call Travis. Tell him not to bring him over here,” V rambled. “I’ll... I’ll meet Zane at his house.”

She might be able to handle that much. Seeing him was going to be hard enough, but she definitely wouldn’t be able to see him at her house.

“Today?” V barely heard Zoey’s question, her head still reeling from the memories flooding her.

V wasn’t sure when a good time to see Zane was, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to put it off much longer. Especially not if he was out of

the hospital.

“You have to go see him today, V. I won’t be able to convince him otherwise.”

“Fine,” V huffed. “I’ll go see him in a couple of hours.”

V could hear Zoey’s muffled voice as she plainly told Kaleb what they were talking about.

V held her cell phone to her ear with one hand and her face in the other, her elbows propped on her knees as she sat on her couch. She wasn’t sure how she’d gotten to this point in her life, but for some reason, she couldn’t seem to dig out of the despair that had plagued her ever since that horrific day. The overwhelming sense of responsibility for what happened was almost debilitating in its intensity. All because of that jackass Jake and his big fucking mouth.

V had grown accustomed to being flirted with, she’d even gotten used to the assumptions that most men made because of whom her mother was, but it would appear Zane hadn’t been able to brush off the nasty comments the way V had. Instead, he’d confronted Jake in front of a large group of people. That was the day Jake made the threat, one no one paid much attention to because of his penchant for unsubstantiated threats.

Jake Sanders had grown up with most of them, although he was several years older than V and Zoey. Since he was held back a couple of years in school, they’d actually attended high school at the same time. He hadn’t been well liked back then, and his reputation hadn’t improved significantly over the years either. He was one of those men who liked to stir up trouble, spouting bullshit whenever anyone was close enough to listen. Most people had learned to tune him out, or flat out ignore him, which was what they had done the day he’d threatened Zane.

She remembered the day they'd been at Anderson Croft's mother's house, trying to clean out the house after the woman spent years hoarding everything she could get her hands on. That particular day had started out like many others; everyone talking, laughing and actually enjoying what they had set out to accomplish. That was until Jake's unruly mouth got out of control like it tended to do.

Jake seemingly set his sights on her, and V tried to be as polite as she could be, ignoring his snide comments and even avoiding him for a good part of the day. At one point, he began saying nasty things about V's mother, long after V had refused his numerous advances.

Although the things Jake said about her mother, then about her, had broken her heart, she'd learned long ago not to let the stones shatter the tough exterior she'd carefully erected.

It had taken her a long time to be able to stand up tall and ignore what others said about her mother, some of them true, others made up over the years through various versions of one story or another. Living in a small town like Coyote Ridge didn't make it easy to avoid the various rumors and lies, but V had somehow managed to ignore them.

Mostly.

“V?”

Zoey's voice broke through her thoughts, and she stood up, shaking off the despair that threatened to consume her all over again.

Taking a deep breath, she answered as strongly as she could, “I'm here.”

“There's one more thing you need to know.”

Shit.

V wasn't sure she could handle any more grim news, and Zoey's tone didn't sound like she was about to tell her that she won the lottery or something equally as exciting.

It seemed as though bad news was all she was getting these days, and it was certainly having an impact on her mood. How was she supposed to fake the happy-go-lucky girl when everything seemed to be crumbling around her?

"What?" she finally asked when she felt she could handle whatever Zoey was going to throw at her.

"Braydon told Zane about Jake harassing you." Zoey didn't sound happy, not that V expected her to.

"Dammit." V knew she shouldn't have said anything to Zoey.

"I'm sorry, V. I told Kaleb because I thought someone needed to know. This is serious. Look what he did to Zane."

V didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't like she told Zoey not to say anything, although, looking back on it now, she should have.

"You need to be careful, V. About Jake. He's crazy."

The man was crazy all right. And homicidal. What he had done to Zane wasn't just a warning. He and his friends had beaten Zane so badly, V was certain if she hadn't been there to alert her neighbors, they probably would have killed him.

"And Zane's changed," Zoey continued. "He's not the same man he was before. His brothers are keeping an eye on him."

V sighed.

She had purposely stayed away from Zane for the last couple of months, choosing to find out how he was doing by asking Zoey or Beau. Zane's reputation was more of a fighter than a lover, unlike most of his brothers. He had a short fuse to begin with and a protective streak a mile wide. V hadn't wanted to provoke the first, and she didn't deserve the second, so she had avoided him at all costs.

Zane wasn't a man to mess with. He didn't have the laidback country boy attitude that Kaleb and Sawyer did, and he wasn't the fun loving, attention grabbers like the twins, Braydon and Brendon either. Zane Walker was edgy. He was hard, and what made it worse, he was infused with a passion so fierce, those he cared about risked the chance at getting burned from time to time

"I'll go talk to him." V could do that much.

With a quick goodbye, she hung up the phone and dropped it onto the couch cushion as she paced back and forth continuously.

Why did Zane have to be so damn stubborn?

Why did she have to care about him so much?

It wasn't like the past couple of months had been easy on her. She'd stayed away out of necessity, not because she wanted to. There were times it had been so damned difficult to ignore Zane's phone calls and texts, but she had managed for the most part.

On occasion, she would break down and answer, but that was usually after she'd spent hours thinking about him. Since the day he woke up, V refused to go back to the hospital to see him, mostly because she feared she wouldn't be able to walk away. V refused to get too attached to a man who

would eventually slip right through her fingers. She wasn't interested in forever, and Zane wasn't the forever kind of guy.

Before the assault, they had shared a few memorable moments together. Most of them resulted in the two of them being naked, or close to it. Not that V was complaining. Considering she hadn't had sex with anyone other than Zane in the last two years, she welcomed those memories. Especially now, after three months of celibacy, when she wondered if she ever would have sex again.

V wasn't naive enough to believe she could keep Zane at arm's length, no matter how much her heart begged her to. Now that he was out of the hospital, she was going to have to see him. She just hadn't expected to have to see him so soon.

Moving toward her bedroom, V checked the front door one more time to make sure it was locked. She did that frequently these days. Almost to the point that she was beginning to wonder whether she had OCD. She knew her nerves were primarily the reason for her sudden paranoia, but she still worried.

Once in her bedroom, V shut and locked her bedroom door as well before moving to the closet. She needed to shower before she went to see Zane. With a full day's worth of dirt and grime caked on her skin, she clearly needed some time to freshen up. Not to mention, maybe an hour or two to steel her resolve.

She was going to see Zane today.

If she wasn't happy about that, then why did her stomach churn with anticipation?

Chapter Two

♀ ♂

Two hours later, V was standing on Zane's front porch. For at least five minutes – maybe more, she wasn't sure – she had been pacing back and forth, trying to convince herself to knock on the door.

She couldn't bring herself to do it.

When the door slowly opened, V stopped mid step and stared at the man standing casually in the doorway. Her eyes traced every graceful line of his lean, magnificent body as he braced his hands on the top of the doorjamb and leaned into it, his smoke blue eyes fixated on her. The movements made every muscle in his upper body stand out in stark relief.

Oh, damn.

Without a word, V let her eyes trail slowly down his thick, ropy biceps, over those sexy as hell back muscles that flared at his sides – lats, she was pretty sure that's what they were called – over his pecs, his washboard abs, and that enticing, perfectly sculpted “V” that disappeared into the waistband of jeans that had seen better days. Her eyes even wandered down to see his beautiful feet were bare.

“Were you planning to stay out here all night?”

Yes. Yes, she was.

As though his words were liquid and she'd been dying of thirst, V's body soaked up every nuance of every syllable; the raspy, low rumble settling some of her tension.

Or, quite possibly, making her aware in other ways.

“I thought about it.”

Zane chuckled, then pinned her with that wicked come-hither grin, followed by a subtle, knowing wink and V inadvertently felt a shift in the air around them. How did he do that? How did he make everything better with just a tilt of his enticing lips?

“Come in.” Raspy and suggestive, his voice soothed her and gave her the courage to accept his offer.

It wasn't like she had much of a choice. If she didn't go inside, she would never be able to have a conversation with him because V was barely able to ignore the ardent memory of what they did, right there against the wall, just a few short months ago. That night had been perfect. The first night V agreed to go back to his house, and they hadn't even made it through the front door before Zane had shoved her against the wall as they devoured one another. Right there, out in the open, Zane had rocked her world.

Putting one foot in front of the other, V managed to get past him and through the front door as his uniquely masculine scent assaulted her senses and nearly had her stumbling in her four inch heels.

V distracted herself by admiring his house and all of the warmth that radiated from it. It was only her second time to be inside, although Zane had been to hers plenty of times during their brief affair a few months before. And just like the last time, V was impressed by the sheer masculinity of her surroundings.

Cowboy? Yes, that was one word that would describe Zane. From the bull rope hanging on the wall to the black and white framed images that told the story of Zane's infamous, albeit short, bull riding career. He was also one of the only Walker brothers who owned a horse. Travis actually

owned several, but Zane had only one. She wondered how the horse was faring after not seeing Zane for so long. The thought brought a familiar sadness to her heart.

There wasn't a single interior wall in the entire floor plan, only the four that constructed the outer structure of the house and a couple of cedar wrapped beams that supported the vaulted ceilings. Distressed hickory hardwood planked the floor while the walls were a relaxing shade of brown, like sandstone. She presumed that it was Zane's rustic take on an open, airy loft space. V liked it more than she was willing to admit. There was something about the space that made her feel at home.

Standing just inside the door, V's gaze instinctively strayed to the bedroom space in the far left corner. A huge, four post, king sized bed made out of intricately formed thick wooden limbs stood beside a wide armoire made of the same distressed wood. The area wasn't overly large, but V figured it didn't need to be. Most of what Zane probably did was on the bed anyway.

That particular thought had heat sizzling down low.

The bathroom wasn't separated by a wall, but rather an opaque pane of glass which offered some privacy and V had some vivid fantasies of what it would be like to have Zane in that monstrous shower. The last time she was here, they had never made it that far. Hell, they hadn't even made it to the bed. The couch had been sufficient... As well as the front porch and the kitchen counter.

Heat infused her, and V knew her blush was visible, so she kept her face turned away from Zane. Shaking the thought away, she reminded herself why she was there. It surely wasn't so she could ogle Zane or to let him get even further under her skin. No, she was here to let him down easy.

And to remind him once again, that if it weren't for her, he wouldn't have been through the hell he'd been through. Nor would his family have suffered for the last few months. That familiar ache reappeared, and V reminded herself that what she and Zane had wasn't real. Never had been. And it was in her best interest – and his – if they didn't see each other anymore.

It would help if she actually believed that.

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Zane didn't make a sound as he stood by the front door, his hip propped against the wood, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched V. Since the moment he realized she was pacing back and forth on his front porch, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her. He was doing pretty fucking well not touching her either.

Now that she was inside his house, there were a number of excessively appealing ideas penetrating his sex deprived body. Three months had passed since he'd last touched her... Tasted her... Felt the searing way her pussy enveloped his cock. The last thought had him stifling a groan.

This woman affected him in ways no other woman had ever come close. Before the assault, Zane had been pursuing V relentlessly, and she had been throwing him a curve ball at every attempt.

Never in all of his twenty four years had he expected to have long term thoughts about a woman, but when it came to V, he thought of little else. It was surprising how much he felt for her and how quickly it had come on. Although they had been apart for three long months, Zane still felt exactly the same. Vanessa Carmichael was his other half, but, just like then, he knew he had his work cut out for him when it came to convincing her of that.

He kept her in his sights, watching as she gracefully lowered herself to the black leather couch, fluffing her short brown skirt out so that it didn't show any more of her long legs and beautiful olive skin. Zane had to bite his tongue.

The last time she had come to his house, she'd been on that couch too. Only because that was the closest piece of furniture they could get to in their haste to practically tear one another's clothes off. That night had been memorable, especially after Zane had fucked her up against the rough wood siding on his front porch, unable to keep his hands off of her long enough to make it inside. Not that she had been complaining.

Unfortunately, Zane was pretty sure V wasn't here to let him worship her with his mouth, although he liked that idea much better than what she probably had in mind. He knew based on his conversation with Kaleb just a short while ago that this wasn't a pleasure visit. V had come over to see him just to keep him from going to her house. He could tell just how much she wished to be anywhere else by the way she sat with her back straight and her hands perfectly poised in her lap.

Him, on the other hand...

Zane wanted V as close to his side as he could get her. Preferably, he'd rather be on top of her. Or under her. He wasn't picky either way.

"Drink?" Pushing away from the door, Zane glanced in her direction as he made his way to the refrigerator. He wasn't sure what he had to drink, but he was fairly certain there was water. At this point, that's all he needed. For some reason, he felt a little dehydrated, and he was sure it was due to the way his blood pressure had skyrocketed and his body temperature had increased since the second he saw V on his front steps.

"No, thank you."

All prim and proper, V was. Or so she tried to pretend. She might've forgotten that Zane had seen her totally out of control with lust a time or twenty, but he hadn't. He was pretty sure he never would forget either.

“You didn’t have to come all the way out here, you know.” Zane sat on the wooden table across from V, doing his best not to reach out to touch her. “I would’ve come to your house.”

V’s pert little nose scrunched, her eyebrows dove down in a frown, and she didn’t look directly at him. She tried to play off her initial reaction by leaning back against the cushions, pretending to get comfortable as she did. She looked tense, and not at all like she wanted to talk to him.

She didn’t make a sound for what felt like an eternity. “Talk to me, V.”

“I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

It was Zane’s turn to frown as he studied her, trying to understand what she was getting at. He’d been to her house on numerous occasions, right up until the assault and never once had she seemed unhappy to see him.

“What? Talking?” If she didn’t intend to talk to him, what the hell had she come over for? “Help me out here, V,” he leaned closer, resting his elbows on his knees with the water bottle clutched between his hands.

Zane never had been good at reading a woman’s mind and V’s was particularly difficult to read. She had an uncanny ability to keep herself closed off as much as possible.

“No. You. Coming to my house. We know how well that worked out last time.” V’s remark apparently shocked her as much as it shocked him. Her eyes flew up to meet his, and he saw the same horror reflected in the whiskey brown color that he’d seen moments before Jake Sanders had knocked him unconscious.

So that was how she was going to handle this? Did she think that making him stay away from her house was going to protect him? He felt the swirling, black hole, filled with vehemence and loathing for what that bastard did to them, open up inside of him.

There had been so many times he wished he could go back to that day and change how things had played out, but no matter how many times he thought about it, he knew he couldn't have changed anything. Jake had planned it all out and somehow the man had gotten away with what he'd done, which had another jolt of anger bursting free inside of him.

Zane would admit that he hadn't been happy when he found out that V had tried to take all of the blame on herself. He'd wanted to talk to her, to shake her until she understood that nothing she did caused it to happen. But seeing her now, seeing the absolute anguish on her face broke his heart. The self-induced guilt was eating her alive.

"Are you ok?" Sitting the water bottle on the table beside him, Zane moved an inch closer, his knees nearly touching hers.

From the moment he woke up in that damned hospital bed two months ago, Zane had wondered how she was holding up. Both physically and emotionally. From the outside, V looked just as radiant as always, but he knew her better than she thought. She was notorious for pretending all was great and perfect, but when she didn't know he was looking, there had been plenty of times he had seen her with her guard down.

It hit him that he didn't even know whether she had sustained any injuries that day. His memory had taken a little time to come back to him, but as soon as he recalled the way one of those bastards had shoved V, sending her slamming into the ground, he'd damn near walked out of the

hospital that day. That one push had distracted Zane enough, giving those fuckers exactly the opportunity they needed to catch him off guard.

“I’m fine. Why?” Her nonchalant attitude pissed him off sometimes. She acted as though nothing fazed her, but he knew better. He could see it in the way she forced a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Did they hurt you?” He had to ask the question because he had to know. No one seemed to know exactly what happened right after Zane had been knocked out. Well, no one but V.

“They didn’t hurt me,” she said, sounding for the first time, like she was trying to reassure him. “They weren’t there for me, Zane. Jake just used me to get to you.”

“He didn’t *use* you, Vanessa. Jake came after *me*. It just happened to take place at your house. There’s a big difference.”

The words came out a little harsher than he intended, but it was more than obvious that she was layering the blame on herself. He wanted to reassure her that it wasn’t her fault. He knew they needed to talk about what happen, but Zane was hesitant to relive those memories so soon after he was released from the hospital.

He knew full well what it would do to him mentally. That black hole of fury was pulling him under, and if there was anything Zane knew about himself, it was that his temper bordered on out of control. He’d become intimately familiar with it during the few conversations that he’d had with that damn psychiatrist – or whatever she wanted to call herself – that his mother insisted he talk to in the hospital.

V’s eyes lowered. “I’m so sorry.” Her whispered words broke his heart and pissed him off at the same time.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, V.” This time he lowered his voice, trying to reassure her as he leaned closer, reaching out for the first time to touch her. Tilting her chin up so she had to meet his eyes, he smiled sadly, “Nothing that happened, that day or any other, was your fault.”

“No?” V stood suddenly. Her abrupt shift had Zane flinching backward instinctively.

Yeah, he was clearly going to have to work on that.

Pushing himself to his feet, he closed the gap between them, towering over her as she stood staring up at him. At six-foot-four-inches, Zane was not by any means a small man. He was still working on gaining the pounds he’d lost while in the hospital back, along with the strength that was zapped from him thanks to a month in a coma.

Standing next to V, all five-foot-seven or so inches of her, Zane couldn’t help but remember how well their bodies fit together. She was tall and curvy and breathlessly beautiful. Even in those heels, he still had to look down at her, and when she hit him with those whiskey brown eyes, some of his anger subsided.

“No, baby. None of it was your fault. You couldn’t have predicted what that fucker would do.” He kept his tone low and even as best he could.

Truth be told, Zane should’ve been smarter. He should have known after Jake jumped him at Moonshiners that the man was rapidly losing touch with reality. Maybe it was because Zane had knocked his ego down a notch the day Jake had insulted V, or maybe Jake was just a loose cannon, bound to explode at any time. Either way, Zane should’ve been prepared.

Instead, he’d let down his guard some.

“He was waiting for you. *At my house*. Why don’t you understand this?”

“Understand *what*?” He took a step back. “You weren’t even at the bar when he jumped me there, were you? So I’m not sure how you get to blame yourself for any of this.”

“No, I wasn’t. But if it weren’t for what happened at Anderson Croft’s, none of this would be happening. And in case you forgot that all started because of me.”

True. V had a point there. The whole thing started that day, but besides her accuracy on the timing, her logic didn’t make any damn sense. Regardless, talking to her was useless because she had since made up her mind. The only thing he could do now was to try and change it.

“You couldn’t control what Jake was going to do, baby, any more than you can control whatever this is between us.”

Zane hadn’t expected to say the last part, but somehow the words had slipped out. The woman was a distraction, one that kept him away from some of the darker, gloomier thoughts and he welcomed that into his life. He’d gotten attached to her, and he wasn’t ready to let go even if she resorted to trying to convince him otherwise. Which he knew she was going to do.

Zane didn’t have it in him to give up, and no matter how hard she tried to push him away, he wasn’t going to budge.

Not this time.

“Zane,” V choked a sob back, “I can’t do this anymore.”

Well, that wasn’t what he wanted to hear, even if he had expected it. In fact, it was a long time coming because he had been anticipating this

conversation ever since the day he went to pick her up to take her to the groundbreaking ceremony. She'd been alluding to the fact that she didn't want to see him anymore, but Zane didn't believe her then.

He still didn't believe her now.

"What *can't* you do?" He needed to hear her say the words. He wasn't sure she could actually say them.

"This." She wiggled one hand back and forth between them, referencing the two of them.

"You *can* do this."

"I'm not talking about sex, Zane," V huffed, backing up another step, her hands going to her hips, her eyes blazing with frustration and what he sensed was anger. "Fucking you has never been the problem."

Fucking him?

Zane's body hardened at the same time something else took root deep in his soul. Something that told him whatever this was between them wasn't just about sex. Even if V wanted to believe that.

"Then what's the problem?" He was getting irritated now. "Are you scared, V? Scared that *fucking me* might turn into something more?" Taunting her, he continued, "Scared that I might just be able to get past that impenetrable outer shell?"

"No!" V stormed away, presenting Zane with her back.

"That's what it sounds like to me, baby. Sounds like you can't handle *fucking me* because you're scared there might be something more between us."

There already was, but Zane didn't say that out loud. He knew how far he could push her.

“You're delusional, Zane Walker. Maybe you should go back to the hospital. I think the doctors might've overlooked the severity of your brain damage.” V turned abruptly to face him again.

Zane laughed, and that earned him a death glare. God she was so damned bewitching when she looked at him like that.

“Honey, I think you already feel something for me.”

“Bullshit. You're just a baby, Zane. We might have fun between the sheets, but that's all it is.”

V's reference to his age, specifically the difference between them, only pissed Zane off more. He hated that she used that as an excuse. She'd tried it one other time, and if he remembered correctly, she'd been sprawled out beneath him in ten seconds flat, begging him to let her come.

He was twenty four, almost twenty five, and she was just barely thirty. Fuck, he wouldn't care if she were forty. What Zane felt for her, he'd never felt for anyone else, and he wasn't about to let her get by with throwing whatever this might be away because of a few measly numbers.

“*A baby?*” Zane stalked her across the room until he pressed her into the glass partition that enclosed his bathroom. He didn't stop crowding her until he was crushing her between his body and the cool glass at her back. “That's not what you were screaming when I had my dick buried inside of you.”

Zane leaned in closer, his mouth hovering above hers as he waited for her response. Her sharp inhale, along with the full body shiver, told him exactly how much he still affected her.

“Was it?” Letting his lips brush lightly over hers, he waited for V to push him away.

She didn't.

And that told him all that he needed to know.

♀ ♂

What the hell was wrong with her? Why did she knowingly push him like that? Zane wasn't the kind of man to back off freely, and she had found exactly what it took to push his buttons. With the warmth of his body pressed against her, V knew she should be pushing him away, knew she should race right across the room, throw open his front door and run. Never look back.

For the life of her, she couldn't seem to do it. Just like the very first time her eyes met his, there was a kinetic energy that shifted between the two of them and she couldn't force herself to move away. Zane stole her breath and her common sense with just a smile. When he actually touched her, it was even worse.

In fact, V was positive she had never met a man as capable as Zane of causing her to drop her defenses as quickly as he caused her to drop her clothes. He was like a drug, impossible to resist once she'd had a taste of him.

And as for their age difference, V didn't give a shit about it at all, but it was the only tangible thing she had to hold on to; her only justification for putting distance between herself and the one man capable of breaking her

heart. Never would V let that happen. Not after what she saw her mother go through.

Her mother and her wandering ways had taught V one valuable lesson: never rely on a man to fulfill you. As she had seen time and time again, no man had ever satisfied her mother, yet Regina continued to ruthlessly pursue them in hopes of finding the one who would. V just figured if she never started, she'd never be disappointed.

This man threatened all of her carefully erected walls because she wanted him more than she wanted anything else.

“It’s not going to work, V.” Zane’s words broke through the haze of lust that was clouding her thoughts.

“What?” V felt as though she missed a vital part of the conversation.

“Trying to push me away is only going to make me come after you more.”

One thing she had learned about this man, he didn’t say things he didn’t mean. He’d been pursuing her for about a month before he was attacked and she’d tried to push him away. He didn’t listen; always coming back for more, no matter how cruel she was with his feelings.

Whatever he thought this was, it wasn’t. What was happening between them was nothing more than a highly reactive proclivity to lust. It was one hundred percent physical reaction between two people who were attracted to one another, spurred on by some wild and impassioned urges. Oh, and pheromones. Yes, definitely those too.

“What do you want from me?” V asked the question although she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer.

“Everything.” The way Zane articulated each syllable had V’s pulse soaring. The way he looked at her like she was everything and then some made her wish that there actually could be something between them. The fact was, they came from different worlds, and she wasn’t so sure that there was a way for them to meet in the middle.

Now, if he were talking about sex, V could see the potential in a short term fling with him. The man inspired orgasms with just a tilt of his head, and V could attest to what he was capable of doing with his mouth. Anything more than that was out of the question, and she didn’t want to lead him on.

“You think that somehow sex is going to make me fall in love with you?” She let the words drip with her incredulity.

“Baby, you keep saying that word like that’s all you want from me,” Zane grinned and V was damn near blinded by the intensity of his beautiful smile.

“That’s all you have to offer me, Zane,” she whispered, trying to sound convincing.

“That’s what you think. Give me a chance, V. Stop trying to push me away at every turn. All I need is a chance.”

“You don’t need to prove anything to me,” V said honestly. She knew just how real he was. She’d experienced just how incredible it felt to be in his arms. She also knew just how devastated she would feel when it was over.

“Maybe not, but I need to possess you. All of you.” Zane’s mouth was brushing against hers with every breath he took, every word he spoke.

Fuck. She was a goner, and she knew it. She couldn't get another word out if she tried. He wanted to *possess* her? V knew exactly what he was referring to. He'd mentioned it before. She had seen a glimpse of his dominating side on more than one occasion, and she had a feeling he knew how worked up she got because of it.

She found herself leaning closer to him, although she knew she was supposed to be pushing him away. She was taunting him, daring him to kiss her. If nothing else, at least she could get lost in the kiss and forget about all of the emotions this man stirred inside of her.

Thankfully, Zane stole her ability to think anymore.

He crushed his mouth to hers, the evidence of his desire pressing intimately between her thighs. When his strong, warm hand slid down the back of her thigh, then behind her knee, she knew there was no more fighting him. The only thing she needed was his touch for her brain cells to stop functioning properly.

Holding her leg against his thigh, V welcomed him by pressing her hips against his. She was trapped between his muscular body and the hard pane of glass at her back, unable to move in any direction and for some strange reason, V found comfort in his touch. Zane controlled her movements, controlled every ounce of her pleasure by the way he took his time with her. If she had learned anything, it was that he wasn't a man to rush through anything.

When his lips scraped against the side of her mouth, down her chin before trailing down the side of her neck, V tilted her head to the side, giving him better access. She reveled in the warmth of his body, the strength she could feel in every move he made. Having extraordinarily

limited experience due to not having been with many men in her life, V was still thoroughly convinced that no one compared to Zane.

“I’ve missed you.” Zane’s raspy words tickled her senses and had her thrusting her hips against his more firmly, trying to increase the friction against her clit. “Tell me you haven’t missed me, V.”

She couldn’t speak, much less lie to him. She’d missed him more than she was willing to admit to herself.

“Tell me how much you’ve missed this, and I’ll give you everything you want. I’ll bury my tongue in your sweet pussy and make you come with just my mouth. You want that, don’t you?”

More than she wanted water or air or any life sustaining substance. Not having known his touch for the last three months had been hell. Having it now was like a sudden plunge into warm water, her body was overheated, and her nipples pebbled, her skin sensitive and aching for more of his touch.

“Tell me, V,” he growled as he nipped her shoulder, pulling the loose collar of her sweater down as he went. She wanted him to rip her clothes from her body and ravish her the way only Zane could.

“I’ve missed this.” She managed to say the words, trying hard to sound normal and not entirely out of her mind with desire. “But I don’t want strings, Zane. It can only be sex.”

Zane’s chuckle sent throbbing need directly to her clit. The deep, dark rumble of his voice made her even crazier with lust. “If that’s what you want, then yes.”

Why didn’t she believe him?

His mouth began moving back up her shoulder, his hand sliding up to cup her head as he lifted her face until their eyes met. “But until we decide

otherwise I want all of you. No holding back, V.”

She wasn't sure she could give all of herself because up to this point, she'd already given him more than she should have. He was putting fissures in that hard shell she'd wrapped around her heart, and she knew that any time spent with him would only increase her chances of falling for him completely.

But what else could she do? This was the only way to prove to herself that she didn't need him. Sex and love were two different things, and she feared she was already beginning to confuse the two.

“All right.” Before she was prepared for them, the words escaped. But once her acceptance was out there, V realized there was no turning back.

Zane pressed his mouth to hers forcefully, taking everything he wanted and giving back tenfold. His tongue was cool, and he tasted like mint and man, and she couldn't help herself. V pulled his head closer to hers, tightening her fingers in his hair as she tangled her tongue with his, licking him, tasting him, taking everything he had to give her. His taste, the strength in his touch, the sleek texture of his skin had her aching to be naked beneath him.

“I need you, V. Right now,” Zane growled as he broke the kiss, his hand still holding her face, his thumb brushing her cheek while the other lifted her leg higher on his hip, his erection grinding between her thighs.

She nodded, unable to speak.

Removing her hands from around his neck, she hurriedly fumbled with the button on his jeans, anxious to take what he was offering without having to think anymore. She lowered the zipper and pushed the denim down just enough to free his thick, heavy erection.

He didn't let her go, one hand still squeezing her leg, the other splayed across her neck, the crook between his thumb and index finger tilting her head up so she was forced to meet his gaze.

"Pull your panties to the side," he growled, piercing her with those glowing blue gray eyes. He didn't pull away; he shifted his hips back ever so slightly so she had room to maneuver.

Unable to refuse him or herself any longer because her body remembered what this felt like, how he overwhelmed her senses, how he pushed her higher than she'd ever known before, V did as he instructed. She eased her panties out of the way, using one hand to guide his thick cock to her entrance before he took over, slamming inside of her.

"Oh, fuck!" Eloquence wasn't something either of them possessed when their bodies came together like this. "Fuck me, Zane."

Zane's hand disappeared from her skin, and then returned but this time much lower, gripping her ass, lifting her until she had no choice but to wrap her legs around him, his cock buried to the hilt, her body fighting to accommodate the sensual intrusion. V fought to hang on. She was so close already; riding that fine, thin, razor sharp edge that separated ethereal pleasure from mind numbing bliss.

When he began thrusting forcefully, he used his body to support her against the wall, one arm beneath her ass, the fingers of his other hand sliding into her hair, pulling her head back so he could take her mouth. V was powerless against the intensity of her desire for this man.

Zane groaned as he separated their mouths, staring into her eyes, her soul. V could feel him everywhere.

“Baby, I’m not going to last. I need you to come for me. Fucking come around my cock. I want to feel your pussy milk my cock while I come inside of you.”

That was all it took.

Those few words sent her body tumbling into chaos; her orgasm equivalent to C4, exploding and leaving a crumbling mess as she held on to Zane with everything she had. When his body stilled, the force of his release filling her, V’s world tilted and exploded once more.

What in the world had she just committed herself to?

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Chapter Three

♂ ♀

The following morning, when Zane opened his eyes, he was greeted with the peaceful silence of his own home. Another thing he realized he'd taken for granted. After three months in the hospital, the consistent interruptions by nurses and doctors, machines beeping, and people stopping by to visit, he welcomed the soothing tranquility that answered.

The only thing that could've been better... if V was sleeping next to him. She refused though. After their brief, but explosive interlude, V had silently righted her clothes, gave him that seductive little smirk he loved and then gracefully walked out of his house.

That's what she always did. She didn't sleep over, nor did she invite him to. Ever.

And as many times as they'd been together, it was beginning to irritate the shit out of him. But, Zane was pursuing her, and he knew if he pushed just a little harder, she'd give in to him. Before long, he was going to push her past all of the boundaries she had erected over the years. Spending the night with him soon wouldn't be an option for her.

Hell, he'd tie her to the bed if he had to.

Hmmm... He honestly liked the idea of tying her to his bed.

Reaching beneath the blankets, Zane took his iron hard cock in his grip and began stroking slowly. Closing his eyes, he pictured V lying on his bed, completely naked... Well, maybe he'd let her leave her shoes on. The woman's shoes were so fucking sexy on her.

The image of V in his mind became clearer. Her arms were stretched out above her head, secured to his headboard while her legs were spread wide, ankles secured, her slick, pink pussy open and inviting. The rhythm of his hand increased to match his breathing as the pornographic visual played in his head. The woman was pure, unadulterated sin as she lay sprawled out before him, her full, perfect breasts tipped with sweet, dusky pink nipples. Those mile long legs, silky smooth and her red tipped toes peeking out of those four inch heels.

Stroking his dick faster, his fist gripping firmly, Zane gave his brain carte blanche to fantasize. His breathing increased as he came closer to release, holding out only long enough to savor the image of V spectacularly naked in his mind. He could picture himself crawling between her splayed thighs, using his tongue to tease the pretty pink folds of her pussy before sliding two fingers deep in her cunt.

Fuck.

Zane came with a vengeance, his release startling him with its intensity. For three months, he resisted the urge to jack off to thoughts of V, and their quickie yesterday, although intensely satisfying, had done nothing to sate the lust that had built up over the last few months.

Although his body begged for him to succumb to just a few more hours of sleep, he managed to force himself from the bed, ripping the sheets off as he went so he could toss them into the washing machine. He needed breakfast, and then he needed to head over to Walker Demolition. His brothers would be waiting for him, he knew.

They'd purposely denied him any information about how the business was going in recent weeks, but he knew they were doing well. Ethan was a whiz with machinery, so the fact that Zane had been down and out for so

long wouldn't have impacted them in the least – as far as business was concerned anyway. But that didn't mean he planned to leave it all to them.

In addition to wanting to talk to them about Walker Demo, Zane also had some questions about the Alluring Indulgence Resort. Like how he would be able to get in on it. He'd spent countless hours in the hospital fucking around on the internet and quite frankly, he found a few articles that caught his interest. He had a vested interest in the place; after all, he was a partner in Walker, Inc.

Zane was well aware that Kaleb, Sawyer and Travis hadn't pushed the resort on the rest of them because they didn't want any of them to feel obligated to join in their new venture. They'd mentioned it briefly up front, but told Zane, Brendon, Braydon, and Ethan that they were welcome to go in or keep moving forward with Walker Demo. It was their choice. At the time, Zane hadn't been sure what he wanted to do.

He'd actually been a little restless right before the assault. Some of it had to do with the feelings V had been stirring in him, some of it was due to his need to keep moving forward. Zane felt like he had been stalled out for quite some time, but he'd never made a move to do anything about it. Now that he was back on his feet, he was more than a little anxious to keep up his momentum. His life had changed due to circumstances out of his control. He was ready to find the bright side and keep going. It was either that, or run the risk of giving in to the black rage that was slowly filling his gut.

He liked the idea of getting involved with the resort. So much so, he was ready to hire a replacement who could handle his position at Walker Demo. This new resort was going to give him a chance to spread his wings a little, explore some new avenues, and with V along for the ride, Zane was

finally looking forward to something that he hadn't even realized was missing from his life.

Half an hour later, showered and shaved, Zane hopped in his Jeep.

As the Jeep eased along down the dirt road that would take him from his house to the offices of Walker Demolition, Zane enjoyed the unseasonably warm breeze flowing through the open windows.

He never thought he'd say it, but it felt damn good to be behind the wheel again. Even a small thing like driving was something he had taken for granted before the assault. He'd taken plenty of things for granted, including what he wanted to do with his life. He'd been given a second chance and, for whatever reason, God spared him. He wasn't going to take it for granted a second longer.

Not with the little things, and certainly not with the big things. The first thing – or rather person – that came to mind was V. For the last few months, she'd been the only thing on his mind most days. Hell, just thinking about *thinking about* her made him smile. The smile disappeared just as quickly as it came when Zane remembered the real reason he had wanted to talk to her yesterday. They hadn't even talked about Jake Sanders, or the fact that he was allegedly harassing her, and no one was fucking telling him anything.

They'd undoubtedly be talking about it later, but first, he had to meet with his brothers and get that out of the way. He hoped like hell they didn't treat him with kid gloves now that he was back in fighting form. Ok, so he wasn't quite there, but he was working to get there. A little more physical therapy and countless hours at the gym wouldn't hurt him in the least.

He made a mental note to call Beau and meet up with him at the gym. It was time the two of them spent some time doing something a hell of a lot more entertaining than shooting the shit at the hospital. He certainly looked forward to spending a few mindless hours with his boy.

“Well, good morning, sunshine.” Brendon’s booming drawl met Zane the moment he stepped through the door of the small office of Walker Demolition. “Glad you could grace us with your presence.”

“Fuck off.” Zane grinned, saying the words without heat.

He’d missed this too. He would be the first to admit that working with his brothers, day in and day out, could grate on his nerves like fingernails down a chalkboard, but he wouldn’t change a thing.

“Well, you look better anyway, Bubba. I have to say, there for a while, you kinda looked like shit,” Braydon chimed in, grabbing two energy drinks from the refrigerator and tossing one to Brendon. Like they needed that shit.

Zane didn’t need any more energy than they did, but he was smart enough to know better. He didn’t drink anything with caffeine in it. Or at least he tried to avoid it at all costs. Hell, he hardly drank anything other than water, which his brothers liked to give him hell about. It seemed they all had their own vices. Hell, he had his as well, but he just tried to keep those to himself as best he could.

“What the hell? You guys having a spa party or what?” Zane ribbed as he grabbed one of the empty chairs and turned it backward, straddling it and facing three of his six brothers. “Kaleb, I’m disappointed in you. Zoey’s turned you into a pussy.”

Kaleb's rumbling laugh filled the space. "I'm not going there, man. Not gonna do it."

"If you're not doing your fucking nails, is this a book club or something? Why are you two here? Shouldn't you be out on a job somewhere?" Zane turned his attention to the twins, leaning his forearms on the chair back.

"*Why* did the doctor clear you to come home?" Ethan asked as he walked in the back door. "Or was it because they couldn't take any more?"

"Probably." Zane grinned. Despite their constant ridicule, he sure had missed this shit. "Where are Sawyer and Travis?"

"Sawyer's on his way," Kaleb added, glancing down at his computer screen. "Trav had to go to Dallas. He's meeting with Luke and Logan again this week."

"How's the resort coming along?" Considering the ground breaking ceremony was so long ago, Zane had expected to see something happening with the construction, but when Travis brought him home last night, he hadn't seen much of anything, other than some clearing of the land.

Apparently, Travis had brought in an environmentalist to survey and find the best place for the resort, that wouldn't affect too much of the land. Zane wouldn't have thought his brother would've cared much about it, so he'd been a little taken aback. Not that he didn't agree, he just didn't expect as much from Travis. His brother was a hard ass, in so many ways. Had been for as long as Zane could remember. The others had tried to tell him that Travis wasn't always like that, but Zane wasn't much of a believer

"We should see a lot more in the coming weeks," Kaleb answered, turning away from his computer.

“How’s the wedding planning?”

“We’ve set the date.” Kaleb grinned.

“Again?” Zane knew that Kaleb and Zoey had pushed out their wedding until the beginning of the year because he’d been in the hospital. It still irritated the shit out of him that he was the reason they were delaying their momentous day, but no amount of arguing with them had done any good.

“We never were happy with the original date.”

His brother was lying, but Zane smiled anyway. That’s what his brothers did. They had each other’s back, no matter the reason. And, in this case, every one of them stood beside Zane during a really touch and go point in his life. And now, despite the little white lie, Zane didn’t fault Kaleb. “Bachelor party planned yet?”

“Oh, hell yeah!” Braydon stood, his restless energy palpable in the small room. “Bren and I are handling that one.”

Oh, hell. Zane laughed again, noticing how good it felt to be able to smile a real smile for the first time in a long time. “You’re a brave man leaving your fate in their hands.”

“You’re telling me,” Kaleb groaned.

“That’s ok. Wait till you hear what V’s got planned for Zoey’s bachelorette party. We’re thinking Vegas!”

“Hell no,” Kaleb barked. “No Vegas. I don’t trust you in Coyote Ridge, I damn sure don’t trust you in Vegas.”

Braydon and Brendon merely laughed at that and the look they passed to one another said they didn’t much care what Kaleb wanted.

Zane was pretty sure Vegas was in the cards.

♀ ♂

“I’ll be so fucking happy when I don’t have to look at another one of these again,” V hissed as she scrubbed the devil’s form of white porcelain hell. She’d rather be anywhere than cleaning toilets on her knees.

Anywhere.

“Well, only a couple more weeks and then we’ll be off to bigger and better things.” Zoey laughed from behind her.

They were doing the last bathroom at the Wilson’s house before they were finished for the day and V couldn’t wait to be out of there for good. Two more weeks were fourteen days too long as far as she was concerned.

The prospect of working for the Walker brothers wasn’t high on her list of things she wanted to accomplish in her life, but it beat scrubbing other people’s messes. Admittedly, V hadn’t set a direct career path for herself, but she was happy about the choices she had made thus far. She was supporting herself, helping her mother when she could, and she got to spend every day with her best friend. In her opinion, she couldn’t ask for much more than that.

Although, the idea of working for the Walkers was a little intimidating, V had been giving it some serious thought. When Zoey mentioned she was going to be closing her small cleaning service, V had been worried at first. When her best friend mentioned they’d be working for the resort, V had initially thought about turning down the offer. She was glad she hadn’t jumped the gun too early on that decision though. After

some serious thought, she had come up with an idea that she was actually excited about. When she mentioned it to Zoey a couple of weeks ago, she was thrilled to know her best friend supported her in this little venture.

Alluring Indulgence Resort was going to rock their sleepy little town in more ways than one. When she actually sat down and thought about it, the opportunity this place presented made her head spin. With her sights set on managing the resort's luxury day spa, V knew she needed to take the next step toward securing the next phase of her life, but she hadn't yet presented the idea to Kaleb, Sawyer and Travis.

She was working on it though. Well, at least she was mentally mapping out what she was supposed to do next. With Zoey's support, V knew she just needed to ask for what she wanted. She wasn't looking forward to having the conversation with the oldest Walker brothers, but she knew if she wanted it, she was going to have to go for it. Now she was just biding her time and trying to muster up a little more backbone. They were an intimidating bunch.

"Are we getting a drink after this?" V prayed they would be, or she might just burst at the seams. Being only two days into the work week, for some reason this was turning out to be one of the longest weeks of her life. She knew she probably could thank Zane for that.

"Definitely." Zoey sounded as exasperated as V felt. It truly was getting difficult to get up each day and clean houses when there were some substantial changes just around the corner. Some changes that would alter the course of their lives, and the lives of so many others.

Just like the Walker brothers did.

V's mind drifted to the day before, and the way Zane had pinned her to the wall and fucked her into oblivion. She hadn't realized just how much

her body had craved his until the instant he touched her. How she had ever convinced herself that the memories they had created before his attack would be enough to sustain her for a lifetime, she would never know. Clearly she'd been delusional.

And now Zane wanted to pursue this little affair for as long as it would last. V didn't have high hopes that it was going to last all that long because hell, sex was sex. She might not have many compelling offers, but she knew, for a fact, the Walker brothers didn't spend many nights alone. The idea of Zane attempting to change her mind about this being anything more was preposterous. But she had to admit, she was looking forward to him trying.

Ok, so maybe she had a change of heart – it was more like a real slight shift actually – somewhere in the dark of night when she was lying awake, fearful of every single noise she heard, every creak of her house, every brush of the tree branches outside her window against the screen. At that point, V had been willing to run to Zane if she thought it would do her any good. Sure, she was nervous, timid even, but this was Zane Walker and she was undeniably affected by him.

Granted, yesterday could've been a fluke as far as she was concerned. Hell, Zane hadn't been out of the hospital for two hours before she'd been competently persuaded to give in to him. The man made her physically ache with his nearness. Considering he hadn't had sex in three months, she could almost believe that she'd just been an easy way for him to rectify his celibate slump. Except V *didn't* believe that. She wouldn't have had sex with him if she had either.

For the better part of the morning, V had been satisfied just thinking about what happened between them last night. Now that the day was

dwindling on, V was a little disappointed that she hadn't heard from him yet. But not enough for her to try and reach out to him. There was still time left, so she held out hope. Yes, that dreaded word that she shied away from was right there lingering at the edge of her periphery.

He probably was elbow-deep in an engine somewhere and totally oblivious to the time. That's what Zane did. He gave one hundred and fifty percent to everything he did and everything else fell to the wayside except what he was working on. Since she'd been privy to his undivided attention a time or two, V couldn't complain.

"Smiling, huh?" Zoey stood just a few feet away staring down at her while V mindlessly scrubbed. "I know it's not the job that's making you light up like that. Must be Zane."

Zoey turned and walked off; successfully dodging the dry cloth V threw at her. She had to agree with Zoey though. She hadn't been smiling much lately, and that was mostly because she still couldn't get over what had happened to Zane that day.

Just last night, when she went home after leaving his house, she'd sat in her car for a good fifteen minutes before she managed to walk to her front porch. She wasn't quite sure what was wrong with her, but whatever it was, it scared her senseless.

When she was finally finished with the bathroom and she had vacuumed the master bedroom carpet, V met Zoey in the kitchen to find the woman on the phone, looking all googly-eyed and dreamy.

V didn't need to eavesdrop on the conversation to know Zoey was talking to Kaleb. She wasn't sure how either of them managed to get anything done during the day with as many times as they stopped to talk on the phone. They'd been together for several months now, and yet they still

acted like the relationship was new for both of them. It was cute. And a little nauseating at times.

V felt absolutely no ill will toward the couple though. She was more than happy for her friend and the fact that she had finally found what she'd deserved from the beginning. Kaleb Walker was one of the finest men V had ever known, and his love for Zoey was apparent. It had been for a long, long time, although both Zoey and Kaleb had been oblivious to it. Most of the people who knew them had seen it, but the two of them had denied their physical attraction to one another for years. Thankfully, they'd both found their way, and now they were planning a wedding.

This reminded, V... She was working on the bachelorette party.

Without preamble, V began loading her things into Zoey's truck while she waited for her to finish her phone call. She'd heard plenty of "I love you" and "I miss you" in the last couple of weeks that she didn't need to hear any more.

By the time Zoey was heading out of the house, V had loaded her things into the bed of Zoey's truck and was waiting patiently. Not that patience was one of her virtues, but she was working on it. Probably had a lot to do with Zane's attack and the fact that there for about a week, they hadn't known whether he would make it or not.

The thought still made her sick to her stomach.

"I've got to go home and shower, but then I'll pick you up and we'll head over to Moonshiners," Zoey mumbled as she approached and at first V thought she was still on the phone. When she looked up, she saw that her friend was, in fact, talking to her.

“Sounds like a plan.” Not that the idea of going home sounded appealing. Especially considering V would actually have to go into the house, but it wasn’t like she had much of a choice.

“How’re the renovations on the house coming along?” V figured idle chit chat was the only way to keep her mind off of going home, so she brought up the safest subject she knew of.

“Fantastic.” Zoey grinned from ear to ear as she settled behind the wheel and started the engine. “With the sale of the land, I’ve got enough money to do some pretty significant improvements to the house. If it weren’t for the age, we wouldn’t be looking at so much money or change, but I think when they’re done, it’ll be totally worth it.”

“When will they be finished?” Completion of the work had been a precarious topic for Zoey last week, although V hadn’t understood why. Considering she and Kaleb were already shacking up at his place while the work was being done, V figured there were other more important battles Zoey should be focused on.

“Now they are telling us about three months. Kaleb talked to the general contractor today, and he’s going to get a crew started this week.”

Since Zoey’s father moved into the guest house that Zoey had originally been occupying, the main house currently stood almost empty which seemed to make her friend a little nervous. Zoey’s little bouts of frustration were few and far between these days though, and V was just happy to see the smile on her friend’s face. Zoey deserved all the happiness in the world as far as V was concerned.

After finding out that Zoey’s ex-husband, Jason Tribbons had actually got some chick pregnant while the two of them had been married, Zoey’s mood had gone sour there for a little while. Not that V blamed her. If it

weren't for Braydon's and Brendon's interference they would have known what happened a long time ago, but instead, the wound was still fresh. According to Zoey, Kaleb was unquestionably worth every ounce of heartache she had gone through in her life just to end up where she was.

Of course, it appeared Jason and his crazy bitch wife were back for good, but Zoey didn't seem to care. And V wasn't about to bring it up. That man was in the past, and V was happy to celebrate Zoey's future with her.

After all, it seemed to be the only future worth celebrating these days.

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Chapter Four

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By the time the twins and Ethan left, leaving only Sawyer, Kaleb and himself, Zane was more than ready to get on with his day. While the rest of them were razzing one another relentlessly, Zane managed to text Beau to see if he could get away for a bit and meet him at the gym. Unfortunately, Beau was busy and said he'd catch him the next day.

At first Zane had been disappointed, but after overhearing Kaleb's phone conversation with Zoey a few minutes ago, he'd found something else to look forward to. According to what he heard, Kaleb was meeting Zoey and V at Moonshiners later, and Zane had invited himself to tag along. He wasn't going to miss his chance to corner V again. It seemed that might be the only way he would get to spend some time with her.

He didn't bother her that morning like he wanted to, mainly because he knew how skittish V was. She reminded him of an abused animal. She wanted to trust, but she wasn't quite to the point where she would open herself up yet, but she was noticeably getting better. She needed space. And after Zane managed to get her to commit to allowing him to pursue her, he figured he'd back off. A little.

He found it amusing that she still wanted to reiterate that whatever this was between them was just sex. Sex with her was certainly on his agenda because what red blooded man wouldn't jump at the opportunity to have V wrapped around him like a fucking blanket. Shit, Zane had never known anything quite like it, and he wasn't about to let go of it if he had a say in the matter.

“Awww, shit. Another one bites the dust.” Sawyer’s sarcasm broke into Zane’s thoughts. He glanced over to see his brother smirking at him.

“What the hell are you talking about?” He dared to ask the question.

“Fuck, bro. You’re sitting over there grinning like a fucking girl in love.”

Zane glowered at his brother, but then he broke into a smile. It was harder and harder to get irritated with his brothers at this point. He had just missed them so damn much while he’d been in the hospital. He had enough anger and hatred boiling deep in his gut from the assault that he couldn’t find it in him to let anything else get to him at the moment.

“Do you really want to go there?” Zane questioned, laughing. “I’ve heard some stories about you and a pretty little Sheriff’s daughter that we could relive if you’d like.”

Sawyer’s eyebrows darted downward, a frown replacing his smirk. There was clearly something going on between Sawyer and Kennedy Endsley, but Zane only knew as much as he’d heard from his brothers and Beau, which honestly wasn’t much.

“Are you planning to return to work soon?” Sawyer redirected the conversation, clearly wanting to change the subject.

The question caught Zane off guard, and he tried to get a read on Sawyer’s intentions. Did his brother want him to go back to work? Was Ethan having problems managing the shop while he’d been away? He hadn’t heard anything, but that didn’t mean they weren’t keeping secrets from him. But this was also exactly the opening he needed.

“I’ve been giving that some thought.”

Sawyer's eyebrow cocked as though he was waiting for the rest of Zane's explanation.

Zane hadn't prepared for this conversation yet and he had a hard time finding the right words... "I want in on the resort." *Well hell.* That wasn't what he had in mind.

"What do you want to do?" Again Sawyer asked the question while Kaleb looked on.

"Don't know. What do you need me to do?"

"I thought you liked being a mechanic," Kaleb interjected, frowning before he continued. "Don't get me wrong, I think it's terrific that you want to be involved in the resort, actually. We never thought to talk to you about it because you always seemed married to your job."

Married to his job? That was funny.

Yes, Zane enjoyed working on cars and trucks, but that hadn't necessarily been his long term goal. As the youngest Walker, he'd had to fit in with his brother's goals because Walker Demo had been started long before he was old enough to work.

With Travis being ten years older, the oldest of them all, Zane didn't have much of a say in what he started out doing. Not that he hadn't enjoyed it. Being a mechanic had been all he needed, but thanks to the recent road bumps he'd stumbled over, he was ready to move forward. And it wasn't like Ethan didn't have some buddies who would be able to help him. In fact, Zane knew of one person who would be perfect for the job.

"Who's going to manage the clubs?" Zane asked, glancing between his two brothers.

“I’m planning on taking one of them,” Sawyer explained, “but we don’t have anyone for the other yet. I thought maybe Travis would be interested, but he’s more interested in managing the actual hotel.”

“I’ll take the other.” That was easy enough, although Zane didn’t have the slightest idea what managing a club would entail. He was smart enough that he’d be able to figure it out. He noticed Kaleb and Sawyer and the look that passed between them. “What?”

“Do you have any idea what type of club we’re talking about here?”

Zane had a relatively good idea. After all, he’d spent the last couple of months cooped up with a laptop and too much time on his hands. He knew from all of the stories on the internet exactly what Travis had in mind. “I wasn’t thinking country club if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sawyer smirked at Zane’s comeback. “Definitely not.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Kaleb offered. “In fact, I think you and Sawyer would be the most logical choice anyway.”

“Not the twins, huh?” Sawyer laughed.

Holy shit. Zane couldn’t imagine Braydon and Brendon managing anything, much less a club. There were a lot of things to consider when it came to the club, including the liquor license, the entertainment – and hell, Zane didn’t even want to know what the twins’ choice in entertainment would be.

“What do you think Travis will say?” Zane knew that Travis was the one person he might have to convince, but with everything the man had going on, he didn’t think it would take much.

“I think his only concern will be whether you and V will be able to work together,” Kaleb stated in that matter of fact voice that grated on

Zane's last nerve. His brother was making reference to what happened at Anderson Croft's house and the way Zane had gone off on Jake Sanders.

"That wasn't out of jealousy." Zane felt the need to convince them.

For months, he'd been defending his own actions considering the repercussions. He'd had to explain to both his mother and father exactly what happened and why. Of course, his mother hadn't been too happy with him, but his father had understood. Throughout Zane's childhood, he'd been taught to defend others. Bullying was not tolerated in the Walker household, and, despite this extreme incident and what Jake had done to him, he'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"We didn't think it was. That doesn't mean there won't be other fuckheads who treat women like shit," Sawyer added.

"You would've done the same fucking thing." Zane's anger was escalating. Granted, maybe Jake's retaliation was the worst that any of them had seen, but Zane knew, for a fact, his brothers would ruthlessly defend a woman from a fuck up like Jake.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Sawyer stated more firmly. "But we can't have it go down like that. Not at the resort."

Nodding his head, Zane agreed. He wouldn't make any promises verbally just yet because until he sought his own revenge on the bastard who had damn near taken his life, Zane didn't know what he was capable of.

"I'll talk to Travis if you want me to," Kaleb offered.

Again Zane nodded. This was what he wanted, and he was going to make it happen. One way or another.

Changing the subject, Zane glanced back and forth between both Kaleb and Sawyer. “Either of you want to tell me just what the hell Jake is doing harassing V? And why the hell no one’s told me about it yet?”

His brothers looked startled by the direction his question was going, and they glanced back and forth between one another. Zane felt his irritation level rapidly intensifying. He hated that they felt the need to protect him. As the youngest, he’d battled being coddled his entire life. He was a grown man and as far as he was concerned, V was his to worry about. They didn’t have any right to keep him in the dark.

“Travis is trying to nail down where Jake’s at, but we don’t know anything yet.”

“How long’s this been going on?” he asked Sawyer who seemed to be the only one willing to talk. Kaleb had hastily stuck his face back in his laptop.

“From what we know, about two months. About the same time you woke up.”

Zane wondered whether the timing was coincidental or if Jake had been keeping tabs on Zane’s condition. Either way, it didn’t make a damn bit of difference to him.

“Have either of you looked into it?” Zane knew Travis would be keeping an eye out. His brother was known for having eyes and ears all over the place.

It still surprised him that Travis hadn’t yet figured out where Jake was, nor did they have the names of the other three who’d been with him that day. Zane hadn’t known any of them. In fact, he’d never even seen

them. The only thing they knew was that those three weren't from Coyote Ridge.

“We've been talking to Beau. He's taken an interest in V for the last couple of months. He's watching her back, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't know that.”

That wasn't news to Zane. Beau was his best friend. They'd discussed what happened, and they were both on the same page. V was the most important as far as Zane was concerned and while he'd been in the hospital, Beau had agreed to keep an eye on her. As discreetly as possible.

He seriously needed to meet up with Beau. There were some other things Zane was ready to discuss. Like how they were going to handle Vanessa Carmichael now that Zane was home.

♀ ♂

“When does Gage get back in town?” V asked Zoey as they sat in a booth at Moonshiners a couple of hours later.

After going home and showering, she waited for Zoey to return and pick her up, for a much needed night out. Nursing a beer and watching the few people mulling about the bar, she wondered whether she should've just stayed home.

Although she hoped a drink would help alleviate some of her tension, V knew better than to think it would. Her stress was primarily related to one gorgeous as hell cowboy whom she couldn't seem to get off of her mind lately. No matter how hard she tried.

“Next week.” Zoey grinned.

“Are you counting down the days?” V still couldn’t believe the bomb her best friend had dropped on her a couple of months ago. After a particularly stressful day, they’d both resorted to a few too many drinks and Zoey’s mouth had gotten away from her. According to her friend, she was happily enjoying a threesome with Gage Matthews and her fiancé, Kaleb. Or rather she had been before Gage set out on the road again. Being a long haul truck driver, Gage was usually gone more than he was home.

“Maybe,” Zoey’s smile lit up her entire face. The woman was something else.

V shouldn’t have been surprised by the news that Zoey was currently the focus of both men’s attention considering the history that Gage and Kaleb had. It wasn’t a secret that the two of them had a penchant for threesomes. Those rumors had come and gone a long time ago. They’d ceased to exist once Kaleb and Gage openly admitted to their trysts years ago.

V was well aware of the stories. There were plenty to go around, and they all involved one or more of the Walker brothers. It seemed each of the brothers had their own kinks, and they all somehow involved ménages in some way. Kaleb and Gage, Sawyer and Greyson, Zane and Beau... They were best friends who were notorious for their threesomes with willing women and not a single one of them denied it.

V knew Braydon and Brendon had had their fair share of rumors, but those two were a little different. Not that she had asked either of them, but from everything she had heard, neither had ever been with a girl unless the other was present. She wasn’t sure whether it was true or not, and she didn’t intend to ask.

The only two V didn't know much about were Travis and Ethan. People didn't talk about Travis Walker, and she didn't know if it were because they didn't know about his sexual preferences or if they just chose not to poke the bear so to speak. As for Ethan, he was too quiet, and no one actually knew much about him. She knew he'd had a couple of relationships, but they usually were short lived and never discussed.

In fact, the tales that were spun through the years were so common that V hadn't even considered what might be happening behind closed doors where her best friend was concerned. Never would she have imagined sweet little Zoey Stranford in a threesome. To have heard from her best friend's mouth had been shocking. It was even more surprising that there weren't any rumors going around about the trio. V was also surprised that there weren't any other rumors circulating.

Like ones including her and Zane.

And Beau.

V hadn't told a soul about the encounter she'd had with Zane and his best friend, nor did she intend to. The first time that it happened, V had been a little out of sorts. Being pinned beneath Zane Walker was a unique form of sensual pleasure, but being sandwiched between both Beau and Zane was almost more than she could handle. It'd changed her. Indefinitely.

Not that Zoey knew that, but V got the impression her friend had picked up on something. Especially considering the way Beau came to her side after Zane's attack. It had been unexpected, to say the least.

"Are y'all planning a reunion?" V pushed Zoey for more information. It's what she did. And yes, her best friend pushed back just as hard, and she knew at some point, her friend was going to insist that she talk about things better kept to herself.

Zoey's face turned pink, visible even in the dim lights of the bar, and her grin said more than words ever could.

V laughed. "You're looking forward to being the cream filling in that little sandwich, aren't you?"

Zoey didn't answer, but she laughed, and then turned her attention to the door, and V's eyes followed.

Holy shit.

V didn't know what it was about the sight of all that masculinity as the Walker brothers piled in one after the other, but it gave her goose bumps to see it. There were four of them walking their way.

Women of all ages swooned over the Walker brothers, but V couldn't necessarily blame them. Every one of them was over six feet tall, packed with muscle and wildly charming. On the days they were decked out in jeans and cowboy hats, like today, V was pretty sure they left women fainting in their path. She almost expected to see it now.

"What's up ladies?" Braydon greeted the two of them with a seductive, crooked smile as he grabbed a chair and pulled it over to the end of the booth she and Zoey were sitting in.

Braydon and Brendon were identical twins and even at twenty nine years old, it was still difficult to tell them apart. The easiest way was when Braydon spoke to one of his brothers. He referred to each of them as "Bubba", but aside from that V hadn't figured out another easy way to decipher between the two.

They were usually attached at the hip, and, according to the rumors, many of the women in town said they gave a whole new meaning to the old jingle from that gum commercial, *double your pleasure, double your fun.*

Considering the twins were notorious for their trail of heartbreak, the women they left behind were always known to have experienced a taste of them both at the same time. That's the way they did things and although V had no idea why, she didn't question it.

Of course, there was Kaleb, who V knew probably better than most of the other brothers, except for Zane, but that was thanks to Zoey's friendship with him throughout their life. V had made it a point not to get too close to anyone, including Zoey's friends, and she sometimes wondered exactly what she had missed out on. Kaleb was a good guy. Better than most actually.

When Zane's hulking body folded into the booth beside her, V was forced to move over. She glared at him, but was unable to be angry with him. Having him close was beginning to be a familiar thing, even though he'd been away for several months. Despite her better judgment, V wasn't crazy enough to push him away. Although she should. She really should.

His arm came to rest on the back of the booth, barely grazing the tops of her shoulders and V had to suppress the shiver that raced down her spine. That's what happened when he touched her, even in the slightest, most innocent of ways. When he leveled those blazing blue-gray eyes on her, V met his stare head on. If she weren't mistaken, there was an odd twinkle in the heated way he was looking at her. God she had missed him.

The instant that thought plowed through her brain V jerked her eyes away. She was the reason he'd been gone for so long, and she'd be smart to remember that.

"How're you?" Zoey asked Braydon, breaking V from her weighted thoughts.

V focused on the looks passing back and forth between everyone at the table. The way the twins smiled at Zoey was so benevolent that V would have probably mistaken her for family if she didn't know better. The way the twins had stepped up to protect Zoey all those years ago when her loser of a husband had up and gotten some girl pregnant, V was pretty sure that's how they saw her anyway. Like a little sister.

But there was nothing sisterly about the way Kaleb pulled Zoey against him when he dropped into the seat beside her. For two people who lived together, no one would've known it by the way they acted when they saw one another. It was like they hadn't seen each other for months, not hours. The amatory way Kaleb embraced Zoey, pulling her against his side and kissing her forehead made V turn away. She felt as though she were intruding on a private moment.

For a brief, irrational second, her brain wandered down an unfamiliar trail, wondering whether she ever would have that sort of love in her life. She was pretty sure she knew the answer to that, and it was a monumental, resounding no. The most she had to look forward to was an affair with Zane Walker. One that was based on extraordinary sex and nothing more.

Brendon returned to the table a minute later with four beers, handing one to each of his brothers and keeping one for himself. Then he grabbed a chair and flipped it around the way Braydon had, and dropped into it.

Watching the twins together was still a spectacle as far as V was concerned. If a man could be described as beautiful, the twins would hold that honor. It was hard to think that two rough and tumble cowboys could be anything but rugged, but there was so much charisma and grace with the twins, V understood exactly why women flocked to them when they walked in a room.

Tearing her gaze away from them when Braydon sent her a knowing wink, V found herself looking over at Zane. Now, this guy was rugged in every sense of the word. With a day's worth of stubble on his strong jaw, and his black Stetson low on his forehead, hiding his beautiful eyes, he exuded that mysterious charm he was known for. She couldn't stop herself from smiling. The man was delicious.

"You're beautiful when you smile," Zane whispered in her ear, low enough that only she could hear. Another chill raced down her spine at the words. She couldn't even say thank you, she was so taken aback. Zane wasn't quite as much of a player like most of the Walker brothers, but he did have his fair share of women in his past. As far as she knew, there was never anything serious though.

"How's the bachelorette party planning going?" Braydon's question shook V back to the present.

"It's coming along nicely." V returned his conspiratorial wink. She and the twins were devising a plan to have the bachelor and bachelorette parties in Vegas, although she was getting a considerable amount of resistance from Zoey, but she knew it was only for Kaleb's benefit. "How's the bachelor party coming?"

"As long as grumpy over here doesn't overrule us, we're set."

V looked at Kaleb, waiting for his response.

"Oh, hell no. We are not doing this in Vegas. Are you in on this too?"

Before V could answer Kaleb's question, Brendon chimed in, "Vegas would be kick ass, and you know it. Seriously, bro, we're doing this in Vegas."

Kaleb looked at Zoey, and she just smiled. V knew for a fact that Zoey was all about partying it up in Vegas. Neither of them had ever been, and they figured now was the perfect time.

“You’re in on this too, aren’t you?” V watched as Kaleb’s eyes sparkled when he looked down at Zoey who was answering his question with a guilty smile.

“What about you? What do you think?” V asked Zane, hoping to distract herself from the longing that was still churning deep in her stomach.

“I think it’s a great plan,” Zane offered, glancing from V then over to Kaleb. “Come on, bro. We need some excitement in our lives.”

The table was quiet for a bit as they all stared back at Zane like he had lost his mind. He might’ve been out of it for a while, but surely he knew that they had all had more excitement than they cared to have when he was attacked.

“Oh, let it go,” he barked, the blue of shaded his eyes turning dark with anger. “Let’s put it behind us and move on.”

Easier said than done, V thought to herself. They’d lived the horror of not knowing whether Zane was going to live or die for six long days. Then, when the doctor’s said that he would wake from the coma, it would just be a matter of time, they’d all held on to hope. And yes, here he was, just like nothing had ever happened. Well, except for the subtle changes she had noticed in recent days. There was something different about Zane. Something darker, angrier, but he was managing to cover it up with a new, more than positive, outlook on life.

V wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Chapter Five

♂ ♀

Zane watched his brothers, and he took note of their irritation with him. He was well aware of the hell his family had been put through for the last few months, and if he could go back and change it, he would. Since he couldn't, he just wanted to put it all behind him. It was time to move forward. With a new outlook on life, Zane wanted nothing more than to spend each, and every day going after what he wanted.

He'd get his revenge on Jake when the time was right. For now, he couldn't sit around with a black cloud of fear or anger looming over him, or wondering what was waiting around the corner. He'd had a couple of nightmares since the attack, and he was pretty sure those were what made the anger burn brighter. There would be payback, he didn't doubt that. Zane just wasn't going to waste his time looking for Jake. He'd wait until Jake came to him.

Right now, he was too busy wanting the woman sitting next to him – in a bad way – for anything else to matter.

When the table grew quiet, in true twin fashion, Braydon and Brendon busied themselves by checking out the women in the bar, and within a minute or two, they were up and off. There was a group of women in the corner flirting dangerously with the twins, and Zane knew his brothers wouldn't be able to resist.

A second after that, Kaleb was dragging Zoey from the booth, saying something about dancing. Zane had to laugh as the two of them moved expeditiously to the small dance floor in the corner of the room. It was

apparent that they had all abandoned Zane and V for a reason, and part of him was grateful to them. He hadn't spent nearly enough time with her lately and having her all to himself had become one of his priorities.

"So...", V began, spinning her beer bottle in her hands, picking at the label.

"So?" Zane dropped his arm around V, pulling her into his side and leaning down close to her. He knew his cowboy hat shielded their faces from any prying eyes in the room. "I've missed you," he whispered.

"Missed me?" V laughed.

"Yes, missed you," he confirmed, keeping his voice low. "So much that I'm ready to sneak you into the bathroom and have my wicked way with you."

"Such a sweet talker you are," V replied, a smile tilting her supple lips.

God, he missed those lips. He wanted to feel them wrapped around his dick. For months, Zane had spent day and night with his memories, and most of them were flooded with visions of V doing naughty, wanton things to him.

Turning so he fully blocked her from anyone else's view, Zane tilted her chin until she had no choice but to look up at him. "Yesterday was just a tease for me, V. I want to bury my tongue in your pussy and make you scream my name."

He felt her body shudder, recognized the flash of excitement in her warm brown eyes. She liked when he talked to her like that, he knew she did. V might pretend to be prim and proper while they were out in public, but he had learned just how naughty she really was.

Sliding his hand down the front of her neck, he continued until he brushed the back of his fingers over her nipple, feeling it pebble beneath his touch. “You like that idea, don’t you, baby.”

Zane wasn’t doing himself any favors teasing her like this. His cock was rock hard, and his jeans were damn tight, but he couldn’t help himself. “I’m tempted to slide my hand beneath your skirt just to feel how wet you are,” he told her, watching the way her eyes closed briefly and she licked her lips. “You’d like that wouldn’t you, V?” Gripping her chin more firmly, he waited for her to open her eyes. “Tell me.”

Her eyes fluttered open, but she didn’t look away. He could see the anticipation in her heated gaze. Vanessa Carmichael was a naughty girl at heart, but she very rarely let herself get out of control. He’d seen it though, so he knew it was possible. Zane was bound and determined he was going to make it happen again.

“Or maybe, I should just sneak you out to my Jeep and let you ride my cock. How does that sound?”

Her sharp intake of breath, followed by a low moan told Zane he was positively affecting her. When she slid her hand down between his legs, rubbing his aching cock through his jeans, he damn near lost it. They were in the middle of Moonshiners, with remarkably little privacy between them, yet she was daring to tease him back.

“Tell me, V. What do you want?” Zane knew where this was leading, and he needed her to make the call. All she had to do was say the word, and he’d drag her somewhere with a little more privacy and give them both what they needed. “You want me to take you in the bathroom? Or in my Jeep?” He knew he couldn’t leave the question open ended, so he was now giving her a choice.

“Bathroom,” V whispered, her eyes still pinned on his face.

Zane pulled away slightly, doing his best not to jump up from his seat and drag her to the back hallway. He spared a glance around the room. Noticing no one was paying any attention to them, he gracefully slid out of the booth, taking V’s hand in his and pulling her along with him. As patiently as he could manage, Zane led her through the bar, looking around to ensure no one was watching them. When he was satisfied they were in the clear, he dragged her along behind him until they reached the bathrooms at the end of the hall.

Thank God for single person restrooms, especially vacant ones. Zane opened the door, pulled V in behind him and then shut and locked it behind them. Within seconds he had her up against the small sink, her butt pressing against the porcelain and his erection grinding between her thighs.

V didn’t speak; she just threw her arms around his neck, pulling his head down to hers as her mouth met his. In a frenzy of tongues and teeth, Zane lost himself in her taste. The way she moaned into his mouth made him harder than stone and eager to slide his cock into her sweet, warm depths.

She took the reins, rapidly unhooking his belt buckle, then easing his cock out of his jeans after unhooking the button and lowering the zipper. While she focused on him, Zane slid his hands up beneath her skirt, jerking her panties out of the way, successfully ripping the delicate fabric in his haste. Apparently, that turned her on because V was once again devouring his mouth, sucking his tongue roughly.

Zane had to pull back enough so he could lift her legs around his waist, but he didn’t waste any more time.

“Fuck, baby,” Zane groaned as he slid his cock inside her wet pussy, watching as her eyes closed. “You’re so fucking wet for me, V. God, baby!” Zane couldn’t stop the rambling, couldn’t slow down if he tried.

Slamming his hips forward, he buried himself to the hilt in her enticing body, thrusting fast and hard until V was scoring the skin of his arms through his shirt as her pussy gripped him like a velvet vice.

“That’s it, baby,” he said, trying to keep his voice low enough no one would hear them. “You like being fucked, don’t you? Almost as much as I like fucking you.”

“More,” V begged. “I need more, Zane. Fuck me harder.”

Zane aimed to please, so he began ruthlessly pounding inside of her, his teeth clenched as he fought the urge to come hard and fast inside of her. *Shit!*

When V began moaning louder, Zane crushed his mouth to hers, swallowing her cries as she moved her hands to grip his hips, pulling him deeper as she lifted her legs, tilting her pelvis until he was as deep as he could get.

“Fuck me, Zane,” V groaned, her pussy milking him, tightening almost painfully around his shaft.

Holding her ass so she didn’t move, Zane plowed into her over and over, willing her to come around him, but unable to say a word because his mouth was fused with hers. When she bit his bottom lip, pain ricocheted through him, going straight to his dick, and he couldn’t hold back any longer. V’s nails dug deeper into his ass, and she moaned one last time as her body spasmed out of control, milking his release from him as she came around his cock.

He had a feeling he was going to need to work on his stamina if he planned to keep up with her.

♀ ♂

As V was coming down from the potent sexual high, she couldn't believe what they had just done. Well, she could believe it. Sort of. The attraction between them had always been like this. Combustible. It was the only way she could describe it.

Ever since the first time they had sex at her house several months ago, it'd been explosive. Back then they'd only spared a few minutes to discuss the necessities – birth control, condoms, and diseases. Once they'd come to a decision that they were both comfortable with, they hadn't looked back. No holds barred fucking at its finest. Never did they make love. What happened when their bodies came together could only be described as hardcore fucking. It was vehement, erotic, and beyond good.

Her legs were shaking as she put her feet back on the floor, Zane's hands firmly on her hips, holding her steady. He was still holding her close as his semi-hard cock slid from her body. The man was a machine and V knew that, in just a few minutes, he'd be rarin' to go again. She, on the other hand, needed a little more time. *Holy shit*. That was one of the most explosive orgasms she'd ever experienced.

“You all right?” he asked, looking down at her from beneath that sexy as hell cowboy hat. V was surprised it still sat on top of his head.

“Better than all right,” she confirmed as she tried to right her clothes, pulling back from him.

She watched as Zane took a moment to clean up before tucking himself back in his jeans and fixing his clothes. He looked as if nothing had happened while she knew from the image reflecting back at her from the mirror above the sink that she had the just fucked look on her face. Her hair was in disarray, and she could see the telltale scrape along her jaw from the stubble on his face.

V realized her panties were torn, and managed to slip them down her legs while Zane was turned away from her. She glanced around the small bathroom and knew there was no way she was leaving them there. Since she didn't have any pockets, she wasn't sure what the hell she was going to do. Zane solved her problem when he turned to face her, that wicked gleam in his eyes as he held out his hand.

Hesitantly, she dropped her panties into his hands and watched as he slipped them in the front pocket of his jeans. *Oh, God!* How was she going to be able to look at him knowing her torn panties were in his pocket?

"I'll give you a minute," Zane whispered, dropping a quick kiss on her lips before slipping out the door.

V swiftly locked the door, realizing she was in the men's bathroom. Staring back at the woman in the mirror, she couldn't resist the urge to smile. Even with her heart raising all kinds of questions, V did her best to ignore the overprotective organ. What she had just done was wild, crazy and ultimately the most exciting thing she had ever done. From the minute Zane had started talking dirty to her at the table, V knew she had to have him.

He was right, yesterday was just a tease, and she had wanted him again as soon as he walked in the door tonight. Running her fingers through

her hair, trying to put it back in place, she accepted the fact there was no disguising what just happened between them.

Turning on the water, V quickly washed up. When she felt semi-presentable, she unlocked the door and then stepped out into the hall, finding Zane leaning against the wall waiting for her. His head was down, but she knew he saw her. Taking tentative steps, she approached him and waited to see what he was going to say next.

“I will have you again before the night is over,” he warned her, and V smiled once more.

As he took her hand, she allowed him to lead her back down the hall and into the open area of the bar. Thankfully, everyone seemed to be minding their own business. She had no idea how long they were gone, but it didn't seem like it was too long. As she slid back into the booth, she was reminded that she didn't have panties on as the cool, silky material of her skirt brushed against her butt. Her face heated, and she looked up to see Zane staring back at her.

“God, you're beautiful,” he whispered and V wondered whether he actually meant to say the words.

A minute later, Zoey and Kaleb returned to the table, and if either of them knew what just happened they were kind enough not to act as though they did. V would have given anything for another beer, but she knew she couldn't afford to take the chance of lowering her inhibitions any more than they already were. She didn't even want to think what she might do if she were actually drunk around Zane.

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Chapter Six

♂ ♀

“Who’ll backfill your position when you take over the club at AI?” Kaleb asked a short while later when he and Zoey returned to the table.

Zane felt V’s eyes on him.

“You’re going to manage one of the clubs?” V turned slightly in her seat to look at him directly.

“Yes.” That was the plan at least. Not that he wasn’t sure of his decision, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to speak to Travis and he still wondered whether he would get any pushback from his oldest brother.

“A sex club?” V clarified, and Zane glanced down at her, his arm still looped over the back of the booth behind her.

“Yes.” He wasn’t quite sure whether she was trying to go somewhere with her questions, or if she were just confirming.

“I was thinking V would be a perfect person to manage the spa,” Zoey added when the table fell silent. Zane had still been watching V, so he noticed the way her eyes widened in shock as she looked back at her friend.

“The spa?” Kaleb questioned, glancing between the two women. “That’s a fantastic idea.”

“I – I –” V stuttered, but didn’t complete her sentence.

“You what?” Zane found himself unable to stop himself from touching her. He let his right hand slide down, and his thumb sweep back and forth over the silky skin of her neck, just below her ear, beneath her hair.

“I was planning to talk to Kaleb and Sawyer about it myself,” she answered, glaring at Zoey.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Kaleb added, “it’s a done deal. If you want to talk to Sawyer and Travis, I suggest you do it soon. We’re looking at some applications that we received in the last few days because we’re hoping to get a jumpstart. Travis is at the point that he is sparing no expense to get AI off the ground.”

“When’s Travis gonna be back?” Zane asked.

“Should be today or tomorrow. They had something monumental go down at Club Destiny in recent days, and the McCoy’s insisted that he come up there.”

“What happened?” Zoey’s interest matched what Zane’s.

“He didn’t go into detail when I talked to him last night, but from what I gathered, Luke McCoy went off the deep end.”

Zane didn’t know Luke McCoy other than the bits and pieces he had gathered from Kaleb and Travis. Since he never made it to the groundbreaking ceremony, he didn’t get a chance to meet anyone that his brothers were working with in Dallas.

“What are you going to name the club?” Zoey turned her attention back to him.

“No idea.” He hadn’t thought that far ahead. He wanted to talk to Sawyer to get an idea of what he might’ve been planning for the other club, to give him some ideas. Truthfully, Zane didn’t see any of it mattering for at least a couple more weeks, maybe months, so he assumed he still had some time.

For the next few minutes, Zane half listened while Zoey and V discussed various things, most of them related to clothes which made him want to laugh. Zane wasn't all that familiar with girl talk, and honestly, even sitting here with V was different from any other relationship he'd ever been in.

Admittedly, Zane didn't have serious relationships. Not even in high school. The women he associated with knew not to expect much from him because quite frankly, he didn't have much to give. He spent most of his time working, the rest of it hanging out with either his brothers, or a couple of his close friends, mostly Beau. When it came to socializing with women, Zane tended to gravitate toward the horizontal conversations versus anything else. For some reason, the women didn't seem to mind. Just as long as he spent more than one night with them.

He had spent more time with V in the months leading up to the assault than probably all of the women from his past combined. He knew she tried to play off their interactions as only sexual in nature, but Zane knew better. They might not know everything about one another, but he certainly knew more about her than she was willing to admit.

V wasn't much on asking questions about him personally, but he knew her well enough to know she tried to keep her own life as quiet as possible, and as a result, she didn't seem interested in getting to know others. Probably because she was scared they would learn more about her than she was comfortable sharing.

Zane wouldn't go as far as to say he knew V as much as he wanted to because she had an uncanny ability to keep herself guarded. There were a few times in the months leading up to his attack that she had almost opened up. And there were things he knew about her just because they both lived in

the same small town all of their lives. Like the fact that she was an only child, her mother being one of the most infamous people ever to come out of Coyote Ridge thanks to her promiscuous lifestyle. Even to this day, V didn't know who her father was, and according to the rumors, Zane wasn't sure her mother even knew. Not that he believed the varied bullshit that was thrown out like old garbage on an ongoing basis. In fact, Zane preferred not to listen to it at all.

That's how Jake Sanders had found himself up against the wall with Zane's hands wrapped around his thick neck. The man thought he could start talking shit, and he just happened to pick the wrong woman to start running his mouth about. Zane had learned real fast just how much he was willing to tolerate from smart mouthed bastards like Jake. Especially when it came to V.

Thanks to his quick temper, Zane also learned that V wasn't fond of having someone stand up for her. She had been downright livid once she finally got over the hurt that Jake's words inflicted. Not that Zane cared about that one way or the other. He didn't regret it, and he'd do it again in a heartbeat. As far as he was concerned, a man stood up for those he cared about. That's what his parents had taught him, and he'd never questioned their logic. Since he cared about V, even if she didn't want him to, Zane was going to make sure no one spoke to her that way. And if they did, they'd be damned smart not to let him find out about it.

"Zane?" A dainty, feminine voice interrupted Zane's thoughts, along with V and Zoey's conversation apparently. When he finally looked up at the woman standing beside the table, he could feel V staring from her place beside him.

Zane nodded his head in acknowledgement, recognizing the woman standing just a few inches from where he sat.

“I heard you were out of the hospital,” Tamara Stalsh smiled affectionately, her baby blue eyes darting from the other three at the table and then back to Zane.

“I am,” he answered, not sure what he was supposed to say.

Zane knew Tamara. He’d had sex with her once.

Literally, one time.

From that day forward, the woman had stalked him to the point he thought he was going to have to move to another country and change his name. It was a mistake, and he knew he was solely responsible for his own actions, but... Well, there were no buts. It was entirely his fault.

“I talked to your mom when I went to visit you in the hospital. She was so sweet.”

Oh, hell. Just what Zane needed, Lorrie Walker talking to Zane’s ex-flings. Still staring up at her, he had absolutely no idea what to say. He couldn’t very well thank her for coming to visit him. If he did, he knew she’d take it as an invitation, and she’d probably show up at his damn house later.

When he felt V’s hand on his thigh, Zane didn’t react. At first, she was just touching his leg, but when she squeezed in a possessive gesture, he turned his attention to her. He expected to see anger in her pretty brown eyes, not heat. She didn’t seem to be jealous, but her touch was meant to be a warning and he found he liked her reaction.

Letting his arm drop onto her shoulders, he pulled her close, never taking his eyes off of her. “Did you need something, baby?”

His words were loud enough for everyone at the table, including Tamara to hear, but he honestly wasn't speaking to anyone but V. At the moment, she was the only damn person that mattered.

She flashed a smile, then tore her gaze from his, looking back up at the woman still standing by the table. Waiting.

"I'm sure Zane's mother will fill him in on all of the visitors he had while he was there. She probably hasn't had time yet," V told the woman nicely.

Zane wanted to crush his lips to V's sassy little mouth and kiss her with the fierce, agonizing longing that he'd been living with for the last three months.

What he did was turn to face Tamara and smile.

She smiled back as though he was only there for her. Weird.

"Thanks for checking up on me."

"If you need anything, anything at all, you've got my number. Just call me. Anytime."

V pinched the inside of Zane's thigh, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from growling. *Fuck that hurt.*

"Thanks," Zane replied through clenched teeth.

♀ ♂

Watching as the lovely young girl walked away, V felt every single one of her thirty years. The girl couldn't have been older than twenty one, maybe twenty two. She clearly had an interest in Zane, and from the way

she looked at him, she was hoping for a white picket fence sometime in the near future. If V knew anything about Zane, it was that he would not be giving anyone a white picket fence. At least not in the near future.

Considering he was only twenty four years old, V also knew he had years to think about it. Hell, she was thirty, and she felt as though she still had a few good years in her before she worried about settling down and having... Ok, she wasn't going there.

Just like his brothers, Zane liked his women willing and often, although he wasn't quite the player the others seemed to be. He steered clear of clingy women and more often than not had one night stands over brief affairs. Those were things V knew from having lived in the small town with him.

Up until recently, V didn't have much interest in the goings on at the Walker household, but for some reason, after that one party she attended with Zoey, she'd developed some strange infatuation with Zane Walker. Hell, she couldn't explain it. No matter how hard she tried, so she'd given up.

V remembered the day she and Zane had actually said more than a standard "hello" or "goodbye" to one another. She'd run into him at a party that Zoey had dragged her to.

"Why are you standing in the corner all by yourself?" A dark, seductive voice caught V's attention, and she turned to see none other than Zane Walker standing much too close.

"Why are you worried about where I'm standing? Do you own this piece of real estate?" V couldn't help the snide remark because suddenly she felt a little off kilter. Ok, a lot off kilter.

The Walker men were sinfully attractive, that wasn't a secret. From their dark hair to those wicked blue-gray eyes to the hard bodies they honed with hard work. Every inch of them screamed prime, alpha male. Considering the party was hosted by Jaxson Briggs, a cousin of the Walkers, V had seen more than her fair share of them tonight alone.

On any normal day, she tried to ensure she never got this close to one of them. Yet here she was standing less than a foot away from the youngest of the seven sinful brothers, and she couldn't come up with anything better than a snide remark.

"Maybe I do," he replied, his head cocked to the side just slightly and an adorable, crooked grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"I didn't realize you were friends with my cousin, Jaxson," he said a moment later when it was clear she was trying to ignore him.

"I'm not."

"Then what brings you here?" He took a step closer, successfully invading what was left of her personal space. V took a step back, finding herself much closer to the wall than she expected.

"I'm here with Zoey," she said smartly, keeping her eyes trained on his.

"Well, it must be my lucky night then."

"That's a horrible pickup line," she retorted, laughing.

"Who said I was trying to pick you up?" Zane asked, sounding much too serious.

"No one. I –" V had no idea what to say to him at that point.

Zoey's voice broke through V's wayward daydream, bringing her back to the present and the three people who were staring at her. "What?"

"What were you thinking about?" When V realized Zoey was talking to her, she caught her friend grinning sheepishly.

"Nothing," she said, grabbing her beer and making a giant production out of finishing the rest of it off. *Yuck!* She hated warm beer.

"Nothing, huh?" Zane's big, warm arm held her much too close for comfort.

V had never been into public displays of affection, but for the last hour, she'd been sitting beside Zane, his rough, callused fingers touching her in some manner and she'd managed not to shrug him off. Mainly because she was enjoying it, although, it still made her a tad uncomfortable. She only could imagine what other people thought when they saw the two of them together.

"Well, I think we really need to get going. I've got to get up early and meet the contractors at the house before I come pick you up," Zoey stated as she pushed her drink away.

"I really should be going, also," V proclaimed when Kaleb maneuvered out of the booth and back on his feet.

"Stay," Zane's voice was low, but V knew the others could hear him.

"I can't," she lied, grabbing her purse from the spot beside her.

"Then I'll take you home," Zane insisted, and she knew she wouldn't be able to argue with him. Considering she and Zoey had ridden together, she didn't have much of a choice. From the look in Zoey's eyes, she had much bigger plans for Kaleb anyway.

"Thank you," she replied, not wanting to make a big deal out of it.

When Zane pulled up in front of her house a short while later, V knew she wouldn't have the luxury of sitting in his Jeep and trying to figure out just how she was going to force her legs to move up those steps and through the front door.

What if Jake was hiding in the shadows?

She absolutely had no intention of letting him know just how panicked she was, so as soon as he pulled the emergency brake, she grabbed her purse and reached for the door handle. She was out in the crisp night air with her feet planted firmly on the ground before she could think about what she was doing, but not before Zane was rounding the front of his Jeep moving briskly to her side.

"I don't need you to walk me to the door," V stated, her nerves erupting as she instinctively began looking around, waiting for something dreadful to happen. "Please, just go."

The sound of metal crushing bone echoed in her ears. Make it stop!

"I'm walking you in," he demanded, and she heard the insistence in his tone. When he took her elbow, she forced her feet to move. They hadn't taken five steps before the shaking began and V knew she was on the cusp of freaking out. This was becoming a frequent thing, and she didn't want Zane to see her like this.

"Please, just go," she told him, ripping her arm out of his grasp and forcing her legs to move faster.

God, please don't let them hurt Zane again. Please. Please.

Zane didn't seem to care what she was saying because he was right there beside her. When she tried to push her key into the lock, she couldn't

get the damn thing to line up because she was trembling like a leaf in a windstorm.

Need to get inside! Must get inside. Please don't let Jake be close.

Zane stilled her hand with his, taking the key and dexterously inserting it into the lock. Once he had the door open, he took her hand and led her inside before shutting it behind them. V efficiently locked the door, but she didn't move. She *couldn't* move.

“What's the matter, V?” Zane asked, his tone low and soothing.

The images played like a horror movie that she couldn't erase from my memory. *The grunts and growls of grown men hitting one another, iron striking bone, Zane falling to the ground, not moving. Oh God!*

She couldn't get any words out, and she was immediately overwhelmed with a cold chill that raced down her spine. Without meaning to, she dropped her purse on the floor, her arms wrapping around her body while she tried to hold herself together. She was shaking, her teeth chattering, her mind whirling with memories she so desperately wanted to eradicate from her mind.

“V?” Zane's voice was no longer soothing. He was visibly worried, and she couldn't blame him.

Here she was falling apart, and he had no idea why, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him. Hell, she didn't know why, other than the fact that she hated coming back here. Hated remembering that day when Jake Sanders brutally attacked Zane right outside her front door. Watching as Zane fell to the ground, doing his best to hold his own against his attackers while she lay bruised and bloodied on the ground after one of Jake's friends

pushed her away. *She couldn't save him. Couldn't stop them. Helpless and cold. So cold.*

“Dammit, V! Talk to me,” Zane’s deep, booming voice penetrated her thoughts, and when he pulled her against him, V didn’t try to fight. She let him wrap his strong arms around her, holding her as she tried to soak up some of his warmth.

“That’s it!” Zane exclaimed, grabbing her purse from the floor at her feet while still holding her close and once again moving out onto the front porch. V’s panic intensified as she stood there with him, her eyes roaming the area surrounding her house as she waited for the horror to rain down on them once again.

What was that shadow? Was it Jake? Or one of his friends? What were they going to do? Please no!

The next thing she knew, V was back in Zane’s Jeep, but she had no idea how she got there. He carried her if she had to guess because even then she couldn’t feel her legs.

“Where are we going?” she asked when she finally found her voice. She was sucking in air like she’d just run a marathon.

“My house,” he responded, but said nothing more.

V watched as he rapidly shifted gears, pushing the Jeep’s engine past the red line as he drove, the deep rumble eerily similar to the anger she could detect in his voice. She couldn’t imagine why he was mad at her, but having gone back to her house, she couldn’t necessarily blame him. Every time she went home, she felt the overwhelming panic ignite like a flame in her belly, tightening her chest and making her bones ache from the chill.

By the time they reached Zane's house, V was feeling remotely better. The trembling had subsided, but now she just felt tired. And cold.

"Come on," he said when he opened her door for her, grabbing her purse from the floorboard and gripping her elbow gently.

"I shouldn't be here, Zane," she said halfheartedly as he all but dragged her up the steps to his porch. "I need to go home."

"The fuck you do," he growled and pushed open his front door, waiting for her to precede him into the house.

By the time V was sitting on Zane's couch, a bottle of water in her hand and a big, growling man sitting beside her, she was beginning to feel normal, not to mention, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she said when the silence began closing in on her.

"For what?"

Zane clearly wanted her to explain what had just happened, and she knew she should tell him. Tell someone. Only she didn't want to explain it. He shouldn't have to worry about her or her apparent mental issues. He had enough to worry about. Like his new job at the resort.

"Are you really going to manage one of the clubs at AI?" Her voice still sounded a little distant. It was clear she was trying to change the subject.

"Not talking about that right now. I want to know what the hell just happened to you, V," he argued.

Damn it. She did not want to talk about this. She had issues, and she had no idea what they were, but seriously, it wasn't any of his business.

"I need to go," she said, standing to her feet abruptly.

“Sit down, V,” Zane ordered, not moving from where he was sitting.

V plopped back down on the couch, resting her butt on the edge of the cushion, still holding the damn water bottle that she didn't want.

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Chapter Seven

♂ ♀

“How long have you been having panic attacks?” Zane questioned as he moved to sit closer to V. He almost couldn’t believe what he witnessed just a short while ago at V’s house. With everything that had happened, it appeared no one thought to check on V during the last few months. Did Zoey know about these anxiety attacks? Was anyone worried about how she was holding up? Or did V manage to keep everyone in the dark all this time?

Sitting close to her, his thigh against her thigh, his arm against her arm, he stared down at the floor, his hands clasped in front of him between his spread knees.

“I’m scared to go in my own house,” V whispered.

For a moment, Zane wasn’t sure that he hadn’t just imagined the words. He waited patiently to see if she would continue. When she didn’t, he prodded her to tell him more.

“Is it because of what happened?” he asked, hanging his head low, knowing the answer was yes, but wanting to hear it from her.

“I keep seeing you lying on the ground, beaten and bloody,” V’s voice was soft and she swallowed hard before continuing, “and I hate that it’s my fault –”

“Stop!” Zane barked, pushing to his feet instantly. “It wasn’t your fault, Vanessa. You couldn’t have stopped Jake from doing what he did.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, her tone still sad. “If it weren’t for me and the fact that the town thinks of me the same as they do my mother...” V

didn't finish her sentence, but Zane didn't need her to.

"Do they, V?" he questioned angrily. "Do they really think you're like your mother? Or is that something you've conjured up in your head?" Zane had heard some of the rumors, but he never paid them any mind. The rumors were nothing more than a bunch of hot air, spoken by people who didn't have anything better to do with their time.

"They call her a whore, Zane." Vanessa's tone firmed as she stared up at him.

"I know what they call her, but that doesn't make the rumors true. Do you believe them?"

V stared down at her hands, but she didn't respond. Zane had a hard time thinking anyone could think so lowly of their mother. The rumors had spanned two decades now, with Regina Carmichael painted as a woman looking to bed a billionaire. With several sharing their stories of bedding V's mom, never intending to have a relationship with her, but wanting to see just how far she'd go. True or not, V's mother had issues, but that didn't make her a terrible person.

"No, I don't. I think she has problems. I think she loved the wrong men, but no, I don't think she's a whore. She's made some mistakes, but she's my mother, Zane."

Zane sat back down beside her, taking one of her hands in both of his and holding it firmly. "We can't change how people want to view things, V. And we can't change how they'll react. I know you hated what I did that day, but, there won't be a single person who is allowed to talk about you like that when I'm around. You didn't cause Jake to go off the deep end. I did. And honestly, I'd do the same thing all over again."

“How can you say that?” It was V’s turn to jump up from her seat. She paced the floor in front of him, her long hair flowing down her back, the same color as creamy milk chocolate.

“I care about you, V. I won’t sit back and let *anyone* talk to you that way.”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re saying. You don’t care about me. It’s sex.”

“What’s ‘sex’?” Standing to his feet again, wanting to be on a level playing field with her, Zane watched her intently.

She was purposely trying to piss him off, and if it worked to erase that look of utter helplessness he’d seen on her face earlier, he’d oblige her. “I don’t see any sex going on here at the moment, do you?”

V pinned him with a glare, and he could detect her exasperation. Vanessa Carmichael was never going to accept the fact that he felt more for her than she wanted him to. It couldn’t be changed, and he wasn’t looking to change it. But, Zane also knew when to keep his mouth shut.

“I want you to stay here for a little while. A few days. A week,” he told her.

“I can’t do that,” V argued.

Damn woman.

“You can and you will.” Zane turned away from her, wanting the conversation to be over. V would argue with him until they were both blue in the face, he knew that much.

“Zane, you know I can’t do that. I’ll never get over it if I don’t face up to it,” she said, sounding tired.

“You’re not worried about getting over it, V. You’re worried about getting too close to me.” Zane knew V had issues staying the night with him, or him with her. She’d made that plain and clear since day one. Well, he was tired of playing this her way. He wanted her to stay, and it was clear she needed someone to lean on. He wanted to be that someone.

The look in her eyes told him everything he needed to know. She wasn’t worried about herself or even him. V was worried what others would think. To hell with others. She needed to learn to live her life for herself and stop worrying so damn much about what other people thought.

“You’re staying here tonight.” Zane wasn’t making a request, and she could argue all she wanted.

To his absolute amazement, V flopped back down on the couch and stared blankly at the flat screen television mounted on his wall. She didn’t argue, and she didn’t look at him either. He was just happy she had stopped shaking as well.

An hour later, Zane finally coaxed V into eating something, but since he’d yet to go to the grocery store, they’d had to settle for pizza. He’d always been the type to limit his carbs, aiming for protein and clean foods, but tonight was an exception. With his anger still bubbling, he had figured this was the least of his worries at the moment. Maybe he’d get down to the grocery store tomorrow.

When V pushed her plate away after her second piece, Zane was satisfied with how much she ate. He stared back at her, but she still attempted to avoid his eyes as much as possible.

“What’s Jake texting you?”

“What?”

It royally pissed him off when V pretended she didn't know what he was talking about.

“Don't do that shit, V. I know he's texting and calling you and I want to know what he's saying.”

She didn't seem to be in a hurry to answer him, but from where he sat, she appeared to be lost in thought.

“When did it start?” He decided to try easier questions.

V glanced over at him, then back to the table.

“Right after you woke up in the hospital. About three weeks after they jumped you.”

“Is Jake the only one texting you?” Zane didn't have a clue who the others were, but he wouldn't put it past Jake to get them to target V as well.

V shook her head. “No. Well, not anymore. For a few days, I was getting texts from unfamiliar numbers, but they stopped.”

“Is Jake still harassing you?”

This time V nodded.

“What does he say?”

For a second, he thought she was going to ignore the question like she had previously, but once again, V threw him for a loop. She handed over her cell phone, and Zane pulled up her texts to find... *Holy fucking shit!* There were seventeen unread text messages, and as he scrolled through them, he saw they were from the last two hours.

Whore just like your mama

Once a slut always a slut

A Walker man's bitch now, huh?

Don't worry, I know where you live

And I know where he lives too

Those were just a few of the nicer ones.

Zane saw red.

Without thinking, he hit the dial button to call the number that the texts had come from.

The phone rang once, twice...

"Ahhh, baby, I knew you'd come running to me sooner or later," Jake's slimy voice answered on the other end.

Zane sucked in air, trying to rein in the boiling rage that threatened to burst out of his veins. Gritting his teeth, he turned away from V. "If you know what's fucking good for you, you no good son of a bitch, you'll stay far, far away from her, Sanders."

"Zane Walker. I heard you were still alive." There was an insane chuckle following the words, but Zane noticed that Jake didn't sound nearly as confident as he probably hoped. If Zane had to guess, he was the last person Jake expected to be calling.

"Alive and waiting for you to show your face. Next time, your buddies won't be there to protect you from me," Zane seethed.

"No, fucker. Next time, I'll just *kill you*." The phone went dead, and Zane stood stone still for a minute, trying to breathe, trying to contain the anger that threatened to pull him under.

When V's hand touched his shoulder, he flinched. He had to remind himself where he was and who he was with.

“He’s not worth it, Zane,” V whispered. “Eventually he’ll get bored with this little game.”

Zane’s fury slipped free as he turned on V, yelling his point until she took a step back. “*Game?* You think this is a fucking game? He’s fucking with you, V. Do you remember what he did to me? He’s not playing a game. The man’s a lunatic!”

Zane walked away, needing a moment to get his bearings. He was infuriated and ready to punch something, only he refused to do so with V around. There was no way he wanted her to see the anger that sparked inside of him.

Zane knew Jake’s mental health was tenuous at best, and he wouldn’t put it past the crazy bastard to do something drastic. *Again.* He wouldn’t let the son of a bitch get the best of him again, that was for damn sure. Bracing his hands on the edge of the kitchen counter, Zane stared out the small window above the sink, into the darkness.

When V’s hand slid down his back, he allowed her gentle touch to soothe him. He focused on the warmth of her hand as it traveled from his waist up to his shoulder blades and then back down again. A frisson of heat shuddered through him. He wanted to feel her against him. Skin to skin. She was the only person capable of distracting him from this anger that he knew was coming to a head.

Figuring he would have to be the one to make the move, he removed his t-shirt by grabbing a handful behind his neck and pulling it over his head. He resumed his position, dropping his head as he focused on breathing. When V’s hands returned to his back, he hissed at the feel of her cool, silky fingers against his fevered skin.

When she sucked in a breath, Zane remembered all too clearly what she was looking at. There were scars, some big, some small, some from the assault, others just normal battle scars from being one of seven boys. If he had to guess, she was two seconds away from overthinking this.

“Put your mouth on me, V,” he demanded, keeping his back to her, his eyes closed as he hung his head, willing the tension to ease from his shoulders. “I want to feel your lips on my skin.”

Zane’s entire body lit up like kindling fanned by a gale force wind inside of him when her lips touched his back. With each gentle press of her warm mouth to his skin, a shiver ran through him. There was no doubt about it, V could get him worked up like no one ever had before. His body responded to her touch like he’d been lured to her by an invisible force. There was no thinking involved when it came to the way V touched him, her mere presence set his body on fire.

Zane wanted her, and he would take her any way he could have her. He’d never felt more broken until the moment he was in V’s arms, knowing that she could heal every open wound he’d ever harbored deep inside of him. When her arms wrapped around his torso, her palms flattening against his pecs while her lips trailed fire across his back, Zane sucked in a breath.

“I missed you, V,” he whispered.

God, how he missed her touch, the feel of her smooth skin against his, the warmth of her breath, the taste of her kiss. For three long months, he’d been deprived of her and Zane had no intentions of continuing to go without.

This was just like the other times. The moment their bodies collided, nothing else mattered. No lingering questions, no annoying issues, no mind numbing fear... Everything disappeared.

The only thing that mattered to him was her.

Zane turned to face her, holding her hands against him so that she couldn't move away. Once he turned around and could see her, he cupped her face in his palms and stared down into those golden brown eyes.

“Stay with me tonight, V.” Zane was prepared to beg if necessary, and that was something he certainly wasn't prone to doing. Yet, if it would allow him the opportunity to lay down with her in his arms and wake with her beside him, whatever it took, he was willing to do it.

The uncertainty in her gaze was disappointing, but the fact that she hadn't said no gave him hope. Taking one of her hands in his, Zane led her over to his bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress and looked up at her, reveling in her beauty. Just having her there with him was more than he could've wished for. He wasn't used to feeling like this, but he always knew, once the time came, he wasn't going to question it. He felt something for V. Something strong, possessive and these overwhelming emotions, although foreign, consumed him entirely.

Zane slid his hands under the edge of her shirt, slowly lifting the cotton as he moved upward, his palms skimming her satiny skin as he went. “Stay with me. Tell me you want to stay.”

V nodded her head, her eyes meeting his. Zane could see the emotions warring inside of her.

“I need to hear you say it.” More than he needed to hear it.

“I want to stay with you,” she whispered.

The words had him flinching internally, his heart constricting with the emotions that crashed like a tsunami within his chest.

“You’re so damn beautiful, V.” She would never believe that he meant more than just her outward appearance, so he left the words at that. He was never much for verbal displays of emotion, but with V, he felt as though he had to tell her how he was feeling. Even if she merely graced him with that skeptical look she’d perfected so well.

“Take it off,” he insisted, placing his hands on her waist, feeling the velvety warmth of her skin beneath his palms. The adrenaline from the abundance of feelings he wasn’t used to having took over, and Zane needed her more now than ever before.

V slowly lifted her shirt, pulling it over her head and holding onto it for dear life as he watched.

“Drop it.”

There was no longer uncertainty in her gaze, in its place, blazing heat. V liked when he got forceful with her. He’d done it a time or two, and each time he noticed how she changed. If he had to guess, she preferred giving herself over to him, letting him take the reins so she could just feel. Something he was pretty sure V didn’t do often.

When her shirt hit the floor, he let his eyes trail from her navel up to her breasts. “Now the bra,” he stated, ensuring he kept the command in his tone.

Her breath hitched, but she didn’t fidget and she didn’t attempt to pull away from him. Her hands disappeared behind her back, moments before her bra was released, sliding down her arms until her dusky pink nipples came into view.

He wanted to suck them. He wanted to feast on them for hours, making her squirm in his arms. The urge to clip the perfectly pebbled tips

with his teeth was brutal.

“Move closer,” he instructed, moving his hands down to her hips.

She took another step closer, almost giving him exactly what he wanted. Sitting on the edge of the bed, his mouth was perfectly aligned with her full, luscious breasts. Not much more than a handful, but perfect in every way.

Allowing his gaze to meet hers, he paused for a moment as he stared back at her.

“I want to own you, V,” he whispered the words and witnessed her deep inhale. She bit her bottom lip, but she didn’t pull away.

“Do you want that? Do you want me to own you?” he asked, not expecting a response. “To take you how I want, when I want?”

Zane had never been more serious about anything in his life. Whatever it was about her, he found he craved her like a drug. He didn’t want to let her go, and the more she tried to get away, the harder he wanted to fight to keep her. Only he got the impression, she didn’t actually want to get away. She was just too scared to admit it to him.

“Answer me,” he commanded, pulling her hips firmly until she was forced to take another step closer. “Do you want me to own you, Vanessa?” he growled the question again.

“No one owns me.” Her tone was reserved, but lacked any sort of conviction, and he knew he had nailed it. Vanessa Carmichael was a submissive at heart. She knew it, and he knew it. But she obviously didn’t have it in her to say as much.

“I want to own you,” he repeated, his hunger evolving, turning into something greater than him. “I want to make you mine. *Mine*, V.”

When she didn't answer, he slowly slid his hands upward, over the curve of her waist, over her ribs. He gently cupped her breasts, lifting them as he caressed them with his eyes. He could see every labored breath she took in the rise and fall of her chest, but she didn't say a word.

"Tonight, V," he said before using his forefinger and thumb to tweak one nipple at a time. "Tonight, I own you. I want to show you what it's like when you give yourself to me completely." He lifted his eyes until they met hers once more as he waited for her response. "I'm living for right now, V. Not yesterday, not last month, not tomorrow. Right this second. Right here. With you. Tonight."

He wasn't going to push her, he didn't need to, but he wanted her to understand the depth of what he was feeling.

V nodded her head in agreement. "Tonight. But just tonight," she whispered.

V wanted this as much as he did. Only Zane knew that this was for more than just one night. He wasn't willing to settle for just one night. He wanted more from her than that, but he wasn't going to scare her away just yet.

♀ ♂

V couldn't believe the words had come out of her mouth. Not that they weren't true. She just couldn't believe she had stated them out loud. She wanted Zane to own her. At least for tonight.

It was so much easier to give herself over to him, to let him control her pleasure than it was for her to think about it. She spent too much time

thinking. Too much time running from her own feelings. With Zane, she didn't have to do that because he was willing to control her. She never would admit that she had submissive tendencies, but she had realized them after the first couple of times she was with him.

Zane was dominant, controlling, protective, and aggressive. She was drawn to him. She had seen it previously, but he never openly stated as much. She could hear it in his voice now. See it in the way he was looking at her.

V wanted to please him by giving in to what they both wanted. She just wasn't sure whether she could commit herself fully. Not long term anyway. Never in her life had she allowed anyone to get close to her. Not close enough to hurt her anyway. Zane, whether he knew it or not, actually had all the power over her no matter how much she tried to deny it. If it were possible, he would be the only one who could break her heart.

She might not have it in her to commit to forever, but tonight she could do.

Standing before him in her skirt and heels and nothing else, she expected to feel exposed. She didn't. Not with his gaze straying across her skin, or his work roughened fingers pinching her nipples until she couldn't hold back the cry that tore from her throat.

That was one of her favorite things about Zane. His hands. They were large hands, proportionate to his size; the skin callused from working with machinery. And the man knew how to use them to please a woman.

Zane released her breasts, moving his hands down her stomach, never fully pulling away, and the rasp of his skin against hers was so damn titillating, she felt her pussy throb with anticipation. She wanted to feel him inside of her, the way his muscular body felt pressing down on her...

He forced her to take a step back when he lowered himself to his knees in front of her, her skirt being pushed farther down her legs. Zane first removed one shoe, then the other, his mouth trailing sweltering, wet kisses at the top of her mound, and she wanted to grab his head and hold him to her. She wanted to touch him, to taste him, to take him fully into her mouth and make him beg her, but V knew she would be the one begging soon.

By the time she was completely naked – which didn't take long without her panties in the way because they were still in his pocket – the sun had set almost entirely, only a shimmer of red and orange banding through the open window that overlooked a narrow valley at the back of his house. It gave the room an otherworldly feel; making the moment seem that much more intimate.

There were so many things about this man that she craved, but his ability to turn her into a crazed romantic was not one of them. V wouldn't deny enjoying sex. She didn't have it enough as far as she was concerned, which was probably the reason she'd become so attached to Zane.

He knew exactly how to play her body, how to make her scream his name. The only thing she wanted to do was close her eyes and enjoy the sensation she knew wouldn't last forever, but she wished it would.

“Spread your legs,” Zane instructed, still kneeling before her, his hands on her thighs, those bedroom eyes penetrating her as he peered up at her.

V hurriedly pushed her legs apart, nearly stumbling when he separated the wet folds of her pussy, not wasting any time before his tongue slid deep. She wasn't going to be able to stand on her own two feet for long. Her thighs trembled, her knees were like jelly. She gripped his head,

holding him to her as he pierced her with his talented tongue, tormenting her clit with delicious swipes back and forth, up and down.

Oh, hell.

“Zane!” V screamed his name as her orgasm tore through her, altogether throwing her off balance with its intensity.

Zane was on his feet, holding her in his arms, pulling her against his chest as her body trembled from the aftershocks. How did he do that? He barely touched her, and she came apart like this was her first time and she didn’t know what to expect.

When her heart rate finally returned to normal, V looked up at him, noting the adorable smirk on his handsome face. The man was truly beautiful: dark hair, square, rugged jaw, smoldering smoke-blue eyes, and a wicked, mischievous smile that could light up the darkest corners of her soul.

V knew she was falling for him, knew she would do herself a favor by staying as far away from him as she could, but she couldn’t bring herself to do so. The three months he was in the hospital was torture. Even if she asked Zoey about him all the time, V had refused to go see him.

She didn’t want to feel anything for him, yet here she was, overcome with emotions that were better left alone. This was supposed to be about pleasure, about extreme sexual gratification. There should be no room for emotions and feelings and all of that lovey dovey crap that she didn’t want any part of. She just needed to feel safe for a little while. Needed to know that they were tucked away where no one could hurt either of them and as long as Zane took control, she didn’t have to think anymore.

And here they were finding solace in one another while at the same time avoiding those crucial conversations that should be had between two people who care about one another. There was no doubt in her mind that she cared about Zane, but V was terrified to admit it to herself. But this she could do. Mind numbing bliss at the hands of the sexiest man she had ever laid eyes on.

When Zane put his hand on her shoulders, easing her down to her knees, V didn't question him or herself. She knew what he wanted, but more importantly, she knew what they both needed. A break from reality. This was their chance.

Easing to her knees before him, V unhooked the button on his jeans, lowered the zipper and then pulled the denim down his thick thighs. She glanced up at his eyes before letting her gaze drift down his impressive chest, his washboard abs and that sexy as hell "V" that dipped in below his waist. The man was yummy.

"Put your mouth on me," Zane urged, one of his hands looping into her hair, a sharp, intriguing tingle shooting from her scalp straight down her spine. She liked when he took charge, showing her exactly what he wanted.

Gripping his thighs, V allowed Zane to control her movements and to her delight, he did not disappoint in the control department. Just like everything about Zane, he was fluidly graceful and powerful, exuding that alpha persona with ease. There was no doubt he was the lead now, just like every other time and V gave herself over to him.

"That's it, V," Zane groaned as he continued to thrust slow and easy against her tongue, holding her head immobile. The delicious way he owned every move she made and the tingle that bolted from her scalp to deep down in her core had V moaning around his erection.

She never would've imagined being the type to enjoy giving a man a blow job, but with Zane, V was learning so much about herself. With him, it was different. Everything was different. Hell, *she* was different. She wanted him, pure and simple, any way she could have him.

Zane's hand gripped her hair more firmly as he pulled his cock from her mouth, holding the firm, thick shaft against her lips. "Lick me," he instructed and V stuck out her tongue, gliding over the smooth underside as she looked up at him.

"Just like that," he crooned, moving his hips so that his cock slid back and forth over her tongue. "Open your mouth."

V slowly opened wider, and when Zane moved closer, she knew what he wanted. She eased her tongue farther down his shaft as he pulled his cock higher, giving her access to his scrotum. V began licking tentatively, teasing him more than anything, but never took him fully into her mouth. That was what he wanted, and based on his groans, she knew he wasn't going to tolerate her teasing much longer.

"All the way," he demanded, his voice sterner than ever before. "Suck my balls into your mouth."

She did as he instructed, sucking him fully into her mouth, using her tongue to glide back and forth over the sumptuous, hairless skin.

"Oh, yeah," Zane groaned again, pulling her hair as he slid from her mouth. "It's too good, baby."

Well, she begged to differ. V was pretty sure that nothing with this man was too good. She knew that no matter how high he took her, there was always so much more in store and she found herself aching for him.

“On the bed,” Zane instructed as he removed his jeans and boxers, dropping them to the floor in his haste.

V crawled onto the bed, turned over onto her back, but apparently Zane had other ideas because he deftly flipped her onto her stomach, his hands groping her ass and holding her still.

When his warm body came down on top of her, the evidence of his desire pressing intimately between her thighs, V wished like hell he would move things along. She wanted to feel him inside of her. His mouth came down to her ear, his heated breath teasing the hair at her nape.

“Do you know how bad I want to fuck your ass, V?”

His words sent sparks of pure unobstructed heat straight to her core, making her body tense in anticipation.

“I can’t stop thinking about the night when Beau had the pleasure of burying his dick in your sweet pussy while I fucked your tight ass. Do you remember that night?”

He knew she did. There were times when V relived the most erotic experience she had ever known, and she ended up with chills. It was the most sensual moment of her entire life, and despite her original reluctance, V had given in to both men, and when they both entered her at the same time, she realized she would never know anything quite as omnipotent as that. She even secretly wished for it to happen again, but she had never requested it, nor would she now.

“I remember,” she whispered.

Zane snaked his arm beneath her neck, cupping her head and turning it so that she was practically looking up at him while her body was flat

against the bed. He was so damn hot, his heartbeat pounding a steady rhythm that she could feel against her back.

“Did you enjoy it?”

V wouldn't lie to him. “Yes.”

“Tell me how much you enjoyed it,” he urged, sliding his cock between her thighs and aligning with the wet, aching entrance to her pussy.

“I loved it,” she moaned as he teased her, slipping the very tip of his cock inside of her, but never giving her exactly what she wanted.

“I want to do it again, V.” Zane placed light, fluttering kisses against the side of her mouth. “I want to watch Beau lick your sweet pussy. Hear the way you moan when he reams your ass with his tongue. Watch while you fly apart with us both buried inside of you again.”

His dark tone turned her to mush. She tried to spread her legs, attempting to get him deeper because she needed for him to fuck her. It wasn't just the threesome that turned her on, but the way Zane controlled it. He directed every movement, ensuring her pleasure more so than his own. She knew that the Walker brothers shared women. That wasn't a secret. And V was pretty damn sure Zane and Beau had done it on more than one occasion, but the way they treated her as though she were the only one that mattered... That had been explosive.

“You're so wet, baby,” Zane whispered against her ear, using his teeth to nip at her earlobe as he continued to tease her, slipping a little more into her body with each passing second. He was heavy against her, and he limited her movements with his muscular body on top of hers. It felt so damn good. He was pressed perfectly against her, the hard planes of his

chest against her shoulder blades, the sculpted muscle of his abs against her lower back.

“More,” she begged, trying to wiggle beneath him.

“My pleasure,” Zane growled before slamming into her, ripping her orgasm straight out of her with the brunt force of his penetration.

V never expected to come like that, never even knew it was possible, but here she was, her body spasming out of control as Zane hefted himself off of her, raising her hips until she was on her knees before he began pounding into her once more.

When he slapped her ass, V screamed, another orgasm exploding within her depths. She could barely hold her body up, and the impact of his hips ramming into her, continued to push her farther and farther up on the bed, but Zane didn't slow his thrusts, hurtling her into the abyss again.

Finally, Zane gripped her shoulders with both hands, holding her still as he pistoned his hips over and over against her backside, his cock buried deeper than she thought possible.

“Fuck!” Zane growled, and V was overcome once more with another release so powerful, she feared she might lose consciousness.

With one final, soul wrenching thrust, Zane groaned his release, falling forward on top of her, kissing her lightly on her temple as V allowed the darkness to consume her.

Chapter Eight

♂ ♀

The following morning, Zane awoke with the sun shining through the plate glass window that peered out over the creek bubbling gently just a few yards away. He'd always loved waking up to the peace that he'd found in his home, but this morning was exceptionally gratifying. There beside him, snuggled against his side was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

She was naked and warm and more tempting than he thought possible. Except, he wasn't about to wake her again, even if his desires were insatiable. After all, he had woken her in the middle of the night, sliding into the warmth of her body as she wrapped herself around him tightly. Zane wasn't sure he'd ever tire of being with her, especially like this.

Pulling her closer, he spooned against her back, sliding his legs against hers and holding her in his arms. Her hair teased his nose while the scent of her relaxed him, her supple, smooth skin felt so delicate beneath his palms. This woman did something to him that Zane hadn't thought possible. When it came to V, he knew it wasn't just sex he wanted, although they certainly caused sparks, there was no doubt about that. He loved the way she handed the control over to him without question.

But watching her sleep could comfortably become one of his favorite pastimes. He'd never had the luxury of waking up beside her until now and Zane was pretty sure he'd never forget this moment.

V stirred slowly, snuggling closer as she ground her ass against his groin. He was hard pressed not to slide between her thighs once more.

“Good morning,” he greeted her tenderly, his lips against her ear.

Pushing the long strands of her hair away from her face, Zane studied her profile and his heart nearly jolted out of his chest when she smiled. Honestly, he had expected V to freak out after having spent the entire night curled up against him so seeing a smile was a pleasant surprise.

“Did you sleep well?” He knew she had, or at least he knew *he* had. V wasn't the only one who didn't like spending the night with someone. Zane definitely didn't do it often, and not at all since he'd starting seeing V.

“Mmmm hmmm,” she mumbled, pulling the covers up over her head.

Zane slid beneath them and pressed his lips against her smooth, warm back. Cuddling had never been his thing, but he found that he liked the idea when it came to V. He found a lot of things he enjoyed when V was around.

“Your cell phone rang a little while ago,” Zane told her as he continued trailing kisses down her spine.

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say because V flew out of bed, stealing the sheet as she went and leaving him lying there totally naked, staring after her as she traipsed across the room to the phone she had left on the counter in the kitchen.

“Shit!” V exclaimed, thumbing something into her phone as she stared intently at it. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

“Something wrong?” He rolled onto his back, sliding his hands beneath his head, his body stirring to life at the sight of her in his house, with his sheet wrapped around her. It wasn't covering nearly as much as she probably wanted it to.

“I’m supposed to be at work!” V bit out, glaring at him from across the room.

He grinned.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked as she marched over to the side of the bed, leaning down to pick up her clothes.

Before she managed to retrieve them, Zane had her flat on her back on the bed once more, hovering over her. He was still smiling while she looked none too happy. Little did she know, but he had already talked to Zoey that morning. As a matter of fact, Zoey had called his phone a few seconds after she had called V’s.

“What are you doing?” V exclaimed, trying to push him away, but he saw the hint of a smile on her perfect, heart shaped lips.

“Seducing you?” he questioned noncommittally, pressing his lips against her chest before cupping one of her breasts in his free hand. His other hand was busy holding him above her. To his surprise, V pressed up against his lips, one of her legs sliding between his while she used her thigh to caress his erection.

“No, seducing,” V breathed, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling his mouth closer to her breast.

“No?” Why did it sound like she was suddenly interested in being beneath him.

He thought it was a brilliant idea.

“I have... to... work,” she sighed heavily when he sucked her nipple into his mouth, using his teeth to make it harden even more.

“Not today, you don’t,” he mumbled, moving to her other breast and laving the hardened point with his tongue.

“I do,” she groaned and halfheartedly tried to push him away again.

Zane moved quickly, pulling V up off of the bed and lifting her into his arms with ease while she clung to his neck and laughed. “I’m thinking we need a shower.”

“Seriously?” V was no longer trying to convince him that she needed to go anywhere. Instead, she had buried her face in his neck and was brushing her soft lips over his collar bone.

“Seriously.” Zane smiled, placing her back on her feet. “Shower first, then breakfast, then we’ll both go talk to Travis.”

“Travis?” V jerked back from him like he’d just whipped her.

“Yes, Travis,” Zane stated calmly, flipping the shower knob on. “You had a business venture to discuss with him, right?”

With his back to V, Zane couldn’t see her reaction, but he could tell by the silence that she wasn’t all that thrilled with the idea of talking to Zane’s oldest brother today. He knew Trav was a busy man and Zane figured there wouldn’t be a better time than right now to discuss the upcoming resort. Hell, he didn’t know how long his brother actually would be in town. It seemed like the man was in Dallas more than he was in Austin these days.

Turning around, Zane faced V and held out his hand to her. When she placed her palm in his, he pulled her close, then backed them both into the oversized shower. She didn’t look too happy with him, but he had a couple of ideas on how to make her smile.

Two hours later, V was sitting in front of Travis Walker in the small office of Walker Demolition, feeling like a recalcitrant child who had been sent to the principal's office. His dark glare didn't go a long way toward making her feel any better either. Part of her wished she hadn't opted for breakfast because her stomach was now churning from her nerves.

"You want to manage the club?" Travis asked Zane.

V listened while the two men discussed the club and what Travis' vision was, along with what Zane was hoping to get out of it.

Travis Walker was a hard man to figure out. If she based his mood solely on the tone of his voice, she'd assume he was pissed. However, when she looked into his eyes, she could see a sensitive side of him as he spoke to his younger brother. It was true, no one truly knew Travis or the hell that he'd been through. But it was common knowledge, he was a different man than the one everyone knew growing up. V was a few years younger than him, so she didn't know the least bit about Travis, other than the bits and pieces she'd gathered over the years.

She could see Travis wasn't against the idea of Zane managing one of the clubs, but she also knew he wasn't going to make this easy on his younger brother either. Travis was not known for his loving, propitious persona. The man was hard, and it didn't seem to matter who he was dealing with, unless, of course, you looked into those eyes. Something she was trying hard not to do.

When they finally finished their discussion, V was barely aware that both men had turned their attention to her. She'd been too busy fidgeting in her chair, twirling her thumbs in her lap and praying that she could find a way to sneak out without being seen. Of course, that wasn't an option now.

"And what about you?" Travis directed his glare on her.

Interesting. Travis still sounded like he was angry, but the compassion that still remained on his face told a different story. It didn't help her to find the words though.

"I –" V didn't know how to come out with it. When she had discussed her idea with Zoey, it seemed like a good plan, but now that she was talking to Travis, she had second thoughts.

She could feel Zane's eyes on her, but she didn't turn to look at him. She was too busy trying to bolster her nerves in order to out and out request to be allowed to manage the spa. Not that she had any experience whatsoever, but she was strong willed and V knew she'd put all of her energy into making it a success.

"My brothers mentioned you want to manage the spa," Travis said when it was finally clear she couldn't choke out the words.

"Yes." There, at least that was a start.

"And what makes you think you're qualified to run the spa?" he asked, sounding slightly perturbed. Not that he ever sounded any different.

"I don't have the experience, but I have the desire to learn," V stated defensively. "I promise you by the time the doors open on the resort, I'll be fully up to speed on what it takes to make it successful."

There was no hiding the fact that she was nervous, nor could she hide the vexation she was beginning to feel.

"How do you plan to do that?" Travis leaned back farther in his chair, tilting his head to the side as though he were studying her.

"I –" Ok, so she hadn't thought that completely through, but in her defense, V hadn't anticipated coming to talk to Travis so soon.

“Give her a break, Trav,” Zane interrupted, leaning forward and placing his elbows on his knees, his shoulders stiff, the cords in his neck straining as he stared back at his brother. “You know her as well as I do. She’ll make you proud. V’s a hard worker, anyone can tell you that.”

V’s breath lodged in her chest as she stared at the man sitting beside her. Proud? Had he really just said that? Never in her life had anyone rooted for her – no one besides Zoey of course – and V had gotten used to going it alone. Hell, she worked for Zoey because it was easier than trying to make a name for herself. Not that she gave her job less than one hundred percent at any given time, but she hadn’t expected Zane to be in her corner on this one.

“Ok, say I let her manage the spa and you the club. How do you plan to work together?” Travis asked, directing his question to Zane. “I heard what happened at Anderson Croft’s and look where that got you.”

V sat up straight, feeling entirely too defensive at the moment. How dare Travis talk to Zane like that? The man stood up for her, when remarkably few people ever had. Granted, it also resulted in him damn near getting killed at the hands of a lunatic, but still...

Oh, God. What would happen if V encountered another asshole like Jake Sanders? Would Zane go off the deep end every time? Maybe Travis was right. Maybe this wasn’t a smart idea.

“It’ll work, Trav. You have to trust me on this,” Zane argued, and V could sense the tension escalating.

Placing her hand on his arm, Zane glanced over at her, and she felt the way his muscles abruptly relaxed. That was interesting. Did she do that to him? Was she capable of calming him down rather than riling him up?

“I don’t know if I’m onboard with the idea,” Travis began, but Zane unexpectedly reacted by shooting to his feet. V managed to grab his arm and pull him back down, although she knew he was giving in to her because there was no way she could’ve made the man do anything he didn’t want to do.

When she looked back at Travis, he was grinning.

“Let’s give it a shot,” Travis concluded, pushing to his feet. “I think this woman might just be the one who can keep that anger in check.”

V wasn’t sure about all of that, but she couldn’t get over the fact that Travis had just given them the green light. *Both of them*. She wanted to jump to her feet and throw her arms around his neck, but she knew better than to do that. Travis wasn’t big on being touched. Not that she knew the reason, but she was smart enough to know not to push him.

“Thank you,” she said, sounding much more confident than she felt. “I promise, I won’t let you down.”

“I never had any doubts about that,” Travis tipped his hat and then walked out of the office. Moments later V heard his truck start up, and she turned to look at Zane. He wasn’t smiling.

“What’s wrong?” V turned to face Zane directly, curious as to what he could possibly be thinking.

“If I didn’t think one of my brothers would show up, I’d strip you naked and fuck you right here on Travis’ desk,” he said, that smoldering look in his smoky blue eyes reinforcing his statement.

V needed to get away from him. At least for a little while. If she didn’t, she feared she might just do something stupid.

Like take him up on his offer.

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Chapter Nine

♂ ♀

After dropping V off at Zoey's per her request, Zane called Beau. He needed to find a way to burn off the excess energy he'd stored up thanks to the anger he continued to rein in and he couldn't think of a better way to do it than to go to the gym. Now he was on his way to meet him, and, hopefully, work on a plan to get his body back in top form.

He still felt weak, sometimes more than he thought he should. The physical therapist's words still rang loud and clear in his brain, but Zane doubted that taking it slow was going to get him where he needed to be. Three months were plenty of time for his body to recover from the dreadful punishment it had been dealt, and now it was time he proved it.

Walking into the small gym, Zane nodded his head in greeting at the few people he recognized, not stopping to talk to anyone though. He found Beau warming up on one of the treadmills and Zane jumped on the empty one beside him.

"You think you can handle that bad boy?" Beau joked as he increased the speed until he was jogging at a slow pace, making Zane laugh.

"I think I'll manage." Zane walked for a couple of minutes, not wanting to overdo it in the first few minutes, but he was soon setting a reasonable six miles per hour pace. Not nearly what he'd been capable of before the attack, but he had told his mother he'd take baby steps.

Half an hour later, Zane felt better than he had in a long time. He slowed his pace until he was once again walking, as he waited for Beau to finish up. When he did, they moved to the back near the free weights.

“How’s it feel to be out?” Beau asked, dropping onto one of the benches, wiping the sweat from his neck with a towel.

“I can’t even begin to describe it,” Zane replied, grabbing a couple of the weights from the rack and turning to face the mirror. The amount of weight the PT had allowed him to lift was child's play, but since he hadn’t picked up anything relative in recent months, he was beginning to wonder how much pain he was going to put himself in.

“You see V lately?” Beau moved to his side, grabbing a set of weights that was significantly more than Zane had picked up.

“Yeah.” Zane thought about V and how she looked just that morning in his shower. He’d definitely seen her all right. Every single inch of her. “Why didn’t you tell me that bastard was texting her?” he asked his friend when the vision disappeared.

Beau’s head snapped over so he was looking directly at Zane, a confused look on his face. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Zane spared his friend a glance in the mirror, but he didn’t stop his repetitions. “Jake,” he answered, figuring Beau would drop the act if he realized Zane already knew what was going on.

Beau set the weights back in the rack and turned to face Zane. “Jake’s been texting her?”

Zane knew Beau well enough that he recognized his friend wasn’t bullshitting him. Zane had known Beau Bennett his entire life. They’d grown up together, and they knew every last secret each other had. It was clear Beau had no idea what he was talking about. Zane dropped the weights back into the rack and grabbed the water bottle he’d brought with him. Taking a swig, he kept his eyes on Beau. Wiping his mouth with the

back of his hand, he sighed. “The fucker’s been texting *and* calling her. Don’t think he was all too happy to hear from me last night though.”

“You talked to him?” Beau asked incredulously.

“Not much, but yeah. I dialed the number he was texting her from. He answered, and I told him to leave her the fuck alone.”

“Does Travis know where he’s at yet?”

Zane and Beau spent hours talking about what happened while Zane was in the hospital. Beau had been at Anderson Croft’s that day and he saw the whole thing play out, but according to him, he hadn’t known about the assault for a couple of days after it happened. At some point, Zane’s mother had called him.

“If he does, he’s not telling me.” Zane had no idea whether Travis knew where Jake was. It wasn’t likely that he did because Zane knew his brother. Travis wasn’t keen on forgiving and forgetting and as far as Zane was concerned, Jake had likely signed his own death warrant for what he’d done. At least as far as Travis was concerned. Of all his brothers, Travis and Zane were the ones with the explosive tempers. Somewhere along the way, Travis had learned to keep his under wraps, but Zane was still working on it.

“Why the hell didn’t she tell me?” Zane knew Beau’s question was rhetorical.

While he’d been confined to the hospital, Beau had taken to watching out for V. Considering what had transpired between the three of them – twice – just a week before Zane was attacked, he’d initially wondered whether that was a good idea or not. But, other than his brothers and his parents, there wasn’t another person Zane trusted more than Beau.

Based on what Beau had told him, V wasn't happy about him hanging around, but she'd gotten used to it. Especially after Beau refused to go away.

"Did you know she was having panic attacks?" Zane figured he'd go for broke. This time Beau looked away, breaking eye contact, which was a telling sign.

"I didn't know exactly what it was. I followed her home one night from Moonshiners. I noticed she sat in her car for an unusually long time, so I got out and checked on her. She was shaking, pale, and gripping the steering wheel for all she was worth. It took me a while to coax her into the house, but once I did, she seemed to calm down. You know V, she wouldn't talk to me about it."

Having known wouldn't have made a difference, Zane knew, but he still hated that she'd been going through this alone. Everyone had been so focused on his recovery, and it pained him to know that V had been left behind. She'd endured just as much that day. Maybe not the broken bones, or the cracked ribs, or the head trauma, but the emotional effect was just as devastating. If not more so.

Looking at his best friend now, Zane wished like hell the man had been around the day he'd been attacked. Zane was a big man and before the attack he'd been even bigger, but Beau Bennett almost made him look small in comparison. At six-foot-six-inches, Beau had been their claim to fame in high school. He'd been the star quarterback, and up until their senior year, everyone thought Beau would be in the NFL one day.

An unfortunate car accident ended that dream after Beau's throwing arm was crushed. The doctors managed to repair it, using metal plates and screws, but Beau had never been able to throw the same after that.

“Mother fucker.”

Zane smiled. Beau was just as temperamental as Zane, but it was almost comical to hear him curse. He was a good ol’ boy in every sense of the word. The girls referred to him as an oversized teddy bear, but Zane never understood that one. There wasn’t a damn thing soft or cuddly about Beau.

Zane dropped to the bench and laid back while Beau instinctively moved over to spot him. “Why don’t you stop by my house tonight?” he asked his friend as he lifted the weight from the rack and down onto his chest.

Focusing on his set, Zane didn’t expect Beau to answer until he was finished, and that didn’t take long. Damn his body. He knew it was going to take some time to get back to his former strength, but shit, he hated how weak he was.

Rather than making it worse, Zane waved Beau off rather than starting another set. He stood up, grabbed his water bottle and his towel before turning back to Beau. “What do you say?”

“Sure.” Beau smiled. “I’ll stop by.”

Zane knew Beau didn’t need further clarification. Ever since the last time, he knew Beau had been looking forward to the next invite, and although he didn’t say that V would be there, it was clear.

“I’ll see you later then.” There was no way he’d be able to do much more and Beau probably had another hour or two on the weights.

“See ya.”

Zane almost laughed at the broad grin that split Beau’s face. The man was something else. But hell, Zane couldn’t blame him. Thinking about V

put that same smile on his own face. Every damn time.

Zane decided to stop by to see his mother before he went home. He'd texted V, and he learned that she and Zoey headed into Austin for the day, taking advantage of having the day off. He didn't question her. He simply told her to let him know when she was back.

"Hey, Dad," Zane greeted his father when he walked in the back door. Curtis Walker was sitting at the kitchen table, a laptop and a cup of coffee in front of him.

He didn't get a formal response, just a wave in the direction of the living room and a grunt. Zane laughed as he made his way past him, slapping him on the back as he did. "Good to see you too."

Zane found his mother sitting in the living room on the couch, an e-reader in her hand.

"Mama." He tried not to scare her, so he kept his voice low, but she jumped anyway.

Then she dropped her e-reader and flew up off of the couch, throwing her thin arms around him. His mother was the touchy feely type, unlike the men in the family. She was always hugging and kissing them, and being the good sons they were, not a single one of them gave her shit about it. She complained that she had to spend the last fifty years being the only source of estrogen in the house, and she insisted that she be granted that one reprieve.

"You're sweaty," she scolded him, taking a step back, but cupping his face with both of her small hands. Zane looked down, meeting those

sparkling blue eyes and waiting for her to let go. No one rushed Lorrie Walker.

“Just came from the gym,” he told her, then thought better of it.

“Did your doctor release you to go to the gym?” she questioned, sounding just like she did when he was a kid and he did something he knew he wasn’t supposed to. Before he could answer, she backed away, sitting back down and patting the couch cushion.

Zane dropped down beside her, leaned back and propped his feet on the coffee table. That was one of the reprieves the men in the house had earned. They didn’t give her crap about the hugs and kisses, and she didn’t say anything about their feet on the furniture. Although, she’d probably given up on that all on her own.

“They released me from the hospital. That’s all the permission I need.” Zane had talked to his mother twice since he’d been home, both times by phone and she’d begged him to take it easy. He promised her, as much as he could promise anyone that he would try.

“How’s Vanessa?” Lorrie asked.

“Good, why?”

“Just worried about her.”

His mother’s comment got his attention, and he turned to look at her, still resting his head against the back of the couch. “Why’s that?”

“Zoey seems really worried about her,” Lorrie replied, glancing down at the floor. That was an obvious partial truth and Zane sat up, turning to face his mother.

“What’s going on?”

His mother sighed dramatically and then met his gaze. “Kaleb told your dad about the phone calls and texts she’s been getting from that Jake person. I don’t know what I’m going to do about you boys.”

Zane bit back the urge to curse. That was one thing his mother didn’t approve of and all eight of them, his father included, had a hard time controlling themselves from time to time. He wasn’t interested in being scolded, so he didn’t say anything until the anger passed.

“What’s Dad doing?” Zane knew there was a reason his father was on the computer. His father wasn’t fond of technology. At least nothing past his beloved television and satellite. The man didn’t even have a smart phone because he said there was no need. If anyone wanted to talk to him, then they would call his basic, easy-to-use, cell phone.

“He’s been emailing back and forth with Sheriff Endsley.”

“Shit.” Zane couldn’t keep that one in if he had to.

“Zane Michael Walker.” His mother’s stern tone and the way she used his full name made him laugh.

Standing up with every intention of going to speak to his father about what he was doing getting the sheriff involved, his plan was smoothly thwarted when his mother pulled him back down to the couch. Relenting, he dropped back down, huffing his defeat in the process.

“Why is he talking to him?”

The last thing Zane needed was for the law to be breathing down their necks. He’d just gotten out of the hospital, and as far as he knew no one had seen or heard from Jake, aside from Zane’s brief phone call with the man the night before.

Zane didn't want the law involved with this. Hell, he didn't even want his brothers involved, and now his father had gone off and invited the damn sheriff into their business.

"Everyone's worried about her," Lorrie stated, her face lined with concern. "And you."

"I can take care of myself, Mom," Zane answered a little more carelessly than he intended.

"Honey, we don't want anything to happen to you."

He understood that. He really, truly did. Zane was well aware of the hell his entire family went through when he was attacked. He knew they were all trying to make sure he didn't end up dead somewhere because of Jake and his homicidal tendencies. "Mom, I've got it handled. Please don't let Dad get involved."

"Too late for that, boy," Curtis' voice boomed through the living room, and Zane closed his eyes and dropped his head. This was the last thing he needed.

Just when Zane was going to chastise his father for getting involved, the screen door opened and then slammed shut, and Zane turned around to see Travis storming through the kitchen.

"What the hell is going on?" Travis barked the question and Zane had no idea who he was talking to. From the look on his mother's face, she didn't either. Surprisingly enough, his father looked sheepish, but true to form, he crossed his arms over his chest and stood up straight. At six-foot-five-inches, he was a formidable man, even at sixty seven.

From the look on Travis' face, he didn't care much for whatever their father had to say.

“I’ve got the fu – uh... the damn sheriff breathing down my neck. What did you do?”

Luckily, Travis saw their mother sitting on the couch before that little word got loose. It would’ve earned him a palm to the back of the head by their father. Even as grown men, Curtis still took to smacking them upside the head when they did something to show disrespect to their mother.

“What are you talking about?” Zane asked Travis, standing so he could face his brother. He was so damned confused about what was going on. Seriously, a couple of phone calls and texts shouldn’t have caused this type of uproar. They knew Jake wasn’t around, so at this point, it wasn’t a direct threat.

Before Travis could answer, the screen door slammed again, and the sound of footsteps stomping across the tiled kitchen floor had echoed in the house.

Kaleb.

Great. This should get good. Zane was tempted to fall back onto the couch and watch the show, but he had already gotten himself riled up. He had no idea what was going on, but he knew one thing: his family was keeping things from him.

“Sit down, all three of you,” Curtis demanded, moving back to allow Travis and Kaleb to come into the room. “I want to know what’s going on, and I want every detail.”

Zane peered over at his father before dropping back to the couch. He felt like a fucking whack-a-mole with all the up and down. He also felt like a damn child being punished for doing something wrong. He watched as

Travis and Kaleb moved to the opposite side of the room and took seats on the other couch, neither of them looking at Zane.

“I want to know why the sheriff’s knocking on my door asking questions about Jake Sanders,” Travis demanded, although his tone had cooled significantly since he walked in.

“I emailed him,” Curtis answered, not bothering with taking a seat and crossing his arms across his thick, brawny chest again as though he were daring Travis to argue with him.

“For what?” This time Kaleb asked the question. He actually looked genuinely confused.

That made two of them.

“He needs to know what’s going on. If Sanders is back and he’s terrorizing Vanessa, I want him arrested. He damned near killed my boy.”

“We’ve got it handled, Dad. We don’t need you and the sheriff interfering,” Travis replied, still not bothering to look at Zane.

“What are you talking about?” Zane felt like he was watching a movie about his life and he wasn’t even invited to play the role of himself.

“Jake Sanders was back in town last night,” Travis stated, glancing over at Zane and then back up at their father.

“How do you know?” He knew it was a stupid question, and if he were smart, he’d wait to talk to Travis when their parents weren’t standing right there listening, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I saw him,” Kaleb answered the question.

Fuck.

“And what? You thought you’d call *Dad*?” Travis sounded downright baffled by the idea.

“I didn’t call him,” Kaleb stated defensively.

“He didn’t have to. Jake Sanders was on my damn property last night. I called the sheriff.”

Zane didn’t say a word. He didn’t breathe, and he didn’t move. Jake Sanders dared to come out to the Walker Ranch?

“*What?*” Travis stood abruptly. “Why the hell didn’t you call me?”

“Watch your damn language, boy,” Curtis chastised Travis, although his language wasn’t much better.

“What did the sheriff say?” Lorrie asked, seemingly trying to be the voice of reason. Their mother, all five-foot-two-inches of her, was sitting on the couch, her hands tucked in her lap, staring back and forth between all four men in the room.

“He wants to talk to the boys.”

Oh, no way in hell.

Chapter Ten

♀ ♂

“What do you mean the sheriff wants to talk to me?” V asked Zoey, trying to understand what was going on.

They’d been driving down the road, minding their own business, laughing and actually having a good time when Zoey’s phone rang. V had been tipped off that something was wrong because that call hadn’t sounded all tender and amorous like the others.

Zoey had just hung up with Kaleb, who, based on what V could understand, was at Zane’s parents’ house. From the bits and pieces she garnered from eavesdropping, Kaleb went there to talk to Curtis. When he arrived, Travis and Zane were there also. While they were there, Sheriff Endsley showed up and now he wanted to talk to *her*.

“That’s what Kaleb said. Everyone’s at his parents’ house.”

Oh, God. V felt her pulse quicken, and she suddenly had trouble time breathing. “Is Zane all right?” Suddenly, she was terrified that something had happened to him.

“Everyone’s fine, V. Nothing has happened. They just want to talk.”

If the sheriff were getting involved, that clearly meant *something* had happened. V watched out the window of Zoey’s truck, not even noticing the trees flying by as they raced toward the Walker Ranch. She had a sudden urge to go home and hide underneath her covers. She just wanted to close her eyes, and when she opened them, she wanted this all to be a bad dream. All of it. Erase the last three and a half months of her life and start over.

V was startled when Zoey shut off the engine. She glanced around and noticed that they had already made it to Lorrie and Curtis Walker's home. Based on all of the cars and trucks parked in the driveway, all of the Walker brothers were there too.

Opening her door slowly, V climbed down from the truck, trying to suck in oxygen and not hyperventilate. There were two county police cars parked out front.

Just when she thought her knees would buckle beneath her, a pair of strong arms circled her waist, pulling her close and holding her upright. V didn't even need to look behind her to see who it was. She knew from his unique scent.

"It's all right," Zane whispered in her ear, turning her so that she was facing him. "Everything's fine, V."

Obviously, he knew she was in the throes of another panic attack, and V was just grateful he was standing there. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and buried her face in his chest, taking a minute to catch her breath. Zane was ok. He was holding her, talking to her. She had nothing to freak out about.

It only took a minute or two for her to regain some of her composure, and when she did, she took a step back and looked up into Zane's beautiful face. "Why are they here?"

"I'll let them tell you."

V didn't like the sound of that, but she allowed Zane to take her hand and lead her into the house. Once inside, V was overwhelmed by the sheer number of people all gathered in the huge kitchen. Braydon and Brendon were perched on the counter with Ethan close by; Kaleb was propped

against the far wall with Zoey standing in front of him while Travis and Sawyer were sitting at the kitchen table with Lorrie, Curtis, Sheriff Endsley and a deputy she didn't recognize.

"Come sit down, Vanessa," Lorrie spoke quietly, pulling out the chair beside her.

V glanced up at Zane, and when he nodded his head, she moved forward, lowering herself in the chair Lorrie offered.

"When is the last time you saw Jake Sanders?" Sheriff Endsley asked without preamble.

V frowned, trying to understand what they were talking about. She hadn't seen Jake since the day he attacked Zane in her front yard, and she told them as much now.

"When is the last time you *talked* to Jake Sanders?" the sheriff asked, still directing his questions at her.

"I haven't talked to him at all," V answered, glancing up at Zane again before looking back at the sheriff. "He's been texting me, and he left a couple of messages, but I haven't actually talked to him."

"Why didn't you call the police?" This time the deputy tossed out the question, sounding oddly accusatory, and V stared back at him, confused.

"What am I supposed to say when I call?" V felt a little defensive. What were they getting at and why was she being questioned?

"Just tell her what the hell is going on," Zane barked and everyone in the room turned to look at him, including V.

"Last night, Jake Sanders was seen on the property. Mr. Walker," the sheriff glanced over at Curtis briefly, then back to V, "called to let us know. You may not know this, but there's a warrant out for Mr. Sanders' arrest."

As there should be. V still didn't understand what this had to do with her. She had no idea he'd been out there, and although the thought positively terrified her, she wasn't sure what they wanted from her. "And how does this involve me?"

"We don't know that it does, but we want to make sure that everyone is on the same page here." This time the sheriff looked around, making eye contact with each of the Walker brothers individually. "I don't need any renegades in my town. That means that I don't want a single one of you boys involved in this. If Jake is back, we'll get him. I expect every one of you to be diligent, but I don't want to hear you've taken the law into your own hands."

The sheriff's eyes hovered on Travis and Zane the longest, and V finally understood what he was trying to say. She couldn't agree more. If Jake was back in town, she wanted to keep Zane as far away from him as physically possible.

Not that she could control any of them, but she was damn sure going to figure out a way to keep Zane safe.

Even if that meant tying him to his damn bed.

"Where are we going?" V asked Zane when they got in his Jeep half an hour later. After the sheriff had reiterated his point – several times – they'd been told they could go. Zane hadn't wasted a single second before he had dragged her out the back door.

"We're going to get some of your stuff from your house. You're staying with me for a few days."

“No! Please! I don’t need to go to my house.” V didn’t want to go home. She didn’t want Zane taking her there. Especially not after learning that Jake was in town again.

“Sawyer and the twins are behind us.”

V glanced in the side mirror and noticed Sawyer’s car, as well as Brendon’s truck, weren’t too far behind them. She managed to relax a little, refusing to argue with Zane about staying with him. It wasn’t like she had much of a choice. She could either stay with him, or perhaps drive to her mother’s house in Buda.

Although her mother wasn’t that far away, V didn’t relish the idea of even visiting her at the moment. Not to mention, she wasn’t even sure she could leave Zane now that his life might possibly be in danger again.

Thankfully the entire trip didn’t take them long. V managed to force her legs to work when they got to her house as well as when they were leaving, not wanting any of Zane’s brothers to see her panic. It was unfortunate enough that Zane had been privy to her mental breakdowns; she didn’t need an even broader audience.

When they finally pulled up to Zane’s house, the sun had already gone down, but the headlights from Sawyer’s car lit up the front of the house after Zane shut off the Jeep. V climbed out without Zane’s help while he went to talk to his brother. She couldn’t hear what they were talking about, but she wondered whether Sawyer actually would be scoping things out for the night. V had no clue how Jake had managed to get on the property, but she only prayed that the cops were going to do their job tonight and make sure he didn’t come back.

Once inside, Zane moved about the house as though nothing at all had happened. He didn’t mention Jake or the cops, or anyone else for that

matter. V watched him until he disappeared into the bathroom, realizing as soon as the shower came on what he was doing.

While he showered, V went in search of food. What she found was little to nothing that would sustain her much less a man Zane's size. Then she remembered that he hadn't been there for several months, and he hadn't had time to go to the grocery store. She was still rummaging through the cabinets when the water shut off.

"Hungry?" Zane's voice startled her, and V jumped, turning to face him. She couldn't help but smile, despite the fact her heart was in her throat.

With his hair spiked all over and still damp, Zane was so cute, it made her heart ache. Yes. Cute. He was so ruggedly handsome most of the time, and downright sexy as hell when he was wearing his cowboy hat, but standing before her in a pair of jeans and no shirt, his hair in disarray and a day's worth of stubble on his chin, he was quite adorable.

"Starving," she answered, hoping he didn't ask her what she was thinking. V was pretty sure Zane wouldn't take too kindly to being called cute or adorable. Although he was both.

"Beau's on his way. He's bringing food." Zane ran his hands through his hair again, sending the last remaining drops of water spraying around him as he grinned.

V's heart thumped hard in her chest at the mention of Beau Bennett. He was on his way over. Bringing food. If that were the case, then why the hell did she feel like she was about to pass out? For some reason, she doubted it was from low blood sugar.

Zane watched V as she processed what he'd just told her. The first time that the three of them were together honestly was unintentional. The second time it was planned. And now, the third time was also planned, but more than that, it was inevitable.

Based on the longing he saw in V's whiskey brown eyes, Zane knew how much she wanted this.

He knew many people didn't understand threesomes, they didn't understand why one man would want to share his woman, or vice versa. In Zane's case, it was the heightened sexuality, the thrill of pleasuring a woman in ways he couldn't do by himself. He wasn't even sure how his first threesome had come about, but he knew he'd been in high school. His senior year if he remembered correctly. In fact, Zane was pretty sure it hadn't been his idea, or even Beau's, but they'd both been onboard with the idea.

However, that time didn't even remotely compare to his first threesome with V. When he and Beau had ended up with her, Zane had been blown away by her passion. Beau was painfully shy around women, and maybe Zane's presence helped ease his social anxiety, but no matter what, there'd never been a woman who had complained.

V had somehow managed to draw out a side of Beau that Zane didn't even know existed. She'd also managed to solidify Zane's dominant nature. Something inside of him changed that night with her. He had decided to take a chance and try and expose her submissive tendencies. It'd worked like a charm and the three of them would likely never be the same again because of it.

Zane would admit to having doubts before that first time, but that was because of his reaction to V. She wasn't like any woman he had ever known. The various emotions she pulled from deep inside of him were foreign to him. And although he'd had his own insecurities that very first time, they'd been eliminated when she'd given in fairly easily to the passion that roared from a small flame to a wildfire in just seconds when the three of them got together.

Now? Well, now Zane looked forward to those moments. V was a passionate woman, and despite her reluctance with men in her past, she gave herself freely to whatever Zane asked of her. There'd only been a brief hesitation that very first time, but that had presumably disappeared the second Beau had kissed her.

Damn. He was going to have to stop thinking about that night, or he was sure they wouldn't make it through dinner. He hadn't been lying to V when he told her that Beau was on his way with food. His friend had called a short while ago and told him he was on his way. When Zane remembered he didn't have any food, he'd asked Beau to bring something, he didn't care what.

As though summoned directly from Zane's thoughts, there was a knock on his front door and Zane turned away from V to let Beau in. He slapped his friend on the back and grabbed one of the sacks from his hand and carried it to the kitchen.

It could've been because they were starving, or because they were all three ready to see where the night would lead, but they finished dinner in record time. While V cleaned the dishes, Zane helped clear the table and grabbed more beers while Beau messed with the sound system in the living room.

The stereo came on, and Beau hooted and laughed, turning his attention to Zane. “Dude, seriously? Thrift shop? I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Zane laughed, knowing Beau loved to give him shit about his choice in music. He was a country boy and yes, most of what was on his iPod consisted of country music, but he liked variety.

Zane carried the beers into the living room while Beau began flipping through the music on his iPod. After fifteen minutes of Beau’s ridicule, thankfully, he grew bored with teasing him about his choice in music before putting on Jason Aldean in the man’s warped attempt at setting the mood.

To his surprise, V took the seat on the couch next to Beau when she joined them, and the two had conspired to give Zane a hard time about his music, both of them laughing and even touching on more than one occasion. They were friends, that was clear and although V tried to keep herself closed off to most people, it was evident they’d become closer during Zane’s stint in the hospital. Rather than jealousy, Zane felt a sense of comfort knowing that his best friend had been taking care of V while he couldn’t.

They’d talked daily when Beau came to visit, and his friend had kept an eye on V at his request, but it didn’t appear to have been a hardship on either one of them. He wasn’t going to think about the things that they hadn’t realized were going on during that time though. He was determined not to ruin this night with his unresolved anger issues, and the mere thought of V and her debilitating panic attacks was a definite trigger.

“The way you’re looking at us, you’d think we were naked,” Beau joked, causing Zane to look over at him.

“Maybe y’all should be,” he replied, tipping his beer bottle to his lips and trying to pretend the idea hadn’t crossed his mind a time or two in the last hour.

“Have a preference on which of us goes first?” Beau asked.

Zane tilted his head to study his friend. It was interesting to see how relaxed Beau was around V. Normally, when he was anywhere near a woman, his face was red, and he usually never spoke more than two or three words at a time. Never had he been daring the way he was when she was around.

“I have a preference,” V added, grinning.

Zane noticed she didn’t seem to be nearly as nervous as she’d been when they got back to his house. After what had happened at his parents’, he’d expected her anxiety to be sky rocketing, but somehow she’d managed to relax. Maybe she was just looking to ignore everything else that was going on the same way he was.

“Yeah? Who’d you like to see naked first?” Zane figured he already knew the answer to that.

“Beau,” she replied, grinning from ear to ear.

“You sure about that, darlin’?” Beau teased. “I’d hate for you to drop Zane like a bad habit once you get to see me naked again.”

Zane watched, his lips smirking against the lip of his beer bottle as he watched the two of them. “A bad habit, huh?”

V glanced back and forth between the two of them, and Zane watched her closely. She was coming up with an idea, and he was interested in seeing what that devious mind of hers decided to do about the two of them.

“You’re right,” she agreed with Beau and Zane laughed, but waited for her to finish. “I think it’s only fair that you dole out your sexiness in stages. Maybe take turns.”

“What? You want us to do a strip tease right here?” Zane questioned her, sitting his beer on the side table beside the chair he was currently occupying.

“Great idea,” she replied, acting as though she hadn’t already had it all planned out.

“Who goes first?” Beau asked, sounding entirely too confident. At least in comparison to what Zane was used to.

This was likely going to get good.

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Chapter Eleven

♂ ♀ ♂

V knew the alcohol couldn't be what fortified her nerves because she'd only had one beer and was working on her second.

For some reason, she just felt comfortable with Beau and Zane. Or maybe she just wanted to forget about all of the shit that had gone on that day, or in recent months. She knew what was coming, and for some reason, she wanted to get there soon.

Beau was in a good mood, laughing and joking, and it was contagious, making her want to tease the two of them. It wasn't like the first time when the three of them were so worried about where they were supposed to put their hands. This just felt – it was strange to say it – natural.

“You get to go first,” V stated, looking over at Beau. “But before you get your freak on, I want the two of you to stand in the middle of the room. I want to see the goods before I take them for a test drive.”

Zane's laugh tickled her ears making her smile even more. This was what she'd been missing for so long. They weren't worried about what happened before, or what might happen tomorrow. This was just three friends, having a good time and enjoying each other's company.

Beau stood, moving the wooden coffee table away from where they would need to stand in order to be in front of her. V pulled her feet up beneath her and pretended she was getting settled in for a good show. Zane took his time getting to his feet, taking another long pull on his beer and watching her intently.

The delectable, teasing smirk on his face did marvelous things to her insides.

“So, are we being graded on form?” Beau’s tone was serious, but his grin spoke of something much more carnal than V expected. “I’ve never done this strip tease thing, so I want to make sure I understand the rules.” Shaking his hand, his thumb waggling in Zane’s direction, Beau looked back at her “He’s probably got a lot more experience at this than I do, so I want it to be fair.”

“Yep,” V confirmed. “Form, execution, and style.”

“Got it. You gonna grade him on a curve? He looks a little frail these days.”

Zane’s laugh boomed through the living room. “Fuck off and get naked, bro.”

Beau’s chuckle warmed V even more. Considering Zane had lost some weight while he’d been in the hospital, it wasn’t obvious to anyone who didn’t know him. Standing next to Beau, he was still just as impressive as she’d always thought him to be.

Although Beau was close to six and a half feet, Zane wasn’t but an inch or two shorter. Granted, Beau was a big man. V had no idea how much he possibly weighed, but she knew it was a considerable amount, especially since he was all muscle. There couldn’t be an ounce of fat on either man. Unlike her. V was thin, but she probably didn’t have much muscle, aside from maybe her arms from cleaning. The rest of her was soft, but she didn’t mind. It helped define the difference between her and these men.

“Shirt. Off.” V pointed to Beau, trying to use a stern tone but failing as she laughed.

Beau grabbed his polo shirt with one hand behind his neck and deftly pulled it over his head. The move was sexy as hell, and the ripped, defined body he revealed was even more so. Her breath hitched, and she wondered whether they heard her. She purposely ogled Beau's body, feeling Zane's eyes on her.

"With a little hard work," Beau looked over at Zane, "you could have a body like this one day."

Zane reared back and punched Beau in the arm, a deep rumbling laugh echoing through the room. V watched as Beau glanced down at his arm, then back at Zane. "Why'd you pinch me?"

That got all three of them laughing.

"Y'all aren't naked yet," V reminded them when they settled down.

"Well, hell, little lady. You just had to ask." Beau joked, toeing off his boots in a hurry, then ripping his socks off of his feet before grabbing the front of the waistband on his jeans, releasing the button with ease.

"Slow down, speed demon. We don't want this party to end before it gets started," Zane joked. "I think it's only fair that we get to sample the goods before we give away all our secrets."

"Ahhh. Good idea." Beau pinned V with a stare, making her squirm. "You're turn."

V felt the heat infuse her body, her skin warming, her mouth dry. Looking up at them, both clad only in their jeans while V had on all of her clothes, with the exception of shoes. "I've got a better idea," V said, glancing across the room and then back at the two men in front of her.

Zane physically turned, following her gaze to the far side of the house where his pool table sat innocently in the corner.

“You want to play pool?” he asked, sounding pleased with the idea.

“No?” She questioned as she stood from her seat. “I’ll even give you boys a chance, and I’ll let you put your shirts back on just to make it fair.”

“You ever see her play pool?” Beau asked Zane.

“No. You?” Zane answered, both men acting like she wasn’t standing right there.

“Nope.”

“All right. You’re on.” Zane agreed, and walked over to his dresser to retrieve a shirt while Beau pulled his shirt back on over his head.

“What are the rules?” Beau asked when he pulled a pool stick from the rack on the wall.

V did the same while Zane pushed past her, brushing his body intimately against hers as he reached for the last stick on the wall.

“It’s simple,” she explained. “You’ll get two options on a shot to make, one from each of us. You choose which one you want. If you make it, the turn moves to the next person. If you miss, the person whose shot you selected gets to tell you which item of clothing to remove.”

V thought that was a pretty good game considering she’d made it up on the fly. Based on the grins she received from both men, they liked the idea as well.

“Who goes first?” Zane was apparently eager to start, rubbing the blue chalk on the end of his pool stick.

“You can. It’s your table and all,” she replied warmly.

The game ensued with Zane going first. V and Beau offered the shots he could select from, and Zane chose Beau’s. Making the shot, they decided

Beau would go next. The same occurred and then it was V's turn. She was surprised at the easy shots they offered, and she made hers with ease. When two more rounds went the same as the first, she glanced over at the two men skeptically. Someone should've had to remove something by now. Although she was glad it wasn't her.

“Ok, no more easy stuff. Let's make this interesting,” Zane stated, taking a sip of the beer he'd grabbed from the refrigerator.

“No problem.” Beau glanced over at V, then gave Zane a much more difficult shot than before. V offered the same level of difficulty and the two of them stood back and watched. To her delight, Zane missed the shot he'd selected, which was the one she'd told him to take.

When he asked, she told him the shirt had to go, and the playing resumed. Within a few minutes, Zane and Beau were both standing in their underwear – boxers for Beau, boxer briefs for Zane – and V still had on every stitch of her clothes.

“You're a pool hustler,” Beau accused as he slipped over to the refrigerator and retrieved another beer for her and him. “You sneaky woman.”

V smiled. Sometimes it felt good to be underestimated.

“Time for the gloves to come off,” Zane grinned, downing the last of his beer and turning toward the table.

He wasn't kidding. Both Zane and Beau gave her choices of near impossible shots, but she made them both after they dared her to. They made one more round and both men kept the last stitch of their clothes on, so when it was her turn again, V purposely missed the shot Zane had offered. Her shirt abruptly came off, with his help of course.

After another fifteen minutes, V still remained mostly dressed; Zane was buck ass naked and didn't seem a bit shy about it while Beau still had on his boxers. They made her take two turns, shooting with her eyes closed, which resulted in her missing one and making the other. To her surprise, Beau had her remove her jeans, rather than her bra. Now she was dressed in her underwear just like him. Zane wasn't playing because he'd much rather be copping a feel from what she could tell.

When it was clear that V and Beau weren't going to miss, and the shots they were taking were becoming repetitive, V turned to Zane. "Got any ideas on how to progress this night any faster?"

♀ ♂ ♂

Did he ever.

Zane was all for taking this little strip tease to the next level. "I think we should make the shots a tad more difficult."

"How do you suppose we do that?" Beau questioned him. "We've already made her close her eyes, and she's made damn near every shot."

"Distraction, of course." He couldn't think of a better idea, and it would progress this little peep show to the next level, which all three of them seemed to be more than ready for.

"Hmmm... I like the idea of a distraction," Beau mumbled, and Zane noticed he was staring at V's mouth. Oh, yes. The man caught on remarkably well.

"Beau's up next. So what's the distraction?" V asked, smirking at Zane.

“You are, baby.” The answer was obvious. At least to Zane. He didn’t have anything against two men being together, but he had absolutely no interest in Beau. Although, he’d thought from time to time that Beau might actually be interested in both men and women, though he’d never admitted to it. Nor had he denied it. In all fairness, Zane hadn’t asked either.

“Well, that means this game’s over before it even gets started,” Beau laughed.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m playing again. And now, the rules have changed. The goal is to make you both lose your clothes, obviously. But, the new rule is that you aren’t allowed to come while you’re being *distracted*.”

V glared at him. She clearly knew they were going to pull out all the stops on her. She had on the most clothes, and he was more than ready to get his hands on her. And his tongue.

Beau glanced back and forth between the two of them, waiting for the next move. Zane smiled at V. “Have at it. Think you can distract him enough to miss the shot?”

V blushed sweetly, and Zane’s insides tightened. Damn she was so perfect.

“What shot does he have to make?” Leaning her pool stick against the wall as she moved closer to Beau, V directed her question at him.

Zane glanced at the table momentarily and then called out the shot. V grinned and then dropped to her knees in front of Beau. Because the table was in the way, Zane couldn’t see her, although he could see her hands as they slowly slid Beau’s boxers down to his thighs.

“Oh, fuck.” Beau’s growl echoed throughout the house.

“You’re turn, big man.” Zane grinned at Beau’s distress.

When Beau’s eyes rolled back in his head, Zane knew the game was all but over. Except he had every intention of getting V naked. And soon.

Beau lined up the shot and missed. By a mile. Hell, he was lucky the ball stayed on the table. He groaned seconds before V stood up, her face red from embarrassment if Zane had to guess. She’d played by the rules, but he knew she wasn’t nearly as forward as she pretended to be.

“You’re turn, baby.” Zane watched V reach for her pool cue, and Beau shed his boxers while she did. “Beau, I’ll let you have the honors of distracting her first.”

“Oh, hell yes.” Beau dropped to his knees in the same position as V had been in, and because V was shorter, Zane couldn’t see what was going on beneath the table, so he rectified the situation as he moved to stand beside her.

Calling out her pocket, he watched as Beau’s head moved between her thighs, her breaths growing choppy as she desperately tried to focus on the shot. She had to stand on her toes in order to lean over Beau’s body, but she made the effort and it looked fucking sinful as hell.

“Remember, you can’t come,” he warned her.

“Fuck.” The single word came out as a whisper as she took the shot and missed.

Zane didn’t hesitate before moving around behind her and unhooking her bra. “That’s more like it.”

Beau continued his sensual assault while Zane stood beside them, explaining another shot to V while she moaned. Oh, yeah. This game was over.

When V made that one, they forced their way through another round, V once again working to distract Zane and then Beau. Then Zane had the satisfaction of teasing her while she aimed and missed. He had opted to stroke her clit with his fingers because he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop if he started eating her pussy the way he wanted to.

When it was Zane's turn again, he waited for V to move into position. When she didn't, he eyed her suspiciously. She was about to play very unfairly, he could feel it. He didn't know what he was going to do about it either.

"I think it's only fair that Beau get to distract you for a change."

"Honey, I'm not sure I've had enough beer for that to happen," he told her honestly. He wasn't sure he'd ever be drunk enough for that to sound like a good idea either.

"Are you refusing?" she asked, her hands on her hips, her pert, beautiful breasts thrust forward as she cocked her hip, daring him.

Zane glanced over at Beau, wondering why the hell the guy wasn't refusing. He was the one who was going to have to figure something out. Beau looked tentative, but there was something else in his eyes. Curiosity, maybe?

Oh, fucking hell.

"No." Zane was answering V's question, but he could very well have been pleading with Beau. The look in the other man's eyes said he was on the verge of changing their relationship in ways Zane wasn't comfortable with. However, he wasn't about to be the one to chicken out first. If V wanted to play like this, he'd punish her later.

V nodded her head at Beau as though giving him the go ahead. It was almost as if the two of them had shared a secret that Zane wasn't privy to. What the fuck was going on?

"Take the shot," V directed him, sounding more assertive than Zane had ever heard her.

Picking up the chalk, Zane prepared the end of the stick before turning to face the table. When he did, Beau moved, and Zane's entire body went rigid. He couldn't do this. He couldn't. Beau lowered himself to his knees in front of him, and Zane pinned V with a glare. What the hell was she trying to prove here?

Zane leaned over the table, praying like hell he could make the shot before...

"Sonuvabitch!" Zane cried out the second Beau wrapped his lips around his dick. The pool stick fell to the table when V rushed into his arms, gripping his chin and planting her mouth on his.

Zane did his best to focus on the woman kissing him and not the man kneeling at his feet, sucking his cock into the scorching hot recesses of his mouth. There was no way for him to pretend that Beau was anyone other than Beau. Based on the firm, callused grip around the base of his cock and the warm suction of his mouth, Zane was all too aware of what his best friend was doing.

"That's so hot," V whispered against his lips when she pulled away, looking down the front of Zane's body to where Beau was attempting to blow his mind.

He didn't want to like it, but damn it all to hell, Beau's mouth felt so fucking good. Hot... Wet... Fuck! His cock was so fucking hard, and Zane

found himself fisting Beau's hair in one hand without realizing he'd even moved. He pulled V's head closer with the other until their lips were once again smashed together, their tongues dueling as Beau continued to damn near blow his head off of his shoulders.

Zane told the hand fisting Beau's hair to push the man away, to force his mouth to ease off of his cock, but he couldn't do it. V broke the kiss, staring back at him.

"You want to watch, don't you? You want to see how fucking sexy it is for another man to blow you?"

V wasn't far off the mark, but Zane wasn't sure he'd ever be able to look Beau in the eyes again if he did. As it was, he was so fucking close to coming down his best friend's throat, he was scared to death what that meant for their friendship.

"He wants this," V whispered, and Zane's eyes flew open. "He's always wanted this. Give this to him, Zane."

Oh, fucking hell.

Zane did the unthinkable, letting go of V and standing straight before looking down at his best friend on his knees sucking his cock deeper and deeper into his hungry mouth. Zane didn't let go of Beau's hair. He held the man firmly in place, glanced up at V one last time and when she nodded her approval, Zane let go. He tried not to think about what he was doing, who this man was with his dick tunneling in and out of his mouth as he began to thrust forcefully, shoving his cock as far as he could in Beau's eager mouth.

"Mother fucker!" Zane groaned, his release was within reach. The sight of Beau on his knees, the feel of his big hands gripping his thighs was more than Zane could manage. "Fuck, that's it!"

Zane couldn't contain the release that powered through him, damn near leveling him with its intensity as he looked back up into V's whiskey brown eyes. The hunger he saw reflected there told Zane that this night was only beginning.

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Chapter Twelve

♂ ♀ ♂

V couldn't believe Zane had gone through with it.

She hadn't thought twice about instructing the scene that played out before her, but now as she watched Zane lose control, coming hard and fast and growling like a wounded animal, she wondered whether she'd made the right choice or not.

There was no doubt in her mind that Zane had never done anything like that before, nor had she ever witnessed anything quite so erotic. Watching Beau on his knees, his lips wrapped around Zane's massive erection was the hottest fucking thing she'd ever seen.

She still had no idea what caused her to suggest it, but something in the conversations she'd had with Beau in the past had given her the impression that he might actually swing both ways. She'd been right, or at least he was interested in experimenting. When he got to his feet, both men were eyeing her, and she knew there was going to be retaliation for her little stunt.

Truthfully, she couldn't wait. Watching the two of them was hotter than she expected, and now she was aching for them to turn that heat on her.

Both of them.

At the same time.

"On the fucking table," Zane ordered and V knew he was talking to her. He sounded angry, but she didn't see any malice in his gaze. Confusion, maybe. But he wasn't looking to hurt her.

She moved in front of Zane, in the exact same spot Beau had been kneeling just a few seconds before. That gave Zane the opening he apparently needed because his warm hands slipped around her waist, lifting her and sitting her on the edge of the table. She had to move back slightly until her ass rested on the felt, but that is where she was no longer in control of what was going on.

Zane moved to one side of the table, Beau on the other and they each grabbed one hand, laying her back until she was fully prone, her feet hanging over the edge. Zane moved back to the end, rectifying her discomfort by placing the bottom of her feet on the edge of the table and forcing her knees apart.

Her back instinctively bowed up off of the table when Zane's tongue slid eagerly down her slit, but then Beau was there, his tongue thrusting into her mouth and she tried to focus on one and not the other. Impossible.

Gripping the back of Beau's head, she pulled him closer, trying to suck his tongue right out of his mouth while Zane was fucking her relentlessly with one finger while punishing her clit with devastating flicks of his tongue.

She wasn't going to last. Not even a full minute and she had a feeling that was Zane's goal. He was punishing her with pleasure, trying to overwhelm her with his hedonic assault. V didn't want it to end, but she knew she didn't have the strength to hold on much longer.

When Beau gripped her breast roughly, pinching her nipple until pain ricocheted through every nerve ending and landing at the spot Zane was torturing between her thighs, V imploded. She screamed, but Beau muffled her cry with his mouth, continuing to kiss her with the fierce determination she could feel in his big, beautiful body.

Finally, they both eased back from her, leaving her panting on the pool table. Before she could recover entirely, she was lifted into Beau's massive arms and carried over to Zane's bed. Zane wasn't far behind and as soon as she was on her back, he was flipping her smoothly until she was facing down, her head at the side of the bed where he stood.

"Just for that, you evil little minx," he said with a smile, "I want to feel your sweet mouth on my cock."

Zane was in rare form, his hand sliding into her hair, gripping firmly and lifting her head before sliding his semi-hard cock between her lips. V was still turned on from all of the activity that had led them to this point, and she was eager to get Zane hard again. Propping her upper body on her elbows, V began licking and sucking until Zane was once again thrusting into her mouth, groaning.

She was startled when something cool slid down the crack of her ass, followed by the warmth of fingers teasing the sensitive hole that had never been breached until these two. The memories of those nights and the rush of pleasure that had stolen her breath made her moan and plead for Beau not to stop. V couldn't keep from thrusting back against the sensual invasion, welcoming Beau's fingers inside of her body. Despite the initial pain, the only thing she felt was exquisite, undeniable exhilaration.

When Zane stilled her head by gripping her hair even tighter, V managed to look up at him.

"Oh, yes, baby. Tonight we're going to fuck you until you scream."

V was ready to beg for it. She felt as though she had lava in her veins and even after the orgasm Zane had pulled from her earlier, she felt another one, only this one was much more violent than the first.

“Do you want that, V?”

V’s eyes flew up to meet his once again as she continued thrusting her hips back against Beau’s fingers as they fucked her slow and deep.

“Answer me, V. I need to hear you say it.”

V knew from experience that Zane could, and would, lose all control. His need to hear her confirm that she was onboard with his intentions was his way of ensuring he wouldn’t do anything she didn’t want him to do.

“Yes,” she whimpered as Beau’s fingers retreated from inside of her.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I want you both to fuck me,” she groaned, not wanting to sit around and have a conversation because she was on the verge of exploding any second. “Fuck me,” she whispered. “Please fuck me.”

Zane nodded at Beau and V felt the mattress shift as he climbed on beside her, pressing his back up against the headboard. Just when she thought she had figured out their plan, V found herself being pulled and maneuvered until she was lying flush against Beau’s now prone body. Only this time, her back was to his front, which meant...

“Oh, God!” V had no idea whether she actually could take Beau like that. Zane was big enough, and he was the only man that she had ever had anal sex with. Even in their previous threesomes with Beau, although she had taken them both at the same time, Beau had never attempted to fuck her ass, but now...

Zane crawled up between V’s legs, a bottle in his hands and V stared down her body, watching him intently. Her body was awash with sensation, her mind battling between the fear of more pain than she could bear and the insistence that the pleasure would be so worth it.

What was he going to do? He grabbed a condom from the bed beside him, opened it and retrieved the contents as she waited with bated breath for what he would do next.

“Is this what you wanted, baby?” he asked, but she had no idea what he was referring to.

And then Beau groaned like a feral beast, his hips bucking up from beneath her and V realized Zane was rolling the condom over Beau’s erection. She tried to lean forward, tried to watch because she knew how intoxicating it would be, but Beau reached around her, squeezing her breasts and holding her firmly against him. His breath came in a rush beside her ear, and she knew he was hanging by a thread.

“Son of a fucking bitch,” Beau ground the words out through clenched teeth, and V began squirming, needing Zane to get on with it. Just the thought of what he was doing, stroking Beau’s cock with the lubricant, pushed her to the edge where she hung right alongside Beau.

She was rapidly pulled back from the ledge when she felt the blunt head of Beau’s cock pushing against her anus, knowing that Zane was guiding him where he wanted him. Beau was growling, and she wasn’t even sure he realized it. His body was tense beneath hers, his hands moderately relaxing on her breasts. V was certain he was focusing on the feel of Zane’s hands on his cock.

“Fuck that feels good,” Beau whispered against her ear and she knew what he was referring to.

By the time he was seated fully inside of her, V felt the sweat trickling down her temple, the initial discomfort finally morphing into something more manageable. When Zane began stroking her clit while Beau thrust shallowly up inside of her, V moaned.

“That’s it, baby. I want to watch Beau fuck your beautiful ass.”

Beau’s arms closed tightly around her upper body as he continued to shift, trying to go deeper, but the way their bodies were aligned didn’t allow for much movement. V wiggled, trying to increase the pressure, but no matter what she did, Beau wasn’t able to move with her on top of him.

Zane clearly noticed because he took her hands in his, pulling her until she was sitting up, with Beau still lodged deep in her ass. It was incredibly uncomfortable, but the heat she saw in Zane’s eyes erased any distress.

“Fuck him, V. I want to watch Beau bury his cock deep in your ass.”

Zane’s words shot fire through her bloodstream; the vulgar image of what was actually happening sent flames licking deep inside of her. She tried to lift herself, but she couldn’t find a rhythm that seemed to work for them both. Then Beau’s hands gripped her hips, Zane’s beneath her thighs, both men holding her up as Beau began to thrust his hips up, his cock tunneling inside of her, the friction damn near sending her into hyperspace. It felt good. So good.

V knew she should be embarrassed by what they were doing to her, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She just wanted more. More of Beau. More of Zane.

“Ahhh, yes.” The resonant rumble of Zane’s voice came closer. He pulled his hands from beneath her thighs as he all but lay on top of her, forcing her back onto Beau’s chest. Zane was slowly pushing inside of her pussy until she felt more discomfort and a sudden, overwhelming feeling of being filled completely.

“Damn, baby, you’re so fucking tight,” Zane whispered the words, nipping her bottom lip as he leaned over both her and Beau. “Are you ready?”

V had no idea who Zane was talking to, but soon it didn’t matter when he began thrusting hard and fast inside of her, causing her body to move between the two men, impaled completely.

“Zane!” V screamed his name as her orgasm took her by surprise, causing Zane to growl and increase the pace, slamming inside of her until both men’s deep bellows filled the room as they came simultaneously.

♂ ♀

Zane faintly heard Beau as he left, the front door clicking shut pulling him from sleep. Glancing over at the clock on the nightstand, he saw that it was already five in the morning. Beau must’ve fallen asleep with him and V, which was not the norm, but Zane didn’t have a problem with it either. V snuggled in closer to him, her head resting on his chest, her arm across his stomach and her leg weaved with his. He pulled her closer, kissed her forehead and stared up into the darkness.

He wasn’t sure what exactly had happened that night. He couldn’t stop thinking about Beau and what happened between them. Those thoughts led to more, including his curiosity as to whether Beau was actually bisexual. How had he not known it? Zane had known Beau all of this life and never once did he get the impression that Beau might be interested in *him*. Sure, he’d suspected Beau might have found interest in men, more so than most men did, but he’d never thought twice about it.

Zane was the last person who would judge anyone. He knew his own sexuality deviated from the norm, with his preference for threesomes. However, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do about Beau. No matter what happened earlier, or how obscenely good it felt in a very abnormal, strange way, Zane wasn't interested in men. He knew himself well enough that he wasn't confused about his own sexuality based on the events that transpired between him and Beau, but he didn't want his best friend to get the wrong idea.

He knew what he felt for V was real. It was so much more than just sex, regardless if she accepted it or not. There was no doubt in his mind how he felt about her. It was her that he was unsure about. Zane wasn't any more sure how she felt about him now than he had been prior to the assault, but he was witnessing V opening up in ways even he hadn't expected.

Zane loved her.

Based on everything he knew about Vanessa Carmichael, she didn't open up the way she had been lately. She kept herself guarded, almost relentless in her efforts to push people away. It was her defense mechanism, and Zane felt as though he were somehow managing to breach those carefully erected walls around her heart.

He intended to keep pushing her until she admitted to herself and to him just how she felt. Sure, a part of him worried that might never happen, but Zane gave himself credit for his tenacity. He wasn't going to back off. He wouldn't allow her to run, although she seemed to be past that at the moment. He just wasn't sure how much longer that was going to last.

Zane closed his eyes, pulling V closer yet again, resting his chin on the top of her head as he let sleep pull him under once again.

Before he drifted off, he couldn't help but wonder whether she might feel awkward about what happened between him and Beau that night though. He knew he had to talk to his best friend because the last thing he wanted was to lose either one of them.

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Chapter Thirteen

♀ ♂

V wasn't looking forward to visiting her mother, but she knew she couldn't put it off much longer. Did that make her a horrible daughter? Probably.

Ever since Regina moved out of Coyote Ridge three years ago, their relationship had actually gotten better. V didn't need a shrink to tell her that she harbored some resentment toward her mother for all the men she allowed to traipse in and out of their lives like they were nothing more than a brief stop on this crazy journey called life.

When it got to the point Regina couldn't go anywhere in town without running into one or more of the men she had burned over the years, V had begged her to think about starting over somewhere else. Regina hadn't liked the idea originally, but after some time, she began to see the merits of it. The most compelling reason would've been the chance to start over with a fresh batch of men if V had to guess.

Regina only lived forty five minutes away, which wasn't all that far, but V found it a good enough reason to only visit once or twice a month. This morning, after waking up in Zane's arms and feeling way more comfortable than she knew she should, V figured today was as good a day as any to get away. It would give her a chance to think while seeing her mother.

Two birds, one stone and all that.

When she pulled into the driveway of the small rental house, V was surprised to see her mother on in the front yard. Was she actually

gardening? That was so unlike her, but truthfully, Regina had managed to surprise V a time or two over the last year anyway.

“V!” Regina exclaimed as she scrambled to her feet, a huge smile spread across her beautiful face.

Regina Carmichael was a beautiful woman. Almost *too* beautiful. At fifty three, she could have passed for thirty. Her hair was still long and thick, without a single strand of gray and V didn’t think she had it colored either. Her face showed a few signs of age, like the smile lines around her mouth, and the few wrinkles beside her dark, chocolate brown eyes, but other than that, Regina still looked as young as she acted.

“Hi, Mom,” V responded as she made her way up the cracked and crumbling driveway to where her mother stood. “Gardening?”

Regina looked down at the flower bed she had just been kneeling by and then back over to V. “I thought I’d give it a try.”

Based on the brilliant flowers that were blooming – in December mind you – V would say that her mother had a knack for it. Considering the weather was a lot warmer than recent years, gardening probably wasn’t such a bad idea. Not that V was going to attempt it. She didn’t even have house plants for fear that they wouldn’t live past their first watering.

A rustle at the front screen door caught V’s attention, and she glanced up onto the porch to see a small, yellow head peering up over the bottom part of the storm door.

“A dog?” V questioned, wondering whether she was actually at the right house.

“Isn’t he precious? His name is Buttercup. I adopted him from the animal shelter two weeks ago.”

Him? Buttercup?

V looked up at the animal, then back to her mother. When V didn't say anything, Regina stunned her by taking her hand and pulling her up the steps and into the house where a very excited Buttercup started jumping up onto her leg, barking a mellifluous puppy yap until V leaned down and rubbed his head. He was cute, she'd give him that. Although, it surprised the hell out of V that her mother had gone and gotten a dog.

The smell of cinnamon and cloves teased V's nose as the front door closed behind her and she noticed a couple of candles lit on the kitchen counter. Candles? The only time V had ever seen her mother light candles was when she was expecting a man to come over. "Expecting someone?"

"No, why?" Regina looked confused as she glanced around, apparently trying to see what V was looking at.

"No reason."

"Come, sit down. It's so good to see you, baby," Regina grabbed her hand once more, pulling her into the living room while Buttercup pounced along at her feet, still yapping away.

"Buttercup, hush," Regina said sternly and the dog did as she asked. "We're going to puppy classes, and he's doing really well."

"What made you get a dog, Mom?" V really wanted to know. All through her childhood she had begged for a dog, but her mother had always insisted they didn't have time to take care of one. V had begged to differ, considering they were always home, but she figured her mother had more important things on her mind than taking care of an animal. Namely trying to bed a husband.

“I don’t know. Lonely I guess.” Regina kept her eyes on Buttercup and V felt a sudden sadness at the longing expression in those familiar dark brown eyes.

No, Regina Carmichael had never found a husband, despite her many, many attempts. She’d found some decent men over the years, and it pained V to know that her mother had been more interested in their net worth than who they actually were. Although V had learned a valuable lesson, thanks to her mother’s promiscuity. Money didn’t make the man, that was for damned sure. There’d been a handful of decent ones, but more not so decent ones. Speaking of...

“Where’s Patrick?” That was the name of the most recent one of her mother’s boy toys.

“He’s...” Regina glanced down at her hands. “We’re not seeing each other anymore.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Regina replied, still not looking up at V. “It just wasn’t working out.”

V wondered whether that was because Regina had actually gotten a good look at his bank statement or for some other reason.

For the last twenty five or so years, Regina had been on a long and steady path to finding a husband. From what V knew, her mother had fallen head over heels in love with V’s father, whom V still didn’t know. The only thing she knew about him was that he was happily married – although V didn’t understand why a man would be out messing around if he were happily married, but whatever. Once he found out that Regina was

pregnant, he informed her that he wasn't interested. So, Regina being Regina, she never looked back.

Not that she ever had time because the woman always seemed to be looking forward. Even when she was dating one guy, she was always looking for the next, trying to find the one who would treat her like a princess and shower her with money. V never understood her mother and her reasons, and over time, she'd stopped trying to. The only thing her constant thinking had done was to put a riff between the two of them. As a teenager, V hated her mother and her antics. Hated that she was dubbed the town whore and had bedded half the town by the time V was twenty.

Buttercup began yapping once more, pawing at V's legs until she reached down and started scratching his head.

"I'm so glad you stopped by," Regina said, pulling V's attention to her.

"Me too," V replied amicably. It might not be the whole truth, but V always did feel better when she saw her mother. Their relationship was strained at best, but despite her mother's many flaws, V still loved her.

"How's Zoey?"

"She's great." The last time V had visited, she'd informed Regina that Zoey was getting married. She hadn't bothered to mention her own relationship with Kaleb's youngest brother though.

As a point, V tried not to delve into her own relationships when speaking to her mother. She'd heard enough warnings about ensuring the man had enough money to take care of her, a nice house, a stable job, blah, blah, blah. That seemed to be Regina's only concern, and V found it almost

humorous how that had all backfired on her over the years, being left completely alone to raise her daughter.

Not that Regina did much in raising V. She spent most of her time on the prowl while V spent more than her fair share of time over at Zoey's. She'd come to love Zoey's mother just like her own, and even her ornery father. Not that she ever told Regina that. For some reason, her mother was blind to most anything except for her main goal and V had been left to raise herself.

Not that she complained. Regina had done the best she knew how, and V accepted her for who she was. It had just taken a long time to get to that point. In the end, V felt as though she were a better person because of her mother's insecurities and her many indiscretions. At least she knew what *not* to do when it came to relationships.

Although, she feared she was beginning to blur those lines where Zane was concerned.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.” Funny how her mother always tried to feed her. “Tell me more about Buttercup.”

Two hours later, after V had learned all there was to learn about Labrador puppies, and after her mother fed her a grilled cheese sandwich, V was on her way home. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she actually didn't look forward to leaving her mother.

Something had certainly changed in Regina since the last time she was there. To her surprise, there hadn't been any discussions of a new man in her life. Her mother hadn't even shared anything more about Patrick, the

last man V had known her to be with. From what it looked like, Regina was looking to be single for a while. Buttercup had somehow managed to fill a void in Regina's life that even V hadn't been able to fill. The thought was bittersweet.

Having grown up without a father, V knew she had her own issues with men. She didn't have a father figure who'd spent any time with her, aside from perhaps one of the men from her mother's past. For the most part, V had learned what she didn't want to end up like. And now, she saw how much of a toll that life had taken on her mother as well.

V hadn't brought up Zane, and she didn't intend to. She didn't want to hear any of the warnings, not to mention, she honestly didn't know what was going on between her and Zane. She knew what she felt, but she also didn't trust her own feelings at the moment. Being with Zane was way too comfortable, and she knew she was falling fast and hard for him. Something she'd promised herself she wouldn't do.

V focused on the road, trying to eradicate all of those pesky emotions from her brain. She didn't need to relive the *what ifs*, and she damn sure didn't need to walk down the path of *what might be* anytime soon.

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Chapter Fourteen

♂ ♀

By the time Saturday evening rolled around, Zane was feeling a little more relaxed, if not a tad out of sorts. The week had gone better than expected, and there hadn't been any more speed bumps; nothing more from the sheriff, nothing about Jake being seen in town, and no awkward moments with V or Beau either. Zane had resigned himself to talking to Beau about their incident; he just hadn't had the opportunity yet – not for lack of trying.

All that behind him, he looked forward to spending a little time with his brothers at Moonshiners, and if he were lucky, V would be there. She'd managed to keep her distance on Friday, using the excuse that she and Zoey needed to play catch up on the houses they missed on Thursday, and she also needed to make an impromptu visit to her mother. She didn't say why. Zane didn't get the impression she was avoiding him, but he hadn't pushed her when she insisted she was going to go home by herself that Thursday night either.

Thanks to Travis, Zane knew there was someone watching her house, so he felt mildly better about leaving her alone. If it hadn't been for his fear of pushing her away after what happened with Beau, Zane wouldn't have thought twice about insisting he stay with her.

That didn't stop him from calling her Thursday night though, and surprisingly, he and V had had one of those teenage conversations where they both laid in their respective beds and talked to each other for hours. It didn't even contain phone sex, and quite frankly, talking to V had been

better than sex in any form. Ok, maybe not *any* form, but still, it helped ease the fact that he couldn't be with her.

She'd been open with him about her visit with her mother, which according to her went better than expected. Zane didn't know Regina personally, nor had he ever actually met her. The rumors in town were the only bits and pieces of the woman he'd ever heard until V told him a few more intimate details. No matter what he thought originally about V and her relationship with her mother, he knew for a fact that she loved her. Unconditionally.

Having been raised in a loving home with a supportive set of parents, Zane wasn't familiar with a family dynamic like V's. Even Beau's parents had been more like his own, and they were just as welcoming to him in their home when he'd been growing up as his parents were with Beau.

After an unusually deep discussion, they had even been reluctant to hang up, which was a strange feeling for Zane because he wasn't much for talking. On the phone or otherwise.

Walking into Moonshiners a few minutes later, Zane glanced around the small, dimly lit country bar and located his brothers right away. They were in the back surrounding one of the pool tables, and, to his surprise, Travis and Brendon were playing each other. Brendon always had trouble finding someone to play against him, but that was because the man couldn't be beat. Ever. It didn't even matter how many beers they poured down him, Brendon rarely missed.

Zane thought back to V and the way she'd hustled him and Beau at pool the night before. The woman had another hidden talent, and he wondered whether she'd be willing to play Brendon. That would be a sight to see.

Tipping his hat, acknowledging Kaleb and Sawyer when they glanced his way, Zane silently greeted his brothers while he stopped at the bar to order a beer.

“It’s about damn time you showed up,” Sawyer harassed him once he approached the table, grabbing one of the stools in the corner and pulling it closer to Sawyer and Kaleb who were sitting off to one side.

“Travis got brave tonight, did he?” Zane asked, watching the two men at the pool table.

“Something’s gotten into him,” Sawyer confirmed, tipping his beer bottle to his lips.

The men played for ten more minutes before Brendon cleared the table again. A round of applause erupted from around them as several of the bar patrons gathered to watch the action, mostly women who were being entertained by Braydon while his twin played pool. Brendon didn’t talk shit when he played, he just played, and he drew attention from his talent alone. Travis, being Travis, didn’t say much, but at the end of the game, he wasn’t a sore loser either. He clapped Brendon on the back and then grabbed one of the stools beside Sawyer.

Beau showed up twenty minutes later, adding to the ruckus they were causing in the back. The group of them laughed and joked while razzing one another like usual. Right before things got too out of hand, in walked Zoey and V. Zane’s mouth literally went dry at the sight of V walking across the room toward him.

The woman knew how to make an outfit look good, and that short jean skirt paired with those cowboy boots damn near knocked him off of his stool. He was used to seeing her in heels, but right now, she looked like a

country angel and he was ready to sneak her into the bathroom one more time just for the hell of it.

All of the Walker brothers stood simultaneously, a response that was as natural as breathing. Zoey walked up to Kaleb, pulling his head down to hers while she planted a scorching kiss on him that was steamy enough to have Beau blushing and turning away. V was a little more reluctant, but Zane solved that problem when he pulled her close, leaning over to whisper in her ear.

“Damn you look good.” He breathed against her ear. “Awww, hell, you smell good too.”

V pulled back and looked at him, smiling from ear to ear. It was nice to see a smile on her face. Most of the time, he didn't know whether she would be smiling or snarling. He'd take her either way, but when she smiled, the woman glowed. And the way she grinned at him now was enough to drive a shock directly to his heart. Zane had no idea what it was V had over him, but it was damn sure something. Something he wasn't willing to fight, and from the looks of it, she wasn't fighting it either.

When V's eyes darted to Beau, Zane noticed the heat burning in her gaze. It mirrored the blush that tinted her cheeks a pretty pink. His best friend grinned back, and Zane was pretty sure V knew what was going to go down in the very near future. At least Zane hoped like hell it would be. Even though he'd been a little nervous after the last time and what had happened, Zane was willing to give it another shot.

“Hey, lady,” Beau greeted V, tipping his hat as he looked down at her. The blush that infused V's face made Zane's body harden. All of him. Including his dick. Just the thought of what was going to happen later had Zane wanting to push up her skirt, shove into her from behind and try and

sate the lust pooling in his groin. *Fuck*. The woman drove him absolutely crazy.

“Hey,” she smiled back, but then turned her attention to the table.

When it was apparent V wasn't going to take one of the bar stools, Zane sat back down and pulled her back against him, her ass nestling between his legs. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he picked up his beer and finished it off. Maybe tonight he'd have more than his occasional one beer when he was out in public. Since he wasn't about to let go of V, he knew he'd have to wait until one of the waitresses made her rounds. While he waited, he listened to the conversations going on around him.

“When's Gage coming home,” Zoey asked Kaleb, sitting on the stool next to Zane.

“Tonight, I think,” he confirmed, downing the rest of his beer.

Zane fought the urge to laugh. Ok, so apparently there was going to be some interesting things happening in Coyote Ridge tonight.

A few minutes later, the group had gotten so engrossed in watching Brendon hustle another fool at the pool table that no one noticed when Gage Matthews walked in. He approached the group, carrying a beer bottle and wearing his cowboy hat low over his eyes.

Travis was the first to acknowledge him, and if Zane wasn't mistaken, there was some sort of silent communication going on between the two men. Gage looked a tad bit nervous while Travis appeared a little pissed off. What the hell was that about?

The subtle nudge that V sent Zoey made Zane smile. So, it would appear that V was in on what was happening between Zoey and Gage and Kaleb. Based on the fact that Zoey wasn't giving V the same hard time, he

would have to assume that V hadn't shared the details of her little trysts with him and Beau. Not that he expected her to.

As far as he was concerned, that was between the three of them and for the most part, Zane never mentioned what happened behind closed doors. There had been a couple of women in his past who thought it was funny to try and goad a reaction from him, or one of his brothers about their various threesomes, but most of the time, they just ignored the rumors and comments. And, if a woman did dare to bring it up, she could pretty well consider herself old news as far as the brothers were concerned.

Well, except for the twins. As far as Zane knew, Braydon and Brendon had never been with a woman solo – why that was, he had no idea. They didn't talk about their sexual exploits either, but for some reason, women liked to brag about being sandwiched between the twins. Probably because they were twins no less. Zane didn't know for sure.

No matter what, Zane wasn't one to kiss and tell. And as far as V was concerned, he didn't want to share what happened between them with anyone else. He damn sure didn't mind sharing her with Beau, but only because he knew from the get go that she was into it.

Thinking back on that last night still made him crazy with the need to have her again. Just like that.

♀ ♂

V listened to the chatter surrounding her, but she didn't participate much in what was going on. Zoey seemed elated that Gage was back, and V only could imagine why. Seeing the way Gage reacted to Kaleb's soon-to-

be wife made V smile. He was just as smitten with the woman as Kaleb it seemed. However, there was a definite possessiveness in Kaleb's reaction to Zoey that wasn't evident in Gage's.

Even more fascinating was Travis' response to Gage and vice versa. V wasn't sure how close the two men were because she had always known Gage to be Kaleb's best friend, but Travis seemed to be interested in what the other man had to say. Or maybe he was interested in what Gage wasn't saying. Either way, V wasn't sure. But the way the oldest Walker brother glared at Gage told her there was something going on.

"Want to play me?" The voice came out of nowhere and made V turn around to see Brendon standing just a foot on her other side. She looked around, wondering who he was talking to, but she didn't see anyone else.

"Come on, girl. Play me," Brendon encouraged. And that's when V realized he was talking to her.

"Me?" she questioned the obvious.

"Yes, you." Brendon offered her his hand, pulling her toward the table where he shoved a pool stick at her.

V glanced at it, then back at Brendon. Was he serious? With a knowing look, she peered over at Zane. He was grinning from ear to ear. His involvement in this little set up was obvious.

"What should we play for?" Brendon stared at her, grinning like a man with a secret.

"The winner buys the loser a drink," she suggested. "But, you can't go easy on me." V knew Brendon was the king of pool hustling, but she also knew he was going to underestimate her. Most people did. Truth be

told, not even Zoey knew about her pool playing abilities. Up until the other night, no one else had either.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Grinning from ear to ear, Brendon went around the table, gathering all of the balls and putting them in the rack. With one agile slide back, then forward, he settled them in their appropriate position, lifted the black plastic triangle and then nodded in her direction. “Ladies first.”

V smiled back, chalked up the end of her pool cue and then moved to the other end of the table. The men around them went silent, and for the first time in a long time, V managed to slip into another realm.

Playing pool was a diversion she had resorted to in order to drown out all of the excess chaos around her. She started playing when she was eleven years old. One of the many men her mother dated had a pool table in his gameroom and she would make herself busy while her mother did the same thing, although Regina’s type of busy was something V did not want to think about.

V had fond memories of Jerry Tanner, although she couldn’t remember what number he was in her mother’s long list of boyfriends. She did remember that he was one of the nicer ones. Of course that relationship hadn’t lasted long because, after six months, Jerry had asked V’s mother to marry him and seemingly the idea of marriage to a man who didn’t have a seven figure net worth wasn’t attractive enough for her mother.

For a few months after her mother broke up with Jerry, he continued to come around. He was the closest thing to a father figure V had ever had and even though Regina Carmichael didn’t want to have anything more to do with him, Jerry hadn’t been able to let go that easy.

V focused on the white cue ball in front of her, lined her pool stick up perfectly, drowned out the rest of the noise in the dimly lit bar and took her shot. With skilled precision, the balls shot out in all directions. From an amateur's perspective, it would've looked casual, but V took stock of what went where. She briefly glanced up at Brendon and the question was there on his face.

This was where people made mistakes. She knew if she had any chance at all of beating Brendon, simply the best pool player she knew, she had to get her shots lined up and sink them as accurately as possible. V was solids, and she lined up to drop the one ball in the corner pocket.

For the next few minutes, V was in the zone, completely oblivious to the rest of the people around her, including Brendon. She worked diligently to deliver the respective ball into the pocket she called, and before she even knew it, she was sinking the eight ball.

Never once did Brendon get to play.

“What the fuck?”

Sawyer's terse comment broke V from her reverie and had her standing up straight. To her surprise, Brendon was smiling at her although she had just done what everyone considered impossible. Had she given him a chance, Brendon would've swept her just as quickly, which was another thing V knew never to let happen if at all possible. Granted, she normally didn't get nearly as fortunate.

“Rematch,” Braydon chimed in, laughing. “Give the boy a chance, V. Let him go first, this time.”

V smiled at the other twin, and then glanced back at Brendon. “Sure,” she agreed. “After he buys me that drink.”

For the next hour and a half, Brendon and V competed back and forth, both of them damn near equally matched at every shot. Before this game started, they agreed that it was the last one. Her legs and her back were beginning to hurt, and to be honest, those heated looks she was receiving from Zane were making it damn near impossible to concentrate.

Just when she thought Brendon would take the game, he missed a relatively difficult shot, leaving her with one more ball, then the eight ball. V lined up her shot, drowned out the rest of the room and ended the game, successfully beating Brendon yet again.

When he walked around the table, moving very slowly toward her, she tried to hide her smile. And failed. He wrapped his arms around her, lifted her against his body and hugged her tightly. “Zane’s a damn lucky guy, lady. If I had my way, I’d steal you right away from him,” he whispered in her ear.

V blushed, and swatted him on the back as he put her back on her feet. “You’re a sly devil, Brendon Walker.”

Before she knew what happened, Zane had her in his arms, his mouth slamming down on hers in a kiss hot enough to alert the fire department. When he pulled back, she saw the intent in his eyes and her body reacted instantly.

Zane looked up at his brother and grinned. “You just remember she’s mine.”

Brendon laughed, and the brothers bumped fists. Zoey came over, hugging her like she was some sort of celebrity. “I can’t believe it. How in the world did I not know you could play pool like that? You’ve been my secret weapon all this time, and I had no idea.”

V laughed, brushing her hair back from her face. Not many people knew her talent, nor did she try and flaunt it. Today was an exception. These were her friends.

The thought nearly leveled her. Never had she actually taken the time to think about how close she had become to the Walker brothers over the years. She went to school with Braydon and Brendon, but they always seemed so overprotective of Zoey, she often felt like the outsider. But then again, V hadn't needed anyone to stand up for her. She'd managed to do a good job all on her own. Based on the way most of the other kids had treated her, she hadn't had much of a choice.

It wasn't a secret that the town had painted her mother as a slut only out for monetary gain, and no matter how painful the thought was, it was what it was. Regina liked men; there was no doubt about that. She also had one agenda – finding the richest, most successful man to shack up with and marry. Never had it worked out for her, but that hadn't stopped her from trying. V couldn't even remember the number of men who came and went from their house when she was growing up. There were times she never even knew their names, which as she got older, she actually preferred.

“You ready?” Zane asked, interrupting her thoughts. V smiled, thankful for the distraction. It was a fact, thoughts of her mother and her sordid past never did much good for V's mood.

She nodded her head and accepted the hand that Zane held out to her. Within minutes, their goodbyes were said, and they were leaving. Zane held her hand as they followed Gage, Zoey and Kaleb out to the parking lot. The threesome didn't seem to notice anything going on around them, and for that V was grateful, especially since Beau was trailing not far behind.

V had a sneaking suspicion that Zane was up to something, but she'd tried to ignore it, knowing her nerves would get the best of her if she allowed them to. She was more than a little excited about the possibilities that this night had in store for her, but she wasn't willing to admit it just yet. After the last night at Zane's, V had developed some sort of shameless fascination for the two men. Although she still preferred just the two of them together if she had a say, V was willing to enjoy the distraction. She seemed to need it now more than ever.

Zane had awoken a part of her that she hadn't even known existed. Beau played a big part in that before the assault and truth be told, she had been anticipating a replay, even while Zane had been in the hospital. On those lonely nights when she assured herself that staying away from Zane was the best for him, she still allowed herself those few sexual fantasies to fill the void that Zane had left in her life.

The other night had been a surprise. Although, most of her anticipation occurred in the dark of night while she was lying in her bed doing her best to ignore those creaks and groans of her house, she found that indulging in a little mental foreplay with two hot, sexy cowboys was an easy way to forget her more pressing thoughts and fears.

This time she wouldn't be imagining it. Her body was completely onboard with that, especially with the adrenaline still coursing through her system. Beating Brendon Walker at pool wasn't an easy feat and V knew, based on the way the game played out, he hadn't let her win. Then again, Brendon wasn't like that, so the excitement was still sizzling inside of her.

Or maybe, that really was from the anticipation of what was to come.

As long as Zane took the reins again this time, like he did every time, V knew she was in good hands. The only thing she had to bring was herself

and her desire, which she was pretty sure couldn't be stoked much more than it was right that moment.

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Chapter Fifteen

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Zane didn't bother asking the question because he already knew the answer. Opening the passenger side door of his Jeep, he waited for V to climb in before turning to face Beau.

"Her house," he told him. He hadn't asked V to spend the night at his house, and he didn't want to assume anything after her insistence the night before. Despite her panic attacks, he wanted to make sure V felt as though the world weren't crashing down around her. He was trying to keep his distance and not overwhelm her with his feelings, and giving her something familiar to hold on to seemed like a reasonable compromise. He wasn't sure how she was going to react once they got there, but he hoped he could get her inside without having to watch her have another debilitating panic attack. In fact, his real reason for wanting to go to her house was to hopefully replace those memories with other ones.

Beau nodded his agreement and then ventured across the parking lot to his truck. Zane liked the idea of Beau coming back to her house for more than just one reason. Being that they didn't know what Jake Sanders was up to at the moment, he wasn't willing to put himself in a position like he had the last time. His brothers were worried about him, he could feel it. Knowing that Beau would always have his back made it easier on him, and probably even more so on V.

While V was playing pool with Brendon, and Travis had been giving Gage the evil eye, Sawyer, Kaleb, Zane, Beau and Ethan had had a brief discussion about Jake Sanders. The fact that the man hadn't been found yet after showing his face on their property wasn't promising. They knew he

would be back. Based on his continued harassment of V, he still wasn't able to let go.

Although they weren't talking about the significant number of text messages she continued to receive from Jake, Zane found it promising that she had started forwarding them to him. He knew she wasn't thinking about them nearly as much as he was, but he tried not to make a big deal out of it. Everyone, including his brothers, seemed content to pretend everything was cool. It wasn't like they could do anything about it until Jake actually made a move.

In fact, Zane had mentioned as much to Beau because he needed someone watching his back. It wasn't that he didn't think he could take the bastard because he knew he could, provided he wasn't ambushed the way he was the last time. Telling Beau just helped guarantee that he never got stuck in that situation again. Since Beau likely wouldn't share the news with his brothers, he didn't have to worry about them going on a manhunt like he feared they would do. Especially Travis.

A few minutes later, Zane was pulling into the driveway of V's house. The instant he shut off the engine and threw on the emergency brake, he took her hand and pulled her toward him. Without asking permission, he slammed his mouth against hers, holding her head to him as he consumed her honeyed taste.

Sliding his hand into her hair, lacing his fingers in the cool, silky strands, Zane pulled her head back, releasing her mouth from his. He didn't allow her to look away as he pinned her with his eyes. "Trust me, V. Trust me to take care of you in every way. Can you do that?" he asked and waited patiently for her answer.

She was breathing hard, and he knew only part of that was from the kiss they shared. She was getting worked up, panicking, and he refused to let her do that. Not tonight. Not with him here to protect her. And he would protect her. He cocked his head to the side, waiting and refusing to move until she answered him.

“I will try,” she finally said, still trying to pull away.

Zane pulled her hair tighter, not enough to hurt her, but enough to let her know he wasn't going to let her pull away. Not physically and definitely not emotionally.

“I don't want you to try, V. I want you to trust me. Tell me that you trust me,” he demanded, leaning in closer. “I want to hear you say it.”

“I trust you,” she said on a sigh. “I trust you, Zane.”

He kept his eyes locked with hers until he believed her. Before he released her, he planted a quick kiss against her lips. “Don't move until I get to your door. Beau's walking up the driveway now, so you have nothing to worry about.”

V nodded her head in agreement and Zane retrieved his keys from the ignition before hopping out of the Jeep and making his way over to her door. Once he opened it, he helped her out, but held her close to him, pressing her face against his chest and leaning down so he could whisper in her ear.

“I don't want you thinking about anything else except what it's going to feel like to have me buried deep inside of you. I want you visualizing what it'll be like to have both of us fucking you until you can't take any more. Understand me?” He made sure his voice remained calm and assertive. He wasn't going to budge on this, and his control was firmly in

place. Tonight, he fully intended to make sure Jake Sanders didn't interfere. He wasn't welcome here, nor was the memory of what he had done.

Now they just had to overcome her fear of going inside.

"Give me your keys." Zane waited while she retrieved them from her purse, still not letting her go, holding her face firmly against his chest and not allowing her to look around at anything other than him.

Handing the keys to Beau, he waited until his best friend had unlocked the front door, then he lifted V into his arms, forcing her to wrap her legs around him. He knew she would freak out about someone possibly seeing them and what they would think of him carrying her into her house so intimately, but that was part of the plan. He wanted her thinking, just not about what had happened that day so long ago.

Carrying her, Zane swiftly moved to the front porch and into the house. As soon as they were inside, Beau locked the door behind them and made his way to her bedroom. Zane wasn't far behind, still carrying V, her face pressed against his neck.

Once inside her room, he shut the door while Beau turned on the bedside lamp, casting the room in a soft, golden glow. He didn't let her down as he backed up against the wall, Beau joining them and pressing up against her back.

"Are you wet for me, V?" he questioned her. "Are your panties soaked from thoughts of what it'll be like to have me and Beau buried in your sweet body?"

V nodded her head, her face still pressed against his neck.

"Look at me," he instructed, keeping his voice firm. "Answer me."

V looked up, and he could see the dazed look on her face, but he was pretty sure it had nothing to do with fear, and everything to do with mind numbing lust.

Holding her ass, Zane felt Beau's hand as it moved beneath her, his fingertips bumping against Zane's stomach as he slipped a finger into her panties.

"Awww, fuck. She's wet. And hot," Beau's voice penetrated the tension filled air, and V groaned.

Zane couldn't see what Beau was doing, but he knew he was fingering her and based on the way V dropped her head back, her eyes closing, she was enjoying it.

"Do you like that, V? Do you like when Beau finger fucks you?"

V leaned farther back, and Zane had to hold her tighter to keep her from falling out of his arms. He pressed his back against the wall and braced his feet on the carpet, pulling her into him while V leaned farther into Beau behind her. "Hold onto me," he growled.

V leaned forward, wrapping her arms around his neck, but before she could hide her face once again, he stopped her. "Look at me. Don't you dare look away. And don't you dare fucking come until I tell you to."

Her eyes glazed over, another moan escaped, and Zane could feel Beau increasing the pace of his hand fucking into her.

"Does it feel good?" He was going to continue to question her until she answered him. He wanted her as much a participant in this as they were. Zane knew from the last time they were together just how much satisfaction V had taken from their threesome, and he wanted that again. This was about her pleasure, and Zane wasn't about to let up on her. After she'd insisted on

one night apart from him, Zane was ensuring they weren't backtracking. He only had room to move forward in his life these days, and he was taking her with him.

"Yes," she whispered, keeping her eyes locked with his. "So good, Zane."

"Do you want Beau to fuck you harder, baby? Or are you ready to get naked? Remember, you can't come until I let you."

Knowing she was close, Zane gave her a choice. Her body had tensed, her arms were wrapping tighter around his neck, and her eyes were glazing over from lust. She was damn close, but Zane wasn't near ready for her to come.

"Which is it, V? Beau will fuck you harder, but it's just a tease. I'm not going to let you come yet."

"Naked," V breathed the single word on a hard exhale as she leaned farther into him, trying to rock her hips against Beau's invading fingers.

With a quick glance over her shoulder, Zane directed Beau to stop with a look. When Beau moved, Zane lowered V to her feet, and held her close when she stumbled. After a minute, she seemed steadier; her breaths returning to normal and he tipped her chin up so that she had to look at him.

"I want you to strip for us, V. I want to watch while you bare all of that soft, smooth skin. Then, you can do the same for us."

The mood was different from how it had been the last time. V didn't seem nearly as playful, and Zane assumed that was because she was at her house. She seemed just as eager, but he didn't get the impression she would take the reins this time.

V was a very hedonistic, highly lascivious woman, and she knew exactly what she wanted. She was also shy when it came to going after it. Zane needed her to show him. He wanted her to take what she wanted because that's what this particular interlude was about.

Zane found his own satisfaction in making her come, making her beg for more, and when Beau was there, her pleasure was only intensified. He wouldn't deny the heightened sensuality that he felt when Beau was involved, but he knew that was due to the spontaneity. It was all about V and the satisfaction they could both bring her. This wasn't about love or romance. This was down, and dirty, hardcore fucking in its most potent form and Zane didn't want to waste another second.

Considering he still had his doubts about what Beau wanted, or possibly expected from him, Zane was looking to keep the attention solely on V for the night. He needed a chance to talk to Beau about what happened, but until then, he wanted to ensure he kept control of the situation. Unlike last time.

Placing his hands on her shoulders, Zane forced her back from him, ensuring she was once again steady on her feet. Once her legs were solid beneath her, Zane moved around her and sat on the edge of the bed beside Beau.

"Take it off, V," Zane demanded.

V turned to face them, and he saw the hesitation in her eyes, but then it disappeared as fast as it came, replaced by sheer determination. That's what he loved about this woman. She didn't want anyone to see her vulnerability, but it was there. This wasn't the norm for her, but she craved the intoxicating exhilaration as much as he did.

V dropped her purse to the floor, before reaching for the hem of her shirt and lifting it over her head. Zane admired the red lace demi bra she uncovered, holding her straining breasts while her chest continued to rise and fall with her short, choppy breaths.

“So fucking pretty,” Beau’s voice broke the silence, but Zane didn’t look over at him sitting just a foot or two away. He kept his eyes locked on the alluring woman now lowering her skirt to the floor. Somewhere along the way, he had missed her unbuttoning it, but he damn sure wasn’t missing what she was revealing as she slid the denim down her long, tan legs.

“Turn around,” Zane ordered, watching as V nearly stumbled in those sexy as hell cowboy boots.

When she turned, he admired the willowy curves of her ass, bisected by red lace.

“Now take off the boots.” He’d much prefer she leave them on, but Zane wanted her completely naked. He wanted to be able to touch every delectable inch of her skin, which meant the boots had to go.

V toed off the boots and stood before him and Beau in only her bra and panties. Seeing her standing there, Zane’s cock throbbed harder, a silent demand that he needed to get this moving along before he embarrassed himself right there in front of his best friend.

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V expected to be embarrassed standing before Zane and Beau in her panties and bra, especially since this situation had taken a more serious turn than the last time they had been together. They weren’t playing a game;

they didn't have beer to lighten the mood, so she had to rely on the heated looks on their faces to encourage her. There was no room for shy in this scenario, and she knew if she wanted the thrill of their hands on her, she had to get through the hard part first.

From where she stood, she could make out the outline of Zane's cock pressing firmly against the zipper of his jeans. Knowing that what she was doing made him hard spurred her on. She wanted this. There was no denying it. And considering Zane had managed to successfully keep her nightmares at bay on the way into her house, she wasn't going to overthink it either.

She needed this memory to replace the horror of what had happened so many months ago. This would allow her to fall asleep at night, in her own bed, remembering what happened between them and the ecstasy they could bring her with just the touch of their hands on her body.

V unhooked the front clasp on her bra, slowly peeling the fabric away from her breasts, allowing them to spill out while Zane's and Beau's hungry gazes watched every move. It was so damn arousing to see the excitement in their eyes, to know how much they both wanted her right then and there.

Never would she have imagined herself being in a threesome, but this was familiar for some reason. There was nothing strange about having Beau there with them and V was grateful for that. She knew what people would say if they found out, but right this minute, she didn't care. There would be plenty of time later for her incriminating self-doubt to overwhelm her. Right now, she refused to acknowledge it.

Sliding her thumbs beneath the thin lace at her hips, V pushed her panties down her thighs until they slid to the floor. Stepping out of them, she moved closer to the bed where Zane and Beau remained sitting. She

couldn't help but wonder whether Zoey was doing the same thing right then with Gage and Kaleb. The thought made her clit throb, and she tried not to rationalize the reason for that.

“Come here,” Zane’s words startled her from her thoughts and V stepped even closer, closing the gap between them. She didn’t say a word, but she knew she didn’t have to. Zane was controlling this, and he had her in mind. He knew what she liked, knew how far he could push her and when she told him earlier that she trusted him, she meant it.

V was scared *for* Zane, not *because of* him. She trusted him, and she loved him, although she knew that last part wasn’t beneficial to either of them at this point. So, instead of wondering what that meant, she gave herself over to the moment. No more thinking. It was time to feel.

“Put your foot on my thigh.”

Zane didn’t move and the image of what would happen when she did as he told her flashed through her brain, making her pussy heat even more. Lifting her left leg, she placed her bare foot on his denim covered thigh, but she didn’t take her eyes off of his face. She didn’t need to look down to know that the position put her sex on full display, nor did she need to look over to know that Beau was taking in the view just as Zane was.

Zane lifted his hand, his thumb grazing the bare skin of her mound before teasing the lips of her pussy. His other hand moved to the top of her foot, holding her in place and forcing her to balance on her other leg. His finger continued to slide back and forth through her wetness, but never did he enter her. He was driving her crazy, his touch so gentle, like a feather caressing her tender folds.

“Do you like that, V?” This time Beau was the one to ask the question and V turned to look at him. He was slowly rubbing the ridge of his cock

through his jeans, but he didn't appear to be in any hurry.

"Yes," she moaned, trying to focus on what Beau was doing, rather than the teasing caress of Zane's rough skin against her clit.

When Zane flicked her clit, the pleasure/pain bolted through her and V feared she might fall, but somehow she managed to remain standing. He repeated the action over and over, the intensity of the motion increasing, the pain blurred by pure, exquisite sensation until she was practically panting with the need for more.

When Zane pulled his hands away, telling her she could put her foot back on the floor, she was torn between begging him not to stop and waiting with remarkably little patience for what would happen next.

"It's our turn to get naked. I want you to remove Beau's clothes first, but I want you to turn around so I can watch your beautiful ass while you do."

Beau stood from the bed, moving around while V turned to face him, leaving her back to Zane. When he gripped her hip, pulling her closer to him, she stumbled but righted herself. Beau was incredibly tall, putting her eye level with his chest, so V had to look up to see his eyes. The dark chocolate brown orbs seemed to swirl with passion and V was impatient for him to unleash it on her. She knew from experience just what his hands felt like on her body, and she was eager to feel them again.

Her fingers trembled, but somehow she managed to unhook each tiny button on his shirt, pulling the tails out of the waistband of his jeans before shoving the cotton down his arms. She didn't strive for gentle, and when she felt Zane's hands on her ass, she knew she was hard pressed for time. If she didn't get Beau out of his damn clothes, she didn't know what might happen.

With very little skill, V continued to remove Beau's clothing, piece by piece, revealing the firm, toned, largely muscled body beneath. The man was gloriously sculpted with lean slabs of muscle that made V's mouth water. She could definitely appreciate his body, as did many of the women in their small town. Although, based on Beau's extreme shyness around women, she wasn't sure there were many who had shared this honor.

Before she moved to his jeans, Beau tipped her chin up until their eyes met. "Touch me, V." His voice was dark and rich and oh so tantalizing. The man could make a woman melt with just the deep rumble of his tone.

Placing her hands firmly on his chest, she continued to stare up into his eyes, feeling Zane's hands on her legs, slowly sliding up one, then down the other, teasing her folds in between. They were building her higher, she knew it, she accepted it, but she wanted to beg for more.

When Beau's strong hands came over the top of hers, V tried to pay attention to what he needed from her, rather than the sinful scrape and glide of Zane's callused hands over her skin.

"Put your mouth on me," Beau instructed.

Considering he was still wearing his jeans, V knew he wasn't asking for more than just a brush of her mouth over his skin, but she didn't hesitate. Pulling her hands away, she pressed her lips against the scorching skin of his pecs, her tongue leaving a wet trail as she moved to one small brown nipple.

Just like Zane, Beau had no hair on his chest, and V lost herself in the sultry, heavenly taste of him. Using her teeth, she scraped over the small brown circle until it pebbled, then she used her tongue to flick it. Beau's hands came around to pull her head closer to him, a faint grumble sounding from deep in his chest. "Your mouth is so sweet."

V continued teasing Beau's nipples, one then the other while Zane drove her wild with his touch. She felt him move behind her, his big body pressing against her back, sandwiching her between him and Beau. He ground his hips into her ass while she reached between her and Beau and easily unbuttoned his jeans. She wasn't fumbling nearly as much now, and she figured that was Beau's intention. He was letting her see just how much he wanted her.

There was something different about tonight. It was clear they were trying to keep her from thinking, making her feel cherished, cared for. It was definitely thrilling, and they knew exactly how to play her, and it worked.

Oh, how it worked.

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Chapter Sixteen

♂ ♀ ♂

Zane let Beau distract V while he continued to tease her, but now he was ready to get on with it. Her confidence was building right along with her need, which only made him harder, more eager to fuck her into oblivion.

He took a step back, allowing her to slide Beau's jeans down his hips, but as soon as she had his best friend naked, Zane gripped her hair firmly, pulling her back to standing before she got any more ideas. Sure, they still had plenty of time to play, but he wanted to be just as naked as she was.

"My turn, baby," he told her when she turned to face him. He leaned down, pulling her head closer and crushing his lips to hers while she moved her fingers to the buttons on his shirt. Within seconds, she had his shirt off, and his belt-buckle undone and was working on the button and zipper of his jeans. While she freed his cock, Zane helped her by toeing off his boots and knocking them out of the way.

With his jeans wrapped around his ankles, Zane managed to push them off while still gripping V's hair firmly. "I want to feel your mouth on me," he stated as calmly as he could muster. He was overly anxious to get her mouth wrapped around his dick, to feel the passionate, fervent rasp of her tongue sliding over him, and he was running out of patience.

Using the hand still in her hair, he pushed her to her knees, keeping his eyes locked with hers. He was spurred on by the hunger and longing he witnessed in her expression. V wasn't hesitating now, but she knew very soon it would be her turn.

With Beau standing on the other side of V, Zane kept his eyes on the woman kneeling, her mouth so damn close to his cock, but not quite close enough. He didn't dare let go of her hair. She liked the way he controlled her movements, he'd seen it before, and he sensed that she needed him to keep her close. Using his free hand, he guided his dick to her mouth, watching as her lips parted, and her attentive little tongue darted out to tease the swollen head, lapping at the drop of moisture beading on the tip. He growled the instant she touched him with her tongue.

"Awww, baby, fuck. So good." Never taking his eyes off of her, Zane let the sensations overload his system as she began sucking him in earnest, using one hand to stroke his shaft, the other to gently knead his balls with enough pressure to have him sucking in a hard breath. If he had to guess, V liked having Beau watching and that he was definitely doing.

Beau moved closer, sliding his hand into V's hair similar to the way Zane's was. Turning her head, Zane's cock fell from her mouth as his best friend turned her toward him. V didn't hesitate before lavishing Beau's dick with the same enthusiasm as she had his. The woman was on fire, and Zane knew it was time to turn up the heat.

Loosening his grip on her hair, Zane backed away, pulling her comforter off of her bed and tossing it to the floor. When he was finished, he returned to V's side and then instructed her to get up. Beau was going to have to wait a few minutes because Zane had other ideas and they included his mouth on her pussy.

"Come here." Zane moved onto the bed, laying back and pulling her on top of him. The little hellcat rubbed her entire body up the length of his as she moved, ensuring he felt the wet heat of her pussy as she slid along his cock. "Damn!"

Zane was unable to hold back as his dick roused even more, anxious to slide into her heat while she wrapped her legs around his waist. But, that would have to wait. He pulled on her arm, forcing her to keep moving until he managed to get her straddling his head, his tongue so damn close to the musky, delicious smell of her. Using both hands, he separated her tender flesh, exposing her pretty pink folds and her clit to his gaze. She was hovering above him, not quite close enough for him to reach. “Sit on my mouth, V. I want to bury my tongue in your pussy right fucking now.”

Zane felt the shiver that ran through her as she lowered herself closer to his mouth until his tongue was delving into the lush, soft contours of her folds, the rich taste of her exploding on his tongue as he lapped at her like a starving man. When he felt V move, Zane looked up the length of her body above him to find her leaning over onto her hands, Beau in front of her, feeding his dick into her mouth. Zane alternated between watching her deep throat his best friend and feasting on her pussy while she moaned and thrashed against him, rocking her hips forward and back, riding his mouth for all she was worth.

Having her like this was so fucking hot, Zane wouldn't be surprised if he came right then and there. He knew V was damn close so he pulled away and she groaned, sounding not at all happy with him.

“I want you to come in my mouth, V. Come all over me, baby,” Zane urged before pulling her hips down toward his mouth once more, thrusting his tongue deep inside before sliding up to circle her clit, then back down. He repeated the motion over and over before easing one finger inside of her, twisting it so he could reach that one spot guaranteed to make her scream.

And it did.

V came apart, her pussy grinding against his mouth, his finger buried deep inside, her muscles clamping down as her orgasm plowed through her.

It was so fucking sexy to witness Vanessa Carmichael come apart. And Zane wasn't ready to stop yet.

♂ ♀ ♂

V couldn't control the trembling in her muscles as her orgasm subsided, the release leaving her both yearning for more and very much depleted of all her energy. She hadn't expected that. At least not yet. Zane had the most skilled mouth she had ever known. Not that she had known many, but still. The man had a wicked tongue.

Beau had grabbed the back of her head, somewhere along the way, pulling out of her mouth long enough to ensure she didn't bite down on him, but now he was resuming his position, pulling her mouth closer to his cock. V licked him like a lollipop from root to tip, then back down, using her tongue to lave his balls before continuing. The way he growled deep in his chest had her body starting another slow preheat after the tremendous orgasm she'd just endured.

Zane maneuvered out from underneath her, and she could feel his body behind her. She couldn't see him, and she didn't bother to try. She kept her focus on Beau and the slight tingle of pain that penetrated her scalp from the hold he had on her hair. She wasn't sure why it was, but she liked the way Zane looped his fist in her hair, pulling it tightly and controlling her movements. When Beau did it, she experienced the same excitement burn through her.

Beau stepped back unhurriedly, a firm grip on her hair as he pulled his cock out of her reach. “Not yet, honey. It’s not my turn yet.”

V let her body rest against the mattress, taking the opportunity to relax while she had the chance. These two men had the ability to shake her to her very core, and this time was no different. She was forced to move when Beau joined her on the bed, propping himself up against the headboard similar to the last time, except he didn’t lie down. Placing pillows behind his back, he propped himself up in a sitting position, all while keeping his eyes on her.

“Come here,” he said, his tone mixed with the lust she felt lingering like a low hanging cloud all around her.

As if her body knew exactly what was about to happen, V pushed up, finding more energy than she thought she had, crawling over Beau’s legs until she was straddling his hips. His attention was diverted to the small foil packet that was tossed his direction, obviously by Zane.

Beau made quick work of sliding on the condom and V was worried he might ask for her help. She’d never done that before. Not that she wasn’t willing to try, but she was beginning to feel her nerves once again, so she was grateful for the reprieve. Once he sheathed himself, Beau pulled her down on top of him, planting his lips on hers. V allowed herself to get lost in Beau’s kiss, mentally comparing the differences between him and Zane.

Beau’s kisses were soothing, yet animalistic, his mouth pliant, yet firm. He knew how to control her reaction with just his mouth, and V welcomed the distraction, especially when she felt the mattress dip from Zane’s weight and the feel of his hands on her ass. He grabbed her hips forcefully, but he didn’t hurt her and he didn’t move her. It was enough that she could detect his need, which in turn ratcheted up her own. She wanted

to be filled by them. The memory from that last night was still fresh on her mind, and she could still remember the rapture that they forced upon her.

Beau cupped her face, pulling her back before biting her lip roughly. “Sit on my cock, V,” he growled and the temperate, gentle man from only seconds before disappeared right before her eyes, replaced by the dominant male that not many knew Beau to be. It was clear that he took the backseat to Zane when the three of them were together, and she figured that was because it was her. She didn’t have the same feelings for Beau. At least not the same way she felt for Zane. She hungered for him, was attracted to him, but in a purely physical sense.

V eased up Beau’s body when he pulled her closer, his mouth latching onto her breast and suckling so hard that pain darted straight to her clit, and she cried out. It was a heady mixture, and in the end, the tingle of his tongue lashing her nipple won out.

Gripping his cock, she impaled herself on him in order to focus on something other than the intensity of his mouth on her other breast where he continued to torment her with his teeth and tongue while his free hand squeezed and kneaded her other sensitive breast.

“Oh, God!” V screamed from the intrusion. Beau was big, and he filled her fully, her body working double time to accommodate him, her muscles relaxing slightly around the girth now filling her.

“So fucking tight,” Beau barked, holding her hips before driving up into her hard. “You’re so fucking tight.”

He sounded as though he was in pain, but he continued to pull out and then thrust up into her. Slowly. He wasn’t rushing things, and there was no way he was going to make her come because he paused over and over, but the friction caused by his thick, hard cock had her eyes crossing.

Then something cool ran down the crack of her ass and V had to fight the urge to panic. She remembered the initial bite of pain from the last time, and so far, Zane hadn't even used his fingers. She was beginning to wonder whether he was just going to ram his cock into her ass and she knew there was no way she could take him like that.

"Trust us, V," Beau whispered, cupping her head and forcing her to look at him. "He'd never hurt you."

V stared back at Beau, wondering why he felt the need to reassure her. Surely she hadn't said anything out loud. Then she heard the whimper, and she knew it was coming from her.

"You've got such a pretty ass, baby," Zane's deep voice rumbled through the room, rough and gravelly from his arousal.

He'd been quieter this time, and maybe that's what was causing V to panic. After the other night, when Beau had gone down on him, V had wondered whether these interludes would cease to exist altogether. She knew he had enjoyed it, but she'd also known he wasn't interested in Beau that way. Maybe he was nervous that they would take that direction again.

V bit her lip from the sensation when Zane thrust his finger in her ass while Beau was filling her. Although Beau wasn't moving, she felt the need to move this along. For some reason, she was beginning to feel disconnected from Zane, and it wasn't something she was comfortable with. Being close to Beau wasn't a problem, but not being able to see Zane was taking its toll on her excitement.

Grinding her hips hard, she managed to increase the friction of Beau inside of her, making him groan.

“Fuck me,” she pleaded. “Fuck me now. I don’t want to think anymore.”

Suddenly V was pulled away from Beau, dislodging him from inside of her. Zane was underneath her, holding her head so she looked him square in the face. He looked pissed, but he wasn’t hurting her. With practiced ease, Zane slid his unsheathed cock inside of her and V moaned at the intrusion. He was familiar, warm and familiar, and she found she needed that right then.

No matter how tantalizing the moment was, no matter how much she was willing to give herself over to both of these men for the sexual satisfaction only, she still found that she needed more from Zane. Being face to face with him eased something deep inside of her. The way he held her face, making sure she didn’t turn away as he slowly pumped his cock into her, had V on the edge again.

“Mine, V,” he whispered, glancing down at her mouth. “Only mine.”

V felt the tip of Beau’s finger against her ass, pushing in slowly, gently at first, then faster as Zane continued to hold her against him, staring back at her with such intensity, she couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking.

“You belong to me; I don’t ever want you to forget that.”

It sounded like a warning and instinct had her nodding her head in agreement moments before Zane’s mouth was pressed against hers, his tongue delving deep and taking her mind off everything except for the feel of his hard body beneath her. Beau continued to drive her utterly crazy with his fingers, and then he pulled out, replacing his fingers with the head of his cock.

With the way Zane was kissing her, there was no chance for her to think about what was happening. Only to feel. Zane broke the kiss, his eyes closing as the pressure intensified in her ass until she knew Beau was balls deep inside of her. She felt incredibly full. She couldn't help but wonder what it felt like to the two of them.

“Fuck me, Zane,” she whispered, begging him to give her what she needed.

“My pleasure.” He began pumping his hips, finding a perfect rhythm with Beau until she was sweating, another mind blowing orgasm building until she had to closer her eyes. Bright flashes of light sparked and fizzed behind her closed eyelids as the intensity of their movements increased until they were slamming into her over and over, one of them pulling out while the other drove inside of her until V's entire body shattered, overwhelmed by mind numbing bliss.

“Fuck!” Beau groaned, slamming into her one last time before remaining still, only for Zane to pump his hips twice more, pulling her head down so his mouth was against her ear.

“Mine.”

With the word reverberating like the echo in a deep canyon, V gave herself over to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

♂ ♀

The following morning, after V headed out with Zoey to handle one of their rare Sunday morning client's houses, Zane went home, showered, and then headed straight for the gym. He had a PT appointment on Monday afternoon, and he wanted to try to get in a couple of workouts before then. He needed to get his strength and his weight back, especially considering what had happened the night before.

And he wasn't talking about the incredible sex with V.

No, unfortunately, someone else had made sure to ruin the night for him. After she had fallen asleep, Zane had walked Beau out, waited until he drove off, and then locked the door behind him. He checked the other windows and doors before climbing into bed and snuggling close to V. Sometime around two o'clock in the morning he'd awoken, startled by a noise. Whatever it was hadn't woken V, so he climbed out of bed, slid on his jeans and went to check the house. Sure as shit, some motherfucker had thrown a brick through her living room window.

It took him all of thirty minutes to get the mess cleaned up, all the while hoping like hell V didn't wake up to find what had happened. As soon as dawn broke, he called Kaleb, asking that he send someone over to replace the window that morning while V was at work. As far as Zane knew, it'd already been done.

He was hoping not to have to tell her what happened, at least not yet. Since he wasn't about to let her stay at her house alone again, he figured he

might have to tell her because convincing her to stay with him wasn't going to be as easy as he hoped. Nothing with V ever proved to be easy.

Managing an hour on the treadmill at a much slower pace than he was used to prior to the assault, Zane knocked out a mild upper body workout before returning to his house for another shower. With that complete, he texted Sawyer, Kaleb and Travis and asked them to meet him at the construction office.

When he walked in, he found his three oldest brothers already there, as was Gage Matthews. Travis and Sawyer were engrossed in something on their respective computers while Gage and Kaleb were talking.

“What the fuck is going on?” Travis spouted the question as soon as Zane stepped foot through the door.

“Well, good morning to you too,” Zane snapped, turning to the refrigerator and grabbing a bottle of water before taking a seat in the small office.

He wasn't quite sure what he wanted to talk to them about, but he knew after what happened the night before that they were all going to have to be on the lookout for Jake Sanders, or one of his punk ass buddies. It was evident from recent events that the man was no longer hiding. There was no doubt in his mind who had thrown that fucking brick and if he caught him, there was going to be hell to pay.

“The window was fixed, and I don't think V knows anything. I didn't say a word to Zoey either, just in case,” Kaleb informed him when he closed the lid on his laptop, turning his attention toward Zane.

Zane listened to his brother, watching Gage in the process. The man seemed worked up about something. Not nearly as laid back and easy going

as he usually was.

“Know who it was?” Sawyer asked.

“I’ve got a good idea,” Zane said, glancing back and forth between his three brothers and Gage.

“What the fuck?” Travis was beginning to sound like a broken record. Zane could sense his anger, and he couldn’t necessarily blame him. If Jake Sanders wanted to play on an even keel, they’d have a chance, but since he liked to tip the scales in his favor, and go after an unsuspecting woman, Zane wasn’t even sure where to begin.

“No one has seen him since the other night, right?” Gage asked Travis directly.

“No,” Travis replied a little too quickly, glancing suspiciously over at Kaleb and not looking directly at Gage. “I’ve got eyes and ears everywhere, and no one has heard from him.” Travis sighed heavily, leaning back in his chair.

“I read the messages he’s been sending V. She’s been ignoring him for the most part, but they’re pretty nasty,” Zane told them.

“What’s the sheriff doing about this?” Gage asked, and everyone looked over at Sawyer.

“What the hell? Why the fuck would I know?”

“We know you’ve been talking to Kennedy Endsley, bro. It’s not a secret anymore.” This time Kaleb chimed in, earning himself a glare from Sawyer.

“I haven’t heard a damn thing. I’ve got a couple of people looking out for him too, but no one’s heard anything.”

Zane didn't even know whether it mattered if Jake was back in town. He dreamed of his own vengeance against the mother fucker who damn near killed him with a tire iron, but at this point, he was more worried about protecting V than he was exacting his own revenge. And that surprised the shit out of him.

Zane was known for his short temper and his ability to instigate a fight, but he'd never done so without good reason. He didn't tolerate bullying, and he'd found himself in a number of situations trying to defend someone against them. The same thing happened with Jake, only Jake took the pussy way out, attacking Zane when he least expected it. He hadn't had a chance against four of them, regardless if they were carrying tire irons.

"I want his ass in jail," Travis barked, running his hand through his dark hair, this time Zane noticed that his oldest brother looked right at Gage.

He wasn't sure the dynamic between the two men, especially not now since he'd been out of the loop for so long, but there was a palpable tension between them. Gage looked... Zane wanted to say guilty, but that didn't seem like the appropriate word.

Tense? Yes.

Concerned? Most definitely.

Hiding something? Possibly.

Zane wanted to know what.

"You and I both know he's going to get off easy. His daddy will make sure of it," Zane retorted, looking back and forth between Gage and Travis, trying to decipher the hidden conversation the two men seemed to be having.

“I bet his daddy doesn’t know he’s harassing women,” Kaleb added, looking just as perplexed as the rest of them.

“What the hell does his father have to do with this?” Sawyer questioned, seemingly oblivious to the tension.

“Pastor Sanders? That ring a bell?” Kaleb tossed the statement out, looking back down at his computer.

“Oh, shit.” Sawyer said the words everyone was thinking.

Zane hadn’t been out of the hospital for a week, and he was already tired of this game Jake was playing. No matter what, he was going to be prepared for the next time; he just wished like hell he knew when that was going to be.

“I expect everyone in this room to keep their eyes open. If you see or hear anything, I want to know about it. Immediately.” This came from Gage and Zane stared blankly at Kaleb’s friend. What the hell did he have to do with this?

“Good idea,” Travis barked, glaring at Gage. “Care to tell everyone why you’re suddenly so fucking interested?”

Gage’s eyes narrowed on Travis, and Zane heard the growl that he obviously tried to suppress. “No, I’d prefer not.”

“Not an option anymore.” Travis seemed to be getting angrier by the second and Zane felt as though he was watching two fighters gearing up for a quick round.

“What the hell is going on?” Kaleb closed the lid on his computer and stared back at the two men who were currently in the middle of some sort of pissing contest.

“Care to enlighten them? Or would you prefer I do the honors?
Chance?”

The last word was drawn out, and Zane didn't take his eyes off of Gage. He had no idea what the hell was going on between the two men, but as soon as that word came out, Gage shot to his feet.

“You don't want to do this, Travis.” Gage's words were said through gritted teeth, his lips pulled back in a snarl. Zane wasn't sure he'd ever seen the man this riled up.

“Don't you think the boys deserve to know that you're not who you say you are?”

Kaleb stood to his feet as soon as Gage moved in closer to Travis. Putting one hand on his friend, Zane watched as Gage slowly took a step back, a blank expression hastily sliding down to conceal the anger.

“What are you talking about, Travis?” Kaleb asked the million dollar question.

Zane glanced over at Sawyer, realizing his other brother was leaning forward, intensely focused on the three men across the room. He looked just as clueless as Zane felt.

“He's a cop,” Travis ground out, saying the word like it was an expletive.

“What the hell is he talking about?” Kaleb looked at Gage, taking a step back as if Gage might grow horns and a tail and pull a pitchfork out of his ass at any moment.

Zane watched as Gage thrust his hands through his hair before dropping back into the chair he'd been sitting in. His head hung low, his shoulders hunched as though he'd been defeated.

“A cop?” Sawyer interjected.

“Fuck,” Gage growled, glaring back up at Travis. “This shit does not leave this room. You fucking understand me?”

Zane wasn't sure he'd ever seen Gage this pissed off.

“I knew it!” Sawyer laughed. “A fucking truck driver, my ass!”

Sawyer's outburst made Zane laugh, but no one else seemed to find it amusing.

“I'm UC.”

“UC?” Zane asked the question, hoping it wasn't as stupid as he thought it was.

“Under cover. Thanks to dumbass over here, he just blew my fucking cover.”

Travis growled and lunged at Gage. In an instant, Zane had his oldest brother restrained. He was quite impressed with himself actually. He hadn't even known he had moved until his arms latched around his brother's torso.

“Sit down,” Kaleb barked, clearly taking control of the situation.

“Both of you.”

When Zane felt the tension release from Travis' shoulders, he let go, moving back to his chair. He knew Kaleb wasn't talking to him, but shit, if this was going to get good, he was more than happy to sit his ass down.

“You're not a truck driver?” Kaleb stared at Gage, propping himself on the edge of his desk.

“No. I've never been a truck driver.”

“What the fuck, man? I thought we were like family?” Kaleb sounded both angry and hurt, which Zane sort of understood. He couldn't help but

wonder what it would be like to find out Beau was living a secret life that no one knew about. He smiled, wondering if maybe he was.

Gage didn't respond; instead, he glared over at Travis like he wanted to rip his head off and shit down his neck. Zane laughed at the visual but wiped the smile off his face as soon as everyone turned their attention to him.

"What? I'm not the cop." There, throw the focus back to Gage.

"There's nothing to explain. I'm a cop. Plain and simple. I don't want this shit to leave this room. You hear me?"

Zane wasn't sure who Gage was talking to, but he nodded his understanding. No point in pissing him off more.

As though the conversation had lost his interest, which didn't make any damn sense because he'd brought it up, Travis stood from his chair and paced back and forth across the room for a moment, and Zane knew the man had something to say, but he couldn't imagine what it was now. *Shit*. Did he have an arsenal of personal secrets that he was willing to expose? Zane sure hoped not.

"We need to get down to business."

"Business?" Sawyer questioned, his feet now propped up on the desk, his hands folded behind his head as he leaned back in his chair. "This was just getting good. It's like an episode of Cops or something. Only this time, the rednecks cornered the cop and not the other way around."

"Shut it!" Gage demanded.

Sawyer laughed, but he didn't say another word.

"The McCoy's requested that we come up to Dallas," Travis said, indubitably looking to rein in the conversation yet again.

“For what?”

“I think it’s a good idea for you and Sawyer to check out Club Destiny. It’s no secret that CD is one of the most popular fetish clubs in the state. We can learn from them. Get some ideas.”

“I thought Luke closed the doors?” Kaleb questioned, his attention riveted on the brother standing in the middle of the room.

“He did,” Travis answered as if that made perfect sense.

Zane wasn’t following.

If the doors were closed, what the hell were they going to see?

“I talked to him this morning, and he’s decided, thanks to Logan’s and Cole’s persuasion, to open the club doors on Monday nights until he decides what to do with the rest of it.”

“Mondays?” Apparently Sawyer was on the same page he was because Zane was wondering the same thing. “Why Mondays?”

“I’m the last person who could possibly explain Luke McCoy’s rationale. I don’t ask questions.”

“Don’t you have to be a member to get in?” Sawyer asked Travis skeptically.

“Normally, yes. He said he’s willing to make an exception for us.”

Zane was confused. Last he heard Club Destiny was a nightclub that catered to the general public. They also had some sort of swinger’s club that, according to the articles he read when McKenna Thorne had been doing her exclusive, wasn’t much to see.

Evidently Travis recognized his unspoken question, so he settled on the edge of his desk and looked back and forth between all four of them. “I

think it's worth checking out. I haven't been to the club yet," Travis began, pausing as if the rest of them were going to bombard him with questions.

If Zane even knew what to ask, he might do just that, but he felt like he was in the dark on this one. He glanced over at Kaleb, then Sawyer to see if either of them could follow the elusive conversation. They looked just as stumped as he felt.

"I thought you were a member." Thankfully Sawyer spoke up after the silence descended upon them. Zane thought he had trouble trying to figure out Jake and his intentions, but shit, having a conversation with Travis was beginning to make Jake look sane.

"I am," Travis said, thrusting his hand through his hair once again and returning to his chair. "I don't know how much I can say."

Now it was Kaleb's turn to ask the "*what the fuck*" question.

Once he did, Travis breathed out an exasperated sigh. "Club Destiny was founded by Luke and Logan McCoy several years ago. In order to keep the attention off of their members only club, they created a nightclub for the general public. They also added a members only level that has caused a lot of curiosity, and it has, up to this point, satisfied most inquiring minds, as well as act as an in between for new members. However, both of those are just a cover up for the real club – The Club at Club Destiny."

Wow, and wasn't that creative, Zane thought to himself. He waited for Travis to continue, and he wasn't disappointed.

"Luke and Logan run an elaborate, high class fetish club that's only accessible by members who have passed their initial probation period. I haven't seen it yet, but that's because Luke closed everything down right before I had a chance to check it out.

“According to Luke, he’s going to open the club on Monday nights, at least for the time being. If we don’t go up there tomorrow night, we’ll have to wait another week.”

“And Luke said we could go? What’s the catch?” Sawyer questioned, leaning his forearms on his desk and staring back at Travis.

“No catch. At least not that I can tell. Since they’ve invested in AI, they’re open to letting us have a look around to get an idea of what they came up with. Before we start mapping out our clubs, I think it’s a good idea to go see it.”

“What about Zoey?” Considering Kaleb’s future wife was now a partner in Walker, Inc., she had as much right to visit the club as they did.

“Luke said to let him know if we’re bringing her. They haven’t let their wives go yet, and I think they’re open to showing them around, but they want to control who attends when they do.”

“Why?” Zane didn’t feel as though he was getting any closer to the light at the end of the tunnel. Travis seemed to be talking in circles.

“It’s a fetish club. One of the main aspects of the club is the sharing that goes on. Members attend so that they can engage in whatever floats their boat. Including orgies. I don’t think the McCoy’s are interested in taking the risk with their wives. At least not to the extreme that this club caters to.”

“I don’t blame them there,” Kaleb added, causing the four of them to look his way. “What about you?”

Everyone’s attention turned to Gage when Kaleb addressed him specifically.

“What about me?”

“Are you a member of the club?”

“Only on a technicality.”

“Will you be going with us?”

“No.”

“He can’t,” Travis added, not looking at Gage. “He’s working on a case, and we can’t be associated with him. It’d be too obvious if he were to go.”

“I’m not leaving V here by herself. If I go, she goes,” Zane stated much more firmly than he had expected.

Travis stared back at him as if he’d lost his mind, but he didn’t disagree right off. “Let me talk to Luke. If y’all are interested in going, we’ll need to tie things up here and change a couple of appointments scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. Dallas is a three hour drive.”

Zane watched as Kaleb and Sawyer both nodded, ostensibly in agreement with the plan. He damn sure wasn’t going to be left out of this one. Hell, not only was he interested from an AI perspective, but shit, he really wanted to know just what the fuck this secret club was all about.

“I’m in,” Kaleb stated, followed by Sawyer, and then finally Zane.

“I’ll need to borrow one of your cars,” Zane told Sawyer when he stood to head out, and his older brother just nodded his head.

Looks like they were taking a trip to Dallas.

As Zane was walking out the door with Sawyer and Kaleb a couple of minutes later, he heard Travis call out to Gage.

“You. I want you to hang out for a minute.”

Zane would’ve loved to be a fly on the wall for that conversation.

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Chapter Eighteen

♂ ♂

Gage stared back at Travis, praying like hell he could get his temper under control before he found himself choking the shit out of the man.

“How the hell do you plan to explain this to Kaleb and Zoey?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. You sort of managed to destroy my life in a matter of minutes,” Gage retorted, unable to shake the rage that was pulsing inside of him.

He would admit, waiting for Travis to spill the beans had set him on edge for some time now. Ever since the night at Tag and McKenna’s party, when he’d called him out in front of everyone, Gage had been waiting to talk to Travis. The other night at Moonshiners had been his first opportunity, but he’d managed to hold in the fury and enjoy the night with his buddies.

Travis took a step closer, and Gage instinctively spread his legs apart, prepared to defend himself.

“They’re going to have questions.”

Well, no shit Sherlock.

“They wouldn’t have if you would’ve kept your fucking mouth closed.”

Gage found himself up against the wall, the gun in his waistband digging into his back while Travis pressed up against his chest. He didn’t react; instead, he held onto that restraint, knowing he’d need it for as long

as possible. He had to remind himself that this was Travis Walker. The man wasn't one Gage wanted to scrap with. Not normally.

Staring into the swirling blue-gray depths of his eyes, Gage waited to hear what he'd have to say. There had to be more, he knew it. As much as it pissed him off, he knew Travis didn't stir up shit unless he had a good reason.

When Travis' eyes darted down to his mouth, something fervent and fierce curled in his belly. *What the hell?* With Travis' hands wrapped in his t-shirt, Gage realized Travis wasn't pushing him away like he expected. It was almost like he was pulling him closer.

Gage returned the favor, looking down at Travis' mouth, and the next thing he knew, his damn dick was hard. Ok, this could be a problem. For both of them. In half a second, Travis was going to feel the evidence of Gage's arousal, and he knew at that point, all hell was going to break loose.

"Why'd you do it?" Gage was stalling, hoping he could distract Travis and force his body back under control. He wasn't supposed to be reacting like this. His body was not supposed to be intrigued by Travis or the brunt force of his actions. No one in this town knew that Gage was... Fuck. They just didn't know. That's all.

"They needed to know. I'm not the one who is going to keep your secrets."

Gage was back to staring Travis in the eye, but he didn't miss the quick swipe of Travis' tongue across his lips and the urge to return the favor was overwhelming. This was not the time or place, he tried to remind himself. And definitely not the man.

“What do you want me to tell them?” Gage finally asked, realizing his breaths were not quite as calm as he wanted. The feel of Travis’ body up against his own, the way his elbows rested against his sternum and the way he kept his fists wrapped in his shirt brought them much closer than Gage was comfortable with.

It was obvious, at least to him, that there was some sort of mutual attraction going on here. The absolute last fucking thing Gage had expected and he damn sure didn’t know what he was supposed to do about it.

Just when he expected Travis to share his infinite wisdom, Gage found himself plastered between the wall and Travis’ hard, unyielding body. The man’s lips crushed down on his, and his shirt was released, but Travis’ hands moved around and gripped the back of Gage’s head. Hard. Pure carnal instinct took over, and Gage lost his grip on the last thread of his resistance, his hands moving to cradle the back of Travis’ head, but he used the same blunt force that was being used on him.

The kiss was a maelstrom of combustible energy; two dominant males battling for control, neither of them willing to give an inch. Gage felt Travis’ answering erection pressing firmly against him as the man moved closer, their tongues dueling, lips and teeth colliding as they consumed one another. The room echoed with the provocative grunts and groans, some belonging to him, some belonging to Travis, both of them owning up to their own reactions.

The fiercest, most mind blowing kiss Gage had ever known was slowly penetrating him straight through, and he wanted more. Wanted all of Travis. With more strength than he intended to use, he managed to flip their positions, pressing Travis up against the wall but never breaking the kiss. He devoured the other man’s mouth, his fingers latching into his hair,

holding him firmly. It was a give and take battle, both of them taking but unable to resist the urge to give as much as they stole.

Un-fucking-believable was what this was.

In a desperate attempt to breathe, Gage pulled back, but didn't let go of the taller man. He continued to press his hips against him, making sure Travis was thoroughly aware of what he'd done to him. If he wanted to play like this, Gage was all for it. He just didn't think Travis knew what he was getting himself into.

♂ ♂

The hold Gage had on him sent shards of pain shooting straight through his body and landing in his dick. He was harder than stone and more aroused than he'd ever been in his life. Travis knew that Gage would be like this. He just hadn't known whether he'd actually be interested.

He was interested all right. The thick wedge of his erection was proof. The way he plundered his mouth with urgent need was the exact reaction Travis hoped for, but honestly didn't expect. Staring into Gage's deep, dark brown eyes, Travis' hunger was slowly ratcheting higher. He didn't know what he wanted, and that was a first for him. Part of him wanted to drop to his knees, take this alpha males cock in his mouth and suck him dry. The other part of him wanted to turn him around and bend him over the desk, fucking him until neither one of them could walk out of the office.

His attraction to Gage wasn't new. It wasn't something he thought about either. Now that he'd had the other man's tongue in his mouth, he wasn't sure he'd ever stop thinking about it.

Letting his gaze drop back to Gage's swollen lips, Travis prayed that this wasn't over. Whatever had started between them would never be over until they'd had one another in a way that Travis had only dreamed about. This had been a risk he was willing to take, knowing that there weren't many men who were capable of giving him what he needed, but he'd felt Gage was the man who wouldn't go easy on him.

Travis didn't deny his bisexual nature. Didn't deny what he wanted, but it also wasn't something he shared with those closest to him. He knew his brothers had no idea. Travis liked women, but he liked men too.

"You don't know what you're asking for." Gage's words penetrated the fog that had descended on his brain. Travis didn't move, didn't try to push Gage away. Their hands were still twined in each other's hair, their noses just a breath apart, their eyes locked as though trying to see something more than what was visible on the outside.

"I know what I want," Travis said honestly. He'd known for a while. Quite a while, actually.

"And that is?" Gage questioned.

The way their bodies continued to rub against one another, Travis couldn't help but wonder just how far this was going to go. He could imagine himself buried balls deep in Gage's ass, or vice versa. He didn't have a problem with either. Top, bottom, it didn't matter to him. The only thing he knew, he wanted Gage with a fierce, aching need that he hadn't known in quite some time.

Pulling Gage's head closer, Travis nipped his bottom lip, his stomach churning with lust, his balls aching with the need for release, his dick throbbing with the aggressive need to plunge inside of Gage.

The growl that tore from Gage's chest only heightened his need for him.

"I want to bury my cock in your ass. Fuck you nine ways to Sunday and then start all over again," Travis said, punctuating his statement with more nips, followed by a swipe of his tongue. Gage's hard exhale made him continue. "I want to bend you over my desk and pound inside of you until you fucking come."

"What if I said I don't play that way?"

"You will," Travis stated firmly. He had no doubt in his mind that if this ever progressed to the next level, he'd never get enough of Gage until he'd had the man in every way.

Every. Possible. Way.

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Chapter Nineteen

♀ ♂

“Did something happen at your house last night?” Zoey asked as they headed down Main Street, in the direction of V’s house. They’d finally finished with their only Sunday morning appointment, and she was looking forward to a hot bath and maybe a stiff drink.

“Not that I know of, why?” V had no idea what Zoey was referring to, but she prayed it wasn’t in reference to Beau. How would she know?

“I don’t know. Kaleb answered the phone in the middle of the night, or at least I thought it was, and I’m pretty sure he was talking to Zane. When I asked him what was wrong, he wouldn’t tell me.”

V knew that wasn’t like Kaleb. He told Zoey everything, and in turn, she usually shared what she could with V. Not that there was much going on that V needed to know about, but a phone call in the middle of the night from Zane did sound a little strange. Especially since he stayed the night at her house.

Now that she thought about it, V remembered rolling over at one point and not finding the warmth of Zane wrapped around her, but she had been so tired, finally sleeping deeply for the first time in months, she didn’t think anything of it. When she woke up he had been there, so she figured it had just been a dream. Apparently not.

As they were pulling into V’s neighborhood, Zoey’s cell phone rang and after glancing at the caller id, she answered.

“Hey, baby,” she greeted the caller and V knew it had to be Kaleb.

V smiled at the saccharine sweet way her friend greeted him. Had she not been having her own bout of contradictory feelings for Zane, she would've been disgusted. Sadly, she just thought it was adorable.

“Dallas?”

V turned her head toward her friend. She couldn't hear what Kaleb was saying on the other end of the line, so she had to eavesdrop and interpret Zoey's end of the conversation. Since her friend began speaking in one word answers, she had a difficult time keeping up.

Her cell phone chirped, signaling her with an incoming text and she glanced down at it. She'd been holding it in her hand, almost like a lifeline.

Zane: We're going to Dallas.

As soon as she read the text, she responded, no longer paying attention to Zoey and her phone call. Evidently Kaleb had been calling her to let her know the same thing.

V: Who's we?

V wasn't sure why she asked that question. It certainly wasn't any of her business, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

Zane: Travis, Kaleb, Sawyer and me

V: Ok

Zane: And you

V: What?

V had no idea what Zane was talking about. She wasn't going to Dallas. Before Zane responded, Zoey hung up the phone and glanced over at her as she pulled into the driveway of V's house.

“We're going to Dallas.” Zoey smiled from ear to ear.

“Who’s we?” she asked Zoey the same question she asked Zane.

“We. You, me, the boys. We’re going to Dallas, so you better get your ass out of the truck and go get packed.”

V glanced up at her house, the panic starting to kick in. She tried to hide the way her hands began to shake, gripping her cell phone tighter. She didn’t want to go in. She didn’t want to get out of the truck. It was getting harder and harder for her to do so and she didn’t know why. It should’ve been getting easier, right? So why wasn’t it?

Gripping the door handle, V went to open the door, but jumped when she saw a man standing just outside the door. She screamed, clutching her heart. Zane pulled her door open, looking down at her with a decidedly unhappy look on his face before taking her hand and helping her out.

“See ya, Zane!” Zoey smiled, seemingly oblivious to V’s sudden inability to breathe.

She didn’t hear what Zane said to Zoey because the roaring in her ears was becoming so loud she couldn’t even hear herself think.

The next thing she knew, Zane was pulling her up against him, holding her head against his chest and placing his lips on the top of her head.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, not moving and giving V the opportunity to inhale the familiar scent of him. Zane didn’t wear cologne, or at least she didn’t think he did. Not often anyway. And the clean, fresh scent of him was even more exhilarating than the most expensive cologne she had ever smelled. For a minute, she let herself be soothed by his arms, his smell, and the pounding of his heart in his chest.

“I’m going to take you inside now. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

V knew that. She did. In fact, she knew that if anyone should be freaking out, it should be Zane. He was the one who endured the trauma right there in her front yard. Not her. So why wasn’t he breaking down? Shaking like a leaf?

She knew why. Zane Walker was strong. Stronger than she was and V wasn’t referring to his physical capabilities. God, she just wanted to be stronger.

Zane didn’t release her, just pulled her closer to his side so they could move up the driveway, then up the steps to her front door. Somewhere along the way, she must’ve given him the keys because they made their way inside quickly, Zane closing and locking the door behind them.

“Shower,” he said as though that were the most logical choice of things to do. Did she smell that bad? It was true that she and Zoey had been working all morning, but she didn’t want to think he could smell her.

Looking up at him, she noticed that sexy smirk and then the lifting and lowering of his eyebrows as though he were telling her a secret with his eyes. For the life of her, V had no idea what he was trying to say.

He didn’t bother to explain either. Taking her hand, Zane pulled her down the short hallway to her bedroom, then he kept on going until they were in her small master bathroom. V felt a little self-conscious about her miniscule bathroom with the single sink and bath/shower combination. It wasn’t nearly as opulent as Zane’s immaculately designed home. There weren’t fancy sinks, or decorative faucets. In fact, they were all the standard, ugly brass, just like the doorknobs.

She had to remind herself that this was her house. She paid for it all on her own, and that's what mattered most. It might not be extravagant, and it might not have a magnificent view of a bubbling creek and acres of farmland, but it was still hers.

V heard the shower come on, and she turned to face Zane, noticing that he had ditched his shirt somewhere along the way. The sight of all that glorious skin, tanned and rippled with muscle, made her mouth water. She never got tired of looking at him. He was striking.

"Take your clothes off," he instructed, his voice once again firm and demanding, just as she'd come to expect from him, especially when he had that heated look in his smoky blue eyes.

V reached for the buttons on her sleeveless shirt, but her fingers were trembling so bad, she couldn't make them work.

"I don't want you thinking about anything except for what it's going to feel like when I bury myself deep inside of you." Zane's voice was firm, but he didn't sound angry. Not the way he had sounded the night before when he had pulled her on top of him, forcing her to look at him while he lodged himself deep inside of her.

She tried to focus on his words, but the panic that had become second nature was still swirling through her blood, making her skin tingle and the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She hated this feeling, but she had no idea what to do about it.

"Now, Vanessa. I want you naked, right now. If you don't do it, I will, and you won't like the shape your clothes will be in when I rip them clean off your body."

V's skin heated from his words; her mind visualizing him tearing her clothes from her body before slamming inside of her and calming her chaotic mind. She realized that's what he was trying to do. He was diverting her thoughts to him, and she appreciated him for it.

More so than he would ever know.

"Is that what you want?" Zane took a step closer.

V glanced down realizing that the outfit she had on was one of her favorites. No, she didn't want him to ruin it, so she managed to free the buttons before sliding her blouse off, letting it flutter to the floor, then doing the same with her skirt. She recognized her bra and panty set and knew it wasn't one of her favorites, so maybe she should take him up on the offer, just to see what he would do.

"Is that a dare?" Zane's question had V wondering whether she actually spoke the words out loud. "You better tell me now," Zane continued, sliding his warm fingers into the thin strip of fabric over each hip.

The next thing V knew, she was standing there, her panties in Zane's hands, torn directly from her body, leaving her bare from the waist down.

Chapter Twenty

♂ ♀

“You are so fucking sexy,” Zane growled the words through clenched teeth. He wasn’t trying to make a habit out of tearing her underwear from her body, but fuck, he was beginning to enjoy it.

For the first time since Zane pulled her out of Zoey’s truck, the glassy, terror ridden look on her face was replaced with something much more acceptable. Heat. Lust. Desire. All of it was right there for Zane to see, and he was more than willing to give V something else to think about.

Zane reached around her, unclasping the hook on the back of her bra before baring her breasts to his hungry gaze. She was stark naked, just the way he liked her. Without haste, he deftly removed the rest of his clothes before pulling V into the small shower with him. The water was scorching, just like the look in V’s vivid, whiskey colored eyes.

“Put your leg on the edge of the tub,” Zane directed her. “Now lean back against the wall.”

Dropping to his knees, Zane wasted no time burying his tongue in her pussy, inhaling her arousal and relishing the feel of her hands as they gripped his hair. Hard.

“Zane,” she moaned his name over and over, her fingers tightening in his hair as she pulled him in closer, giving him all the access he needed to spear her with his tongue, using his thumb to tease her clit until she was shaking.

“Fuck me. Oh, God, I need you to fuck me.”

Zane fully intended to fuck her, but he needed her ready for him. He didn't want to hurt her, and he knew that just being in the shower required him to ready her that much more. He continued his assault on her clit, switching, using his tongue to drive her crazy while driving his thumb deep inside of her until she was no longer moaning, she was screaming his name, her hands sending blinding shards of pain straight through his scalp as she held on.

Fuck, he loved when she did that.

Standing to his full height, giving her just a second to return to him, Zane aligned his body with hers, lifted her leg over his hip and slammed deep inside of her. V's eyes flew open, and she bit her lip, the walls of her sex gripping him painfully tight as he pulled back and then slammed forward once more. He wasn't aiming for gentle, he needed to fuck her, to hear her scream again as he sent her over one more time.

When her body clamped down on his cock, her fingernails digging into his biceps, he knew she was close. "Look at me, V. Open your eyes."

When she did, he thrust his hips harder, faster, pounding inside of her as though he was starving for her. Which he was. He found himself always wanting more of her, and he knew he would never get enough. Never.

"I want to hear you scream. I want your neighbor's to know who is fucking you, V. Scream for me, baby."

Slamming into her again, Zane felt his own orgasm brewing, and he knew this one was going to be even more severe than the last. They always were.

"V! I'm gonna come, baby!" Zane found her clit with this thumb, pressed hard and felt her pussy spasm around him at the same time he lost

control, his release pulsing through him, filling her as she finally screamed his name.

Half an hour later, they were both climbing out of the shower, clean and thoroughly sated. Hopefully, he'd managed to keep her mind off of her panic. Not that he wanted her to have those attacks at all, but having sex with her in order to distract certainly was not a hardship. Not by a long shot.

"When you said I was going to Dallas, what exactly did you mean by that?" V asked him as she pulled on a flirty little sundress that had Zane pausing as he buttoned his jeans. Maybe he was moving too fast here. He might be taking them off again if she insisted on wearing that little white number because... FUCK! She looked good.

It took a second to remember what she had asked, but when he did, he turned away to find his shirt before answering.

"Exactly what I said. We're all going up to Dallas early tomorrow morning. It's a quick overnight trip, but Luke McCoy has agreed to let us explore the club." Zane wasn't going to go into more detail than that. Not that he had much more.

"I don't know," she said, running a comb through her hair.

Zane met her eyes in the bathroom mirror. "I need you to go with me, V."

He didn't want to go into the reasons why he wasn't willing to leave her here alone either. If he could avoid telling her what happened last night, he intended to. At least for now.

"Why? I'm not a decision maker in this process," V said matter-of-factly. "Zoey should be the one going."

“She is. So are Kaleb, Sawyer and Travis.”

“She is?” V asked, noticeably not caring about the latter part of his explanation.

“Do you think Kaleb would leave her behind?”

“No.” V resumed combing her hair, not meeting his gaze. “I just don’t think I should go along.”

Zane moved closer, pressing against her back and wrapping his arms around her waist. He rested his chin on her shoulder and smiled at her in the mirror. “I’m asking because I want you with me, V.” It was more than the truth.

More than not wanting to leave her alone while he was gone, Zane really wanted her with him. Hell, he wanted her with him at all times, and it had nothing to do with protecting her. He found he didn’t want to be away from her. Three months had been a hell of a long time and as far as he was concerned, he was still making up for lost time.

Not only that, Zane was going to get a firsthand glimpse of one of Texas’ most renowned fetish clubs, which he considered an essential part of preparing for what he wanted his club to be. The fact that Travis had agreed to let him manage one of the clubs still had Zane riding high. Hell, he hadn’t been back to work since he left the hospital and he wasn’t sure he was going to be able to now. Not with what was looming on the horizon for him. Working on cars and trucks no longer held the same appeal as it used to.

Speaking of... Zane made a mental note to stop by and talk to Ethan. He needed to see what he could do to help his brother out. Hiring another

mechanic, if they hadn't already, was probably the right way to go. He felt like a total ass for not doing it already.

"When are we leaving?" V's question pulled Zane back to the present.

He smiled at her in the mirror, grateful that he hadn't had to beg. He would have, but he wouldn't have been happy about it.

"In an hour," Zane told her, throwing out a time.

"What? You said we were leaving tomorrow morning."

"And we are, but tonight we're going to spend the night at my house."

It was a three hour drive to Dallas, and he wasn't sure when exactly his brothers planned to leave. He also needed to pick up one of Sawyer's spare vehicles.

♀ ♂

V stood in her closet, staring at her clothes. What the hell was she supposed to wear to a fetish club? What the hell was a fetish club? It wasn't like they had one in Coyote Ridge.

Yet.

She contemplated calling Zoey to ask, but she didn't want to sound like a complete idiot. Except when it came to this, she was. Grabbing her cell phone from her dresser, V paced her bedroom, hearing Zane talking to someone in the other room. His cell phone vibrated shortly after she agreed to go, and he disappeared as soon as he answered.

"What am I supposed to wear to a fetish club?" V asked without preamble as soon as Zoey answered.

Her friend's chuckle made her smile.

"I have no idea. I was about to call you and ask the very same thing."

Well, crap. That didn't help. V wandered back into her closet, flipping through her clothes. She had too many damn clothes.

"I guess it's safe to assume you'll be wearing a skirt or a dress, right?" Zoey's voice was muffled, as though she were holding the phone between her cheek and shoulder, probably going through her own clothes if V had to guess.

Of course, she'd be wearing a dress. What the hell else would she wear to a place like that? "What kind of place is this?" V asked, trying to plan out an outfit in her head.

"The only thing I could get out of Kaleb was that it's upscale and elegant. That's about all he could get from Travis."

Well, crap.

An hour later, V was packed, both her and Zoey agreeing on the outfits they were wearing the following night at to the club. When all was said and done, V had picked out both of their outfits, but that's what she did best, and Zoey looked to her on many occasions for wardrobe help.

Zane hadn't returned to her bedroom, but she no longer heard him on the phone either. Placing her suitcase on the floor, she lifted the handle and then rolled it behind her as she headed down the hall to the living room.

"You get everything you need?" he asked when she walked into the room.

He was standing by the front windows, the curtains pulled open as he stared out at the street. V glanced outside to see what he was looking at, but she didn't see anything out of the norm. Nothing aside from the front yard where the unthinkable happened just a few months ago.

Turning away, V moved into the kitchen, checking the back door and grabbing two bottles of water from the refrigerator. She wasn't thirsty necessarily, but she needed to keep herself busy or she was going to go down that dark path she'd been frequenting way too much lately. When she returned to the living room, Zane was now carrying her suitcase, the keys to her door in his hand.

"We need to stop by Sawyer's and get one of his cars," Zane said as he opened the front door and took a step back.

"For what?"

"As much as I love my Jeep, I don't think it's worthy of a trip like that."

V didn't respond, figuring his comment told her all she needed to know. As much as she tried to focus on his words and what he was telling her, just like so many other times for the last few months, V's stomach began churning, her palms began sweating, her breathing accelerated, and she began to shake.

She hated this part. Absolutely detested it. She had no idea why she couldn't walk in or out of her own house without going through this horrific moment of terror. It seemed to be even worse with Zane there. She almost could smell the fear from that day when she'd rushed outside finding him bloody and hanging on as four men continued to beat on him.

V had thought he was dead.

“I’ve got you, V,” Zane’s voice was close to her ear, his arms wrapped tight around her, his body warm against her chest. “Baby, I’ve got you.”

She hated this part. She hated the fact that she reminded him over and over about what happened, more so when she reacted like this, but for the life of her, she couldn’t control it.

“Come on, V. We’re going to walk out to my Jeep and drive to my house. And for the next couple of nights, you won’t have to think about anything else except for us and what interesting things we might find to do in a sex club.”

That got her attention, and she smiled, like he probably knew she would.

Taking his proffered hand, V linked her fingers with his, grabbed her purse and her cell phone and followed him outside. She tried to catch her breath, tried counting to one hundred as he locked up the house and walked her to the car carrying her suitcase. Once they were inside, he even buckled her seatbelt, before moving around to the driver’s side and starting the Jeep.

Ten minutes later, they were pulling down the long, winding dirt road that led to Zane’s house, and V was feeling much better. At least the episodes were getting shorter. She knew that was more thanks to Zane than for any other reason because if she were left to her own devices, she’d be a puddle of mess in her kitchen floor right about now.

Zane pulled the emergency brake, turned off the engine and then climbed out. V watched him as he moved around to her side before opening her door, kissing her firmly on the mouth with a smile before taking her hand and helping her out of the car.

V glanced around, checking out Sawyer's house. Because it was dark, thanks to the short winter days, she couldn't see much more than the outline of the large house, and the enormous front porch that appeared to wrap around. It appeared to be a log cabin style structure, at least in the dark.

Before they made it to the steps, Sawyer was walking out onto the porch, wearing nothing but a pair of faded jeans and a smile. The man had a thing for being partially naked. V had heard more than enough stories about his frequent stunts out on Main Street. He seemed to have a thing for holding up signs and intrinsically stirring up gossip within the town. She was starting to believe it was Sawyer's way of picking up women. Lots and lots of women.

Sawyer tossed something in Zane's direction, and he caught it effortlessly, then glanced down into his hand.

When Zane let go of her hand, she kept her eye on him as he went back to the Jeep and grabbed the suitcase she brought with her. When she heard the trunk release in the sleek, black car parked beside her, she stared back at Sawyer.

"We're taking the Corvette?" She was so surprised, she wondered how she even got the words out.

"We are," Zane answered simply, grabbing her hand and pulling her around to the side of the car.

Once she was in, he shut the door, and V was overwhelmed by the scent of leather and something else. Some sort of carnauba wax if she had to guess, probably used on the interior. Whatever it was, it smelled rich and luxurious, sort of like the car itself.

V managed to sink into the seat, deciding right then and there that she was going to give herself over to this experience.

Who knew if she'd ever have the chance again.

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Chapter Twenty One

♂ ♀

The following morning, Zane and V got up fairly early and went out for breakfast, before meeting up with his brothers at the construction offices where they laid out the plan for the night. According to him, Travis had to stick around that morning for a meeting about the resort that he hadn't been able to change, but the rest of them were going to head up to Dallas around noon. Zane had been antsy to get out of town, so he told his brothers he'd just meet them there.

Now, three hours behind the wheel of one of the stealthiest cars Zane had ever been in, as well as being surrounded by the exhilaratingly subtle scent of V had left him in a highly frustrated mood. Not necessarily in a bad way, but not in a good way either.

He felt fine, and the smile on his face was genuine, but Zane was more than ready to back V up against the wall of the elevator they were now standing in and fuck her senseless. Except for the fact that there was a little old couple beside them, he might've done just that.

Ok, he wouldn't have, but it was fun to pretend.

The hotel Travis booked for them was a nice one, which sort of explained the high volume of people checking in at two o'clock in the afternoon. Exactly five hours before they were expected to meet for dinner at some fancy steakhouse not too far from the hotel. According to the voicemail Travis left on his phone, this was going to be an interesting get together, and Zane wasn't quite sure he was ready for it.

“Where are we going for dinner?” V asked as they made their way into the lavish room. Had it been up to Zane, he wouldn’t have chosen such an expensive room, but Travis had booked it, paid for it, and left no options for Zane to say otherwise. So, here they were.

“Ruth’s Chris?” Zane repeated what his brother had told him, a name that sounded quite strange to him, but after clarification, Travis had ensured him that was the proper name.

V stopped abruptly, spinning to face him, and he was startled by the look on her face.

“What?”

“Have you ever been there?” V was acting as though he should know about it or something.

“No. I’ve never been to Dallas either,” he reminded her. They’d had that conversation in the car on the drive up. They both had that in common. Neither of them had been much for traveling up to this point in their lives.

“They have one in Austin.”

“Well, the answer is still no.” He tossed the suitcases on the king size bed, before turning back to her. “Come here.”

V didn’t move, but neither did Zane. He merely cocked his head and smiled.

“You’re evil, Zane Walker.” Laughing, she moved into him, pressing up against him and then pushing up onto her toes, so he didn’t have to lean that far down to kiss her. And that he did.

By the time he was finished kissing her, he’d managed to sneak his hands up underneath her dress, cupping her ass and grinding his erection against the apex of her thighs.

“There’s no time for that,” V pushed against his chest, successfully breaking his hold on her before stepping away.

Zane swatted her on the butt, smiling once more. “There’s *always* time for that.”

“Not right now there’s not. I need to get ready for tonight, and if we’re going to Ruth’s Chris, I’ve got work to do.”

What the hell did that even mean?

Zane watched as V opened her suitcase, pulled out some sort of small travel case and then disappeared into the bathroom. Grabbing the remote, he flopped down on the couch to watch television. He needed five minutes to change, which meant he had plenty of time.

V emerged from the bathroom several times over the course of the next few hours, but Zane had no idea what the hell she’d been doing in there each time. The only thing he did know, the woman stole his fucking breath when she finally said she was completely ready. He figured that was his cue to change shirts and grab his hat – five minutes tops.

Mental note: when V’s in charge, schedule at least fifteen minutes to change.

Zane found himself changing once, and then again which had been hard to do considering he only brought one outfit. As it turns out, V knew fashion and what he had opted to wear, although more than suitable for a steakhouse was not up to par with her.

As they walked out of the hotel, hand in hand, Zane had a hard time walking beside V. He’d much rather be walking behind her. Those fucking shoes made her legs look ten miles long, her calves were sculpted to perfection and that damn short skirt swayed just enough, he knew if he

watched long enough, he might be able to get a glimpse of her tight little ass. When he'd mentioned as much, he'd earned a slap on the arm and a quick kiss on the lips.

Opening the door for her, Zane waited while she got in, and yes, being the man he was, he tried to sneak a peek, but somehow V managed to remain perfectly decent the whole time. Much to his dismay.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Zane handed the key to the valet and met V on the sidewalk after the second attendant had opened her door for her. He'd much rather it'd been him, but he hadn't been fast enough.

Mistake on his part. One that he wouldn't let happen again.

Taking her hand, they made their way inside where a young hostess asked their names and then led them to the back of the restaurant where a large group was already gathered. V's hand tightened in his when they approached the small group of men and women, most of whom Zane didn't recognize.

Kaleb and Zoey were already there, which Zane was grateful for considering they were the only people he knew. However, his brother quickly rectified that situation, introducing both him and V to everyone at the table. Thanks to all of the commotion, Zane wasn't sure he'd be able to keep the names straight.

V chose the seat beside Zoey, leaving Zane to sit on the other side of her, right next to a big guy with blonde hair and unusually intense blue eyes. If he remembered correctly, the guy's name was Cole. By deduction, he would like to think he was correct, considering he knew Luke and Logan McCoy were twins, and they were seated on the opposite side of the table as him and V.

Thankfully, Travis, Sawyer, and much to Zane's surprise, Ethan, Brendon and Braydon came walking up to the table, all dressed similarly to Zane. It was damn hard to take the cowboy out of the man, that was for damn sure. At least he'd insisted on wearing his cowboy hat, even after V had tried to talk him out of it.

Once his other brothers took seats around the table, Zane choked back the urge to laugh. It was kind of funny, really. Between the seven Stetson wearing cowboys, himself included, the other men looked a little... uptight. At least as far as their appearance. Not that he had anything against suits and ties and all that, but pigs would probably be flying through the frozen depths of hell before Zane would be caught in one.

Zoey and V were chatting quietly between them, as were the other women at the other end of the table, but Zane couldn't make out what any of them were saying. A minute later, he had a good idea because Zoey and V stood, changing seats with Kaleb and Sawyer so that they could move closer to the other women.

Well, fuck. Who the hell was he supposed to talk to now?

♀ ♂

Nervous might just be the understatement of the century, V thought to herself as she sipped a glass of red wine, listening to the laughter and various conversations going on around her. She chimed in when expected, smiled like her lips were being pulled upward by invisible strings, and tried to have a good time. She would be too if she weren't so damn nervous.

Why? Hell if she knew. Samantha, Sierra, Ashleigh, and a knock out red head named McKenna seemed pleasant enough. They included her in the conversation, but she couldn't find much to say. Unlike Zoey, who acted as though she had known these women all of her life.

Jealous? Ok, maybe a little.

V watched Samantha as she told a story about something that happened last week, noticing how eloquent the woman was when she spoke. Very confident, not to mention, very beautiful. Her long blonde hair hung board straight, flowing over her shoulders and swaying like silk with every head turn. She was Logan's wife, although, for the life of her, V couldn't determine which one of the two men was Logan and which one was Luke. She'd been introduced to each of them separately, knew they were wearing different colored ties, but hadn't taken enough mental notes to distinguish the difference.

There was Sierra, glowing like a damn lamp post, her hands resting on her round belly, her eyes dancing with humor while her jet black hair shone with hints of cobalt highlights beneath the overhead lights. The woman sitting next to Sierra – Ashleigh – wasn't nearly as vocal as the others, but she never stopped smiling either. V was pretty sure hers wasn't forced though.

And then there was the red haired goddess who had somehow captivated V. Never once had she ever been attracted to a woman, but holy hell, she was pretty sure McKenna could be the exception. She was stunning. From what V could tell, she was a journalist, and she was dating, or engaged to, or hell, she might even be married to, the attractive, bald man sitting at the far end of the table.

“How far along are you?” Zoey asked Sierra when Samantha finished her story.

“Thirty four weeks,” Sierra blushed beautifully.

“Not long now,” McKenna added from the seat across from V.

“Not long at all. In fact, if Sam doesn’t get her butt in gear, we might have a baby before we have a baby shower,” Ashleigh added before sipping her wine.

When the salads were brought out, V managed to eat and talk, without feeling too incredibly awkward. The longer she sat there, the more comfortable she became until she was acting just like Zoey. Like she had known these women all of her life. It was true, V didn’t normally make many friends, but there was something about this group of women that she just couldn’t explain.

Well, that was until Sam changed the subject and V damn near choked on her tomato.

“So, Vanessa,” Sam began, “do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

V glanced around at the other women, noticing the way Sierra tried to stifle a smile and the quick eye roll that Ashleigh thought she was hiding.

“Ok,” she answered, unsure whether she honestly wanted to be asked any questions. Something told her this one might sting a little.

“Have you ever had a threesome?”

Cue choking on tomato.

Zoey slapped V on the back while all of the women laughed. Oh, they weren’t laughing at her, she could tell. Something told her that Samantha

was a wild one and that question probably wasn't the worst of it. V knew she was as red as the tomato lodged in her esophagus, and she prayed they all thought it was because she had trouble breathing.

"Oh, just ignore her," Ashleigh laughed, signaling the waiter to bring them more wine.

"I guess I should've warned you," Zoey grinned, looking remarkably pleased with herself.

That would've been nice, V thought to herself. From that moment on, even though V hadn't shared her most intimate secret, the six of them became even closer and the conversation took a very quick and even spicier turn. At one point, V looked up to see the men staring over at them, probably hanging onto every word Sam spoke. The woman wasn't shy about anything, much less her need to talk about sex.

By the time dessert was served, V was feeling no pain. After three glasses of wine, a steak she had been able to cut with her fork and more laughter than she was sure she had ever heard, she was definitely enjoying herself.

When the topic turned to the club they would all be visiting in the next hour, V's ears tuned in.

"I haven't been to the club," Sam explained. "I'm still shocked that Logan kept it a secret from me for this long. Here I was thinking that the private rooms and the play room were what all the hype was about."

"I knew the second Tag walked me through those doors that they were hiding something," McKenna laughed. "I won't deny that going to the play room has its benefits, but holy shit, it is child's play compared to The Club."

“What’s it like?” Sierra seemed just as in the dark as Sam when it came to this uber secret sex club their husbands owned.

“That, my friends, is not for me to tell,” McKenna went on to explain the confidentiality agreement, although she inserted a lot of “blah, blah, blah’s” when she felt the details were boring. V appreciated her for it. As it was, she didn’t understand what they were talking about.

“So, how did Club Destiny come about?” V heard herself asking, seriously relaxed from the wine. She didn’t normally engage in conversations, preferring rather to sit back and listen.

“Luke purchased the club about six years ago,” Sierra began, “and at the time, it was called The Destined Hearts Club. I know, I know. Horrible name. Once Luke took over, he changed the name, then restructured, giving the nightclub a face lift and creating a secure area on the second floor of the building he now owns.”

“That’s the sex club part?” V inquired, trying to visualize this place.

“Well, if you mean do they have sex there? Yes, they do. But not like you think. Club Destiny is restricted to members only, and it’s pretty upscale if you ask me. Totally not what I expected when I first went on the tour. There are a handful of apartments that they rent out to members, several conference rooms that they use for business, as well as a play room.”

“Yes, play is exactly what happens in this room,” Sam added when it was obvious V didn’t understand. “Taboo, if you will.”

“But nothing compared to what you’ll see tonight,” McKenna added. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by what you find. If you’ve ever

researched sex clubs, this is not what you would expect, although it very much is a sex club.”

V hadn't researched sex clubs. Glancing over at Zoey, she wondered whether her friend had. By the way her eyes were glazed over as she hung on every word, it was quite possible. In order to avoid sounding any more prude than she already did, V didn't ask any more questions. That wasn't a problem because Sam began firing them off left and right like she were a prosecutor and McKenna was on the witness stand.

McKenna didn't answer a single one, which made Sam pout, although not for long. The next thing V knew, everyone was getting up from the table, shaking hands, and agreeing to see each other at the club.

Feeling the minimal effects of the alcohol, and according to the conversation she just had, V began to wonder whether she should've ordered another glass of wine. Or ten.

Yep, her nerves were back, and the second her eyes met Zane's, she was instantaneously overridden by an even more poignant emotion.

Lust.

Chapter Twenty Two

♂ ♀

When Zane pulled Sawyer's Corvette into the underground parking garage of Club Destiny he was still reeling from dinner, and it had nothing to do with the food. Although fabulous, Zane had barely tasted a damn thing. Instead, he'd been hanging on every word that the McCoy's spoke as it related to Club Destiny. To hear how the club came about, what it was before and what they managed to turn it into, he'd been impressed. More so, when Travis spoke as though he knew more about the sex club industry than even Luke and Logan McCoy.

His brother had undoubtedly done his research. The same could be said for Sawyer and Kaleb who held their own, asking questions that seemed to stump Luke a time or two. It all made Zane realize just how out of the loop he actually was. He'd made a commitment to himself that he would rectify that once they were back home. Seeing how intensely serious Travis, Sawyer, and Kaleb were about making AI a success made Zane need to prove his worth to his brothers. He had absolutely no doubts that he could do this, but he was no longer willing to sit in the shadows and wait for guidance.

"Are you all right?" V asked when he helped her out of the car.

"Fine, why?" Zane knew he hadn't been talkative on the drive from the restaurant, but it had only taken five minutes, so he didn't feel the need to talk. Since V hadn't chosen to say anything either, he'd been content to enjoy the companionable silence with her.

“You’ve been quiet,” she answered, taking his hand and walking with him to the club entrance.

Zane put his hand on the small of her back, walking behind her as they entered through a door one of the bouncers – make that security guard - held open for them. Bouncers didn’t carry guns and this man was packing. Once they made it inside, he realized they were in the nightclub, although it seemed oddly empty for a Monday night.

“He closed the bar for the night,” Kaleb answered once Zane approached the rest of the group, answering Zane’s unspoken question. That made sense. If not, Luke McCoy needed to do some serious advertising because there were only a handful of people, not all of them within their group, but most of them were.

“Who are those people?” V asked, talking to Kaleb.

“He handed out some special invitations. If I heard correctly, they’re interested members that Luke has known for a while.”

Zane liked the control Luke had over his club. He also liked that the man didn’t bat an eyelash at closing the doors on what was undoubtedly one of their busiest nights. As he stood beside Kaleb, listening to his brothers talk, waiting for Logan and Sam who had yet to join them, Zane admired his surroundings. Namely V.

She seemed a little relaxed, probably from the wine she’d had with dinner, but she also seemed different somehow. She was laughing with the other women, talking very animatedly which was something Zane didn’t see her do very often. He decided instantly that he liked it. He liked seeing her with her hair down per se, enjoying herself as though nothing else was going on in her life. If he knew a way to put that smile on her face all the

time, and eliminate those memories that somehow managed to mentally cripple her from time to time, Zane would do it.

“You ready for this?” Sawyer asked, pulling Zane apart from the rest of the group.

“Ready for what?” Zane had no idea what Sawyer was talking about.

“This is going to be our first taste of what Travis’ expectations are,” Sawyer explained.

Zane glanced over at his brother, noticing he was standing really close to the red haired woman and the bald man she was with. He had no idea what the connection was with those two, but Travis seemed fairly intimate with them. More so than he had seen his oldest brother with anyone else.

“Do you know anything about this place?” Zane continued talking to Sawyer while he watched Travis.

“Not a clue. I’ve tried researching it, but the McCoy’s have somehow managed to keep it out of the media. Completely.”

Zane had no idea how they could’ve accomplished that, but he was interested in finding out. He didn’t think Travis had the same intentions for AI, but Zane wasn’t positive on that either. After tonight, he fully intended to sit down with Sawyer and Travis and define what the expectations were for these clubs. Zane had some ideas, yet he was certain he’d have more before the night was out.

“Looks like the party is getting started,” Sawyer whispered when Logan and his wife Samantha walked in.

Zane made his way over to V, listening to a couple of the introductions being made. Some guy named Dylan, a younger couple, probably closer to Zane’s age – Lucie and Kane – and an intimidating

looking man that Logan referred to as Trent. The Trent guy didn't look like one to fuck with either, but he did look oddly familiar. Like Zane had seen him on television or something.

Taking V's hand, Zane followed the rest of the group back out to the parking garage, then in through a door that looked like it would've led to some sort of mechanical room. For all intents and purposes, Zane felt as though they were walking through a maze.

Although no one entered any codes along the way, he didn't miss the number of small, electronic boxes lining the walls just outside of a set of double doors that were currently open, and manned by at least two security guards.

Before they made it to the last set of doors, Zane heard the thump of the music as it pounded through the club, getting louder as they moved closer. Once he stepped inside, he had to keep moving around the group as everyone stopped in one place as though they were on some sort of scenic tour.

Holding V's hand, Zane eased to one side, noticing a bar backlit with brilliant pink LEDs.

"Holy shit," V's startled mumble had Zane glancing over at her, then following her gaze to the two women standing behind the bar.

Holy shit was right.

The entire setup was stimulation for the senses, in a wildly risqué sort of way. Between the loud, provocative music, the scantily clad bartenders, the black floors and walls, along with the metal cages suspended halfway up on thick, steel poles, the whole place screamed sex. That could also have

been concluded by the few groups of people scattered about, actually engaged in some sort of sexual act.

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but this clearly wasn't it. Zane had frequented his fair share of strip clubs and those were seedy by comparison. From what he could tell, Luke and Logan had spared no expense on this place. The building was vast, with what appeared to be three floors, although those above were only around the perimeter of the building.

Aside from the lavish setup at the glass bars and the expensive looking furniture scattered about the lower level, there was an overabundance of steel and glass. In fact, that was the only other material Zane noticed, and he liked the design, which inspired some ideas in his mind for his own club.

"I thought he closed it down?" V asked from beside him, interrupting his thoughts.

"I doubt we'd find much interest if no one were here," Zane informed her. Seriously, what were they all going to do, separate and go at it? He didn't see that happening.

While Luke and Logan moved together around the room, followed by Travis, the rest of the group seemed to scatter, including their wives. A few people moved up the stairs while the others took in the scene in one of the huge glass rooms located on the main floor. Zane wasn't sure what they were expected to do, so he just took V's hand and decided to give himself a tour. He didn't need to know the logistics – Travis could manage that – but he was interested in seeing the overall club and getting a glimpse into what actually went on there.

The night flew by in a blur of motion and activity. V spent the last three hours cuddled up to Zane's side, watching with voyeuristic fascination, everything that was going on in the club until, finally, the group they came with opted to leave. Interestingly enough, V hadn't seen anything remotely sexual out of any of the people they came with. Not that she had been looking. Ok, she had been looking.

Everyone seemed to be doing a scope of the setup, rather than showing any interest in what was going on there. Considering the conversation she'd had with the other women at dinner, V had been a little disappointed not to see Samantha go wild. The woman seemed like the type, but tonight, at least at the club, she had composed herself exceedingly well.

Now that V and Zane were back at the hotel, she longed to crawl into bed and close her eyes. It'd been a long day, starting with a long drive, and then a night at a club that managed to overstimulate every single one of her senses.

Truthfully, she had been stunned by Club Destiny. Initially, she had expected just a glorified strip club, maybe with a little upscale design. That was by far what she found when they arrived. Not that she had been to many strip clubs, nor had she ever been to a fetish club, or swingers club, or whatever the hell they labeled it as. She liked it enough. Definitely enough that she was even more interested in what the Walkers were planning to do with AI.

Sneaking into the bathroom, V took a few minutes to wash her makeup off, brush her teeth and then comb her hair before changing into a

tank top and boxer shorts that she brought along to sleep in. Once she was finished, she made her way back to the bed where Zane was propped up against the headboard, watching television.

Without a shirt on.

Heaven help her.

Had she seriously been thinking about sleep just a few minutes ago? There was no way she was thinking about it now. Not with Zane spread out before her like a feast.

“Hmmm...” Zane’s mumble had V’s eyes darting to his, a blush infusing her face. He’d caught her admiring him, and she couldn’t hide the fleeting embarrassment that overcame her.

“I like when you look at me like that,” Zane stated as their eyes met. “It’s like you want to feast on me. Is that what you want?”

V knew he was teasing her, but what Zane didn’t know was that he’d nailed it accurately. No longer were her eyelids heavy with the need to go to sleep, they were now heavy with something entirely different.

“Answer me, V,” Zane stated with a bark of demand in his tone.

His demeanor belied the hungry animal just beneath the surface, and V loved that about him. He looked like the average, laidback country boy, but deep down, he was an alpha male with serious control issues.

She stood rooted to the floor, watching as Zane slowly unbuttoned his jeans, then lowered the zipper, his eyes watching her as he did. When the denim eased open, revealing his impressive erection, V fought the urge to gasp. She wanted him to think he didn’t affect her, but she knew she wasn’t fooling anyone but herself. She was mesmerized by the sight of all that muscle, toned and rippled, beckoning her to touch him. Zane Walker was by

far the hottest man she had ever met. Even though she was inclined to agree that all of the Walker brothers were exorbitantly gifted in the looks department, not a one of them held a candle to Zane's perfection.

He didn't beckon her over, but somehow, her feet carried her closer to the bed until her knees bumped the edge of the mattress. Directly in front of her, sprawled out like a god that needed to be worshipped, Zane stared up at her, his cock firmly in his grasp. She watched as he slowly stroked from the root to the tip and then back down, never increasing his rhythm and looking all the more relaxed. Here she was, heat pooling between her thighs, her mouth watering, and her nipples acting as a homing beacon with Zane as the intended target.

Climbing up onto the bed with him, V stayed between his spread legs as she moved in closer on her hands and knees. The seductive, sly grin he shot her was like an arrow straight to her clit, making her body zing with awareness. She loved when he turned all that charm on her. Thankfully, V had never witnessed another woman being the recipient of all that country boy charm, and she was grateful for that. At least she could think for a little while that it'd all been saved up for her.

Lowering her head, she kept her eyes trained on his before sticking out her tongue and licking him like a lollipop, applying just a tad more pressure against the vein running along the underside of his shaft. When he growled, dropping his head back and closing his eyes, V mentally patted herself on the back.

Without using her hands, she continued to play with him, lavishing his cock with her tongue and sucking him into her mouth, but only briefly. She glimpsed the contraction of his stomach muscles, felt the way his thigh muscles knotted against her arms, and each reaction spurred her on.

He hadn't said a word and V was surprised. She'd come to expect a play by play with him, and honestly, she was anticipating it. She knew at some point he would break, she just hoped she could outlast him.

When Zane pressed one thigh up between her legs, she couldn't resist the urge to grind down against him, applying just enough friction on her clit to have chills running up and down her spine. She knew she probably could get off this way, but she didn't mention it to Zane. If she were lucky, which after the night they had at the club she was pretty sure she would be, there was going to be a lot more in store for her than just some dry humping and a little oral stimulation. Although, she was greatly looking forward to some oral stimulation – both his and hers.

Zane's hips began to move slightly, his cock pressing firmly against her tongue as she continued to lick him, trying to avoid taking him into her mouth as much as possible. The temptation to suck him hard and deep was intense, but V wanted this to last. She owed him a little teasing after all of the sexual torment he usually put her through.

Turning her head slightly, V opened her mouth and then used her teeth to lightly scrape the underside of his cock, starting at the crest and then sliding ever so slowly down to the base before she teased his balls with her tongue. That earned her a grunt and a growl from Zane as well as his fingers sliding into her hair and holding her to him firmly.

“Ahhh, fuck, V.”

She smiled as she continued to bathe him with her tongue, ensuring she went slowly although he was beginning to drive his hips upward to meet her mouth.

“All the way. Suck my balls into your hot fucking mouth, V.”

Her body hummed with desire as he instructed her, the rough, gravel pitch of his voice proof that she was succeeding at driving him wild. She did as he instructed, opening her mouth wide and sucking his balls fully inside before moaning her acquiescence, knowing that the vibration likely would have him moaning.

“Son of a bitch!”

Bingo.

Zane’s fingers fisted in her hair, lifting her head and effectively dislodging his cock from her mouth. Before she knew what happened, she was on her back, Zane kneeling between her thighs with a smile on his face that promised some heated retribution.

She wasn’t sure she was going to make it through the night.

♂ ♀

The woman drove him absolutely wild with a smile, and when she turned her attention on him in other ways, Zane barely managed to control himself. He hadn’t been this quick on the trigger since high school, but somehow V managed to pull him right to the edge where he had to hang on by his fingernails just to keep from coming.

This was why she was now beneath him.

He didn’t have any problem going from point A to point C, but he damn sure wasn’t going to avoid point B just to get there.

“Lift up your shirt,” he instructed, doing his part to pull the tiny pink boxers down her legs.

She teased him by lifting the shirt enough to bare her flat, tan belly, but little else. Zane cocked his eyebrow at her which was all it took to have her laughing beneath him. In one expeditious movement, Zane had her almost folded in half, the tops of her knees almost touching the mattress and her pretty pink pussy suggestively displayed for him.

“Mmmm.” Zane licked his lips, glancing between her legs and then up at her face. The laughter died instantly, and now V was panting as she watched him.

Using the same techniques she had used on him, Zane lowered his head, trailing his tongue from the top of her slit, careful not to graze her clit, then all the way down to her opening. He repeated this over and over, licking her like an ice cream cone until she was moaning his name and begging for more.

“Lift up your shirt,” he repeated his instruction from earlier, wondering how long it would take for her to realize this was her punishment for disobeying him the first time. There was no way Zane was going to let her come until he was satisfied that she was doing what he asked.

He watched as she lifted the thin tank top up and over her full, firm breasts, her fingers grazing her nipples in the process.

“Play with them,” he told her, not lowering his mouth back to where she wanted him until she did. When she began pinching and twisting her nipples lightly, he licked her again. He kept watching her and every time she applied more pressure to her nipples, he applied equal amount of pressure with his tongue until he was flicking her clit with fervor, listening to her moan and plead once more.

“Zane!” He sensed her warning, she was close, but he wasn’t quite ready for her to come just yet, so he pulled back. That earned him a death glare and a huff of frustration which only made him smile.

“You like that?”

“God, yes.”

“Well, I’ll keep going, but you have to do something for me.”

“Anything,” she stated firmly, and for once, Zane believed she was serious.

“Tell me what you liked most about the club. About what you saw other people doing at the club tonight,” he ordered her and then lowered his head once more, running his tongue lightly over her slit once again as though starting over from the beginning. This time he teased her anus with his tongue while he was at it, and V cried out.

“Tell me, or I’ll stop.”

“The second floor,” she whispered, sounding both nervous and highly aroused.

Zane licked her, teasing her clit one time. He paused and waited. He could do this all night.

“The one room...” she began, her breath catching as he moved his tongue against her again. “The one with the two girls and one guy.”

Zane knew exactly what room she was talking about. That had been pretty fucking intense, he had to admit. It wasn’t anything that he couldn’t see in any typical porn video, but seeing it live had been enough to make his dick hard.

He paused again, waiting for her to continue.

“I liked how one girl was fucking the other girl’s mouth.”

The image flashed in his mind. One girl had been laying flat on the bed, a man kneeling between her splayed thighs while another woman had been sitting with her pussy pressed against the first ones mouth. Definitely entertaining. Not that he would’ve thought V would’ve liked it so much.

Pulling his mouth away, he stared up at her. “Did you enjoy watching two women together?”

She sucked in a breath and Zane waited patiently for her to answer. “Did you, V?”

“Yes,” she moaned and Zane forcefully pushed her thighs more flush against her body, crushing his mouth to her pussy as the thought of V with another woman flashed through his mind. Before he knew what was happening, V was screaming his name, coming with a rush against his mouth.

With hurried movements, Zane was off the bed, shucking his jeans onto the floor before mounting V, and without preamble, he was thrusting inside of her while she screamed out.

He immediately stilled. “Did I hurt you?”

“No! Please! Fuck me!” she begged, pulling him down until their mouths were fused together, his hips fucking into her wildly until they were both covered in sweat.

“God, V,” he groaned, trying to slow his punishing thrusts but all of the images of what he’d seen at the club scrambled his brain and the lust overruled his common sense.

“Zane!” V screamed his name as her pussy spasmed around his dick, milking his release from him in an unexpected, damn near painful rush.

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Chapter Twenty Three

♂ ♀

“What’s up?” Zane greeted Beau when he saw Beau on his front porch on Wednesday evening. He’d been surprised to actually hear from the man since the two of them hadn’t spoken nearly as much as usual, especially after what had happened that one night. “Mind if I take a shower real quick? You can grab a couple of beers.”

Zane had been at the gym, confused when Beau said he couldn’t make it, especially now that the man was sitting on his front porch.

“Sure.”

Ten minutes later, he was showered and sitting on one of the rockers on his back porch, a few feet away from Beau. He wasn’t sure why Beau chose to come out back, but the deck did offer a better view of the creek behind the house which was more pleasant than staring at the dirt drive that bisected his parents’ land. He didn’t need to ask to know that Beau had something to say, it was apparent by the simple fact that he showed up.

“I’m sorry,” Beau said quietly, making Zane turn to look at him.

“For what?” Asking the question wasn’t necessary because Zane had a feeling he knew exactly what Beau was here to discuss. As much as Zane knew they needed to talk, he was distinctly uncomfortable.

“The other night.”

Zane didn’t ask any more questions. He knew Beau, and he knew his friend would say what was on his mind, it just took him some time to get there.

A few minutes passed as they stared into the twilight, listening to the gentle gurgle of the creek, drinking the beers Beau had retrieved. Zane didn't even taste his. He was too concerned about the conversation and the uneasy tension that lingered between them. They'd been around each other more than once since that night, but for some reason it felt like it just happened a few minutes ago.

Zane had to clear his mind just to get the memory to dislodge. It wasn't something he thought about often. The feeling of Beau's mouth wrapped around his dick made him uncomfortable, but at the same time, it sent shockwaves through his system. It was hard to deny how fucking hard he'd come that night. Right down his best friend's throat.

"I didn't mean to put you in that position," Beau began.

"Listen, man –" Zane wanted to tell him to forget about it. What was done was done, but Beau cut him off.

"I need to say this, so just hear me out."

Zane clamped his mouth shut. He didn't look at Beau, but he did nod his head in agreement.

"I didn't expect it to happen like that, and I know it made you uncomfortable."

When Beau didn't continue, Zane had to bite his lip to keep from saying anything. He knew the conversation wasn't over, but he suddenly wished it was. He wanted to pretend it didn't happen, but for some reason, he could sense Beau needed to get this out.

"I won't lie, I've thought about doing that for quite some time."

Zane's discomfort level increased.

“I never thought it actually would happen though. I’m not sure what that makes me...”

The sentence hung between them in the humid night air. Zane didn’t know how to comfort his friend and he didn’t know if he were supposed to.

“Maybe I’m gay, maybe I’m just curious. I don’t know, but it felt so fucking good.”

Zane wasn’t prone to blushing, but he felt the heat infuse his face. This was the honest to God most unpleasant conversation he’d ever engaged in, but he knew it had to happen. If they expected their friendship to continue, it was only fair that Beau had his chance to say his piece.

“When you touched me...”

Again, Beau let the words hang between them and Zane remembered the way he’d rolled the condom on Beau that night. The passion he’d witnessed in V’s eyes had spurred him on. She’d gotten off on it. Why, he had no idea. The memory made his dick stir in his jeans, and he tried to ignore it. Truthfully, it hadn’t been awful.

“Man, I’m so fucking sorry,” Beau groaned and then pushed to his feet.

“Sit down,” Zane ground the words out, looking up at his friend for the first time. “Fucking sit down. Let’s talk about this. As uncomfortable as it is, it’s not going to just go away.”

Beau’s reluctance was palpable, but he did sit back down.

“Is that all you’ve wanted to do?” Zane wasn’t sure why the hell he asked the question and he really didn’t know if he wanted to know the answer, but it was out there now.

“No.”

That was an honest answer if Zane had ever heard one.

“Are you bisexual?” Another random question and Zane wanted to sew his lips shut. Were they actually having this conversation? Was he really talking to his buddy about sex? Talking about what happened between them and a woman was one thing, this... this was not normal. At least not according to Zane’s definition.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been with a guy.”

Zane looked over at Beau, the question probably obvious on his face but he asked it anyway. “That was your first time to give a dude a blow job?”

“Yes.”

Beau was at least consistent with his one word answers every other question.

“Do you want to do it again?” Fuck, that did not come out right.

“Yes.”

Son of a bitch. Zane was digging a hole that he wasn’t sure he knew how to get himself out of.

“With me?”

“Yes.”

Fucking A.

The silence descended on them for longer than was probably necessary, but Zane didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know what to ask. Didn’t know whether he really wanted to know more. His best friend, the guy he’d known all of his life, just told him he wanted to suck his dick. The

worst part about it all, the idea didn't repulse him. And Zane honestly didn't know what to think about that.

"I won't though. You don't have to worry about that."

Zane didn't answer; he just continued to stare out at the dwindling foliage behind his house. In the summer, the trees were thick and green, but now that it was technically winter, or close to it, the trees were getting bare. He was distracting himself. He knew it, and Beau probably knew it too.

"Why'd you ask that?" This time Beau stunned him with a question.

He had no idea. "No fucking clue." There, that was honest.

"Look, Zane. I didn't mean to bring it up. I just don't know who else to talk to about it. I guess I'm just confused. I hadn't expected that to happen, but I won't lie, when V gave me the opportunity, I wanted to take it. If you'd have said no, I would've backed off."

"I did say no," Zane reminded him.

"Yeah, but you didn't mean it."

No, no he hadn't put any conviction behind the word at the time. What did that say about him? Was *he* gay? He was pretty sure the answer to that was no. Did he enjoy it? If he were honest with himself, he'd have to say yes. Did it bother him to touch Beau's dick? The answer to that would be no as well. *Fuck*. Now he was confused.

He thought about V and how fucking hot she made him. With just a look, V had the ability to make his dick throb. Zane didn't say another word, unsure where the hell this was actually going. The only thing he knew for sure, nothing would be happening between him and Beau unless V was there.

That one word shook him to the core. *Unless*. Was he saying he was ok with this?

Did this make him bi-curious?

♀ ♂

V hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but when she'd walked in Zane's front door and hadn't seen him, she'd automatically ventured to look out on the back porch. She knew Beau was here because his truck was parked outside.

The sliding glass door that led to the back porch was slightly ajar, and one thing led to another. V was rooted in place, riveted by the conversation between the two men. In fact, the way they continued to evade the main issue was turning her on. Whatever it was about the way Beau had given in to his curiosity gave her chills when she thought about it.

She and Zane hadn't talked about what happened that night, although she fully expected to get the brunt of his anger in the light of day, but it hadn't come. Based on what she heard now, she couldn't help but wonder whether there was going to be a repeat. She was both intrigued and a little angry. Would Zane not consider that cheating? Would he experiment, regardless of who he was with, and think that was ok if she didn't know about it? She definitely didn't agree.

Stepping out onto the porch, she promptly caught the attention of both men and Beau went from pale white to bright red in the blink of an eye.

“What are you boys doing?”

“How long have you been standing there?” The question from Zane sounded more than a little angry.

“Long enough.” V was going for the truth, knowing she’d only be caught in a lie, and it would do nothing but piss him off more.

“Long enough for what?” Zane wasn’t happy. V watched as he glanced over at Beau and then back up at her.

“Long enough to hear Beau apologize.” There, maybe that would ease some of their tension.

No such luck.

“Goddamn it, V!” Zane exclaimed and stood up, causing her to take a step back. It was an automatic response, and the angry look in his eyes didn’t dissipate. “I fucking hate that shit.”

“What shit?” V asked, the heat in her blood no longer due to lust. She was just as pissed as Zane, if not more so. “That I might’ve overheard you considering cheating on me with your best friend?”

Zane stared at her, his eyes locked on hers, the aforementioned anger now fully boiling.

“This is none of your fucking business, Vanessa.”

V felt as though she’d been slapped. As much as the words stung, she knew them to be true. She shouldn’t have been listening. She violated their privacy in a big way and based on how quiet Beau was, she knew she’d gone about it the wrong way.

“I’m... sorry,” she whispered to Beau. She was too pissed off at Zane to apologize to him. “If it’s any consolation, I’m glad you’re talking about it.”

“Not your business,” Zane clarified.

V met his gaze once more and then turned to walk inside. Ok, she was running more than she was walking.

Just when she hit the front door, ready to bolt and never look back, Zane's gigantic hand slammed against the wood, keeping it shut.

"Move out of my way," she ordered him.

She heard Beau's entry into the house when the glass door slid closed completely.

"No."

V turned to face Zane, looking right in his eyes. "I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me?"

Zane's hand was still against the door, over her shoulder, and he was leaning in close. Close enough that she could smell that heady blend of soap and man. "First of all, that was a private conversation."

V didn't respond. She was well aware they hadn't wanted or expected an audience. She knew that based on the words they'd spoken to one another. An unwelcome jolt of heat speared right through her at the remembered words.

"That was your first time to give a dude a blow job?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to do it again?"

"Yes."

"With me?"

"Yes."

V spared a glance behind Zane. Beau was standing with his head hanging low, but he was clearly listening. He never was the type of man to

speak much. The bits and pieces of the conversation between the two men shouldn't have been any of her business, but it was. She was in a relationship with Zane, and she was sleeping with both of them. That gave her some rights, didn't it?

"Do you want it to happen again?" Zane's words were but a whisper and V's eyes darted back in his direction.

"Don't put this on me," she answered. This was not about her and they couldn't use her to try and define the awkwardness that they were experiencing. "You and Beau have to figure this out."

"You're part of this."

"Why? How do I even possibly have anything to do with this... this curiosity you two seem to have?" Waving her hand back and forth between the two men, V found that she couldn't keep still.

"Because you belong to me. I asked your permission before I shared *you*, didn't I?"

Oh God! V's stomach lost altitude, and she felt a strange quake deep in her gut. Was he saying? Did he? An acute throb took up residence between her legs, and her thighs tightened.

She glanced around Zane and found Beau staring at them, his eyes wide, his mouth hanging open. Obviously he had heard the question and he was just as surprised as she was.

"This isn't about what might happen between Beau and I. That's our business. But if it does happen, you'll be a part of it. Understand me?"

V nodded her head in agreement, not quite sure what she was agreeing to.

Zane turned and faced Beau. “I won’t lie to you. You’re my closest friend, and you deserve more than that. What happened the other night... It was strange. I’m not sure how I feel about it. At first, I was adamantly against it. But you’re right. I didn’t say no. At least I didn’t mean it the way I thought I had. That doesn’t mean I’m interested in anything more than an experiment.”

V watched Beau, noticing how he didn’t move. She wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

“One time, Beau. Understand me? If you can’t handle that, then you should walk away from this right now. Our friendship still stands, and I won’t ever look at you differently.”

V waited for Beau’s response. She held her breath anticipating what he would say next. Part of her wanted him to walk away because she knew him better than she realized. He was going to get hurt. He wanted Zane, and she had a feeling it was way more than the curiosity that Zane was caught up in.

Finally, just when she thought he was going to walk away, Beau met Zane’s gaze. “One time. I can live with only one time.”

Zane turned back to V, looking down at her. “No matter what happens here, I need to know you’re ok with this.”

V nodded her head again.

“I need to hear you say it. If you’re not, we’ll pretend this conversation never happened.”

V looked back at Beau, seeing the desire brilliantly sparking in those deep brown eyes. When her eyes met Zane’s again, she knew she was all in.

“Yes. One time.”

Zane took a step back and then looked back and forth between them.
“No matter what happens, I’m in charge. Got that?”

V heard his declaration, and she was also pretty sure his confidence was suddenly wavering.

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Chapter Twenty Four

♂ ♂ ♀

Beau stood motionless in the middle of Zane's living room. He still wasn't sure what just happened. An hour ago, he'd found himself sitting on Zane's front porch, waiting for him to come home. He'd prepared his speech and fully intended to dig himself out of the hole he'd found himself in, not go in even deeper.

Truth be told, the conversation he'd had with Zane just a few minutes ago was one of the most difficult things he'd ever had to discuss. He apologized for something that still confused the hell out of him. Was he attracted to Zane? More than he thought possible. Did that make him gay? Maybe.

He'd been battling these feelings for about two years now. Never once had he thought to act on them. He honestly thought it was just an overactive libido and the fact that he and Zane found themselves in intimate situations because of the fact that they shared women between them.

That made sense. At the time. Then, right after Zane started hooking up with V, Beau felt a shift in what he felt for Zane. Sure, maybe it was just curiosity, but he doubted it. Zane wasn't the first man that Beau found himself attracted to, but what he felt for Zane was more powerful than anything he'd ever known.

He couldn't move from where he stood. Didn't want to. If he did, they all might just go their separate ways and above all else, Beau did not want to lose his friendship with Zane. They'd known each other all of their lives.

They'd grown up together, learned to ride horses together, learned how to satisfy a woman together – and wasn't that a strange thought.

No matter what happens, I'm in charge.

Zane's words bounced around in his head, and he wondered what the hell was going to happen now. He'd told Zane the truth when he admitted that he'd never given a blow job before. Until him. He'd thought about it plenty of times. Then, when he'd been on his knees, Zane's cock buried deep in his mouth, Beau had finally felt like that something he'd been missing all this time was being fulfilled. He knew that what happened that night could've very easily changed their relationship – hell, it could've ruined their friendship.

But it hadn't. They were still friends; they'd even shared V again since that night. It was obvious they were about to share her again. This was going to be more though. His nerves were in turmoil, his head was spinning from his thoughts, and his cock was throbbing in his jeans.

Beau knew that whatever happened here tonight wasn't going to be more than what it was. Zane was giving in to his curiosity and as much as he knew they'd both probably enjoy it, Zane wasn't bisexual. One time, that's what Zane committed to, and he wondered if that were more for his sake.

Either way, Beau wanted tonight. He'd take it if it were all he could have. One day, there'd be a relationship that made sense to him. He was still interested in women, just maybe not as much as he was interested in men. That still confused him, but he'd learned to live with it.

“What now?” V's seductive, sultry tone broke through his thoughts, and Beau looked at Zane. The man had insisted he was in charge. How was this supposed to work? Was there a script they were supposed to follow?

Were they just going to strip naked and get it on? For some reason, Beau doubted it.

Whatever happened though, he just wanted to go through with it.

♂ ♂ ♀

Zane heard V's words. He had asked himself the same question. Looking over at Beau, Zane had the sudden urge to walk up to the man and just kiss him. It was inevitable, right?

Instead, he made his way to the kitchen and pulled out the whiskey. He needed something to bolster his nerves. If he thought about it too much, he was going to change his mind. The fucking weird thing, he didn't want to change his mind. He just thought that was what he was supposed to do.

His dick was harder than fucking iron, and when he closed his eyes, he remembered the feel of Beau's mouth on him. He could envision what it felt like to roll that condom down Beau's massive erection moments before he buried his cock in V's sweet little ass.

First shot down.

He should've gone for the tequila.

Zane wasn't sure what compelled him to go this route, but he was committed. Horny and fucking committed. He was scared too. Yes, even grown ass men got scared. He only hoped he could go through with it.

Second shot down.

He didn't bother turning to look at the two people waiting for him to say or do something. He just stared out the kitchen window, facing the front

yard and tried not to close his eyes. When V's hand touched his back, the memory of the last time they were like this filled his head. Her hand weaved its way beneath his t-shirt this time, and they were instantaneously skin to skin.

Third shot down.

As she caressed his skin, Zane felt her lifting the edges of his shirt until she was maneuvering it up and over his shoulders. He had to duck his head so she could get it off of him, but once she did, a chill ran down his spine. It wasn't cold in the house, not by a long shot.

Fourth shot down.

If he didn't stop this, he was going to be plastered. He was already starting to feel no pain. He glanced over to see V removing the bottle from his reach, and he didn't admonish her for it. He just kept his focus on the sparse grass and the dirt driveway. He tried not to look at Beau's truck sitting out front either.

Zane groaned when V's mouth met his skin, her tongue trailing lightly down his spine, her fingers doing the same on his chest. His cock was lengthening, swelling until he wanted to rid himself of the damn tight jeans.

He didn't turn around, mainly because he couldn't. This was what he wanted, he really, truly did. One time. It was all about the experience. It's what he lived for. His life had been about adventure, and this was just another checkmark on the already full score card. Only this time he was crossing a line that he'd blurred sometime during the last few weeks.

As the alcohol buzzed in his bloodstream, Zane gave himself over to the sensations, the need. Turning to face V, he looked down into eyes the

same sparkling brown as the whiskey he'd just devoured. So fucking beautiful. He could see in his periphery that Beau was still standing across the room.

“Come here,” he ordered the big man, wondering where the growl in his voice was coming from. He felt like a wild animal, ready to pounce. Ready to mark his territory however he needed to.

Beau moved forward, and when he was within reach, Zane looked up at him as V moved out of the way. When she wiggled in behind him, Zane had to take a step forward, bringing him that much closer to Beau. He heard her shift, then realized she'd perched up on the kitchen counter, and now she was pulling him back against her, her cool fingers once more trailing up his back, then into his hair as she tilted his head to the side and began sucking on his neck.

His fucking knees damn near gave out when she nipped him. The sharp sting was dulled by the whiskey, but it was sexy as hell.

Zane kept his gaze locked with Beau's, and he knew they would stand here like this forever if he didn't say something. Do something. He reminded himself that this was all or nothing. Right here. Right now.

♂ ♂ ♀

Kissing Zane's neck was supposed to be a distraction. V wasn't sure whether she was trying to distract him or herself, but she was pretty sure it wasn't working on either of them. She continued to watch the two men as they stood less than a foot apart, waiting, wondering just how far this was going to go. V had no doubts that Zane wanted this; she could feel it in the

subtle vibrations in his vigorous body. He was tense, not even the whiskey had unlocked the strained muscles in his back.

Glancing up at Beau, she had to wonder who was more nervous. He looked like he was gearing up for the fight of his life and he didn't expect to win.

Just when it looked as though both men might decide to forgo this endeavor altogether, Zane surprised them all by reaching out, gripping Beau by the back of his neck and pulling him close, their mouths crashing against one another and the brutal kiss that ensued stole V's breath.

Leaning closer to Zane's neck, she kept her eyes pinned on their mouths as they ate at one another. This wasn't a simple, get to know you type of kiss. This was hungry and desperate and so damn raw, V half expected sparks to start shooting out from where they touched.

"That's the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen," she groaned against Zane's ear and his growling response only heated her blood even more. "I want to watch while he sucks your cock deep into his mouth. I want you to watch," she encouraged, continuing to hold him against her, his back flush against her front, his hips encased in her thighs as she wrapped her legs around him from behind. Zane was gripping one of her thighs, holding her close as though she were grounding him somehow.

When Zane broke the kiss, they both were panting, and from where she sat, she could see the dazed look in Beau's eyes.

"Do it," she whispered in his ears. "Make him suck your cock, Zane."

Zane might've said he wanted to be in control, but V knew he would welcome the help. As desperate as they all might be to see where this would lead, she knew it was foreign. For all of them. Sharing her had become

almost normal, but for these two alpha males to give in to one another, that was going to take some coaxing. At least on Zane's part.

"Pull out my cock," Zane ordered, speaking to Beau.

V rested her chin on Zane's shoulder, her arms wrapped around his chest, beneath his arms. It was almost as though she were holding him back, but really, she was trying to keep him with her. As kinky as this was, she wasn't willing to let Zane go this alone.

"Awww, fuck." The unrestrained growl that tore from Zane's lips as soon as Beau had freed his cock echoed around them.

Beau didn't hesitate before he lowered to his knees. V continued to watch down the front of Zane's body, holding him back, but not restraining him. When Beau's tongue darted out and licked the head of Zane's cock, Zane's body jolted, and she held even tighter.

"That's so damn sexy," she whispered in Zane's ear. "Watching Beau on his knees, sucking you, teasing you the way I do. It makes me want to help him."

Zane's body went utterly rigid, and V wondered if it was due to something she said or what Beau was doing. She wasn't sure. When he pulled one hand free of her grip, V watched as Zane thrust his fingers into Beau's hair, holding him close but not impeding his movements.

"Don't you dare make me come," Zane warned.

The sound of Beau's tongue and mouth working Zane over was making V wetter than she thought possible. She couldn't see all of what he was doing anymore because Zane's body was bowed, his head falling back against her. She nipped and sucked his neck, then his earlobe, relishing in the harsh, choppy breaths Zane was taking.

“Take me deeper,” Zane ordered. “Don’t move.”

V leaned forward once more watching in absolute awe as Zane fed his cock deeper and deeper into Beau’s mouth.

“Damn, it’s too fucking good. I’m not ready to come yet.”

V wasn’t ready for him to either. This party was just getting started, and that deviant, libidinous side of her wanted to watch these two men longer. She wanted Beau to find his pleasure in the moment. She just wasn’t sure what that was.

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Chapter Twenty Five

♂ ♂ ♀

Beau let Zane use his mouth. He never stopped sucking, stroking his smooth, hot erection. This wasn't much different than the other night, but it was so much more at the same time. Zane was fully onboard, giving and taking at the same time. Beau wanted to see how far he'd go. Not that he wasn't nervous because he was. His brain didn't shut down, not since he dropped to his knees in front of his friend. Knowing that Zane wasn't doing this for himself made it tip the scales of lascivious encounters. No, Zane was doing this for him and V. Beau knew that. He didn't question it because this was his selfish moment. There weren't many of those, but he wanted this.

If there were a chance for him to go further, to do more than he ever imagined, Beau wanted Zane to be his first. They may never talk about it again, but he wanted to walk away with the knowledge that his first time had been about him. Frequently he was the third in these little trysts, although sometimes Zane was, depending on the woman they'd taken. This time he wasn't the third. V was, and that had Beau's brain buzzing with desire.

"I want to watch you fuck him." V's words shattered the silence and Beau felt Zane's legs go rigid beneath his hands. He didn't want to move, didn't want to break the moment because he feared what V said would send Zane running.

"I want to watch you bury your cock in his ass, fucking him the way he wants. This is for all three of us, Zane."

Beau didn't stop his ministrations, continuing to pull Zane deep in his mouth, bobbing his head over his long, thick cock, all the while refusing to touch himself. He didn't want to alter the course they were on. He also didn't want to go off like a rocket, which he feared he would. It didn't take long, the night Zane had touched him. Even if it hadn't been in a teasing manner, the feel of Zane's hand on him had been pure, carnal torture.

“Do you want that, Zane?”

Beau opened his eyes and looked up the length of Zane's magnificent body until he reached his eyes. Zane was staring down at him, and the second their gazes collided, Beau knew what was coming.

“Yes,” Zane growled the single word and Beau's cock throbbed, lengthened. He wasn't sure he'd make it to that point. “Stand up.”

Beau released Zane's cock from his mouth with a loud pop, never breaking the eye contact. He stood to his feet, and although he was taller and a few pounds heavier than Zane, he actually felt smaller. The control Zane had over him was compelling, even if the man didn't realize it.

When Zane moved forward, Beau waited, wondering what was going to happen next.

“Get down. I want you to undress him,” Zane told V.

Beau wasn't sure he'd be able to handle her talented little mouth on him. He was primed and ready to explode. When V didn't hesitate, jumping to her feet and moving closer to him, Beau could only watch.

When her small fingers found his belt buckle, he sucked in a breath, the cool contact against his bare skin beneath his shirt was almost too much.

“Turn around and lean against the counter.”

Beau processed V's words, but it took a few seconds before his feet actually did what his brain was telling them to do. Zane moved around to the side, his arm brushing against him and Beau found it even harder to breathe.

He felt like he was in an alternate universe, watching this from somewhere far away, but close at the same time. He knew the sensations of her hands touching him while she removed his clothes one piece at a time were real, he just didn't know it could be this good. His skin was hypersensitive; there was a buzz in his brain similar to when he'd had his fair share of liquor. Beau didn't want it to end.

Sex had always been good, and Beau had never been dissatisfied. Ever. But this... This was more than the best he'd ever had. It was as though the electrical current directly connected to his bloodstream was making a complete circuit.

Beau sucked in a breath when V's soft, warm hand gripped his dick, stroking him so lightly, it was almost the equivalent of a light breeze. So good.

He watched her, seeing how her pretty pink lips wrapped around the engorged head, the feel of her tongue teasing the slit in the head had his knees shaking.

“Do you like her hot mouth on you?”

Zane's words filtered in through the haze in his brain and Beau nodded, watching as she slid him deeper in her mouth, her tongue teasing the underside before curling around him completely.

“Son of a –” He let the last word die off as he got lost in the sensation.

“Open your eyes,” Zane demanded and Beau’s eyes flew open, but he didn’t look at the man. He kept his gaze firmly planted on V and her lips as she continued to torment him with pure, ecstasy.

“Have you ever had a blow job by a man, Beau?”

Zane’s tone was harsh, but not mean in any way. It was almost like the guy could hardly contain whatever was building on the inside.

“No,” he said honestly. Unless his dreams counted, Beau had never felt a man’s lips on his aching dick. No matter how much he’d wanted it.

His brain barely registered the movement when Zane’s body lowered closer to the floor, directly in front of him, beside V.

Beau had to grip the edge of the granite countertop just to remain standing, and Zane hadn’t even touched him. Just the thought of his mouth on him had his balls tightening, the need to come too much to bear. He couldn’t watch, wasn’t sure he could handle the sight of Zane blowing him.

The sensations changed, and Beau dropped his head back, keeping his eyes tightly closed. V’s silken hand was still wrapped around the base, applying just enough pressure to keep him grounded in the moment, but as soon as a pair of firm lips wrapped around the head of his cock, Beau’s body shook violently, his cock jumping.

“Open your eyes, Beau.”

V’s words were encouraging, but he couldn’t do it. He wasn’t sure he’d survive it if he did. He grunted and inhaled sharply, the warmth that enveloped him was unlike anything he’d ever felt. Zane’s mouth wasn’t gentle or teasing. The man was both hesitant and demanding all at the same time.

When the warmth disappeared, Beau wanted to cry out from the loss.

“Open your eyes.” The male growl that erupted in his ear drums had Beau pulling his head forward. “Watch. It’s all about you right now. Only you.”

Well, when Zane put it that way...

Beau tilted his head down, holding his breath as he prayed that he wouldn’t pass out. Oh, God! It was so fucking good. Too damn good to be real. His dreams hadn’t felt like this. Nothing felt like this before.

A growl pierced the air and Beau realized it was him. He watched, transfixed on the two heads between his legs and when V moved lower, using her little tongue to bathe his nuts, Beau wondered how he was still standing.

“Fuck!”

“Open your eyes, Beau.” Again, V’s voice brought him back from the edge. “Fuck his mouth.”

The idea hadn’t even occurred to him. This was Zane. Zane was always in control, and Beau didn’t want to do anything that would make him stop doing what he was doing.

“Now.” V’s demand made his hand move of its own volition, gripping the silky, lustrous strands of Zane’s hair as he pulled him closer, slowly sliding his dick deeper into the man’s mouth, watching as the shaft disappeared inch by inch until he was damn near in Zane’s throat. Pulling out, he repeated the process over and over, ever so slowly, not wanting to rush this because he knew as soon as he did, he was going to come.

When Zane sucked painfully hard, Beau realized he’d closed his eyes again, and he was now staring down at the man on his knees before him. His cock fell from Zane's lips, and Beau wanted to beg him not to stop.

“Bedroom. Now.”

Without another thought, Beau got with the program, traipsing naked across the spacious living room and over to the bed. He had no choice. It was that or panic.

He refused to do the latter.

♂ ♂ ♀

Zane had no idea what prompted him to suck Beau’s dick, but he had. Never having been one to feel regret, the feeling didn’t overcome him now. He didn’t regret this, but with each and everything they did, he was reinstating the fact that this wasn’t something he craved. Whether or not that made him feel any better, he didn’t know. The only thing he did know, he was going through with it.

When he’d told Beau that this was about him, he’d meant it. Something in his friend’s eyes made him want to be here. Right here in this moment. With V by his side, Zane knew this was finally all about someone other than him or her. As many times as the three of them had come together, it’d never been like this. He realized how selfish he’d been. Their threesomes had always been about the woman, even if the two of them found their own satisfaction. Only Zane hadn’t realized that Beau’s satisfaction had never been complete.

Oh, he wasn’t being a fucking martyr. That’s not why he was doing this. He had his own curiosity, and this was satisfying that need, but more importantly, he was eager to bring Beau to the edge and send him over.

“You, naked.” Zane looked over at V who was standing to the side like she wasn’t invited to this little shindig. Thankfully she didn’t have much in the way, and within seconds she was stark naked, and Zane’s body reared to life even more so than before.

Zane nodded to V, and the woman seemed to know exactly what he wanted from her. She moved in closer to Beau, pulling his head down to hers and kissing him with a fury that the moment required. It didn’t take long before the two of them were on the bed, and V had managed to get on top of Beau. He opted to watch for a few minutes as he gathered condoms and lubricant.

When he turned back around, he found Beau flat on his stomach, V straddling his back as she moved down his body placing kisses across the taut skin. Beau was rigid and unmoving, and although the expression on his face looked pained, he looked like he was enjoying it.

Zane didn’t move, watching intently as V did something he’d never expected her to do. She’d crawled down between Beau’s legs and was placing small bites along his ass, using her hands to separate the white globes before her tongue disappeared between them.

Beau’s body bowed, and he growled, a sound Zane had never heard before. She continued to ream his ass with her tongue, moments before she slid one finger inside his ass. Zane’s dick jumped, forcing him to grip it painfully. The sight was profoundly prurient, and he wished like hell V had done that to him.

Later. There was plenty of time for the two of them to explore later.

When her other hand slid across the mattress, Zane looked down, confused. She pulled her fingers in and out as though beckoning him for something and when he met her eyes, she darted them down to the tube of

lubrication in his hand. He tossed it to her, returning his gaze to where she continued to tease the man's puckered hole with one small finger. For the first time in his life, Zane realized he was considering fucking a man. As strange as the feeling was, he wanted this. What that said about him, he didn't know. He didn't fucking care either.

“Do you like that?” He found himself talking once again to Beau. “Do you like when V fucks your ass with her fingers, Beau?”

“Fuck yes. More. God, I need more.”

Beau's body was bucking on the bed, his thick cock pressed into the mattress beneath his big body, his ass pressing insistently against V's finger – no, make that two fingers. That's why she needed the lube. Zane watched as V began scissoring her fingers in his ass.

Zane wasn't sure he could take much more before he exploded right there in his own fucking hand.

He moved onto the bed, handing one condom to V as she slid her fingers out of Beau's ass. It took a minute, maybe longer for them to get situated, but once they did, Zane was looking down the long, strong length of Beau's back, V's much smaller body hidden beneath him. Beau had risen up on his knees long enough for V to roll the condom down his rock hard length. When he covered her once more, Zane heard her gasp as Beau impaled her on his dick.

Neither of them touched her in any way, but she seemed primed and ready to go.

“Beau!” she squealed, her hands coming around to cup Beau's ass.

Zane got with the program, rolling the other condom down his dick before searching blindly for the lube he knew was somewhere close. Once

he found it, he greased his cock, along with sliding more lube over Beau's hole.

Fuck! Was he actually going to do this? He was suddenly second guessing himself.

"Fuck him, Zane. I want to feel you fuck him while he fucks me." V's voice came across assured and insistent. She was controlling this. As much as Zane thought he'd be the one making the demands, he knew she was the one directing the show. He was grateful for that.

"Oh, God," she groaned as Beau's hips thrust forward.

Zane used one finger, sliding it into Beau's ass, the heat he found there damn near scorching him. He was so fucking tight. Glancing down at his dick didn't do him any favors. He had no idea how he was supposed to fit.

No more thinking. He was going to freak out if he kept up the mental rundown of what they were doing.

With fumbling fingers, Zane began fucking Beau's ass, leaning forward so he could see V's beautiful face, contorted with her own pleasure. When her eyes met his, the flash of heat he saw there forced his hips forward and he was lining his cock up with Beau's virgin ass. *Oh, fuck.*

"Now, baby. Fuck him now."

Zane felt the sweat beading on his forehead, but he didn't move to wipe it away. He didn't move at all. He stared down at V.

"Fuck me, Beau. Fuck me hard," V pleaded and Beau's hips began to surge forward, move back, over and over until Zane was once again ready to drive his painfully hard dick into the man.

Without much finesse, Zane did as V wanted. He spread Beau's ass cheeks wide, then lined his cock up with the small, puckered hole, slowly guiding himself in, inch by painful inch. The tight muscles gripped him and his breath caught in his chest. He wasn't going to fit. There was no fucking way.

"Fuck me," Beau roared and slammed his hips back against Zane, nearly dislodging him completely until Zane returned with a thrust of his own, finding his dick totally consumed by Beau's body.

"Fucking hell!" Zane groaned as he began retreating slowly, then ramming in hard. Over and over he drove inside of Beau's tight, hot hole until he was fucking him wildly, spurred on by V's moans and whimpers.

"Shit. Oh, hell. I'm gonna fucking come!" Beau was the first to announce his impending orgasm and Zane watched as V's fingernails dug deep into the man's shoulders.

He was no longer cognizant of what was where. Instead, Zane began pounding harder, faster, his balls drawing up tight, his own release within reach. Meeting V's gaze once more, Zane made sure she was right there with him.

"Yes!" V screamed, her body going stiff beneath Beau, just as Beau stilled. Zane slammed inside of Beau one last time and let himself go.

Chapter Twenty Six

♀ ♂ ♂

Zane disappeared into the bathroom while V held Beau against her. He was shaking, and she wasn't sure if he was all right or not, but she refused to let him go. When he pulled out of her, moving to her side, V pulled him closer, never taking her arms from around his neck. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, and she gave him the few minutes she knew he needed.

Despite his agreement that he only wanted this one time, V knew it was going to be hard on Beau. Especially knowing that Zane didn't swing both ways and this had certainly been a one-time event. She'd seen it in Zane's eyes. He'd nearly backed out, but somehow he managed to follow through. If, for nothing else, she knew it had been for Beau.

And didn't that just sound all kinds of fucked up. Maybe she was trying to rationalize it too much. Maybe this had been more about all three of them than anything else, but she doubted it. As for her, she'd enjoyed it. There was something to be said about seeing two men together. Especially these two alphas. Big, strong, handsome, intensely masculine men in the throes of passion were titillating. Even if she knew it would never happen again.

Zane returned from the bathroom a few minutes later, crawling up onto the bed on V's other side and pulling her against him. She pressed into his body, allowing his heat to consume her.

Beau pulled back and as much as V wanted to hold him close for a few more minutes, she let him go. The bed rustled, and he disappeared into

the bathroom. She heard the shower turn on and other than the sound of raining water, the house was totally silent. Except for Zane's breathing. She wondered if he was asleep.

"Are you ok?" She needed to make sure that this one moment wasn't going to change them all in ways that they couldn't recover from.

"Never better." He was lying, she could feel it.

Instead of pressing him for more, V laid still, waiting for Beau to return. He didn't. With a towel wrapped around his narrow waist, he moved across the open area, probably to retrieve his clothes. Without words, he dressed and then quietly slid out the door into the night.

After Zane's breathing slowed, V managed to ease out from underneath him, then disappeared into the bathroom herself. After brushing her teeth and running through the shower quickly, she also headed to the kitchen, this time to retrieve the shirt that Zane had been wearing. She pulled it over her naked body and then grabbed a glass, filling it with water. Looking out the window over the sink, V realized Beau's truck was still parked out front.

Looking over at Zane, V was satisfied that he was still asleep, so she walked out the door, finding Beau sitting on the porch.

"You all right?" she asked, taking a seat beside him in the swing that hung from the porch rafters.

"Never better."

Ok, this was bullshit.

"Are you sorry that it happened?" she questioned, unexpectedly feeling as though they'd all engaged in some gruesome act.

“No.” Beau’s tone was resolute, and he peered over at her. “No, V. That’s not it. I swear.”

“Do you think this will change us all?” She needed someone to tell her she wasn’t crazy for thinking it would. It had seemed like a good idea in the heat of the moment, but these two men had been friends for most of their lives and no matter what anyone wanted, they’d just changed in immeasurable ways.

“In many ways, yes. In others, no. If you’re asking if this will ruin our friendship, I hope not. I don’t see Zane any differently than I did before.”

“And how did you see him?” V got the impression that what Beau felt for Zane was so much more than friendship.

“He’s my boy. Always has been. Always will be. It doesn’t matter what I feel for him. I knew it would never be that way between us. I just needed to know that what I felt was real. It is. I’m different. I get that.”

“Different?”

“I want both men and women, V. Tonight was inexplicable. I thought it would be like that, even if I thought it would never happen.”

“Are you glad that it did?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t trade tonight for anything.” Beau looked at her and V noticed he was trying to smile. “Are you?”

“In many ways, yes. I am. I don’t know how Zane’s going to feel.”

“Don’t underestimate him, V,” Beau stated firmly, looking back out into the night. “Zane’s the strongest man I’ve ever met. He doesn’t hold anything against anyone. He’s adventurous. Maybe he never thought to experiment like that, but I can almost guarantee that he will wake up tomorrow, no different than he woke up today.”

“I hope you’re right.” V heard herself saying, still unsure about this whole thing.

“I am. You’ll see. I gotta go.” Beau stood. “Thanks, V. I’m so glad you came into Zane’s life. One day, I think you’ll realize what you’ve got with that man.”

V nodded, unsure what to say to that. The only thing that was painfully clear: Beau Bennett was one of the best men she’d ever had the pleasure to meet. It got her to wondering whether her mother had ever come across a man like him and if she had, why she would have been stupid enough to think money could ever be better than the heart that he had to offer someone.

Chapter Twenty Seven

♂ ♀

The next few days were relatively uneventful. Considering what had happened at his house, Zane wasn't sure anything could top – no pun intended – that for eventful anyway.

With Travis still in Dallas, Zane hadn't had a chance to sit down with Sawyer or Travis, but he had actually talked to them both and they were planning to meet up on Thursday. Since it was only Wednesday, and Zane had his first dreaded physical therapy appointment, he couldn't come up with a good enough excuse to miss it.

So, here he was sitting in the small waiting room with about twenty empty chairs, waiting for his newly assigned physical therapist to come and get him. He found it a little amusing that the sign on the glass window partition said that the patient would be charged twenty five dollars for appointments cancelled in less than twenty four hours, but it seemed perfectly acceptable that the therapist was now twenty seven minutes late for his appointment. He was half tempted to march right up to the door and let them know he'd gladly take twenty five dollars in cash, and they could call him when they actually had time to see him.

Before he could do just that, the door opened, and a very pretty woman looked his way, but she didn't smile. It was obvious he was the one she was searching for because he was the only person in the room. Zane pushed up from his chair and headed toward her.

For the next forty five minutes, the woman practically tortured him and definitely not in a good way. Between the strange stretches, that damn

machine that shocked the shit out of him, making his muscles tense and release, and the fact that she seemed almost pissed off, Zane was ready to bolt. And never come back.

Just when he thought he was going to get out of there without a confrontation, the woman actually had the audacity to follow him outside.

“Zane!”

He turned to see her heading toward him like a bull charging a matador. He braced himself for the impact.

“Can you give Sawyer a message for me?”

Oh, fucking hell. He kept his eyes level with hers, knowing she was going to tell him no matter what his answer was.

“You tell him that I don’t appreciate him never calling me again.”

He didn’t smile. He actually didn’t react in any way. This wasn’t the first time some strange woman walked up to him and insisted he give one – or more – of his brothers a message.

“Oh, and you let Braydon and Brendon know that I don’t appreciate them either.”

What the fuck? Three of his brothers? God, he hoped not at one time. This woman couldn’t have been more than five feet tall and maybe one hundred pounds soaking wet.

“That’s all.”

This time he did nod, and then he turned and double timed it to his Jeep. He certainly would be giving those three a piece of his mind. How the hell did he always end up getting tortured for their mistakes?

“What’s up little brother? How was the first PT session?” Sawyer laughed when Zane walked into Walker Demolition half an hour later. He was stiff from the crazy therapist’s idea of Walker brother punishment, and he was more than ready to give Sawyer a piece of his mind.

“Does the name Miranda Holmes ring a bell?” Zane asked.

Sawyer had the decency to look slightly ashamed of himself, but that didn’t last long.

“Oh, hell,” Sawyer laughed uncontrollably. “She *was* a physical therapist, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. And the woman has a fucking hard on for you. In a bad way.”

“Shit.” Sawyer’s laughter died down somewhat, but he still grinned like an idiot. “Sorry about that.”

“Could you start having your little liaisons somewhere outside of the county? I think it’ll be in my best interest.”

“I think it’s too late for that,” Kaleb chimed in as he came through the back door. “He’s already gone through the available women in Coyote Ridge, so you’re doomed no matter what you do. And heaven forbid you need to go to the grocery store.”

Zane laughed, as did Sawyer, both of them watching Kaleb as he moved over to the coffee pot.

“What’s new with you?” Kaleb spoke as he glanced back over his shoulder.

“You mean aside from being physically assaulted by a little blonde girl for the better part of an hour?”

Kaleb laughed.

“Have either of you seen Ethan today? I wanted to stop by and talk to him, but he wasn’t at the garage when I drove by.”

Zane had intended to take Ethan to lunch so they could discuss Zane’s plan for hiring someone to replace him as Walker Demo’s mechanic, but his brother was nowhere in sight.

“He mentioned something about needing the day off today,” Sawyer offered.

The news surprised Zane. Ethan never took time off. Ever. He was always covered in grease and grime, and most of the time he could be found at the shop, elbow deep in one of the engines. But then again, that was what people used to say about Zane too. Now, he couldn’t even bring himself to stop in to see if Ethan needed help. He wasn’t looking forward to jumping back in to help for the time being, although he knew that’s what he should be doing.

“You talk to Mom and Dad lately?” Kaleb asked when he moved toward his desk carrying a coffee mug and a newspaper.

“Not in the last few days, no. Why?”

“You need to go by there.” Kaleb tilted his head and looked at Zane as though he were studying some sort of extinct species.

He knew he needed to go by and talk to them. His mother left a couple of voicemails and Zane returned the calls, but he never gave in to her requests to come by. Hell, they weren’t far away from where he sat right then, but he just hadn’t been able to bring himself to do it. His mother was worried about him still, but with his father’s interference, Zane was trying to keep his distance. The concern in her voice when he talked to her on the phone, had worried Zane. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to go by and see

them. He just knew what they were going to say when he did. He wasn't quite ready for another lecture on being careful and watching his back.

"What'd you think of the club?" Zane asked Sawyer, ignoring Kaleb's grim expression.

"It was interesting."

Interesting? That was the best Sawyer could come up with? "How so?"

Sawyer grinned sheepishly, and Zane didn't need to ask any more. Apparently, his brother must have gotten better acquainted with the club than Zane and V had. He hadn't seen much of any of his brothers while he was there, especially Travis, but then again, it wasn't like he'd been keeping tabs on any of them either.

"Did it help spark any ideas for either one of you?" Kaleb inquired as he sipped his coffee and powered on his laptop.

Zane glanced over at Sawyer before looking back at Kaleb. "I've got some ideas. I've drawn up a couple of ideas that I'm hoping to run past Travis later this week. What about you?"

Sawyer stopped what he was doing on his computer when he realized Zane was talking to him, and he looked lost in thought for a couple of seconds. "I like the idea of the fetish club."

And?

Shit, Sawyer was being more elusive than usual, and that was saying something. "Is that your plan?"

"I don't know yet. Did you get a chance to talk to Mistress Serena?" Sawyer closed his laptop lid and resting his forearms on his desk, seemingly giving Zane his full attention.

“Nothing more than a brief introduction, no.” He had met the extremely intimidating woman, and, at one point, he’d even wanted to ask her a few questions, but she had been arguing with one of the guys who had come in with them – Trent something or other – and Zane didn’t feel like interrupting.

“She runs the place.”

Zane knew that much. When he and V were introduced to her, he got the impression she wasn’t keen on the idea of so many people trampling through her domain, especially not the Walker brothers. He had no idea why that was, nor did he question it.

“How’s V?” Kaleb asked a minute later when Zane started to fidget in his chair.

“She’s good.” He didn’t know what he was supposed to say to that. Aside from the fact that he insisted she stay at his house for the time being, she seemed to be doing fine. They had stopped by her house and grabbed some clothes when they made it back to town and surprisingly she hadn’t put up much of a fight.

Ever since the encounter with Beau, she’d been acting strangely aloof, which was saying something for V. He and Beau had moved on with life, just like he knew they would. What happened, happened. Zane wasn’t much for regrets. He didn’t do things he might regret. However, it would appear V wasn’t handling it nearly as well.

Her days were spent cleaning houses with Zoey because this was their last week of doing so and she didn’t come back until late at which point they didn’t do much more than sit on the couch and watch television. They’d somehow lapsed into a fairly comfortable silence when they were

together. Unless, of course, they were in bed. Then the woman was definitely not quiet. The thought made him smile.

“Zoey questioned me again about what I talked to you about the day you called to get a replacement window.” Kaleb didn’t look at all happy as he spoke.

“Did you tell her?”

“No.”

Good. Zane didn’t want V to know what happened. Not yet. He fully intended to tell her at some point, but not until he was certain what the next step was in getting a handle on Jake Sanders and what the man was brewing up. Zane had the feeling that something was in the works. He didn’t know what it was exactly, but he couldn’t shake the feeling.

“All right. I’ll leave you two alone so you can do whatever it is you pretend to do here.” Zane stood from his chair and flipped it back around to face Travis’ desk. “I’ve got a date with the gym for a couple of hours.”

“Stop by and talk to Mom and Dad, would ya?” Kaleb threw the question out there, although Zane knew he wasn’t asking as much as he was telling.

Nodding his head in agreement, he left.

♀ ♂

“How are things going with Zane?” Zoey asked as they sat at a booth in the small restaurant, sipping sweet tea and waiting for their food to be delivered.

They'd managed to finish the two houses they had for the day early and decided to sneak over for dinner together. V had been surprised when Zoey asked her to join her because usually these visits included Kaleb these days. She was grateful for a chance to talk to her best friend alone for a little while. Although she wasn't all that fond of the topic Zoey had selected.

"Fine," she replied briefly. Actually, things couldn't be better. They were acting like a regular couple, hanging out at his place and watching television, or cooking dinner, or sitting on the back deck and watching the creek slowly trickle by. It was almost too normal for V, but she didn't complain. Not to Zane and certainly not to Zoey.

"Is it true Beau Bennett stopped by your house the other night?" Zoey whispered the question, but she might as well have yelled as far as V was concerned. Her head jerked up, her eyes meeting her friends and a knowing look passed between them.

Shit. How was she supposed to answer that without lying to her friend or giving anything away? It was a catch twenty two. Zoey knew something was going on, and if she knew Zane and Beau the way V did, she knew damn well what that was.

"Don't lie to me, Vanessa Carmichael," Zoey said firmly. When she used V's full name, it was clear she wanted answers. Only V didn't know what answers to give her. She wanted to talk to someone about what happened between the three of them, but she didn't know how to approach the subject. Now was her turn to spill the beans, but for some reason, she couldn't find the words.

"Are the three of you...?" Zoey didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to. There was only one question that was on her friend's mind, and V

knew she had to tell her. She couldn't lie to Zoey.

"Yes," she whispered back, glancing around to make sure no one else was around.

Thankfully, it was still early in the afternoon, and the restaurant wasn't crammed with people, but V was still worried someone would overhear. Especially someone like their waitress Rachel Talbott. If she got wind of what Zoey was asking about, it would be all over for V. She'd be labeled more like her mother than ever.

"Are you all right with that?"

V looked deep into Zoey's eyes, trying to figure out just what she was getting at.

"I don't mean it like that," Zoey added, looking both worried and a little inquisitive. "I just want to make sure you're not being pressured."

Hmmm. That was an interesting question coming from Zoey. V had never thought about being pressured by Zane to do what they were doing with Beau. Not the first time and definitely, not the times after. The three of them were enjoying themselves, and although V still wasn't sure how she felt about the idea of threesomes, especially after what happened the last time the three of them were together, she couldn't deny the magnitude of having two men all to herself from time to time.

"I'm not being pressured." V smiled at Zoey, hoping she could see the truth in the statement.

Of all the people she had ever met, aside from Zoey, V trusted Zane more than anyone. He wouldn't hurt her. He'd never let anyone else hurt her either. It wasn't an easy thing for her to trust him, but she did. More

than she was willing to tell him, although she got the impression he knew just how much she did trust him.

That simple statement had Zoey's eyebrow arching in curiosity, and V knew she was in for it now. There was no going back now that she'd hinted about her brief interlude to her best friend. She just hoped they wouldn't be having this conversation here.

"If you even think you're getting away with not telling me the details, you're crazy." Zoey's smirk beamed brightly back at V, and she couldn't help but laugh.

Yes, she was going to have to share the details, but there was that whole you give/I give thing they had going and Zoey had yet to give her anything scandalous about her little rendezvous with Kaleb and Gage. "Right. Just as soon as you tell me what it's like to be the filling in your little man sandwich."

"Oh, honey, it's beyond incredible."

So, it would appear Zoey wasn't going to hold back.

"So, I'm guessing y'all had a little welcome home party for Gage?"

"We did. And it was incredible. Let's just say it included a couple of beers and Kaleb's hot tub. Now your turn. Tell me about the first time."

V felt her face heat, knew she was probably turning beet red, but she couldn't help it. Remembering the first time she and Zane and Beau had gotten together still did that to her.

"It was about a week before Zane's attack. The night you and Kaleb went home early from Moonshiners. Remember that?" Not that Zoey would remember it because, in recent months, there'd been plenty of times they'd snuck out early.

“Where’d y’all go? Your house? Or Zane’s?”

“Mine. They rode to the bar together, so they followed me back to my house.”

“Was it planned? I mean, did you know it was going to happen before you left?”

“No. Ok, yes.” V smiled. She hadn’t known for sure, but she had an idea. Her attraction to Zane was no less intense then than it was now. He’d manage to rile her up for a couple of hours while they’d sat at a booth, talking and drinking.

“So, is it really just about Beau joining in with the two of you? Or do you have feelings for Beau too?”

Zoey’s question caught V off guard.

“I care about Beau. But only as a friend. I’m attracted to him, sure. What woman isn’t?”

It was true; Beau Bennett was handsome as hell. First of all, he was a giant of a man. Blonde hair. Smoldering brown eyes. He’d been the football team’s star athlete in high school and had more than his fair share of women fawning over him. Not that Beau knew what to do with that attention because aside from being irresistibly attractive, he was also almost painfully shy. Well, except around her and Zane as it would appear. The thought made V’s face heat even more.

“Tell me,” Zoey remarked, obviously noticing where V’s thoughts had strayed.

“Let’s just say, Beau’s a big man.”

Zoey’s grin widened, and her eyes sparkled. “So, no complaints? One of those things where they walk into the room and your clothes just fall off,

huh?”

V laughed because that was almost true. Her clothes had a mind of their own at least where Zane was concerned. “Sounds like you’ve got a little experience with that problem?”

“I’d say so. Since Gage has been back, I’m not sure I’ve kept my clothes on for more than a couple of hours at a time when Kaleb is around.”

They were quiet for a moment while Rachel brought out their food. V wondered whether they should check their meals for tampering after the glare Rachel shot their way just before she stomped off. She wasn’t sure what had crawled up the waitress’ butt, but she didn’t appear to be thrilled that Zoey and V were there.

“How are things with you and Zane?”

The seriousness to Zoey’s tone told V she’d moved on from the sex part. V frowned as she began picking at the chicken strips on her plate.

“Talk to me, V. I know you. I know where your head is.”

Well, it was good that someone did because V sure didn’t. She’d started to overthink a few times in the last couple of days, but each and every time she saw Zane, he managed to reel her back in with his adorable, crooked smile and his country boy charm.

“I don’t even know where to go with that,” V said honestly.

“Do you love him?”

Oh, God. It was way too early to be thinking about love. Wasn’t it? Sure, they had some fervent sex, but V was trying like hell not to think about what might happen next. Couldn’t they just be happy with the way things were? Was she supposed to be thinking about more?

“Ok, don’t answer that,” Zoey stated adamantly. “Just promise me one thing.”

V glanced up at her friend, wondering whether it was possible to promise anything at this point.

“Promise me that you won’t make any crazy decisions, one way or another, until later. Much later. Just enjoy Zane for a while. God knows you both deserve some happiness, and there’s nothing to say that anything else has to come of this. Not today, not tomorrow. Can you promise me that?”

V smiled, but she knew Zoey would see right through her. “I’ll try.”

“Ok, good. Now, tell me about what it’s like to be sandwiched between two hot, hunky men. I mean, tell me something I don’t already know.”

V laughed, and for once, she was grateful for the change in topic.

Chapter Twenty Eight

♂ ♀

“Seriously? Kaleb finally agreed to Vegas?” Zane wasn’t sure he believed his brothers, but for once the twins didn’t look like they were trying to pull one over on him.

“Yep. And the good news is, we’ll be going before Christmas.”

Holy shit. Christmas was only two weeks away. How the hell did they manage that one? “When?”

“Thursday.” Braydon smiled that mischievous smile that generally got all of them concerned.

“Like a week from yesterday?” That barely gave them enough time to get a flight.

“Yep. The rooms are all booked. We’ve talked to V, and she’s handled everything on her end for the girl’s. Gage is still in town, Travis said he’d be back by then, and we’ve got a handful of others going as well.”

“Like who?” Zane knew they wouldn’t even attempt it if all seven of them wouldn’t be there, but he wondered who else they’d invited.

“Greyson, Beau, Blake, Aaron, Jaxson, CJ.” Brendon glanced back at Braydon as though trying to make sure he hadn’t left anyone out. “We tried to convince Kennedy to go, but she just laughed at us. Don’t tell Sawyer.”

Zane grinned. Leave it to the twins to try and convince the girl Sawyer was pretending not to be interested in, to go to Vegas for a bachelor/bachelorette party. Greyson Cutler was Sawyer’s best friend, but Zane hadn’t seen him in a while. Zane didn’t know Blake Henley, but

thanks to Kaleb, he'd learned he was helping Ethan out at the shop since Zane hadn't been back. Aaron Haines was another friend of Zane's, although he was also good friends with Brendon and Braydon. Chase Jameson, who went by CJ, and Jaxson Briggs were both cousins.

"So, who's left? Who's going with Zoey, besides V?" Zane didn't know any of Zoey's friends. Come to think of it, he didn't know any of V's either, aside from anyone they ran with together.

"We're still waiting on a couple of other people to confirm. I have no idea who V invited. She said she was going to talk to Zoey."

Well, as long as V was going to be there, Zane really didn't care who else they invited. He figured the guys that were going were likely going to bring some women along, and ever since the twins informed him that they were doing a combined bachelor/bachelorette party, Zane was almost anxious to see how it would play out.

Seriously, how does that work? Are there going to be strippers? Did he have to watch some dude strip before he watched some chick? Or after? Hell, with the twins in charge, there's no telling what they were in for when they got to Vegas.

"Have you seen Ethan?" Zane asked when the twins settled down after whooping and hollering one more time about Vegas. Zane had no idea what all the fuss was about. He'd never been to Vegas, nor did he really have a desire to go. Since this was for Kaleb, he was all for it, but as far as he was concerned, they could have the bachelor party at Moonshiners.

"He's at the shop," Brendon offered.

With that, Zane made a beeline out the door. He needed to talk to Ethan, and he needed to do it soon. For some reason, Zane was under the

impression his brother was avoiding him.

Five minutes later, he pulled his Jeep up next to the mechanic shop located not far from the Walker Demolition construction office right on his parents' property. Ethan's truck was parked out front which was a good sign. Grabbing his black Stetson, Zane took a deep breath and ventured inside.

It didn't take long to find Ethan, who was up underneath one of the large tractors behind the shop. They only worked on vehicles inside which meant most of the large equipment was stored behind the shop and was also where Ethan spent most of his time.

Zane cleared his throat, hoping to get Ethan's attention. It worked. His brother slowly rolled out from under the tractor, peered up at him before rolling right back under. Ok, so apparently this wasn't going to go as well as he hoped.

"Hey," Zane called out. "Get your ass out here and talk to me."

"Fuck you," Ethan remarked without much heat, but he didn't move either. "I've got work to do in case you haven't noticed. Oh, wait. You *haven't* noticed."

"Get your ass out here, or I'll join you underneath there, and you know how that'll turn out," Zane barked.

Because Zane and Ethan worked so closely together, they had a tolerably strained relationship. Before the attack, the two of them had spent most of their days together, and they managed to get on each other's nerves more times than not.

Ethan rolled back out, grabbed one of the grease rags from beside him and proceeded to stare up at Zane while wiping his hands. “Five minutes, bro. That’s all you get.”

“Five minutes won’t work. Get your fucking ass out from under there,” Zane demanded before turning to go back inside the shop.

This was Texas, and the weather was generally mild, but sometime overnight they’d had a cold front blow in, which dropped the temps into the thirties. Call him a pussy or whatever, but Zane wasn’t looking to freeze his ass off. He’d had to run back in his house and grab his Carhartt jacket this morning as it was. It didn’t offer much protection from the wind whipping around him.

Once inside, Zane headed right to the small area that they’d commandeered as their office. It wasn’t a large room, but they managed to make good use of the space. More importantly, it had heat. Or it would as soon as the damn heater kicked on. Zane screwed with the thermostat on the wall until finally the heater rumbled to life.

The smell was horrendous. Being spoiled to Texas weather, they didn’t have to use the heater that much, and every time they did, Zane hated the smell that was emitted while the dust burned off.

While he waited for Ethan, Zane flipped on the coffee pot, knowing damn well his brother was always in a foul mood without his coffee. He was as bad as the others when it came to his caffeine fix. Zane seemed to be the only one who avoided the stuff.

“What the hell do you want?” Ethan growled when he came into the office a few minutes later. “I’ve got work to do, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Where’s Blake?” Zane asked, remembering what Kaleb said about the man who was supposedly helping Ethan in Zane’s absence.

“Fuck if I know.”

The words out of Ethan’s mouth did not match the confusion on his brother’s face. It was true, Ethan didn’t smile a lot, but for the most part, he didn’t say much either. Especially not a litany of curse words in so few sentences. Zane understood Ethan’s anger, knew he wasn’t happy about the fact that he didn’t plan to come back and work at the shop, but he also felt they needed to discuss it.

“Is he hired on permanently?” Zane dropped into the chair that he previously claimed as his own. Propping his boots up on the edge of the desk, he stared back at Ethan.

“No.”

Ethan didn’t elaborate, but he did pull out the other chair and slid down into it. Zane stared at his brother across Ethan’s immaculately kept desk. Glancing back at his own, he wanted to laugh. Yeah, they were worlds apart in so many ways and looking at it now, Zane found it a little amusing that Ethan would be so mad about him not coming back. At home, Zane kept everything in its place. At work... Not so much. Although, that was going to change with the new club because he wasn’t going to have much of a choice.

“Kaleb told me he’s been helping out.”

“He has.” Ethan glanced over at the coffee pot, just realizing it was finished brewing. Between the smell of the heater and the stench of the coffee, Zane wasn’t sure which was more unappealing. Obviously Ethan

didn't think it was the coffee because he bolted up out of his chair and reached for the pot and a Styrofoam cup.

"Does he want to work full time?" Zane questioned his brother, watching him as he added sugar to the black liquid.

Ethan turned to face him then, his face void of any and all emotion. "Are you not coming back? Is that what you're finally telling me?"

Zane stared into the same smoke blue eyes that he saw when he looked into the mirror. All of his brothers had the same color eyes, the same color hair, and almost the same build. Ethan looked more like their father than any of them with his chiseled features.

"I want to do something else," Zane finally said, looking down at his hands resting on his propped up legs. "It's time for me to do something else." Zane wasn't sure Ethan was going to understand his reasoning, but he wasn't sure he understood his own reasoning. He just knew that he was ready to move forward and not go back.

"Why?"

"Don't get me wrong," Zane began, looking up at Ethan again. "It's not that I didn't love what I did. I just think it's time for me to move on."

"Is this because of the attack?" Ethan questioned, and his tone simmered somewhat.

Was it? Did the attack change him? Maybe. But Zane wasn't sure that was all it was.

"I don't know." That was the honest answer. "I spent some time looking into the resort while I was in the hospital and I got excited." For the first time in a long time, in fact. "Hell, you met the McCoy's. Aren't you just a little curious as to what AI is going to be about?"

Ethan glanced down at his coffee cup. “A little.”

His brother sounded torn. Like maybe he wasn't happy doing what he was doing either. “Have you considered moving on?”

“No.” The adamant answer pretty much told Zane exactly what Ethan meant. Butt out.

Figuring it was a moot point to try and push, at least right now, Zane went back to the safer topic. “So, why don't you hire Blake to come on full time? As my replacement.”

Zane's gaze was drawn to a tall man walking in through one of the bay doors. He didn't recognize him, but he had a feeling that was Blake. Glancing back over at Ethan, he realized his brother had noticed him too. Only, Ethan wasn't looking at Blake like they were merely working together. There was something else in his expression. Just as quickly as it was there, it disappeared, and Ethan was looking at Zane once again.

“I need to get back to work. If you're sure you aren't coming back, I'll talk to Blake.”

Zane thought that was a good start, except Ethan might want to consider talking to Blake about other things too. Not that Zane would interfere, but he'd always expected that his brother was different from the rest of them. Not in a bad way, just in a different way. The way Ethan was looking at Blake, he saw the same thing he'd seen before. Interest, maybe? Longing? Hell, he didn't know and maybe he was making shit up in his brain just to make himself feel better about not coming back to work at the demo company.

“Hey,” Blake's head appeared in the door, and he smiled down at Ethan.

Ok, definitely not making shit up. Whatever he saw in Ethan's expression earlier was the same thing he saw on this guy's face.

"Hey. Blake, this is Zane, my youngest brother. Zane, this is Blake."

Was it him or did Ethan sound just a little frustrated?

"Nice to meet you," Blake said as he moved closer, holding out his hand.

Zane dropped his feet back to the floor, tipped his hat back slightly and reached out and shook Blake's hand. "You, too. Thanks for filling in here while I've been gone."

"Sure." Blake glanced back and forth between him and Ethan. "Are you coming back to work today?"

Zane looked over at his brother, expecting him to answer the question, but he didn't. "No. I'm not coming back." He left it at that. Whether Blake thought that meant today or ever, he didn't really care. At this point, Ethan needed to figure it out, or hell, Zane was going to see if Beau wanted to join the Walker Demo ranks as one of their mechanics. The guy would be a huge asset to the company.

"All right. Well, I'll talk to you later?" Blake spoke to Ethan, but before Ethan said anything, he turned and walked away.

"What's going on between you two?" Zane inquired, knowing Ethan was going to give him the glare that told him it was none of his business.

Yep, there it was. Perfected by so many of them over the years, that Walker glare pretty much said, "Shut the fuck up".

"Well, I've got to go. Meeting Beau at the gym, then hoping to meet up with Sawyer later this afternoon," Zane said when it was clear Ethan was

finished with this discussion, no matter how one sided it had been. “Look, if you need anything, just let me know.”

Ethan tipped his head in understanding but didn’t say anything. So it would seem, there was something fascinating in his coffee cup. Zane shook his head in confusion as he walked out of the office. “Nice to meet you, Blake!” he hollered toward the man on the other side of the room as he left, barely hearing the man’s response.

♀ ♂

By the time evening rolled around, V was exhausted. Somehow they’d managed to knock out three houses that day because Zoey made the decision that she was ready to move on. Instead of doing one house a day for the next three days, they’d managed to squeeze them all into one. Although that meant they were officially through with their little cleaning business, it didn’t make V’s feet feel any better.

She’d even turned down Zoey’s celebratory suggestion at Moonshiners, opting instead to go home. Which was where she was now. It had only taken her twenty minutes this time to get inside her house after the panic attack had left her all but paralyzed. She’d sat in her car with the doors locked, peering around and half expecting Jake Sanders to jump out of one of the bushes. He hadn’t though.

Finally, after what seemed like an incredibly long time, V made it into her house, locked all of the doors, checked all of the windows – twice – and had now locked herself in her bedroom. She needed a shower, and then

hopefully she could just fall into bed without another thought. Doubtful, but maybe.

A short while later, V was showered and in her pajamas. She checked her cell phone to see if she'd missed any calls from Zane, but there weren't any. She hadn't heard from him that day. Not one time. For some reason, ever since they had gotten back from Dallas, there'd been a little distance between them. She wasn't sure whether that was her fault or his, but she would admit she hadn't pushed it. They needed the time apart anyway. V was getting way too close to him.

On her way to the kitchen, V glanced around the living room, trying to see if something was different. It felt different. She wasn't sure why. Everything looked the same. Apparently she was just paranoid. But, since her freak outs were fairly consistent, V carried her cell phone in her hand just in case.

When she rounded the corner into the kitchen, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and V started to hyperventilate. She flipped on the kitchen light, only to find that everything in there appeared the same as well. She was there just that morning, so what could have possibly changed when she was gone for a few hours? V impulsively wished she had a dog. Maybe her mother was on to something there. At least a dog would let her know whether she was crazy or not.

Opening the refrigerator, V grabbed a bottle of water and then closed the door.

That was when she saw it.

Her heart pounded like a bass drum in her ears, her chest constricted painfully, and she wondered if she was going to pass out.

I can get you or him any time I want.

The note on the refrigerator was scrawled in bold, black ink. V gripped her cell phone so tightly she was surprised it didn't crush in her fingers. The pain reminded her of where she was, and she glanced down at the screen, then up at the words in front of her. Without another thought, V called the sheriff.

Fifteen minutes later, there was knock on her door, and V told Zoey to hold on. After she called the police, she instinctively called Zoey, praying she'd be able to keep herself together. Before she managed to get any words out, Zoey had known something was wrong. Thankfully her friend agreed to stay on the phone with her until the police arrived.

With the phone against her ear, V glanced through the peephole in the door. There on her front porch was Sheriff Endsley. She opened the door, trying to focus on breathing and told Zoey she would call her back in a little while.

“Vanessa?”

She vaguely heard the sheriff's voice, knew he was talking to her, but the panic had set in long ago. She'd managed somehow to remain lucid for the last half hour, but now that he was there, she wasn't sure she could hold it together much longer. In an instant, V felt herself falling, her brain going fuzzy and the last thought she had was whether or not Zane was ok.

Chapter Twenty Nine

♂ ♀

“Where is she?” Zane didn’t even wait for Sheriff Endsley to get the door open completely before he pushed through the door, heading straight for the living room.

“Son of a bitch.” That was the greeting him and his brothers received as he walked right past the sheriff in his haste to get to V. Kaleb, Sawyer, Brendon, Braydon and Beau were behind him, he knew. He had been at Beau’s when he got the phone call, and since Zoey had been the one to call, he hadn’t been surprised to see his brothers pulling in behind him when he arrived at V’s house.

There in front of him was V, sitting on the couch, holding something against her forehead while Greyson Cutler spoke softly to her. He hadn’t been on the phone with Zoey for more than a few seconds before he was in his Jeep and disobeying every traffic law as he made his way over to the house. Apparently the ambulance beat him, which was surprising.

“What the hell?” Zane rushed to her side, easing himself down beside her and trying like hell not to pull her into his arms. He looked up at Greyson and saw the concern in the other man’s eyes.

“I think she needs to go to the hospital,” Greyson said, his voice calm and reasonable. He didn’t sound urgent, so Zane relaxed a little.

“Baby?” Zane leaned over, placing his hand on V’s shoulder as she turned to look at him. She appeared disoriented for a second, but as soon as recognition dawned, she threw her arms around him and began sobbing into

his neck. Zane's heart squeezed painfully in his chest. Now he had a hard time breathing, and it wasn't from the way V clung to him.

Raising his eyebrows in question, he silently asked Greyson what was going on. Instead of answering, Greyson stood up and went into the kitchen where Sawyer and Kaleb were talking to the sheriff. Zane noticed that Brendon, Braydon and Beau were standing near the front door, all three of them looking out the door.

"V?" Zane whispered into her ear, holding her head against his chest, his body shaking from the impact of her sobs.

"I can't let him get to you again," she whispered, and Zane's heart broke right then and there.

The stress was finally too much for her. He couldn't imagine what she'd gone through the day he was attacked. By the time he woke up in the hospital, many of his injuries had healed, at least those on the surface. But Zane had seen pictures of what those bastards had done to him. Yes, it was, quite frankly, probably a miracle that he had lived. Knowing that V witnessed the entire thing as it happened still pissed him off.

"He's not going to get to me, V. I promise you that," Zane reassured her as he kissed her hair, holding her close. He wasn't giving her false promises either. Jake Sanders would not have the chance. Zane was ready for him. His brothers were ready for him.

"I don't give a shit!" Sawyer's voice bellowed from the kitchen, causing Zane to look up, and V to flinch in his arms.

"I want him arrested." Zane watched as Sawyer pressed his fingers up against Sheriff Endsley's chest in a move that was likely going to get him

arrested. “If he lays one hand on my brother again, you won’t like what happens. I promise you that. You find that bastard. Or we will.”

The silence that followed Sawyer’s statement was deafening. Zane knew this was beginning to wear on them all. Travis had eyes out in town, and they knew Jake was back. However, no one had found him yet. He wasn’t staying at his house, and he hadn’t been to his parents’ house either. But he was there, they knew that much. He was getting braver, or maybe he was just getting stupider. Either way, Zane knew this was going to come to a head sooner rather than later.

Right now, he wasn’t worried about Jake. He was concerned about V. It was obvious by Greyson’s body language as he stood across the room talking to Kaleb that he was concerned too.

When the front screen door slammed, V jerked in his arms, and Zane barely saw Sawyer’s back as he went out, followed by a very pissed off sheriff. It was a damn good thing that Sawyer knew Sheriff Endsley’s daughter because he might just need her to protect him right now.

“Hey,” Kaleb’s voice caught Zane’s attention as he sat across from him, followed by Greyson.

“What’s up?” Zane knew what he was about to hear.

“She needs to go to the hospital,” Greyson stated at the same time V began shaking her head against Zane’s chest. “At the very least, she needs to go see a doctor.”

Zane knew that Greyson wasn’t referring to a physician. V needed to see someone who could help her to cope with what had happened. Zane wasn’t able to help her as much as he hoped he could.

“She’s showing all of the signs of PTSD,” Greyson said quietly.

V did look up then. Zane released her but kept his hand on her leg. “I’m not the one who suffered the attack,” V replied, clearly not understanding just how much she had been affected by the attack.

“V,” Kaleb said as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, “you need to talk to someone about this. What you saw that day is tearing you up inside.”

“No!” V exclaimed adamantly, pulling away from Zane completely. “It’s Jake. He’s stalking me. He’s breaking into my house and leaving notes! He’s... terrorizing me.”

“And he’s also throwing bricks through your goddamn window, V!” Zane barked, losing his shit. He was so fucking tired of seeing how Jake Sanders had affected every damn person he cared about. V was suffering probably more than he ever had because the mental strain was so much different than the physical pain. He’d healed.

Sure, the anger was still a black cloud that loomed dangerously overhead, and clearly it was beginning to spread to his brothers.

The fear in V’s eyes made Zane realize what he’d just done. He’d worked hard to keep what happened from her, yet he was the one who went and told her.

“That’s what you and Kaleb were doing? You had my window replaced?” V asked, sounding oddly calm.

Zane nodded.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” Ok, not so calm anymore.

This was getting completely out of hand.

“Grey,” Zane addressed the EMT, also Sawyer’s best friend, “she’s not going to go to the hospital.” That was more than apparent. Zane totally

agreed that she needed to see a doctor, but tonight wasn't the time to discuss it.

"I don't think she should stay here alone," Greyson added.

"She'll be staying with me." Zane wasn't about to leave her here, and they were much safer at his house, thanks to the fact that his brothers all lived on the ranch.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?" Greyson asked V one last time. When she shook her head, telling him the same thing she'd told him earlier, Greyson simply nodded and left the room.

"Get some of your things," Zane instructed her, trying to rein in some of his frustration. He was angry at so many things right at that moment – V for being stubborn, Jake Sanders for being a prick, Sheriff Endsley for not doing his job. But mostly, Zane was mad at himself. He'd brought this all on them. He'd been the one who couldn't keep his temper in check when Jake was mouthing off. He was the one that Jake was retaliating against, yet everyone he cared about seemed to be in the middle of it.

When V didn't move, Zane glanced over at Kaleb, waiting for his brother to give them some privacy. Kaleb nodded his head, then stood from his seat on the other side of V. He, as well as everyone else, disappeared out the front door, leaving them completely alone in the house.

"Go get some of your things," he repeated, looking over at her now.

"I don't want to go with you." V's words stunned him for a minute.

"We'll be better off at my house where my brothers are close by."

"No, Zane. I don't want you here, and I don't want to go with you."

His anger flashed bright and incandescent. So that was the way she was going to play it. Zane was too damned tired to play her games right

now. “You’re not staying here by yourself.”

“I’m going to go stay with my mother for a while.”

“What do you mean ‘for a while’?” Zane stared back at her, noting the determination in her light brown eyes. She was breaking up with him. He could feel it in his bones.

“I don’t know.”

Zane stood from his seat, too pissed off to say anything more. He didn’t have it in him to argue with her. Once V made up her mind, it would take more energy than he had to change it. Nodding his head in understanding, Zane walked right out the front door and didn’t look back.

♀ ♂

V packed her suitcase. Two actually. She would be going to Vegas next week with Zoey, and she wasn’t about to come back home before then. She’d go stay with her mother for a little while. Maybe without her here, Jake wouldn’t be so hell bent on hurting Zane.

Dragging both suitcases into the living room, V nearly came out of her skin when she saw Beau standing in the doorway.

“You scared the shit out of me,” she told him, remembering she hadn’t locked the front door after Zane left. Beau had still been on the front porch with the twins, and she wasn’t sure whether they’d need to come back in. Apparently he did.

“You’re really leaving?” Beau didn’t sound or look happy with his thick arms crossed over his even bigger chest, a scowl on his face. For all

intents and purposes, Beau was a giant teddy bear. He didn't seem so soft and cuddly at the moment. In fact, he looked a little pissed.

“Just for a little while,” she explained, knowing it wasn't going to do any good.

“Why?”

V should've expected the question, but it pissed her off all the same. It was none of his business why she was leaving.

“As a point, I do my best not to get involved,” Beau began, “but I'm going to say this one time. Don't crush him, V. You can't even begin to understand what you've got in a man like Zane. He's loyal, honest, and when he loves, it's forever. He's found that with you. I've never seen him look at another woman the way he does you. Take time to think about what you need to think about, but make sure you know what you're doing. If you push him away, he won't come back.”

V's heart felt like it'd been stabbed with an Exacto knife and was deflating rapidly. She could only stare at the big man in her entry way. The same man she'd been intimate with a time or two in recent months. The same one who she'd come to care about because he was there for her while Zane was in the hospital. The same man who obviously had more feelings for Zane than anyone else would probably ever know. Beau Bennett was a good man. As good a man as Zane.

V nodded her agreement, afraid that if she so much as inhaled deeply, she'd break down. She couldn't afford to break down. There was too much to think about. And she fully intended to think. Later. Much, much later.

“I’m going to follow you until just outside of town. I want you to call me when you get to your mother’s.” Beau took a step closer, then pulled her up against him in a hug so fierce, it threatened her resolve in an instant.

“He loves you, V. I’ve never seen him love someone that way before.”

The tears began streaming down her face, but V held back the sobs. She wrapped her arms around Beau’s trim waist and buried her face in his chest for just a minute. When she managed to dry up the water works, she took a step back and reached for her suitcases. Before she could get them, Beau hefted them both in one hand and carried them out the front door.

V hurried through the rest of the house, shutting off the lights and grabbing her purse and her keys. Just when she thought she’d have to face the terror of her front porch alone, Beau was back, taking the keys from her hand and helping her the rest of the way to the car, locking up behind them.

When V noticed the headlights of Beau’s truck disappear from view just a few miles outside of Coyote Ridge, she reached for her cell phone and dialed her mother’s number.

“Can I stay with you for a few days?” V listened to the welcoming sound of her mother’s voice, grateful when she said she’d be thrilled to have V there for as long as she needed to be there. With that, V hung up the phone and drove.

Chapter Thirty

♂ ♀

Vegas was exactly as Zane expected it to be: loud, flashy and crammed with people.

After checking in at the hotel, Zane and the rest of the crew, except for Kaleb and Gage who were waiting for Zoey and V to land, left their luggage in their room and spontaneously went in search of food. That idea was effortlessly squashed as soon as they noticed the more than plentiful bars that dotted Las Vegas Boulevard. Within minutes, they were inside Diablo's Cantina, listening to some kind of loud, screaming music and laughing about the trip in.

It didn't take long before they were flocked by a group of women who looked barely old enough to drink, but more than eager to party it up in Las Vegas with their small group. Zane glanced around, laughing at his brothers who were eating up the attention as though they didn't spend most days inundated with strange women. Travis, Sawyer, Greyson, Brendon, Braydon, Aaron, CJ, Jaxson, and Blake didn't seem to mind the attention at all.

Zane, Beau, and Ethan were managing to keep their distance, although he wasn't sure who Ethan was staying away from. He had a feeling his brother had absolutely no interest in the women, although he did seem to show quite a bit for Blake. Not that he was going to ask. No, Zane was quite satisfied with the idea of getting drunk for the next two days and staying that way.

Surprisingly enough, Zoey and V took a separate flight from the rest of them, and that meant Zane hadn't seen V for almost an entire week. He hadn't talked to her or texted her either. She hadn't reached out to him at all, and the thought still hurt like an anvil sitting on his chest. He was doing his best to pretend he wasn't affected by the easy way she'd shunned him, turning her back on him at a time when he thought she might actually need him.

He'd been wrong.

Somehow Zane managed to keep himself busy though. When Travis returned from Dallas, he did as he promised himself he would, meeting with both Travis and Sawyer to lay out a plan for the new clubs in the resort. They agreed to work with Sierra Sellers on the design, and they put a rough drawing together of the layout for both of them. That's what he spent most of his time doing.

Another pain filled session with the physical therapist could also be scratched off, and he was pretty sure that one had been worse than the first. Obviously his little therapist wasn't fond of being ignored. Twice. Why the woman would've thought telling Sawyer and the twins that she was mad at them would've made a difference, he wasn't sure. Hell, the twins hadn't even remembered who she was. Not that he told her that.

He and Beau had spent countless hours in the gym, which aside from detailing out his plans for the resort, was the only thing Zane had looked forward to. Somewhere along the way, he'd managed to gain four pounds and was working his way up to the standard three hours a day workouts. At least for the time being. Once he packed back on an additional sixteen, or so, he'd be happy. Until then, he had frequent dates with weights and protein.

Stopping in to check on Ethan again had been an exercise in futility. His brother was clearly still pissed, but Zane was glad to hear that Blake had asked to come on full time. Things were working out well because of it. Not that Ethan would admit it.

Although it hurt like hell, Zane also kept an eye on V's house while she was gone, making sure Jake didn't pull any shit. After a couple of follow ups with Sheriff Endsley, Zane learned they hadn't seen Jake at all. Zane knew he was still there. He could feel it. He just didn't let it bother him. The man would have to show his face eventually, and when he did, Zane was going to be ready for him – tire iron or no tire iron.

Zane even managed to score a wedding gift for his brother and his soon to be wife. That was saying something because Zane was not one to shop, even if it was all done online.

“How's it going, man?” Beau clapped Zane on the back, effectively breaking him out of his thoughts and reminding him that he was in Vegas to have a good time.

“Never better. You?”

Beau frowned at him, then busted out with a smile. “So, this is Vegas, huh?”

“That’s what I hear.” Zane looked around at the small bar and restaurant. They’d commandeered most of the bar, or at least one entire side of it anyway. With a beer in hand, although it was barely noon, Zane watched the hordes of people moving along the sidewalk on the strip.

A deep laugh had Zane turning to face Sawyer as his brother moved closer. “Hey, bro. That was Kaleb.” Sawyer was referring to a phone call if Zane had to guess. “He’s bringing Zoey and V over here in a few minutes. Just thought I’d let you know.”

Zane nodded his head in understanding and then glanced over at Beau. “You interested in gambling?” Downing the rest of his beer, Zane knew he wasn’t willing to stick around. Not right now. He wasn’t ready to see V. He wouldn’t be able to avoid her later, but for now, he had no intention of getting all worked up for no reason.

“Ready when you are.” Beau knew him better than anyone. Thankfully, he didn’t question his motives.

After letting Travis and Sawyer know that he’d catch up with them later, Zane headed out of the bar.

♀ ♂

Ten minutes after they stepped foot in the airport, V had already decided she wasn’t a big fan of Vegas. She much preferred the quiet of the country compared to the overwhelming noise. Everywhere she turned there were people and lights and sounds, all of which she was ready to get away from.

A limo had been waiting for them, which was nice. Now that V was in her hotel room, unpacking the few things she brought, she felt almost lonely. With Zoey staying with Kaleb and Gage, V had been left to her own devices. Not that Zoey hadn't tried to convince her that they could share a room. She had. V refused. Now she was alone for a few minutes which didn't help her mood any.

She knew what the plan was, and she knew at any time she'd come face to face with Zane. She'd missed him fiercely during the time she was at her mother's, but she hadn't called him and he hadn't called her. On numerous occasions, she found herself wanting to text him just to see how he was doing, but she managed to refrain from doing so. According to Zoey, Zane was doing fine. She needn't worry.

As much as V missed her mother, after the second day, she'd begun to question her sanity. No, Regina didn't have a strange man in her life. Somewhere along the way, her mother not only found comfort in her dog, she also found comfort in church. Not that V minded that at all, but listening to the constant preaching from her mother had nearly sent her into hysterics by day three.

There was no doubt in V's mind that Regina was on the right path, but V was just grateful to be going back home after this little Vegas stopover because she was more than ready for her regular routine. Not to mention, a little quiet. The only thing she hadn't missed while she'd been with her mother was the panic attacks. Without having to go home and relive the events of that one fateful day over and over again, V was finally able to relax.

A sharp knock on the door had V scrambling to toss her things into a drawer. She opened the door to see Zoey, Kaleb and Gage smiling back at

her.

“Ready?” Zoey grinned from ear to ear.

“For?” V had no idea what they were planning to do, but she knew she wasn’t going to be able to hide out in her hotel room for the duration. Although it wasn’t a bad idea.

“The boys are across the street at a little bar. We’re heading over to join them,” Zoey explained.

The boys. Right. V almost forgot that half the town came to celebrate with them. That also meant that Zane was likely one of the boys Zoey was referring to.

Nodding her head, V ran back to the dresser, grabbed her purse and her room key and then met up with them in the hallway. Ten minutes later the four of them were joining up with the band of merry drunks – or very close to it – at a cute little restaurant on the strip.

When V walked into the restaurant, she was instantly aware of the delicious aroma, but more so, the sound of rock music blaring in the background. The many voices of the patrons were battling to see who could actually be louder, and V wasn’t sure which was winning.

She and Zoey took two empty seats at the bar while Gage and Kaleb stood beside them, the rest of the bachelor slash bachelorette party crew closing in on them. With as much discretion as she could muster, V glanced around to see where Zane was, but she didn’t find him.

“He left,” Sawyer offered helpfully. Obviously she hadn’t been discrete at all.

She bit her tongue before she could do something stupid like ask where he was, instead asking the bartender for a margarita. She needed it. In

a bad way.

Either no one seemed to notice that Zane wasn't there – not likely – or they just didn't want to bring it up with V around, but no one spoke of Zane or Beau or questioned where they were. For that V was grateful. She wasn't sure where they were, nor would she ask, but her curiosity was killing her. She had wanted to see Zane, almost as much as she wanted another margarita. He was noticeably avoiding her, not that she could blame him.

“We should go out and hustle some pool together,” Brendon's deep voice rang in V's ear, making her smile.

“Not in this lifetime,” she answered. Not in Vegas anyway. There was no way she was going to risk something like hustling in a city known for its gambling. There was no telling who they'd come up against.

“Sore sport,” Brendon teased, but then patted her on the shoulder and V wanted to cry. He was trying to cheer her up, which meant her mood was obvious. She was here to support her best friend, not to wallow in her own self-pity. If Zane didn't want to have anything to do with her, well, she'd brought it on herself.

Beau warned her, and yes, she spent the better part of the week thinking about him and what she was going to do about whatever this was between them. Unfortunately, she hadn't come to a decision.

If she were honest with herself, V was ready to settle down. No, maybe she hadn't spent the last ten years of her life sowing her wild oats, but that's because she didn't have any to sow. She never wanted to mess around with more than one man. Hell, for the most part, she hadn't wanted to mess around with *any* man. What happened between her and Zane was unexpected. The fact that he pursued her for so long still didn't seem real.

Now that he wasn't, was a little painful as well. She just didn't know which hurt more.

"You ok?" Zoey asked in that sweet voice that told V she was concerned.

"Huh? Oh, yeah! Great!" Again, this was not the time or place for self-pity. "How about a shot?"

With that, V and the guys managed to get Zoey and Kaleb fairly intoxicated.

♂ ♀

By the time Zane and Beau made it back to their hotel room, it was two o'clock in the morning. Blessedly wasted, Zane passed out as soon as his drunken ass hit the pillow. This morning was an entirely different story. He'd already had to yell at the assholes banging on his hotel room door three times. He knew who they were, so he didn't bother to get out of bed. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, he knew he wasn't going to be able to waste much more of the day away.

Forcing himself out of bed, Zane noticed that Beau was already gone, so he shot off a text to find out where he was and then jumped in the shower. Fifteen minutes later he was dressed and ready to head out. Picking up his phone, he noticed Beau hadn't gotten back with him, so he sent a note to Kaleb. The response he received was almost instant, letting him know they were in the restaurant downstairs.

Zane made his way through the massive hotel and onto the casino floor. His brain was sluggish, and he felt like shit, but he figured food was

in order and definitely water. Once he reached the restaurant, he let the hostess know who he was meeting, and he was led to the table at the back. The instant he saw V, their eyes meeting briefly, his heart stuttered in his chest. Considering the only empty chair at the table was the one next to her, Zane turned around and walked out, ignoring the disruptive shouts from his brothers.

Fuck them.

Zane wasn't playing this game. Not with them, and certainly not with V. Without looking back, Zane made his way to a small shop around the corner, grabbed a sports drink and a protein bar and then perused the casino.

It wasn't that he was trying to be a dick. He just wasn't going to be the one to approach her about where their relationship stood at the moment. She held all the cards. It was her turn, and if she chose to fold, Zane would walk away. It was going to hurt like a mother fucker, but he wasn't going to chase a woman who didn't want to be chased. He loved her; there was no doubt about it. He just wasn't willing to let her go back and forth anymore. She had a decision to make and as much as he prayed she'd choose him, he wasn't going to beg.

Ever since that very first night when they'd talked at Jaxson's party, Zane had known that what he would feel for her was going to be significantly different from any other woman he'd ever met.

V was so damn pretty, especially when she was flustered like she was right at that moment. He'd even tried a cheesy pickup line on her just to see what she'd say, and it'd worked like he hoped. Now, as she stared back at him, still trying to figure out whether he was or was not trying to pick her up, Zane couldn't help but smile.

“Need another drink?” he asked, noticing the small cup in her hand was empty.

V glanced down, then back up at him, but she didn’t smile. That didn’t stop him from laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Clearly she was not amused with him.

“Nothing. Come on, let’s go outside where it’s quiet,” he told her, taking her free hand in his and pulling her along behind him. To his surprise, she moved with him, not trying to pull away like he initially suspected.

As soon as they stepped outside of the overcrowded house, Zane felt like he could breathe better. He’d grabbed two beers on his way and handed one over to V as they moved away from the house. The night was warm, and only a few people were mulling about in the front yard. Noticing Beau’s truck was parked out front, Zane made his way over to it while V followed along behind him. He lowered the tailgate and patted the seat beside him as he dropped onto it.

V glanced down as though the truck might bite, but apparently she decided it wouldn’t because she climbed up beside him.

“How’s your mom?” Zane asked, not surprised in the least when V flinched like he’d hit her or something. He didn’t know everything there was to know about Vanessa Carmichael, but he knew enough to be dangerous.

“She’s fine.” V sounded completely uninterested in the conversation, so he moved on.

“Zoey and Kaleb, huh? Who’d thought they’d finally wake up and see the light?”

That garnered a laugh from V and Zane decided right then and there that he liked the sound. A lot.

“I don’t know what took them so long,” she admitted, still laughing.

“What about you? Who’re you seeing?” he questioned her, taking a long pull on the beer he was holding.

The glare she sent him was amusing and so damn sexy, Zane felt a twinge in his groin. He didn’t say another word, just listened to the sound of the wind as it hissed through the trees, picking up a little more than earlier. The night was dark, due to the clouds covering the moon, and the music that billowed out through the open windows of Jaxson’s house was a nice addition to the comfortable silence between him and the beautiful woman sitting beside him.

“What’s with all the questions?” V questioned a few minutes later.

“Just trying to get to know you. Is that a crime?” he chuckled, then downed the rest of his beer before chucking the bottle into the bed of Beau’s truck.

“You’d be smart to go find someone your own age, Zane Walker,” V whispered, sounding serious and not at all interested in getting to know him.

“And how old do you think I am?” He wondered if she even knew or if that was her first attempt to cock block him.

The thought made him smile.

“You’re just a baby,” she replied.

“You’re what? Twenty-nine?” Zane couldn’t hide the irritation in his voice. One thing he hated was when people used age as an excuse.

“Thirty, thank you very much.”

“Well, there you go. Just a few years older than me,” he retorted.

“Maturity counts too,” V whispered, and Zane barely heard her. But he did.

Turning to face her, he instinctively reached out and caught her chin with his fingers, turning her face so she was looking directly at him. “You think so, huh?” Without asking permission, Zane leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. He had the good sense to wait to see if she’d push him away, but when she didn’t, he sought the inside of her mouth with his tongue.

When V let loose, kissing him back and leaning into him, Zane wrapped one arm around her, using his tongue to explore the delectable, rich taste of her. She tasted like beer and sunshine, and his dick no longer twitched. It fucking ached. She kissed him back, and the rest of their surroundings disappeared, replaced only by the sultry little breaths she took, and the moans she fought to keep inside.

“You got any more excuses?” he asked her, pulling his lips from hers, but not putting any distance between them. She stared back at him, and Zane knew exactly what she was feeling because he felt it too. Something strong and persistent and so damn thrilling, he thought his chest might just explode.

Zane stepped out into the bright sunshine, surrounded by the stench of too many people in one place, frustrated at himself for walking out, but more so for giving in to his thoughts. He’d never chased a woman in his life, never had to. But he’d also never met a woman who filled every waking thought with memories of her. He wasn’t sure how long it would take to get over her, but he knew for a fact it would happen.

He fucking hoped it would happen.

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Chapter Thirty One

♀ ♂

“You can’t be serious?” V exclaimed when an incredibly beautiful, if not seriously fake, woman walked up to the table, tapping Kaleb on the shoulder.

V was sitting between Braydon and Brendon at a table that was filled with friends of both the future bride and groom. They’d been at the club for a good hour, and so far nothing had gone awry. Apparently, someone hadn’t put a leash on the twins and the stripper – obvious by the long, fake extensions, the double d’s that God didn’t bless her with, and the orangish tint to her skin – was proof of that.

V glanced over at Zoey to see her smiling like a kid on Christmas. She was sitting between Gage and Kaleb, and had been alternating her time between talking with everyone and dancing with one, or sometimes both men at the same time. Her best friend had let down her hair since coming to Vegas, that was for damn sure.

Since she stepped foot in the club, V had vowed to have a good time. The first thing she did was locate Zane within seconds of entering the darkened room. As far as she could tell, he hadn’t looked at her once, but she hadn’t expected it either. Ever since he’d turned around and walked out of the restaurant the day before, she’d known that whatever had been between them was dissolving almost as fast as it had flared up. Her heart hurt every time she thought about him. Even sitting just fifteen feet away, V missed him fiercely, but she didn’t know what she was supposed to do about that.

V watched the blonde as she saddled up to Kaleb, smiling sweetly, and obviously enjoying the attention of all the cowboys who were trying to undress her with their eyes. If V had to guess, the woman was seeing dollar signs in every single pair of eyes at the table. The woman/girl – V didn't figure she could be much over the age of twenty one if a day – stood up, then slowly made her way around the table, teasing and taunting all of the men but never actually touching them. When she stopped in front of Zane, V's stomach lurched.

The grin that split his face was profoundly sexy and boyishly charming all at the same time. He didn't touch the woman, but he didn't look away either and V just wanted to claw the bitch's eyes out. It was too loud to hear what she said, but whatever it was made Zane smile even more and when she leaned in close to his ear, whispering something more, his eyes met hers briefly from across the table. He never stopped smiling, but V knew he wasn't smiling at her. She felt sick.

Glancing down at her drink, realizing it was empty, V pushed back her chair and rushed across the room, her eyes on the bar and the much needed drink she knew awaited her. There was no way she could do this. Seeing Zane was hard enough, but if he even pretended to hit on another woman, she wasn't going to be able to hold it together.

“Hey.” The deep voice startled her, and V nearly fell into the big man at her back.

Turning, she looked up into beautiful, familiar eyes, and V had to force herself to calm down. Beau. Ever the friend. “Hey,” she replied, moving into the line that extended out from the bar. She wasn't all that surprised to see how busy a club like this one was, but V suddenly wished

she were at home at Moonshiners, where the bartender knew everyone, and there weren't any lines.

Or strippers.

"You ok?" Zane's voice was both soothing and calm, the complete opposite of her emotions at the moment.

No. No, she sure was not. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Y'all can't run from each other forever, you know."

V glanced up at Beau, wishing he would mind his own business, but at the same time appreciating the fact that he cared enough to check on her.

"Don't you have a stripper that would like to experience what it's like to be the center of an Oreo?"

"He's not like that, V. You know it, and I know it."

"No?" she questioned, glancing behind him to see what Zane was doing at the moment. To her surprise, he was sitting by himself once again, staring down into his beer. Damn him.

V spent the last week coming up with all the pros and cons of being with Zane Walker and she didn't want to admit it, but the list was undoubtedly in his favor.

As much as she wanted to pretend he wasn't exactly what she wanted, V hadn't been able to come up with enough that would convince her. Even the "too young" that she'd put at the very top of the list was bullshit, and she knew it. If anything, Zane was more mature than she was in many ways. Especially when it came to accepting his feelings. She just wasn't sure why she couldn't get past that nagging feeling that told her to keep her distance.

“Dance with me,” Beau said, pulling her out of the line and over toward the small dance floor.

This wasn’t a country bar, and quite frankly, V didn’t know the music, but at least it was slow. Instead of fighting, because she wasn’t interested in making a scene, V allowed Beau to pull her up against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“He misses you, V. He might not admit it, but it’s obvious.”

V looked up into those endless brown eyes. Beau Bennett was a devilishly handsome man. Had she not been in love with Zane since almost the moment he put his lips on hers, she could’ve seen herself dating Beau. But, she knew that would’ve been all they had. In all of her thirty years, V had never allowed herself to get close to any man. She hadn’t been looking when Zane stepped in her path that one fateful night, but she hadn’t looked back either. Despite her fears – mostly for Zane’s physical safety – V knew she couldn’t keep up this charade. She would have to face up to her feelings sooner or later.

“I miss him, too.” Maybe she’d get props for admitting she had a problem. Maybe not.

Either way, V couldn’t deny it. Not with Beau. They’d become good friends in the last few months, and she couldn’t lie to him. She was pretty sure he’d see right through her if she tried.

“It’s not too late, you know.” Beau held her close, but not too close. His voice soothed her, and she hoped they wouldn’t turn so that she could see Zane. If he decided to hit on that stripper again, she was pretty sure she was going to break down in tears.

She didn't respond to Beau's comment, not quite sure if she was supposed to say anything. Watching Zane with another woman was painful, thinking about not seeing him every day was even more so. However, she couldn't help but wonder whether she was the right woman for him.

According to him, at least, by the way he made her feel, she was the right woman. V felt different when they were together, and not just when they were in bed. In so many ways.

She didn't worry about what was to come, didn't worry about why she was the way she was, and she didn't worry about who Zane expected her to be. He wanted her for her, and that's all anyone ever could ask for.

On the other hand, Zane had nearly lost his life because of her. There were plenty of Jake Sanders in the world, and since she'd always been the butt of the jokes, or the topic of gossip, she knew Zane was going to risk his life any time he decided that someone was in the wrong for what they said or did. V wasn't sure she could handle that.

She couldn't handle losing Zane. Not forever anyway. She'd much rather walk away from him now and know that he was strong and healthy and would make some woman extremely happy someday. If she didn't, what might happen? That was the question that constantly plagued her.

If only her brain and her heart could somehow get on the same page. They weren't working together, and V was so confused because of it. Seeing him tonight, she'd been beside herself with wanting to talk to him. Only he evidently didn't want to talk to her. At least not until she told him what he wanted to hear. Unfortunately, V wasn't sure she could. The more time that passed, the more she wanted to, but she also knew that she was pushing him away with each passing minute.

“Talk to him,” Beau whispered in her ear and V looked up into his beautiful brown eyes. “Now.”

V pulled back, but she was instantly distracted by the tall, handsome cowboy that took a step closer, successfully inserting himself between her and Beau.

“May I?”

Zane’s voice was like creamy, rich chocolate and V craved more of it. Without hesitation, she allowed Zane to pull her into his arms. She settled within his embrace, her face resting against his shoulder, the overwhelming scent of him causing tears to prickle behind her eyelids.

“Are you having a good time?” Zane asked the question, and V tried to discern the underlying intent. She first thought he was trying to be sarcastic, but she didn’t hear any heat in his words.

“No,” she said sincerely, not turning her head to look at him.

“Me either.” His breath was warm against her face, and she wanted to look up at him, to taste his lips, but she didn’t. Knowing that this was as hard for him as it was for her didn’t make her feel any better.

“Zane,” she began but quickly shut her mouth again. What was she going to say? Everything that was in her heart would likely have him angry with her because, aside from the fact that she loved him, she still didn’t know whether they could actually be together.

She felt broken. He was finally whole once again. How would that work? She couldn’t even go to her own house without having a mental breakdown. And even Greyson told her that she needed psychological help.

While she’d been at her mother’s house, V looked up post-traumatic stress disorder, and she definitely recognized some of the symptoms. It just

didn't seem like the right diagnosis though. She wasn't the one who'd been through the devastating experience. She was just a bystander to the horror. If Zane wasn't screwed up because of it, why would she be?

The slow song ended, and a fast one took its place. Thankfully, Zane took her hand and led her away from the chaos that erupted on the dance floor. She expected them to return to the table, but to her surprise, Zane led her toward the back of the club. She noticed a dark hallway and realized that was where Zane was headed.

God, she only hoped she didn't do something stupid.

♂ ♀

No matter what Zane told himself, he hadn't been able to stay away from V. Watching her as she danced with Beau had been too much. Although he knew his best friend wasn't hitting on her, he still couldn't help but think that he should've been the one holding V in his arms.

It didn't take him long to piss Tessa the Stripper off, and when she finally realized he wasn't buying what she was selling, she moved on. Hell, she had an entire table of guys willing to give her at least a few minutes of attention, although he'd be surprised if any of them actually intended to pursue her past the little strip tease she was offering. Zane didn't have any interest whatsoever. When he'd looked over to see V staring back at him, Zane recognized the jealousy on her face. Not that he was happy about it, but it told him everything he needed to know.

So walking away from him hadn't been easy for her.

That made two of them.

Standing in the darkened hallway, having to dodge people as they moved in and out of the bathrooms at the end of the hall, Zane wished he could sneak out with V in tow. He wanted to talk to her and he didn't, all at the same time.

“I missed you.”

V's sudden admission wrecked him in ways he hadn't expected. Quite frankly, Zane figured V was going to blow him off in a big way. To hear her admit that she missed him was something his heart hadn't been prepared for it.

Lifting her chin, Zane made her look at him. He stared down at her for a long time, trying desperately to read her intentions. He didn't want to hear what she had to say if she was going to try and brush him off again. Selfish or not, Zane wanted to move forward with her in more ways than one. Not the other way around.

They needed to focus on healing each other, not continuing to try and increase the distance between them.

“Want to get out of here?” He hoped she would say yes, although he knew the party wasn't over. Considering their moods, they probably weren't livening up the party much anyway.

“I can't leave Zoey,” she stated.

Zane merely nodded, then took a step back from her. He knew this wasn't going to go the way he wanted it to and honestly, he was tired of being the one to pursue her. He wanted to be with her. Hell, he'd even considered asking her to marry him, but from the look she was giving him, he was receiving the brush off.

When he went to walk away, V grabbed his arm, and he stopped. He didn't turn to look at her. He couldn't. To hear her tell him it was over would be too much.

"Can we go back to your room when the party is over?" she asked, her hand still on his arm. "To, you know, talk?"

Zane did turn that time. "You want to talk?"

"Yes. There are some things we need to talk about. But, if you'd rather we wait until we get home, I understand that too."

Zane knew they'd be on a plane back to Austin first thing in the morning, but he wasn't sure he could wait that long to talk to her. He needed to though. It wasn't like he could displace Beau for the night anyway. Not that he couldn't share a room with someone else, but Zane didn't want to.

"When we get home." Zane found himself saying. "I'll come to your house when we get back –" Zane held up his hand to stop her when she tried to interrupt. "This isn't up to you right now, V. When we get home tomorrow morning, I'm coming over. We'll talk then. But that's it. We figure it out then, or we both walk away. Understand?"

He was tired of playing games. As much as he hated to think he could very well be ending this relationship as he knew it, Zane wasn't willing to continue moving in circles. For the longest time, he'd thought they were moving forward, at least inch by inch. These last few days had proven that he was wrong. They weren't getting any closer to solving these issues between them. It was time they put the past behind them. Moving forward was his only option from here on out.

Chapter Thirty Two

♂ ♀

By the time Zane was on his way to V's, the day was more than half over. The morning had been hectic, getting to the airport in Vegas, getting on the plane and then finally pulling into his driveway had taken a little over five hours. Truthfully, after the night before, he really just wanted to fall into bed for a couple of hours. After he and V had opted to wait to talk, they'd returned to the party and even though they didn't talk much, they'd managed to liven things up a little.

In true twin fashion, they'd had three more strippers come join the party and no one could ever call Zoey sweet and innocent anymore. She'd helped the strippers tease both Kaleb and Gage, which if no one had known that the three of them were doing the deed together, they sure did now. When Zoey kissed one of the strippers, Zane thought the bar was going to erupt. His dick had sure enjoyed the sight, but thankfully, he drowned his hormones with alcohol.

At one point, Gage and Travis had been talking, and despite the aggressive way they regarded each other, Zane could sense another kind of tension between them. Strange. Very, very strange. He tried to blame it on the vodka, but now he wasn't so sure. Maybe he was just seeing things. After what happened between him and Beau, it was quite possible his mind was playing tricks on him. Just because he had experimented, didn't mean everyone was.

Then again, Zane hadn't imagined what happened between Ethan and Blake. He'd been innocently on his way to the bathroom to take a leak and lo and behold, right there in the hallway, Blake was pressed up against

Ethan, their mouths locked together. Not even a crowbar would've pried those two apart. He pretended not to see anything and went about his business.

What the fuck? Shaking off the thoughts of his brothers with men, Zane focused on driving to V's. Just as a precaution, he'd called Travis and Beau beforehand. Not that he expected anything to happen, but Zane wasn't interested in getting his ass handed to him again. He wasn't feeling one hundred percent at the moment as it was. Being precautious wasn't a bad thing, he reminded himself.

He managed to arrive at V's without incident, making it through her front door without a second thought. When he saw her, his mind blanked, and he could think of nothing except stripping her down right there in the living room and burying himself deep in her body. So deep, she would never be able to run from him again.

"Hey," she greeted, slipping behind him and locking the front door. He knew she thought she was being discrete, but it hadn't worked.

"Hungry?" she asked as she turned back to the kitchen.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, not referring to food. He was hungry all right. He wanted to lift up that dress and feast on what he found underneath. In fact, he fully intended to do so in the next few minutes. If she’d let him.

He followed her to the kitchen and found she’d been passing the time cooking. It smelled delicious. Almost as good as that distinctively spicy fragrance of her skin. His hands itched to touch her, and his mouth watered.

“V.”

The moment she turned to look at him, Zane’s heart pounded hard. A fast, painful thump in his chest. She was so damn beautiful. Her long, chocolate brown hair hanging in waves around her face, flowing over her breasts. The succulent curves that were outlined by that dress. Her feet were bare, which wasn’t usual, and he took a moment, admiring her pretty purple tipped toes. Purple. An unusual color for fingernail polish, but he suddenly loved the color purple.

“Hmmm?”

Her response was but a whisper and he knew she felt it. Whatever it was. She felt it too. He knew she did.

“Tell me what you’re thinking right now,” he told her, not moving from where he stood just a couple of feet away from her.

“What I’m thinking?”

“Yes. Right this minute. What are you thinking?”

“I’m... I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Now tell me.” Zane wasn’t sure what was wrong with him or why he needed to get this out in the open right now, but for some

reason this felt urgent. The need to get their feelings hashed out seemed startlingly important. As though they didn't have enough time.

"I missed you," she said.

"And?"

"And what? Isn't that enough?" V started to turn away from him, but he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"What else? Tell me."

"What about you?" V sounded defensive. "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

"I love you." The words sprang out without conscious thought. They were exactly what he'd been thinking, but maybe not right then. Those three words had been tumbling around on his tongue for quite some time now. He just hadn't known he was going to say them to her. He felt them. Every single syllable was etched into his heart, echoed with each beat, but he had some self-preservation. Or so he thought.

"You do?"

That wasn't what he expected from V. A denial, maybe. An argument, definitely. V was always trying to tell him what he was feeling and so far, she'd always been wrong. This had never been about sex with her. Not since that first night at Jaxson's party. And not one single minute since. He loved her.

"I love you." It was like all other words had vanished from his vocabulary. He only knew those three, and he would have to repeat them over and over until she believed him.

"I love you, too."

Zane grabbed the counter. He hoped he was subtle, but he doubted it. Those words were like a sledgehammer to his heart, knocking the breath from his chest.

“You do?” Now it was his turn for confirmation.

“I do. I’m pretty sure I’ve loved you all along, but I didn’t want to believe it.” V took a step closer, and Zane wondered whether this was the same woman he’d gotten to know these last few months.

“But you believe it now?”

“I know it’s true, yes. I knew the minute I got to my mother’s house that I couldn’t run from you anymore. I couldn’t run from my feelings. But, it’s never been about that. I’ve never wanted to hurt you, Zane. I just want to protect you. I wasn’t able to protect you that day –”

V’s voice faltered, and Zane moved until he was holding her in his arms, his lips pressing against hers. “I’m the one who’s supposed to protect you.”

V pulled back, cupping his face and the smooth, gentle touch of her fingers made him want things he never thought he’d want. “Not true. I’m supposed to protect you just the same. I want to protect you.”

“The best way you can do that is to love me, V.” Zane knew that her love would be all he needed.

“I do love you. I can’t change that, but...”

Zane stopped her again. “No ‘buts’, V. Not this time. Love me. Just like I love you. It’s the only way I know how to go forward from here.” It was true. He was tired of moving backward or sideways. Even his anger for what had happened to him had been sidelined because this woman managed

to fill him with so much more than the anger could ever offer. Loving her was the only thing that mattered.

“I love you,” V muttered, her lips pressing against his.

Zane lifted her onto the counter, stepping between her thighs. “Please tell me you have nothing on underneath this dress. I need to be inside of you. Right now.”

Her smile was radiant. Palming her thigh, Zane ran his hand up her leg until his fingers found the smooth, hairless lips of her pussy.

“Yes, Zane. Please.”

They were at least on the same page. He knew he shouldn't do this here. He should carry her to her bed, make love to her properly, but he couldn't wait. With hurried movements, he freed his erection from his jeans, sliding back between her legs. The counter was too high to make this possible, so he lifted her in his arms, forcing her legs around his waist and sinking his cock into her without further ado.

Turning, he backed her against the kitchen wall, holding her tightly, unable to move as her wet heat pulled him deeper. He groaned, dropping his head to her shoulder, burying his face in her neck as he inhaled her pure, fresh scent.

When her fingers slid into his hair, holding him closer, Zane began to press deeper, barely able to pull back thanks to how close their bodies were, but that was ok. He didn't even need to move. Her body could probably milk a release from him just like this.

“Look at me, Zane.”

He lifted his head reluctantly, staring into those bottomless whiskey brown eyes. It was then that he saw his future flash before his eyes.

Everything revolved around this woman. Every minute of happiness and pain had been spent getting to this moment in his life. This was all for him. She was everything.

“Tell me you love me,” she whispered.

Zane hitched her a little higher, thrusting in deep as he did. When she moaned, her eyes closing briefly, Zane waited until she opened them again. “I love you, Vanessa Carmichael. I love you with everything I am.”

V started pulling him closer by pressing her ankles against his naked ass, and he gave her what she was asking for. With deep, slow thrusts, Zane made love to her. It didn't matter that they were almost fully dressed in her kitchen. This was what making love was all about. Two souls coming together, accepting one another in a way that had never happened before. For either of them.

“I. Love. You.” Zane punctuated each word with a hard thrust. His release was barreling down on him, faster than he expected. “V! Oh, God, baby.”

“I love you, Zane,” V exclaimed, her voice strained, her legs tightening around him.

V's pussy clamped down on him, hard. Her body milking him until his release was inevitable. Pounding into her once, twice, and one final time, Zane gave himself over to her. Not just his body, or his release. He gave every part of himself to her right in that instant.

Chapter Thirty Three

♀ ♂

After the two of them cleaned up, V forced Zane to sit down at her kitchen table. She'd been cooking almost since the second she walked into her house and was looking forward to a few quiet moments.

Instead of sitting in her car panicking, she forced her brain to ignore the pressing thoughts and her body to block out the overwhelming fear that she was consumed with. Once inside, she locked everything up, made sure there weren't any notes on her refrigerator door and she'd taken a quick shower.

Since then, she had worked in the kitchen, cooking until she didn't know what else she could possibly make. It was time she started moving forward. Just like Zane was. She had to stop living in the past, and although she knew these panic attacks weren't entirely at bay, V was ready to rid herself of them. Counseling, as Greyson had suggested, was inevitable. While she'd been making grilled cheese – the comfort food her mother had always fed her in times like this – she'd called the number on the card Greyson had left on her refrigerator. She had her first appointment tomorrow.

While the two of them ate, V explained all of this to Zane, and he asked if he could go with her. She'd agreed to allow him to go along, but she wanted to go the first time by herself. As much as she wanted to lean on him, V knew she had to do this for herself as much as for him. He deserved for her to be whole again, just like he was.

They were doing the dishes together when there was a knock on her front door and V's knees actually gave out. Had Zane not been standing there with her, she'd have fallen to the floor. So much for thinking ahead. Clearly she was still suffering from paranoia. It only took a second for her to get her legs back under her and she headed to the front door, not two steps behind Zane. She wanted to pull him back, put herself between what danger may lurk on the other side of her front door, but he didn't allow it.

To her surprise, evil was not standing on her doorstep. It was Beau, and he looked like he had just run a mile.

"Are you ok?" Zane asked, pulling him inside.

"Shut the door. Give me your phone."

While Zane continued to ask Beau what the hell was going on, Beau ignored him, grabbing V's cell phone from her hand before she had a chance to give it to him.

"They're both in here."

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Zane demanded, grabbing the phone from Beau's hand.

V watched as he listened to the person on the other end of the line, his face void of all emotion.

"Where?"

That was the only question he asked before he hung up the phone.

Zane gripped the doorknob, jerking the front door open before Beau managed to stop him. V heard herself scream his name, that same paralyzing fear surging up from the soles of her feet and extending through every one of her limbs.

“Listen here, you son of a bitch. You want something from me? I’m right here.”

V heard the indignation that dripped from every word out of Zane’s mouth and her body shook. Beau grabbed her, but she yanked out of his grasp, moving to the door.

What was he doing?

God, this couldn’t be happening again. It couldn’t!

That’s when she saw Jake. He was standing on the sidewalk in front of her house, staring across the distance at Zane. She looked around but didn’t see anyone else. Wait. There was someone. Across the street. Her eyes flew back and forth, looking desperately in all of the hidden spots to see who else was lurking there. How many did he bring this time? Could Beau and Zane handle them?

Her heart was beating so fast, she wondered if she would pass out.

“Oh, God.” She knew the words had come out of her mouth, but no one acknowledged her. Not Zane. Not Beau.

Looking past Jake at Zane’s Jeep parked on the street, she saw more feet near the tires. There were at least three people out there, including Jake.

“Breathe, V. Just breathe, honey.” Beau’s voice was strong in her ear. He was still standing behind her, both of them inside the house while Zane was on the front porch.

“Keep her inside,” Zane demanded as he moved down the step.

“No!” she screamed.

“What’s wrong, Vanessa? Worried your little boy toy can’t take another beating?” Jake’s cruel words boomed across the yard.

“I can take anything you can dish out, you bastard.” Zane kept moving forward, and V felt like she was in a glass box, watching the inevitable happen again and unable to stop it.

“Why are you in here? Go out and help him!” she screamed at Beau, trying to break free from his firm grip on her arm.

“If he needs me, I’ll be right there. I promise you.”

What was he talking about? Zane needed him now. There were at least three of them and the others were hiding this time. How many more were there that she couldn’t see? She tried to peer out the door, but she wasn’t close enough to see what might be lurking at the edges of her house.

That’s when she saw a glint of metal in Jake’s hand. There was movement, but V couldn’t tear her eyes off of the... *Oh, God!* Jake was pointing a gun at Zane.

“Not happening this time.”

The voice penetrated V’s brain, but for some reason, it didn’t sound like Zane. Or Jake.

That’s when she realized that the feet behind the Jeep had moved. Another gun. Only this one was pointed directly at Jake’s head, the muzzle pressed against his temple.

Gage.

Everything went black.

The weather was eerily the same as the last time Zane was here. The sky wasn't quite blue, but not quite gray either. A little cooler, maybe.

Ever since he heard Travis' voice on the other end of the phone, he knew what was happening. Walking out on the porch had been a distraction he knew had to happen, only he hoped it didn't end badly. As much as he wanted to tear Jake apart, limb by limb, Zane wasn't willing to lose V again.

He could've embraced the violence racing through his blood, could've confronted Jake and taken his chances, but he knew that wasn't an option anymore. As much as V wanted to protect him, he wanted to protect her even more. Every part of her. Including her heart. He wasn't willing to take a chance that this time he might not come back. Second chances didn't come often, and Zane wasn't willing to ask for another reprieve.

Thanks to Travis, Zane knew exactly what was going down out front. He knew that the legs he could see near the tire of his Jeep belonged to Gage Matthews. He knew the shadow across the street, standing in the hedges belonged to Travis. He was aware that Jake was alone this time.

He was even aware that Jake was packing heat. He was taking a small risk, but he prayed he'd be able to get out of the way if Jake was to pull the gun on him. Which he did.

The man didn't look steady though. And the gun hadn't even made it up level with his face before Gage was on him, the man's Glock level with Jake's temple. He announced the crap that police officers usually greeted suspects with, and Jake surrendered much faster than Zane had expected.

“Zane!”

Beau's voice bellowed from inside the house, and he turned and ran back up the steps, the screen door damn nearing pulled from its hinges as he yanked it open. V was lying in Beau's arms, unconscious.

Her body effortlessly transferred from Beau's arms to his own and Zane carried her back to her bedroom, kicking the door closed with his foot. Laying her on the bed, he settled in beside her, gently shaking her face and talking to her. She passed out, which was understandable, considering all of those panic attacks that had preceded this little event.

"Baby, wake up. V." He continued to talk to her until finally her eyes fluttered and those honey gold eyes peered up at him.

"Everything's ok. I'm right here. Jake –"

"Did Gage kill him?" V questioned, cutting him off midsentence.

"No, baby." Zane chuckled, staring down at her. "Jake's not dead. No one's hurt."

Her arms latched onto his neck, pulling him off balance and Zane fell on top of her, nearly crushing her with his weight.

"I love you. So much. Please, don't ever leave me, Zane. I love you."

"Never, baby. I'm right here. Not going anywhere." Lifting his head up, he looked into her eyes again, grinned. "Unless you want to head on back to Vegas and check out one of those little chapels."

Chapter Thirty Four

♂ ♀

Note to self... Parents do not like finding out their kids all disappeared to Vegas for a bachelor/bachelorette party. At least not the parents whose last names were Walker or Stranford.

That was the main reason there were so many people gathered behind the main Walker house, beneath tents, laughing and joking while Zoey and Kaleb danced. No, this wasn't their first dance – at least, not as husband and wife. That wasn't going to happen for at least a few more weeks.

This little shindig had actually been the brainchild of Curtis and Carl, with a little encouragement from Lorrie – who'd dubbed this Zoey's bridal shower, although the men were invited. Zane's parents had teamed up with Zoey's father to make sure this celebration was done correctly. It was significantly toned down from the party in Vegas, but, if he had to say so himself, this was much more to his liking.

First of all, there were no strippers.

Thank God for that.

Secondly, Lorrie and V had done Zoey right. There were hoards of ladies present, all bringing gifts for the bride to be. Even Regina was present and as soon as V recognized her mother was there, she'd almost cried. That little dog of hers was managing to drum up more attention than the bride to be though.

No one seemed to mind.

“Honey, can you go inside and grab some more punch? Oh, and a few more of those glasses?”

Zane nodded at his mother as he turned on his heel to go into the house. Those little glasses his mother referred to actually said “Zoey’s Bachelorette Party” on them. She’d thought it funny when she ordered them, considering. He didn’t understand the joke, but he didn’t question his mother either.

Once inside, Zane maneuvered around the couple of ladies in the kitchen who were working diligently to get more food prepared to take outside. Other than the clang of forks and knives, the house was silent, which was a little surprising.

Or, maybe not.

The sound of two male voices came from down the hallway that led to the stairs, and Zane looked back at the women in the kitchen. Either they didn’t hear the heated argument, or they were pretending not to. Either way, Zane wasn’t about to let anyone ruin this day for Kaleb and Zoey, so he closed the refrigerator and moved down the hall at a fast clip.

“It will happen again, I told you that.”

Zane heard Travis’ voice loud and clear. He stuck his head just inside the doorway to the small office his parents rarely used. Travis had Gage pressed up against the wall. It appeared that they were arguing. Based on what he heard, Travis was probably angry at how the whole Jake Sanders ordeal went down. Not that Zane could blame him. If he’d had a say in the matter, Jake would’ve been arrested long before he had a chance to pull a gun on anyone.

What happened next told Zane that these two men weren’t in any way talking about Zane or anyone else. As quietly as he could, Zane pivoted on his boot heel and took off down the hall.

Absolutely none of his fucking business.

♂ ♂

Travis couldn't help himself. Gage had cornered him unexpectedly, more than a little pissed off that he'd completely blown the cop's cover in order to save his brother's life. He'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Whether Gage was trying to push his buttons or not, Travis couldn't resist what he was about to do. He'd pushed him up against the wall and was gripping his chin in one hand, making sure Gage was well aware of his intent. The night of that damn party in Vegas, Travis sat back, silently watching as Gage got all touchy feely with Zoey, undoubtedly with Kaleb's permission. It was as though he was taunting him. Travis had promised himself the next time he got Gage alone, he wasn't going to hold back.

They may not have as much privacy as he'd hoped for, but this would have to do. For now.

"It will happen again, I told you that," Travis told the cop, but he wasn't referring to Jake Sanders or the clusterfuck that happened a few days ago.

No, he was talking about this.

Travis slammed his mouth down on Gage's. Hard. No holds barred. He thrust his tongue into the other man's mouth, his body surging to life as soon as Gage returned the kiss. He'd been waiting for this ever since that first time in his office. He was counting down the minutes until what happened the next time he got Gage alone. By themselves or with a woman between them, Travis didn't give a shit. He wanted this man. Fiercely.

Sliding one hand between them, Travis palmed Gage's dick through his jeans, making the other man moan into his mouth.

When they broke apart, primarily for air, but partly due to the fact that Travis wasn't interested in an audience, he stared down into those dark, swirling brown eyes. "Will. Happen. Again."

With that, he pressed his own iron hard length against Gage's before taking a step back. He'd have blue balls before the night was out, especially if he had the pleasure of watching Gage for long. It was something he was just going to have to deal with.

At least for now.

♀ ♂

V stood on the edge of the makeshift dance floor, watching Kaleb and Zoey maneuver so effortlessly to the music. Regina was also out there, this time dancing with Sawyer, who'd somehow convinced her mother to dance with him. She'd been reluctant, but finally gave in. Most women were helpless against the Walker charm.

V was so happy her mother came, and she was almost beside herself when she saw that Regina did not bring a date. According to her mother, there were no dates in her near future. She was quite content with Buttercup. Not that she wanted her mother to be alone, but she knew time was the only thing that could alleviate some of the emotional pain she'd been dealing with over the years. V made sure her mother knew she was there if she ever wanted to talk.

V turned her attention to Lorrie and Curtis who were smiling at one another like teenagers in love. She could only hope that one day, she'd have what those two had. With seven sons, they were brimming with love for every one of their boys, as well as each other. It was hard not to watch them and hope that she'd find that one day.

“Care to dance?”

Zane's beautiful baritone broke into her thoughts, and V turned to smile at him. Taking the proffered hand, V let him lead her out to the middle of the floor and settled into his arms like she was born to fit there.

“One of these days, you're going to have a party like this, you know?” Zane spoke close to her ear, and V let the warmth of his breath wash over her.

“Maybe one day,” she replied, smiling into his shirt. She was through running from this man.

“Maybe?” Zane pulled away from her, effectively separating their bodies.

V looked up at him. He looked serious. Was he hurt? She hadn't meant anything by it.

That's when she noticed that people around them had stopped dancing. Oh, no. She did not want to be the one to ruin this party.

“I didn't mean –”

Zane cut her off with a press of his fingers against her lips, only seconds before he dropped to one knee on the plywood floor beneath him.

“Vanessa Carmichael, as long as the day will come, I'm willing to be patient. As long as there aren't any maybes in our future, I'm not going to

rush you. However, until that day comes, I'm not willing to wait one more second without that promise."

V looked at him, confused. Promise?

"Will you marry me? I don't care if it's tomorrow, or a year from now. I just need you to promise me that you'll be with me for the rest of my life. It's the only thing I want in this world. I love you."

V's vision blurred as the tears formed in her eyes, threatening to spill over her lashes.

"Marry me."

Zane's final demand made her smile. He knew her so well. Those submissive tendencies were hard to deny. Even now.

"Yes," she whispered, and the cool metal that slid over the third finger on her left hand stole her breath.

Clapping ensued, and before Zane could even get to his feet, V found herself wrapped in Zoey's arms. Her best friend was smiling, and there might've even been a tear or two.

"I'm so happy for you!" Zoey exclaimed.

V noticed all of the people standing around them, clapping and smiling. "This was supposed to be your day," V whispered to Zoey.

"Oh, honey. It is my day. It couldn't have gotten any better if it'd been planned."

Before the tears could leak from her eyes any more, Kaleb swept Zoey up in his arms, making her laugh as he began two stepping around the dance floor with her once again, leaving V to be pulled into Zane's arms.

“And just so you know, I did ask permission. From your mother and Kaleb and Zoey. I wasn’t going to ruin this day for anyone, baby, but it was time. Way past time, actually.”

When Zane pressed his lips to hers, V felt her heart heal just a little more. It’d been doing that.

With each minute that passed, the fissures he’d made in those invisible walls she’d erected so long ago continued to get bigger while the little cracks in her heart continued to get smaller.

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Epilogue

♂ ♀

Three months later...

Zane was pretty sure the weather had been handpicked for this very day. There was absolutely no way they'd have been able to come up with a good enough reason to duck out on Kaleb's important day. As if the penguin suits they'd donned just a few weeks ago hadn't been punishment enough, Zane and his brothers had been summoned to help Kaleb and Zoey move into their new house. The man was racking up a shitload of IOU's, and when those get multiplied by six, Zane was pretty sure Kaleb was going to be in their debt for quite some time.

"What the hell are you doing?" Travis' irritated growl erupted from just outside of the moving truck. Zane didn't bother to turn around.

"Lift," Zane instructed Beau who had also been wrangled to help out – by Zane directly. There was no way he was going this alone. As it was, V was already inside helping Zoey unpack boxes just as quickly as they were being delivered.

Zane backed down the ramp, one end of the heavy sectional couch hoisted up to his chest in order to keep Beau from having to lean down. Once they were on the ground, Zane continued toward the house, Travis following close behind.

It wasn't that he was purposely ignoring his oldest brother, but quite frankly, the man was beginning to get on his nerves. Ever since Gage disappeared about two and a half months ago, apparently off on one of his super-secret jobs, Travis hadn't been himself. It spoke volumes about the

man, although after witnessing what he had that one day, Zane wasn't about to say a word. None of his business. He still wasn't sure why Travis was in such a lousy mood. It wasn't like he and Gage got along on the best of terms when the man was in town anyway.

Ever since they actually started breaking ground on the resort, Travis had been directly involved with the resort and almost completely stepped out of the Walker Demo business altogether. That's where their cousin Jaxson came in. He'd stepped up to manage the business side of the demolition company since Kaleb and Sawyer were both splitting their time between the two.

Once Zane and Beau made it up the front steps, Braydon was directly behind them holding open the screen door so they could maneuver the oversized furniture inside. Two minutes later, they had it situated where Zoey instructed and were heading back out to the truck.

"He's on his way back," Zoey was saying to Kaleb, but Zane tried his best to ignore their conversation. Truthfully, he just wanted to get this truck load emptied so he could sit back on the rest of his day off with a beer and maybe a little relaxing time with V.

"When?" The voice that interrupted Zoey's conversation belonged to none other than Travis, and that made Zane smile.

The man had a serious hang up with Gage Matthews. It was comical actually. Considering Travis had been visiting Dallas more and more frequently these days, Zane was beginning to wonder whether the man actually was involved with someone up there. Based on his reaction to Gage's whereabouts, that might not be the case.

"Ready to finish this off?" Zane glanced over at Beau as they headed back down the front steps toward the moving truck that was thankfully

about three quarters emptied at this point. That didn't seem like nearly enough since they'd been going at this moving thing for the better part of four hours now. Even with Braydon, Brendon, Ethan and Blake helping out, they didn't seem to be going as fast as Zane had hoped.

"You up for a beer when we're done?" Zane asked Beau as he walked up the sturdy metal ramp that ended on the wooden floor of the twenty six foot moving truck. He still had no idea where the hell Kaleb had kept all the shit he'd managed to fill inside the truck. There were only two of them, yet Zane had moved enough furniture to fill a four bedroom house.

"Can't," Beau answered, lifting one end of a hulking wooden dresser that Zane had never seen before.

Hefting the other end, Zane glanced over at Beau. "Why the hell not?"

Thankfully, their relationship hadn't changed at all, even after that one night of experimentation. It hadn't happened again, not so much as a hand job during their threesomes, but Zane could feel Beau starting to pull away. He hated that it was like that, but he just didn't have the same feelings for Beau that his best friend seemed to have for him.

"Date," Beau smiled, and Zane almost stumbled right out of the truck.

"With who?" He didn't mean for so much disbelief to lace his words, but as far as he knew, Beau hadn't dated anyone in quite some time.

"Not saying." Beau smiled.

"What the fuck? You're going on a date, and you're not even going to tell me who you're going out with?"

"Not yet. I'll see how it goes, then I'll let you know."

Zane wasn't going to push him. Right now, he didn't have the energy to do much of anything except make it up the steps into the house for what felt like the hundredth time that day. He was dripping with sweat even though the brisk breeze and sixty degree temperature should have been keeping him cool.

After lugging the damn dresser up to the second floor, Zane was once again descending the stairs, his thighs and back screaming in agony from all the moving. The sight of his beautiful fiancé took his mind off of his worries almost as quickly as they'd come on.

Damn, the woman just got more beautiful by the day. Today she was sporting a pair of short jean shorts and one of his sweatshirts, her hair piled into a haphazard mess on top of her head, and she looked so fucking gorgeous, he wanted to sneak her up to that extra bedroom the twins had been working to set up.

Before he had the chance to make the suggestion, the front door opened and in walked Gage Matthews. The room suddenly went quiet, all of the movement silenced immediately as everyone turned to look at the man standing in the doorway. It wasn't like they were all that surprised to see him.

No, that wasn't it at all.

Zane was pretty sure everyone was more interested to learn exactly who the stunning blonde on his arm was. He noticed that her facial expression went from surprise to murderous in three seconds flat. Now she looked like she was ready to take his head off with her bare hands.

“Sonuvabitch.” That one word growl pierced the eerie silence and had everyone turning to look directly at the man who spoke. The one who looked more pissed off than any of them had probably ever seen him. And

that was saying something. Travis looked like his head might just explode right off of his powerful shoulders.

Zane just wanted to make sure he was nowhere in the near vicinity when that happened.

“Travis?”

Zane’s head shot back over to the doorway, along with several others in the room. Why did it sound like that blonde woman not only knew who Travis was, but there was something else in her tone. Something way too familiar.

“Fuck.” That was Travis’ only response.

Well, that probably said it all.

♂ ♀

Gage stared blankly at Travis, ensuring his face remained expressionless. The recognition in the man’s eyes was exactly the response Gage was going for when he made the decision that morning to come back home to Coyote Ridge.

One thing he prided himself on was his ability to do his job. Not only could he protect those he cared about, he also had an uncanny ability to uncover dirt that other people tried desperately to hide. Travis’ dirt was hidden better than most. In fact, it had taken Gage almost a month, but he’d finally accomplished what he set out to. Gage had finally found what Travis apparently didn’t want anyone else to know about.

Gage only had one question...

If Travis was looking to bury his past, why hadn't the man ever gotten a divorce?

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With all of the support that I receive through the various social media sites that I probably spend way too much time on, it's still difficult to sit down and list out the amazing people who inspire me and keep me sane most of the time, but I'm going to try.

Many of you are familiar with my amazing husband, the man who supports me no matter how many times he finds me talking to myself, trying to hash out a scene or figure out what a character is actually trying to say. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here today. He is my best friend and my soul mate and he deserves more credit than I can ever relay.

For the bloggers who have become such an important part of my life because of their support and their kindness, I just want to say, thank you. There are so many and I'm afraid to leave anyone out, but you know who you are.

Denise, throughout the last few books I have written, you have been there to inspire me *wink* and I will never be able to thank you enough for your time and your support. Thank you.

And my fans, above all else, you make this all worth it. Each and every email brings a smile to my face and I thank you for taking the time out of your day to send kind words my way.

Thank you!!!!

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Infatuation
A **Club Destiny** Novel

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Erotic Romance – intended for mature audiences

McKenna Thorne, owner of Sensations, Inc. – an online magazine geared toward libidinous carnality and erotic lifestyles - is intimately familiar with the lifestyle that the Club Destiny club is famous for. As a journalist, she's interested in understanding just what makes the swinger's club so popular. When she comes face to face with Tag Murphy, the sophisticated, sexy attorney representing the club and its owners, she finds a new reason to be curious. It only takes one encounter for McKenna to realize the heat the two of them generate together is hot enough to melt her internal thermostat. That doesn't stop her from requesting an exclusive on the club that might just turn into more than she bargained for.

Tag Murphy, a highly successful corporate attorney who represents some of Dallas' wealthiest companies is not only Club Destiny's legal counsel, he's also a member. It's during his time in the public spotlight, representing the club in a volatile lawsuit against one of its former members, that Tag gets his first glimpse of a fiery red headed journalist bent on exploiting his personal life for the benefit of her readers. In order to protect his own personal interest, and that of the club he represents, Tag decides to take McKenna up on her offer, only he adds his own stipulations. If she wants to learn more about the club, she's going to get the guided tour – from him.

Will the two of them be able to overcome their own personal issues as well as those they find themselves in the midst of? Or will their

independent, stubborn personalities force them to keep their distance?

Erotic Romance

Mature Audiences

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Chapter One

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With a slew of reporters standing around, looking to pick up the tiniest bit of news that they could exploit, Tag Murphy did his best to appear unaffected as he made his way through the crowd. Although he wasn't Sierra's lawyer, Tag was still representing Club Destiny and felt it necessary to be present in the event Luke needed anything. As it turned out, he had. This was just part of his job that he wasn't all that fond of.

He didn't have any problem being the necessary distraction that would keep the media at bay temporarily for Sierra's sake, but he'd rather be doing just about anything else. If Susan Toulmin's rant of lunacy was anything to go by, the tactic appeared to be working.

Tag spared a glance at the immaculately dressed woman coming out of the courtroom spouting all kinds of crazy shit. As much as he'd like to be surprised, sadly, he was not. He didn't expect anything less from her today, especially after the judge finally ruled in favor of Sierra Sellers.

He might have to endure a microphone or two that came just a little too close for comfort, but it was the least he could do to keep the attention from Sierra who was now being escorted out through the side entrance by Luke and Cole. Better him than Luke McCoy that was for damn sure.

"Mr. Murphy," a microphone was jammed toward his face, "is it true that, not only do you represent Club Destiny, but you're also a member?"

Tag couldn't count the number of times he had heard that exact question in the last couple of weeks. And just like every other time, he ignored it and continued making his way through the hordes of people mulling about.

Another microphone.

Another question.

“No comment,” Tag said as he shouldered his way through, only this time, something – or rather *someone* – caught his eye.

Stopping abruptly, his feet unwilling to continue, Tag searched the faces around him until his gaze narrowed on one woman. The same woman who had caught his eye every day for a solid month and captivated his thoughts for even longer.

McKenna Thorne.

After their first run in, Tag had spent the better part of an afternoon digging for more information on the titillating red head now standing just two feet away wielding a microphone and a seductive smile. The microphone he didn't mind, but the smile was more than just an intriguing tilt of her full, red lips. It was a dare.

His persistent research gave Tag quite a bit of information on the tremendously successful journalist. She wasn't just any journalist though. McKenna was a relentless, highly admired entrepreneur who owned Sensations, Inc., a well-known online magazine geared toward swingers and the sexually taboo. In recent weeks, thanks to the loose lips of Susan Toulmin, McKenna's magazine had received more than its fair share of recognition.

He knew better than to provoke the intriguing McKenna. Not because he worried his life would become fodder for her daily newsfeed, but because, quite frankly, Tag wasn't sure how far his control could be stretched, and the vibrant red head, with her teasing smile and come-hither stare, seemed to realize that.

“Is it true, Mr. Murphy,” McKenna drawled in that sexy, raspy voice that was better suited for phone sex than an interview in his opinion, “that you’re representing Luke and Logan McCoy in their newest business venture? Investing in a mega resort catering to the uber wealthy and their kinky obsessions?”

Tag made sure his expression didn’t change as he continued to stare into the most exotically intense eyes he’d ever seen on a human being. From a distance, her eyes appeared to be as crystal blue as the waters of the Caribbean, but up close, less than a foot between them, he could see that McKenna’s eyes weren’t blue, or green, or brown, but a combination of all three. The iris consisted of a thin band of brown, encapsulated by a thicker ring of green, surrounded by an unusually bright teal blue. He didn’t even think they could be called a specific color.

Her eyes weren’t her only feature that Tag found appealing. Ever since the first day, outside of the exact same courthouse where they stood now, he’d been consumed by thoughts of her. It wasn’t just the smooth perfection of her porcelain skin, her cute little nose, her luscious mouth or all of those sinful curves that made men turn and watch while she walked away. McKenna had a confident sophistication about her, and when she had said his name that day, he’d been a goner.

His body hadn’t known the type of lust she inspired for quite some time; an inferno of passion and need that all but consumed him. Only Tag was a smart man, and he’d been taught at a remarkably young age not to play with fire. And he sensed this woman was as fiery as the long, silky tresses upswept at the back of her head.

“No. Comment.” Tag offered McKenna his signature statement and a sardonic grin, then turned and moved through the crowd. Had it not been

for his momentary pause, he might've been able to avoid what came next.

“Mr. Murphy!” The voice rang out, all too familiar, and more than a little irritating. “Don't you think it's time you came clean with the nice people of this city?”

Why couldn't the woman just keep her damned mouth shut?

Tag initially found Susan's insistence on representing herself highly amusing, but it hadn't taken long before she proved not only to him, but the judge as well, that she was unquestionably bat shit crazy. Now, apparently, she was out to ensure the world knew it too.

He turned slowly, dreading the confrontation that had been a long time coming.

“Ms. Toulmin,” Tag greeted her politely, although he should've ignored her.

With Luke McCoy, on behalf of Club Destiny, in the process of suing Susan for violation of a binding contract, Tag knew better than to invite trouble if he could avoid it.

Susan's reaction to Sierra's relationship with Luke and Cole came as a bit of a shock to the three of them. She made good on her promise to sue Sierra for misrepresentation of her design experience, although Susan's retaliation was obviously due to her intense feelings for Luke and Cole. Tag knew for a fact that Sierra had wished she never laid eyes on the high maintenance, demanding attorney, so today's outcome had to be a welcome relief.

“When are you going to let these people know what Club Destiny is truly all about? The lewd and repulsive acts that go on behind closed doors?”

Funny how the woman didn't find the club lewd and repulsive when she had been the one being nailed to the wall by one or more members of the club during her frequent weekly visits.

Tag raised his eyebrows as if to question Susan, knowing full well she was continuing to dig herself a deeper hole every time she chose to open her mouth.

He sometimes, like now, had trouble understanding what made the woman snap. Tag liked Luke McCoy well enough, but seriously? Could Luke have been that good in bed that the instant Susan felt he wasn't hers to have any longer she went off the deep end? Shit, he'd engaged in some seriously intense sex in his lifetime, but no one had ever pushed him to his limits.

Then again, Tag never allowed himself to consider anyone *his* the way Susan mistakenly did. There might have been a relationship or two that Tag considered exclusive, but with those partners, they agreed up front and they knew full well what he was and was not interested in.

When it was over, it was over.

Another reason he liked the recent nontraditional aspect to his relationships. He was content with being a third because it allowed him the freedom he craved while also giving him the monogamy – for lack of a better word – that he desired. However, his current relationship status stood at single because he didn't have time for anything else. Or at least that's what he told himself.

For a solid month, Tag had managed to avoid Logan and Samantha McCoy's requests for him to join them in their infrequent rendezvous' because... well, because of *her*. The sinfully beautiful woman, dressed in black, from head to toe, pinning him with those exquisite eyes; the same

one standing behind Susan Toulmin, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth in another attempt to fuck with him.

Instead of responding to either woman, Tag turned around, and this time successfully escaped the throng of reporters eager to sling mud all over the front pages of whatever magazine or newspaper they represented.

Including McKenna Thorne.

If she knew what was best for her, she'd back off before she bit off more than she could chew.

~*~*~

McKenna watched as the extremely fine specimen known as Tag Murphy slowly disappeared from sight, appearing to be swallowed whole by the throng of reporters jumping for the chance to catch that one golden ticket comment that would rocket their career to stardom.

She didn't move until she couldn't see his sexy as hell bald head any longer. What she wouldn't give just to follow him. Thankfully, she had been blessed with enough common sense to know better.

From the moment she laid eyes on him nearly two months earlier, McKenna realized Tag was one she didn't want to mess with. Yet, she was captivated by him. Totally enthralled with every facet of the man to the point she was all but stalking him on the internet, digging up as much information about him as she could, and absorbing it as fast as possible. It was a good thing that was her job, or she might be a little worried about her own sanity.

Oh, hell, who was she kidding? She *was* a little worried.

She found some consolation in the fact that Tag Murphy considered her the enemy; therefore, thwarting any chance of her getting close to the man. Little did he know, McKenna was the least he had to worry about. But, it was easier to accept his aversion to her than risk the chance of facing him one on one again.

Their impromptu introduction a couple of months before had left her reeling. Similar to her intentions today, McKenna had been at the courthouse in hopes of speaking to Tag in regard to his personal take on the trial. Considering he wasn't representing Sierra, she had been hoping to get his opinion on a future outcome.

From the moment she asked the question, McKenna had been caught up in the mesmerizing intensity of his beautiful green eyes. He never did fully answer her, but something else had transpired between them that day. Something McKenna thought about often in the days since.

In recent days, she'd acquired a few juicy tidbits of information about the sexy lawyer that she was tempted to share with her readers, but for some reason, she felt it necessary to keep those intricate secrets to herself. After all, she hadn't become successful by exploiting people. No, her readers had come to love her online magazine for her insight and her honesty. But, just like any other journalist worth their salt, McKenna had learned how to get the information she needed.

That was her job, and she was good at it.

Although, it didn't explain why she couldn't get her mind off of him and hadn't been able to for longer than she cared to admit.

Tag Murphy was sex personified, and she could only imagine what he'd be like between the sheets. Not that she would ever find out, but she could have fun pretending for a little while.

Her attention was pulled to the woman standing next to her, feeding a line of unsubstantiated bullshit into one of the lingering microphones. McKenna already knew what the bitter Susan Toulmin had to say. Same thing she always did.

According to Susan, the club Luke owned was one that dealt in raunchy, indecent acts of debauchery that were often orgiastic in nature. She continued to taunt the media by threatening to mention names of supposedly prominent members of society who frequented the club. However, whenever asked about her own membership, Susan often backtracked, hinting that she hadn't realized what she was signing up for at the time she applied, was accepted and then paid the outrageously expensive membership fee.

McKenna knew she should be interested because, at some point, Susan was going to slip up. She just had an issue with taking her at her word because no one had the lowdown on the legendary Club Destiny, which meant there wasn't enough proof for her even to hint at a story and feel good about it. She was curious though.

Figuring the day was already shot, McKenna switched off her microphone and turned to go. She didn't need to hear any more, and if she was honest, she didn't come to hear Ms. Toulmin speak in the first place.

Her real reason for coming had just walked away.

Grabbing her cell phone from her pocket, McKenna dialed her assistant's number, wondering whether she was any more successful in getting information from Sierra or Luke.

"Whisper?" McKenna greeted when her assistant answered the phone.

Yes, her assistant's name was Whisper, and no one knew whether that was her birth name, or if she'd changed it along the way. No matter what, the name didn't suit her at all. McKenna was pretty sure the term "quiet" wasn't even in the woman's vocabulary.

"Hey, Mac? You have any luck?" McKenna barely heard her assistant over the sound of a hundred voices speaking at one time, so she waited until she emerged on the other side of the group huddled closer and closer to the mouth at the microphone.

"No luck on my end," McKenna said, thinking back on that smoldering hot look Tag had gifted her with seconds before he turned his back on her. "How about you?"

Any good reporter knew that Sierra Sellers was going to escape through the back doors of the courthouse while a diversion had been set up out front. McKenna had known, but she had also opted to take her chances on that diversion being Tag.

"No, Sierra wouldn't talk and the glares I received from those muscles on her arm had me backing off. I'm not an idiot, you know."

McKenna laughed. Whisper might've been the loudest, most obnoxious woman she'd ever met – and she meant that in the most endearing way possible – but at least she knew when to back off.

Most of the time.

"I'll meet you back at the office. I've got something I want to write up for tomorrow's blog," McKenna told Whisper as she headed to her car. "Don't worry, it's nothing juicy, but I figure it's not a bad idea to dangle the carrot every now and again."

“McKenna.” Whisper managed to drawl her name into way more than three syllables, which she recognized as a warning.

“Oh, hush. I’ve got this one covered,” McKenna told Whisper.

“You’re going to push that man too far, honey. I can feel it.”

McKenna’s sole objective these days seemed to be finding more and more ways to push him. The man was too self-controlled for his own good. She wanted to rough him up a little bit, and this little stunt just might get her what she wanted.

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