

COME HERE.

ANGEL

Trapped with
MR. WALKER

ELLE NICOLL

Trapped with Mr. Walker

Elle Nicoll

Rose Hope Publishing

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Cover Design: Abigail at Pink Elephant Designs

Cover Photograph: Ren Saliba

Formatting: Atticus

Editing: The Word Emporium

Proofreading: Heart Full of Reads

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Author Note

This book contains explicit language and sex scenes, as well as reference to sexual assault and suicide.

It is recommended for adult readers only.

To everyone who wants a hero who fights for his girl

x

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Chapter One



Harley

“MY WIFE DOESN’T UNDERSTAND me.”

I pull my best sympathetic face as I nod and listen to the man I’ve dubbed Mr. Gas Station. I know the type—lavishes his mistresses with expensive meals out and perfume, while his wife, who is probably at home right now tucking his kids up into bed, gets discounted flowers from the gas station on their anniversary because he was too busy being an unfaithful pig to remember.

“Really? That must be so difficult for you.” I lower my voice and rest my chin in my hand on top of the bar. “And I bet you work so hard, too.”

His eyes drop to my cleavage, and he puffs his chest out in his suit and nods like the pompous ass he is. “I do. I work very hard, and I like to... relax whenever I can. I think it’s important, don’t you?”

His eyes roam over my figure-hugging dress as he trails the back of one finger over the bare skin on my upper arm.

“Oh, it’s so important.” I smile and let out a practiced giggle as he fails to hide the fact that he’s leering over my breasts again.

“Why don’t you and I... see if we can help each other relieve some tension? I have a room booked a few blocks away.”

I bet you do.

“Really? You want to... um...” I bite my lip, knowing what it does to guys like him. As if on cue, his eyes drop to my lips as I lean closer. “You want to head out now? Together?”

Just as an added touch, I smooth my hands down over my lap, and the movement has his eyes dropping to my legs. He places his clammy hand over mine and pats.

“I do. It’ll be fun, baby.”

Baby. Yuck.

I plaster a seductive smile on my face and slide off the bar stool. He stands, but I place one hand on his chest and nudge him back into his seat. I’ve got the evidence I came for, secretly recorded on a hidden camera disguised as a pin badge on my dress. I don’t want to stay a second longer than I have to.

“Oh, I’m sure we can have lots of fun together. Let me visit the restroom quickly first.”

The smooth smile that crosses his face, thinking he has me, sends sourness spreading over my tongue and down my throat.

Cheating asshole.

I know for a fact his name isn’t Greg, as he introduced himself to me. It’s Grant. And he’s a married father of three who works in real estate, whose wife suspects he can’t keep his dick in his pants. And unfortunately, she’s right.

They always are.

Of all the honey traps I've done for the agency, not one has ever been a wife, fiancée, or girlfriend being paranoid. Every single man I've been sent a brief on has been more than happy to try and persuade me to keep him company for the evening. One even wanted to fly me to the south of France for a weekend on his yacht.

Cheating pigs, every single one.

I cross the bar toward the restrooms, glancing back to make sure Mr. Gas Station isn't watching me, and then I dart out of the main door and take a quick right, striding along the sidewalk.

It's late. Later than I would have liked the trap to run, but Mr. Gas Station/Cheating Pig isn't exactly punctual. The agency told me which bar he goes to after work on a Thursday to hook up when he's told his wife he's working late on viewings in the city. I don't know; maybe before he came to the bar he was showing someone an over-priced shoebox in Manhattan, convincing them they could fit a king-size bed in and still open the bathroom door. Whatever the reason, it means I'm now late. Too late to use the subway and walk the six blocks at the other end to my apartment alone. Mr. Gas Station is costing me money I can't afford to spend on things like cabs. But I promised Dad I would never walk alone at night this late unless it was somewhere busy. He always drummed it into me and my sister as kids, and my brother, too. But it's not the same for guys. They can usually walk alone at night without fearing for their safety at the hands of the men around them.

I shake off my thoughts as a familiar tightening invades my chest, then I raise my arm to the traffic. A cab sails straight past me, so I keep walking as I look for another.

“Hey, Julia! Where are you going?”

I halt in the middle of the sidewalk for the briefest second that it takes to register Mr. Gas Station's voice growing louder from somewhere behind me.

"Julia," he says again, his clammy fingers circling my forearm and holding me just a little *too* tight. "You aren't skipping out on me, are you?"

I dart my eyes to the black car that's just pulled up alongside us; its rear door already opening as someone exits.

I turn and smile sweetly. "I'm so sorry, Greg." *Grant. Lying cheat.* "Something's come up, and I need to head off."

"And you weren't going to tell me before you left?" His fingers haven't stopped gripping my arm, and the glassiness in his eyes tells me he's probably had more to drink than I initially thought.

"I'm sorry, it was very last minute." I place my hand on his wrist and tug my arm free. "Our chat was very special, though, so thank you. Have a good night."

I turn away, but he grabs me again. "Julia, wait—"

"There you are," a deep voice booms with more than a hint of irritation in its clipped tone.

I look up straight into fiery eyes. To say they're amber wouldn't be quite right, yet they aren't chocolate or hazel, either. More of a—I narrow my eyes as I study them—smoky quartz. A captivating gray with a hint of gold.

Unfortunately, for all their beauty, I know their owner too well.

"Yes. Here I am." I give a tight smile, wondering which is the lesser of two evils—grabby Mr. Gas Station, or the owner of the deep voice in front of me.

"And you are?" Grant moves closer behind me, and I close my eyes momentarily, swallowing in disgust as his hot, sour breath hits the back of

my neck.

“Reed Walker.”

He leans around me, all expensive cologne and designer suit, somehow maneuvering me at the same time so that he’s now positioned between me and Grant as he extends his hand. The corners of Grant’s eyes pinch as he shakes it warily. With the subtlest pull of his arm, Reed has Grant almost tripping over his own feet as he jerks him closer.

“Your night’s over. She’s coming with me,” Reed says in a slow, commanding voice.

“Julia, who is this jerk?” Grant peers around Reed’s broad frame at me. His shoulder spasms and his left eye twitches, his hand still firmly wrapped in the tight handshake. Reed, the bastard, is standing cool and unaffected. There’s no question about who is controlling this situation.

Reed tips his chin over his shoulder toward me, the streetlight illuminating his smooth jaw.

“Julia?” He raises one mahogany brow questioningly and lets go of Grant’s hand. Grant immediately draws it in to his body, cradling it protectively. “Yes, that’s my name.” I shuffle my feet nervously, willing him not to say anything to contradict it. Having an extra evening job as a honey trapper isn’t ideal, but I need the money. The last thing I need is for the agency to find out that a client discovered my real identity. It’s their biggest no-no. I’ll have my ass fired faster than Grant is willing to drop his pants for a stranger.

Reed turns his attention back to Grant. “I’m *Julia*’s boss. And we have a work emergency. So, if you don’t mind.”

I glance at Reed, masking the surprise on my face. He’s not my boss. But I’m impressed he thought of that so quickly and is making a fine job of

being convincing.

“No, no. Go ahead.” Grant’s voice pitches as he backs away.

He gives my breasts a final, parting leer as Reed glares at him. And then he turns and walks off.

I wait until he’s disappeared back inside the bar before turning my attention back to the man radiating heat like a furnace next to me.

“Thank you, but I was fi—”

Reed turns to me, unleashing the full effect of his glare on me. Golden flecks blaze in his eyes as he stares down at me, his broad frame towering above me.

“Don’t tell me you were fine. Who the hell was that asshole? Why did he have his hands all over you? And do I even want to know why was he calling you Julia?”

He does this. Shows up all the time when I’m busy trying to work at my day job as the PA for Griffin Parker, the owner of The Songbird hotel, New York’s most prestigious hotel, in prime position facing Central Park. But I’ve never seen him when I’m honey trapping. He’s either following me or this is the world’s weirdest coincidence.

I cross my arms over my chest in defiance. “That’s none of your business. And he didn’t have his hands anywhere.”

His jaw ticks, tension taking over his face as strands of his warm brown hair fall forward. “His hand was on your arm.”

I follow Reed’s accusing gaze to the faint red mark that’s fading on my skin.

“It’s nothing.”

“Did you really start doing it?” His eyes are back on my face, and I can feel their heat trying to penetrate me. Trying to unravel me until I spill my

secrets.

This is another thing he does. What he's good at. You don't get to where he is in politics without a knack for knowing when people are bullshitting you.

I made the mistake of telling him once—so long ago I'm shocked he remembers—that I was considering signing up to a honey trapping agency to help me pay the extortionate Manhattan rent prices. I explained that I could live off the island and commute to work every day, but then I wouldn't be available as easily at The Songbird if there was something urgent Griffin needed help with. Well, that's the reason I gave Reed; I couldn't tell him the real reason I needed the extra money.

He looked so angry when I mentioned it—like he was about to tear someone's head off.

Kind of like the way he looks now.

“That's none of your business,” I snap.

“Harley...” He draws out my name so it sounds like a warning. “I thought Griffin gave you a pay increase. Are you that short of money that you have to meet up with jerks like that?”

I roll my eyes and huff. “Griffin might be your best friend. But that's still none of your damn business. And as my boss, he shouldn't be sharing things like that with you.”

He doesn't even flinch, just parts his lips, answering in a beat. “He didn't. I heard you talking on the phone to your mom last time I came by the office.”

I close my mouth and frown at him.

Nosey ass.

I didn't use to see much of Reed. He lived in LA, working as the deputy mayor. I would just hear his voice on the other end of the phone whenever he called to speak with Griffin. They are lifelong friends ever since they went to some posh, snooty boys' school together.

But then the phone calls turned into visits, each one longer than the last. And ever since the New York press went hungry hyena, batshit crazy over a huge scandal at the New York Mayor's office nine months ago, resulting in the previous mayor quitting, Reed has been around more.

Too much more.

And now he's running in the election to be the next Mayor of New York. A role, which, if he wins, means he will be around indefinitely. Not that it affects me. I mean, except for when he comes to visit Griffin at work all the time and I hear the two of them laughing in the office when I'm trying to concentrate. Then there's the fact that he's currently staying in a penthouse apartment in the private residences tower of The Songbird. A penthouse that my friend Maria, Griffin's girlfriend, stayed next door to for a while. A penthouse that Maria said had so much wall banging action every night that I wonder whether Reed Walker thought it was his personal mission to test it for its ability to withstand earthquakes. Only using his own *dick-ter* scale as a measurement of seismic activity instead.

"Harley?"

I blink, realizing that I'm still staring at him, and he's waiting for an answer.

"What I do with my evenings is none of your concern." I arch a brow at him. "I could join a group of yodeling nuns and practice my soprano range while wearing a scuba-diving suit, and it would still be none of your business."

He rolls his lips, and I swear the corner of his mouth twitches.

“That may be so. But you were not yodeling, nor were you with a group of nuns. And you are definitely”—his eyes drop over my pink dress, then back to my face—“not wearing a diving suit. But what you were doing was being felt up by a jerk who wanted nothing more than to take you to a hotel and screw you all night... *Julia.*”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I wasn’t going to go with him.”

“I know that. You have better taste.”

“I was—” I stop as Reed’s backhanded compliment registers. “It’s just work.”

He holds my gaze, his voice hinting at a growl. Just a tiny one. A miniscule rumble, vibrating in the back of his throat. “I don’t like you doing it.”

“Well, it’s not up to you, is it?” I blow out a long breath and break his interrogating gaze to stare up the street. I’m not about to admit to him that I hate it, too. I hate the pretending, the dressing up, the fake flirting, the loose, roaming eyes, hands... morals.

I hate how with each new trap where I meet yet another lying, cheating man, I know that there’s another woman out there with a broken heart, wishing... praying that I’m going to report back that he passed the test. That he didn’t flirt with me, ask for my number, try to kiss me, or invite me back to his hotel. That he’s different.

In more than two years that I’ve been doing it, not a single man has passed.

I guess they wouldn’t though, would they? To get to the point where you’re willing to pay hundreds of dollars to catch out a spouse must mean

you're pretty certain they already are, or have been cheating. A lot can be said about gut instinct and intuition.

Yes, I hate every part of honey-trapping.

Except the money.

The money is the only reason I do it. It fits perfectly around my job at The Songbird. I could do bar work or something like that, but the money wouldn't be as good. And this—catching cheaters out—seems kind of symbolic, given what happened. A kind of retribution.

The familiar tightening returns to my chest again, and I ignore it as I look back into Reed's intense stare. He must sense I won't back down. He doesn't understand my reasons, and I'm not about to enlighten him. It's none of his business.

His gaze darkens as his brows flatten. "If it *were* up to me—"

"It's not."

He continues studying my face, and I lift my chin defiantly.

"Right," he growls, and this time, it's *definitely* a growl. "At least let me give you a ride home, *Julia*." He tips his head to the black town car waiting by the curb in the same position where he climbed out of it earlier.

I look at the car, then back at him.

"It's fine. I was about to hail a cab." I look up the street. There are plenty of cabs driving around Manhattan, as always, but none have their lights on to pick up a fare. They're all occupied, and I wonder if any of the other passengers have just left a date with a cheating, married man. How many are smiling to themselves about the wonderful night they've just had, thinking they've met the one? Someone special. Their lobster. Because lobsters mate for life.

At least I know the lines these guys feed me are a pile of crap and I'm not emotionally invested. There's something worse than a cheat. And that's a cheat who breaks the hearts of multiple people all at once from their selfish actions. A cheat who not only destroys their own family, but someone else's too, a cheat who causes—

“It's late. And you'll never get a cab right now.” Reed cuts into my thoughts again, and I look up at him. “Please. Come with me. It would make me feel better knowing you got home safely.”

I eye him curiously. “It sounds like you may have actually read the statistics on the city's crimes against women while on your campaign to take over New York.”

“Let's say I have. Will it persuade you to take up my offer?” His voice is still the same smooth, deep tone. Only now, the clipped sound of irritation has been replaced by a hint of something else.

Something that sounds a lot like amusement.

“That depends.”

“On what?” His eyes sweep my face as he waits for my answer.

“On whether you've also read the statistics of what happens to women who accept offers of a ride home from strange men at night.”

His lips quirk. “That's tonight's bedtime reading.”

I give him a small smile, and he smiles back at me. And being this close, I notice for the first time how beautiful it is. It lights up his eyes and brings out dimples, one on either cheek, and if I didn't know better, it would probably make me go weak at the knees and giggly. Which is what I bet happened to all the women Maria heard Reed 'entertaining' through her apartment wall.

It makes sense. Politician. Man-whore. Able to talk his way in or out of anything... or anyone, apparently.

Reed Walker is the definition of a charmer.

Unless your name is Grant. Then he's probably an icepack on your hand and a lonely drive back to your soon-to-divorce-your-ass wife.

"Fine," I huff.

I stand back as he opens the rear door for me. As I slide into the cool seat, I inhale his cologne again. It's like nothing I've ever smelled on anyone else but him. It's both spicy and warm. Thrilling, yet steady. Like wild adventure and the sanctuary of home all at once.

I bet one of the many women whose name he can't remember bought it for him.

Months ago, there was a charity gala at The Songbird. Reed came, and I had to share a table with him and his date, among other people. She was all long, gazelle-like legs, and pouty lips. Snapping selfies all night long. I thought I would mess with Reed, so I asked him to introduce me. He bottomed out. Couldn't remember her name, despite being sat with her all evening, and doing whatever the hell he'd been doing with her before that point to even invite her as his plus one in the first place. I didn't expect her to throw her drink over him and storm off. I actually felt bad about it afterward. I told Reed I was sorry the next time he visited Griffin at work. But he didn't seem to care about it. *At all.*

Maybe that's how you get by in politics. You have a thick skin and move on. Either that or he didn't care because he likely had a long list of women, happy to replace her. Happy to escort him home. That's one thing Maria told me I've never forgotten about... the sounds that came from his apartment.

Pure, unfiltered pleasure. Loud, uninhibited, raw.

All sounds very complimentary of Reed Walker.

Reed slides into the seat next to me and leans forward to tell the driver where to go.

When he sits back, his broad shoulders fill the seat. At least his campaign pictures will look pretty around the city once they go up. With his wavy, dark brown hair that he constantly brushes back from his eyes, and a jawline that could cut glass, he's easily one of the most handsome men I've ever met. Not that it means anything. There's not much that's a bigger turnoff to me than a man-whore.

Okay, a cheat. Definitely a cheat. Way worse. Like on a scale of one to one hundred, a man-whore would be one hundred. But a cheat would be a million. And then some.

The car pulls out into the traffic and I'm aware of his golden-flecked gaze lingering on the side of my face.

I glance at him. "Thank you for the ride."

He clears his throat, a small smile twisting onto his lips.

"You're welcome... Harley."



Chapter Two



Reed

“QUESTIONS WITH THE PANEL at ten, interview with Vogue magazine at noon. That takes us into lunch at one. Then back to HQ this afternoon. We need to run through the order for the televised presentation tomorrow.”

“Hm, yes, fine,” I mutter as Stuart, my campaign manager, makes notes in his folder.

We’ve been sitting in our makeshift campaign office most of the afternoon, working on speeches, policies, etcetera. The rest of the team are out on the street taking surveys, talking to people, finding out what New Yorkers want to see from their new mayor. I was with them this morning, and then Stuart and I headed back here to crunch numbers, read and prepare.

I’d rather be back out there, in the community, where it really matters.

“Perk up, Walker. We’ve got this. You’ve got the panther working with you.” Stuart snaps his fingers in the air in some weird self-appreciation thing he does that I let him get away with because, frankly, he’s the most capable campaign manager around. He’s unrivaled.

And he knows it.

I snort at his panther description of himself.

“You can’t tame this wildcat, Walker. You’d better believe it.”

“You’re a pussycat, Stu. I know it. You know it. The world knows it.”

“Fuck you. I’ll make sure the photographer makes your ass look all ways of ugly for the campaign shots if you’re not careful.”

I laugh as he smirks at me, then I pull my glasses off and drop them on top of the pile of city policies I’ve been reading. Statistics for gender related crime being the top one. It draws me back to Harley’s comment the night I found her with that asshole’s hands all over her. I clench my fists, cracking my knuckles.

Stuart sifts through some paperwork before tapping his pen against his chin.

“We need to go over your principal objectives again, make it really hit home with the voters. We want to appeal to as many different demographics as we can: families, working parents, single men, women, retired folks, Marge, and Homer fucking Simpson. You name them, we want them. So I think we really ought to home in on a few main areas that will cover some of the larger voting groups.”

Stuart knows his shit. I’ve seen him work with previous candidates. He’s swept things under a rug, dodged bullets, and thrown curveballs at the opponents. Whatever is needed to win. Ruthless, but with a sense of decency still attached. That’s what I respect most about him. He gets the job done. But he does it the right way.

Mostly.

He’s a force to be reckoned with. Especially on the New York scene. I knew him before, back when I lived in LA. We had some lively debates at some national conferences. I think secretly he was as pleased to work with

me on this campaign as I was when he said yes to being my campaign manager.

Together, with the rest of the staff, we're the dream team.

Mayor of New York, here I come.

“Who are you screwing right now?”

“Excuse me?” I splutter at his bluntness. I remove my thumb and finger from my eye sockets where I am rubbing away the memory of page after page of statistics about women being attacked at night—on the subway, walking down the street, in their own homes—and stare at him.

“Screwing?” He glances up from the note he's writing. “You know your dick—”

“Yes, all right, Jesus. What's that got to do with anything?”

But I know why he's asking. It has everything to do with anything. While I'm running for mayor, everything about me, including my personal life—especially my personal life—will be subject to thorough scrutiny from the world's press. Those loveable vultures will literally rip meat off a bone until it's dry. Regardless of if the creature is still breathing. All for the sake of a good story. I know too well what they can be like after Griffin had his fair share of trouble a while ago.

“Does it start with an ‘A’?”

“What?”

My brow creases as I look over the top of the large wooden table at him. We were lucky to find such a great space. Views over the city, in the heart of downtown, handy for all the press conferences and publicity we will be doing. Plus, I can't help feeling smug as shit knowing my opponent, Harry Ellston—who I have a good relationship with, despite competing for the same role—had to take an office in the old meat-packing district, next to an

unused dildo factory. I joke every time I see him about whether he's using the back entrance to get into his office. He looks more and more like he wants to knock me on my ass each time I say it.

Stuart throws his pen down and leans back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“Even one syllable of her name would be a start.” He sighs, exasperated. “What was I thinking? You probably don't even know her name or there was more than one of them. I've taken on a press disaster waiting to happen,” he mutters under his breath.

“I *can* hear you.” I grit my teeth as I lean forward over the desk.

“Good. You should. Then you'll understand how I deserve a big fat bonus when we get you into office.” He stares out the window, deep in thought, then suddenly jumps forward in his seat. “Okay. We need to find you a girlfriend. Not your usual wannabe model or actress. Someone intelligent, with a ‘normal’ job. Oh, and maybe a dog, too. People love a guy in a committed relationship with a dog. I mean, a baby would be ideal as it makes you the most relatable to families, but we don't have time for that. So a dog would work.”

“I'm not getting a dog just to parade it around for the campaign.”

Stuart looks at me with the weariness of someone trying to explain something incredibly simple to someone who is incredibly dumb.

“You can keep it after. I'm not cruel.”

Images of me walking a dog through Central Park, in the pouring rain, scooping up shit pop into my thoughts. No, thank you.

“No dog,” I grit out.

“Fine.” He sighs, sinking back into his seat again. “But I don't hear any objection to the girlfriend. That's a must. So... any ideas?”

“I’m not seeing anyone serious right now.” I shift in my seat, recalling the last time I ‘entertained’. It was the night before that charity gala at The Songbird. Nine months ago.

Nine fucking months.

I’m not sure how my balls haven’t turned blue and dropped off. Either that or my hand hasn’t been worn down to the bone with all the friction.

I don’t know what happened. I just know since that night I haven’t felt... well, I haven’t felt like hooking up with someone whose name evades me. It’s not like I forget their names. I just never bother to process them in the first place. Maybe I’m finally growing up, like my sister, Riley, keeps telling me I need to do because meaningless sex feels just that... meaningless.

“Not a problem.” Stuart picks up his cell and starts scrolling through it. “That can be fixed. I know a woman who runs an escort agency. She’s very discreet, it will—”

“No!”

The strength in my voice has Stuart dropping his phone onto the table. He takes a deep breath, folding his hands together on top of his folder.

“Well, Mr. Smart-ass. If you have a better idea, I’m all ears. It only has to *look* real for the public, that’s all. I don’t care if she’s the love of your life or a paid employee. It just has to *seem* authentic. Someone the public will like. Someone you can make it seem believable with. You’ll need to do the public appearances together, look like it’s serious. We can move her into your apartment to make it realistic. What the hell you both do behind closed doors is up to you. I don’t need to know. I don’t *want* to fucking know, all right?” He takes one glance at my face, opening his palms wide before

continuing. “Look, it’s just the way the game is played. You know your opponents will do the same things. Only worse.”

“Yeah, I know,” I grumble. I’m being backed into a corner. A fake, just for show one. But if it means our best shot at winning, then—

“It’s your fault, anyway,” Stuart declares before he presses his lips together and tips his head to the side.

“How’d you figure that?”

“Well, if you hadn’t spent the past few years fucking every woman that moves, then we wouldn’t have so much damage limitation to control.” He blows out a deep breath as his eyes land on my tense shoulders. “Look. We’ve all done it at some point, although it’ll not do well for your image if you keep it up. But... if you now have a serious live-in girlfriend... well, that I can work with. I can spin it into a modern-day fairy-tale romance. The emotionally suppressed brute who was looking for love in all the wrong places finally meets the woman of his dreams, who he falls head over heels in love with. The end, thank you very much for coming, there’s the exit, tips gratefully received.”

He looks at me as if expecting an applause, then mutters something to himself, rolling his eyes as he gathers up his notes.

“Get a good night’s sleep, Reed. And tomorrow, tell me who the new Mrs. Walker is going to be.”

He pats me on the shoulder as he passes. “Got it?”

“Okay,” I snap, cracking my knuckles as I stare out the window at the Manhattan skyline.

Once I’m alone, I huff out a frustrated groan. He’s right. I know he is. If I want to be the next Mayor of New York, I need to do this. It’ll help with the campaign. And then I can help the city. It sounds stupid and romanticized,

but I didn't get into politics for personal gain, or ego. I did it because I truly want to make a difference in people's lives. To how they work. To how they can enjoy their spare time with their family. To how they educate their children. To their healthcare. To their safety.

To everything.

The idea that in order to have the best chance of getting there, I have to lie and deceive first, is just... well, it stinks. To be honest, it's shit. But then that's politics.

And the end justifies the means. One little white lie won't hurt anyone. If it means I can make changes that will benefit the people who live here, then it's worth it. No question about it.

But there is one question left.

Who's going to play Mrs. Walker?



The elevator dings, announcing my arrival at the top level. I step out into the sleek, modern hallway. The rest of The Songbird is classical French Renaissance style—pinks, creams, and gold. Lavish and opulent. But up here on the top level where Griffin's office is, it's a different world. All glass, chrome, and minimalism.

I head past the main reception desk, greeting Griffin's head of hotel administration, as he talks with the receptionist. I come here often enough now that no one announces my arrival to Griffin anymore... well, except Harley. Today, just like normal, she makes me take a seat in the waiting area by her desk outside his door until she checks he isn't 'too busy to see me'. I swear she's messing with me. But as I take a seat and admire the pink

pencil skirt and white blouse she's wearing with a pair of hot pink heels, I don't give a shit about having to wait.

I remember meeting her for the first time, when she first came to work for Griffin. Eyes full of wonder, like she was Dorothy, and she'd just stepped into the Emerald City. Typical small-town girl in the big, bad city. She was more innocent then, but never naïve. She has this girlish charm about her. Maybe it's the way her voice is light and breathy, like every teenage boy—and fully grown man's—fantasy. She sounds like she's purring when she says certain words. I've tried to get her to use the word 'cock' in conversation before. Talking all sorts of shit about chickens and cockerels, and people keeping them as pets. But my efforts have been futile. Probably for the best really. I'm not sure I can hold myself in a degree of appropriate decency in public should I hear that word come from her pink, pouty little lips.

I glance over at her working at her computer, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth as she re-reads whatever it is she's just typed. Then again, maybe it's her hair that gives her this sweetness. It's light blonde, a natural blonde. Unlike any other woman I've met. And I've met a lot of blondes. But hers is just... different. Whatever it is, that, and the way it has this slight curl to it as it falls around her shoulders...

I can't deny she's beautiful.

And I noticed it the first time I met her.

But she's also Griffin's PA. The best one he's ever had, apparently. The first time I met her, he told me in no uncertain terms was I to get 'ideas' that might lose him one of his most valued staff if I fucked up.

I was living in LA then, and only visited a couple of times per year. So that nipped any ideas I might have had in the bud. Probably for the best,

because God knows what I would do to her if she was mine, all the ways I would ruin her... the way I would—

“He’s off his call now.” Harley looks down at the display on her desk phone, which is linked to Griffin’s, and then back at me. “You can head in if you like. But he has another meeting in half an hour. So please don’t keep him talking.”

“Noted.”

I stand and do the top button of my suit jacket up with one hand as I approach her desk. I stop as I draw level with it and gaze down at her.

“How have you been? Since Thursday?”

Her shoulders stiffen as she looks up at me, her brow furrowing. “Thursday?”

“The guy. Your arm. His hand.” I arch a brow as I hold her gaze.

“Oh.” She shakes her head and looks back at her screen. “That was nothing.”

“A *nothing* you’re intending on repeating?” I try to keep my voice level and calm. But the thought of her going out and meeting these fuckers makes my blood boil. Maybe she thinks she’s doing a service to other women or something. Or does just really need the money for rent, like she told me. Either way, I know the idea of her doing it again and getting someone worse next time makes me want to unleash hell.

“What exactly does that have to do with you, Reed?” She sighs as though bored, before fixing her blue eyes on me again. I imagine grabbing her in my arms and— “Exactly. Nothing,” she says when I don’t reply.

“How much?” I grit out before my brain registers what I’m saying.

“For what?” She stops typing.

“A trap. How much do you make from each one?”

“Seven hundred dollars,” she answers without missing a beat.

“Seven?”

A frown darkens her face.

“It’s a very skilled business. It’s not just a case of showing up in a low-cut dress, you know. I have to ask the right questions, gather evidence, maintain my cover. And nothing *ever* actually happens.”

Fuck. Seven hundred? Really?

The agency has it all wrong. They should charge so much more for a knockout like Harley to work for them.

“And you do this what, two or three times a month?”

“About that.” She narrows her eyes at me as I do the math in my head.

“So, two thousand dollars a month? On top of what Griffin pays you here?”

She rolls her lips as her eyes narrow further. “Yes. And before you ask, Griffin knows about it now. But assuming it doesn’t affect The Songbird and my work here, he doesn’t interfere in what I do during my personal time. He isn’t as nosey as some people.”

The corners of my mouth twitch.

“You call it being nosey. I call it being a concerned friend.”

“We’re friends, are we?” She crosses her arms, and I’m pretty sure the corner of her perfect pink lips twitches too as her eyes flit over my face.

I blow out a deep breath, hiding my smile as I fuck with her. “I mean Griffin. The last thing he needs is some aggrieved guy coming in here to confront you when he finds out you’re working on behalf of an agency.”

She snorts, rolling her eyes at me. “That won’t happen.”

“It might.”

“It won’t.”

“Might.”

“Won’t.”

She sighs, her eyes still fixed on mine. “You’re going to miss speaking to him if you don’t catch him now.”

I put my hands on my hips as I stare back at her.

“Fine, your call—” she says as she turns back to her computer.

“Three thousand.”

“Sorry?”

Her attention is back on me again, and the words come out before I can stop them.

“Three thousand dollars a month to be my girlfriend.”

“What?”

I have her full attention now as her eyes widen and her mouth forms a perfect little ‘O’.

“My campaign manager says it will help the public view me in a better light and aid the campaign.”

“You want me to pretend to be your girlfriend in public, so you have a better chance of being elected mayor?” She raises her brows as she continues to stare at me.

He said to choose someone with a regular job who’s believable. Harley’s day job is regular, even if her evening one isn’t. And now I know she can play a part. She’s perfect. Plus, it’ll keep her away from the married creeps trying to get in her panties. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before.

“Yes, exactly.”

She looks at me as though I’ve just pulled my pants down and pissed all over the floor. “For three thousand dollars a month?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

I place my palms on her desk and lean closer. “What do you mean, no? It’s more than you earn trapping. And it’s a lot safer.”

“Really? Safer with you? Don’t forget, Maria is my friend, and she had a very interesting time being your neighbor.” She smirks.

I squeeze my eyes shut and hiss out a breath. It’s unfortunate that all those months ago, I didn’t know the apartment next to mine was no longer empty. Otherwise, I would have kept the noise down. Well... probably not, but I would have at least had more consideration about when I brought guests back. Luckily, I get on great with Griffin’s fiancée, Maria, now. She hasn’t held my past against me, unlike some people.

“We all have a past. We don’t have to live in it.”

That wipes the smirk off her face, and her expression grows more serious as she searches my eyes. I stay rooted to the spot, leaning toward her, refusing to back down.

“What exactly would it entail?”

I fight the small smile on my lips from turning into a full-blown grin. She’s asking more questions, which means she’s considering it.

“Going to events, dinners, the odd public appearance. Helping me work on my gender equality and safety policies.”

Her brow arches and she smirks at me again. I’m so close I can see her pulse fluttering in her neck beneath her flawless skin.

“I’m serious. It’s one of the top five policies I’m running with,” I say as I watch it beating.

My answer makes the smirk fall from her face again.

“Four.”

“Four?” I question.

“Four thousand.” She tips her head to the side, looking me up and down. “It’s going to require a lot of work on my side to act constantly. It’s not just an evening like a trap would be. We are talking multiple hours a day, seven days a week. And I’m assuming it means I won’t be able to date other people while we have the arrangement?”

“Absolutely not.” I press my hands hard into the surface of her desk, needing to crack my knuckles desperately.

“So there’s the loss of time that I could be doing that…” She looks off into space as though contemplating something else. “And if I’m not allowed to see anyone else, then I assume—”

“I won't be seeing anyone,” I snap.

She surveys me again, pursing her lips. “Won’t you find that difficult?”

Fuck’s sake.

“No. I just need you.”

Her brows rise at my words.

“Look, it’s a live-in position. It makes it more authentic if the press thinks it’s serious. There are going to be quite a few events coming up, and people are going to ask us about each other and how we met.”

“And you need me?”

“Yes.”

“Me, specifically?”

I look into her blue eyes, inching a little closer. “We know each other already, so it will be more believable.”

“I see.” She holds my gaze, and I can practically see the thoughts processing behind her eyes.

I hold my breath. It’s too much. She’s never going to agree to staying in the same apartment as me, even if it the penthouse has four bedrooms and

three bath—

“Okay,” she says softly.

I clear my throat to hide the surprised cough that’s surfaced there.
“Really? Right. Good. That’s settled.”

She stands and holds her hand out. Her eyes continue to hold mine as I take her delicate fingers in mine and shake.

“Reed?”

“Harley?”

“When do I start?”

I keep her hand in mine as my smile grows. As soon as I’ve caught up with Griffin, I need to call Stuart.

And tell him I’ve found Mrs. Walker.



Chapter Three



Harley

I LAUGH A DEEP belly laugh as the raccoon on my phone screen freezes like a statue, standing on his hind legs.

“Um, Miss. Distracted? These things aren’t going to pack themselves,” Suze calls from across the living room, where she’s folding up my favorite snuggly blanket I like to keep on the couch for when I’m watching TV.

“All right.” I laugh as I tear my eyes away from the video on my phone and drop it down onto the couch.

“Did you want to pack this?” Maria holds up my sloth mug that I placed out on the counter before they arrived to help me pack.

“Yes. I need that. It’s my special mug.”

“I’ve never seen you drink out of it.” Suze wrinkles her nose as she looks over at Maria, who’s holding it up with a puzzled expression on her face as she studies the cartoon sloth wearing pink pajamas.

“I don’t. It’s my *special* mug... you know?”

I look between their blank faces and let out a sigh. “It’s the one I sterilize my menstrual cup in.”

Suze's eyebrows shoot up, and Maria carefully wraps the mug in a sheet of tissue paper and places it in a box.

"What? It's got to be done. It's not like the cup can go in the dishwasher."

"I didn't say anything." Suze holds up her hands.

"No, you were just wondering if you'd ever been given a drink in it." Maria laughs.

"Exactly." Suze nods, pointing at her.

"Neither of you has, okay? Sloth knows his reason in life, and it is not for beverages," I say as I carefully fold and pack my pajamas into the open case on the floor.

"I'm really happy you'll be living so close." Maria smiles.

She and Griffin live in the top floor penthouse of The Songbird private residences. They have the entire floor to themselves with an amazing roof garden and helipad. But despite Griffin's billionaire wealth, and Maria's thriving spa supply business, she's so down to earth. I was so happy when she moved to New York. Until that point, I only had Suze and Will as close friends. Not that I'm complaining, they're awesome. But it's so nice to make another friend, someone you just click with. Especially now that Will has followed his heart and moved to Paris with his boyfriend, Fraser.

"I know," I say. "I'll be able to come up for breakfast with you before work. And we can get dinner together and watch movies at your place. I can wear my pajamas up in the elevator!" I grin as I plan it all out in my head.

"What about Reed?" Suze asks.

"What about him?" I close the lid of the suitcase and zip it up.

"What will he be doing while his 'girlfriend' is out of the apartment as much as possible?"

“I dunno.” I shrug. “Whatever it is he usually does... except that,” I add as I see them both look at one another. “He told me while I’m playing house with him, he won’t be seeing anyone. The same goes for me. It has to look real.”

“Okaaay,” Suze says, not sounding at all convinced. She’s probably more jaded than me about men’s behavior since her husband cheated on her with his secretary. It’s how we met. She suspected he was cheating but needed hard evidence to force herself to accept it, so she contacted the agency who sent me.

I have a secret camera concealed in my purse to collect the evidence. Then, after the trap, they invite the client into the head office to view the footage. Suze ignored that part. She needed to see it in person, so she hid in the bar where I met her ex—father of her two kids—Curt. Afterward, she approached me, and we ended up having the best night. We talked, laughed, and danced for hours. We’ve been friends ever since.

“I’m sure even Reed can keep it in his pants if his career depends on it,” I murmur as I look around the room for anything I might have missed. I’m going to sub-let my apartment to a sweet girl from the housekeeping team at The Songbird. She just broke up with her girlfriend and needed somewhere fast and short-term to stay. It means I can leave my furniture and books, and things like that, behind, and only pack the essentials.

“Yes. He’s very dedicated when it comes to work. Griffin said it’s the only thing he was passionate about growing up.”

“Don’t try and make him sound human,” I say to Maria as I slip into the bedroom to grab my slippers.

“I’m pretty sure he is, in fact, human.” Maria chuckles as I walk back into the main living and kitchen area and scowl at her.

“If he’s not, he must be one of those frisky aliens with the incredible twin dicks people read about,” Suze chimes in, looking at Maria. “If the sounds you used to hear through the wall are anything to go by.”

I grumble to myself as I unzip my case and squish my slippers inside. Despite Reed’s sexual escapades providing a source of amusement to our girls’ get togethers in the past, I’m not in the mood to hear about them again right now.

Not when I’m about to live with him for the foreseeable future.

“Twin dick or not, he’s still...” I search for the right words.

“Hot?” Suze offers.

“Great at his job?” Maria counters.

“A walking billboard for why women are choosing not to get married and get a pet instead,” I huff as I sit on my case to force it shut.

I mean, he’s ridiculous. Maybe he is good at his job, like Maria says. But it doesn’t alter the fact that he’s as shallow as a puddle. As far as I know, he’s never spent longer than a weekend with the same woman, let alone had a serious girlfriend.

“Hey, I’m not going to argue with you about the marriage thing.” Suze sighs, then looks at Maria. “You’re happy with that delectable man of yours, Maria. Cover your ears and don’t listen to me. Griffin’s, well... Griffin. And quite frankly, he’s giving me hope that there are still decent men out there.”

I walk over to Suze and wrap my arm around her. Maria comes to join us as I hold out my other arm.

“There *are* decent men out there. Ones who don’t cheat. And don’t have a bedpost so notched it resembles a matchstick,” I add as Maria opens her

mouth, no doubt to defend Reed. “Ones like Griffin and my older brother, Brett. They show up the rest of the male population just by existing.”

I mean every word. Even though honey trapping work shows me the ugly side of people, deep down I still cling to dreams of that little girl who grew up watching Disney, believing in true love. I think if it weren't for my brother, Brett, and how selfless he is, then I wouldn't believe it. He would give anything for me and my sister, Rose. Literally anything. Even his own life. He's always been that way as long as I can remember. Maybe it goes with the territory of being the oldest.

I look around my tiny apartment and smile. We've finished almost all the packing.

“Talking of men, I have the perfect ones for us now that we're nearly done.” I walk over to the freezer and pull out three tubs, grinning. “Here's to Ben and Jerry.”



“What are you doing?” Reed quirks his brow at me, his head tilted to one side as I look back over my shoulder at him across the hallway.

“What's it look like I'm doing? I'm pruning Bruce.”

I turn my attention back to my Bonsai tree, which I've given pride of place on the entryway table. Reed was using it to just throw his wallet and key card down on, but a spot like this, the first thing you see as you walk into the penthouse, deserves something special.

It deserves Bruce.

“Bruce? You named it?” Reed walks toward me, bringing the magic potion of his cologne with him.

“Please do not bring negative energy into Bruce’s space,” I reply as I gently snip a browning leaf off with a pair of nail scissors, leaning in close to get a good cut.

“You know it’s a tree, right?” Reed leans down next to me, his eyes on Bruce as I carefully snip another leaf.

“Haven’t you seen those experiments where people bully one plant and are kind to another? The one that they’re kind to thrives, but the bullied one goes all sad and brown and withers.” I chew my bottom lip as I recall how upset it made me to see that bullied plant on the internet clip.

“I must have missed that segment on CNN.” Amusement laces his voice. “Anyway, how exactly do you bully a plant?”

“You know, say mean things to it, and be unkind.” I pick up my spray bottle and give Bruce a good mist.

Reed straightens up but stays standing close enough that I can hear the gentle inhale of each breath he takes.

“You’re looking mighty fine, Bruce. Keep on producing wood like that and all the women will be shaking their leaves at you.”

I turn just in time to see the smirk on Reed’s stupidly handsome face as he moves away, taking the heat from his body with him.

“Let me know if you need to borrow my scissors anytime,” I call after him. “They’re really good with *tiny* branches.”

He chuckles as he heads off into the apartment.

Our apartment.

I need to get used to saying that. It’s been a strange couple of days. He wasn’t here the first evening I moved in. He was out doing some campaigning somewhere, and by the time I heard him come in, I was already in bed. Although he left me a new home card addressed to ‘Mrs.

Walker'. I swear he actually believes he's funny. It's a good job he isn't running for the role of comedian instead of mayor.

Tonight is our second night, and it's the first time I've seen him. I preferred having that bit of time here alone, if I'm honest. It gave me time to snoop. I've been in this penthouse before. Even though I work in the hotel side of The Songbird, I still come into the residences frequently to see Maria. And I help arrange stays for Griffin's family and friends when they visit and aren't going to stay in the hotel.

The apartment is furnished with sweeping city views from its corner position. It's breathtaking up here. And luckily, it has four bedrooms. All with private showers. Which means that Reed and I don't have the awkward morning walk to the bathroom to contend with.

I peeked into his room earlier. I couldn't help it. The only things of his around the furnished living space are some political looking documents and a pair of reading glasses, which I've never seen him wear. It was hardly enough to work out whether I've unknowingly shacked up with a serial killer or not. His bedroom, on the other hand, from the small peek I had from the doorway, was an Aladdin's cave for clues about the real Reed Walker.

Everything was neat and orderly, which matches his professional personality. But it was the acoustic guitar and photos that interested me the most. I have never once heard him mention he plays guitar. Maybe he doesn't, and it's just a décor thing. Like those people who have grand pianos because they look amazing, but they can't even play chopsticks on them. And the photos were sweet. His parents and grandparents, I assume, judging by the resemblance. And there was one of him with a woman with

long, flowing chestnut brown hair and gray eyes. I'm assuming his twin sister, who he's mentioned in passing before.

Afterward, I felt a little guilty for looking. But he left the door open, and I have to walk past his room on the way to mine, so I wasn't *really* poking around. And besides, it's made me feel a little better about this weird situation. I was starting to wonder what the hell I had agreed to when I was unpacking my things.

"Harley?" Reed calls from the living area. "Where are all these pink strands coming from? Don't tell me you've got a cotton plant called Colin somewhere that needs to be told what a good fluffer he is in order not to depot himself."

I snort out a laugh as I head into the vast living space in search of him. My step falters as I round the corner and see him sitting on the large sectional couch with his glasses on.

Thick, dark frames, below thick waves of rich brown hair.

It's definitely a step up from my previous neighbor at my apartment, who used to go down the hallway to collect his mail in just his robe, which would miraculously unfasten itself on far too many occasions.

"Oh, these?" He smiles as he sees me looking and then takes them off and rubs his eyes. "I wear them when I'm doing a lot of reading."

"More policies?" I sink down next to him on the light beige seat and glance over at the paperwork. The words 'Sexual Assault' jump out at me.

"Yeah. Always more to read up on." He shuffles the papers, moving them to the side, and then holds up a tuft of pink between his fingers. One of the threads is glittery.

"They're going to be bald soon, I swear." I tut as I reach around the side of the sofa and grab my slippers, giving them a shake in the air. More pink

and glittery strands fly out, floating in the air for a beat before clinging to Reed's suit pants.

"It looks like you killed the pink panther."

I laugh as I slide my feet into them and let out a delighted sigh.

"They might be a bit bright," I say as I look down at my fluffy feet. "But they're so warm."

"Harley. It's not even winter. And we have heating if you need it."

We have heating.

The way he says it so casually has me sitting forward on the edge of the seat. I suppose we are a 'we' to the outside world. Well, we will be once I start making public appearances with Reed and our 'relationship' becomes public knowledge. But in here, where it's just the two of us? *We* sends all sorts of weird sensations rushing around my body.

Me and Reed Walker a 'we'?

Nope. No way. It's only pretend.

"I think I'll just keep my slippers, thanks," I say as I get up. "I'm going to meet Suze for dinner tonight. She's got a rare night off as Curt is taking the kids out, so we intend to make the most of it and try out a new Thai restaurant we've been wanting to visit."

Reed chuckles. Even that is deep and smooth, like his voice. "Have a nice night with Suze."

"Thanks, I will—" I turn back, and he's put his glasses on again. His dark brows furrow as he reads the paperwork in his hand. His shirt sleeves are rolled up his forearms, showing tanned skin and prominent veins. I swallow down a weird fluttering in my stomach.

He glances up and locks eyes with me. A second or two passes, and neither of us says anything. I stare back and heat swirls low in my core.

No, you don't, Harley.

This is not good. I cannot develop something akin to Stockholm syndrome while I am here with him. It's for the cameras only. It's all for show. His dick has seen more pussy than a gynecologist. Something I need to remember.

"Can you come out with me Friday? There's a dinner I need to attend. It'll likely be full of stuffy, boring people trying to show off who is richer. But I need to show my face," he says finally, his eyes dropping to my bright pink feet as the corners of his mouth curl up.

"Sure. First public act. Wouldn't miss it."

He looks back to my face, the corners of his eyes creasing slightly behind his glasses.

"Good." He nods. "Glad to hear it."

I turn and head off to my room.

I don't do things by half. He said he needed a convincing fake girlfriend and I intend to be exactly that; stuffy, boring dinners or not. Frankly, it beats chasing down leery married men any day. And I can live with Reed. Minus the man-whoring, he's got the potential to be a great roomie. He's tidy and quiet. The apartment is immaculate and smells of his unique cologne, and so far, all I've seen him do is read.

With those glasses on.

This is going to be the easiest four thousand dollars a month ever.



Chapter Four



Harley

“DO I LOOK LIKE a convincing future mayor’s girlfriend?” I ask as I walk into the living area and perform a twirl.

Reed’s eyes lift from the phone in his hand to the figure-hugging silk of my pink dress as I complete my three-sixty. Thank goodness for Maria lending it to me. She gets loads of free dresses since Vogue featured her as businesswoman of New York in their latest annual awards. Really, I’m doing the up-and-coming designer a favor by wearing the stunning gown, even if I am loving every second of feeling like a film star in it.

I grin as the fabric slides over my skin.

“Well?” I look up at Reed.

He shoves his phone into his pocket without looking back at it; his eyes firmly glued to the high split that’s allowing a peek of my thigh to be on show.

“Too much for the stuffy bores you mentioned?” I shimmy a little, testing out how much leg will be exposed when I dance. I mean, it’s a little bit of skin, but not too much. I think it’s perfectly acceptable. The neckline is high and elegant, so it works. Tits or leg, Suze always says. Not both.

“No... not too much. You look beautiful.” Reed finally lifts his eyes from my thigh to meet mine, and I clasp my hands in front of my face and walk closer to him.

“I’m sorry, I’m so rude. I’m going on about my dress, and here you are looking...” I take in his black dinner jacket, bowtie, and crisp, white shirt. Standing this close, his cologne reaches me in waves. Each note of its unique scent dances around me like tiny whispers of dreams in the air.

He looks like a fantasy. A sex one.

“... Looking very, very... capable,” I finish.

Damn, this must be how he manages his man-whoring so easily. He doesn’t even need to open his mouth. If it isn’t the scent of him, then it’s the deep earthy strands of his hair or his gray smoky quartz eyes that light up when he talks. And if you survive all that, then it’s the broad chest and strong arms that fill out a dinner suit like it was custom made for him that will take you down.

My brows pinch together as I study him. I’m no expert on designer suits, but I’m also sure in all the years I’ve worked at The Songbird, and all the high-profile guests I’ve seen, I have never seen anyone look like Reed looks in a dinner suit before. If the mayoral campaign could be cast on sex appeal alone, then he would win, hands down.

“Capable?” One of his thick, dark brows lifts.

“Yes.” I nod at him, a smile growing on my face. “Totally capable of spending an evening outshining stuffy people when you tell them all about your amazing policies and plans for the city.”

I reach up and straighten his bowtie, my fingers brushing his freshly shaven jaw by accident. His eyes widen, and I pull my hand back.

“Sorry, force of habit. I’ve helped my brother when he’s worn them in the past.”

Reed clears his throat and looks away as he picks up the key card for the apartment. “It’s fine. Are you ready to go?”



The dinner is being held in one of Manhattan’s grand hotels. After we’ve eaten, I head to the ladies’ room and tap out a message to Maria to inform her she can tell Griffin their food is not a scratch on The Songbird’s.

I slide my phone back into my purse and pull out my nude lipstick to re-apply. As far as stuffy evenings go, this one hasn’t been half bad. Reed and I are sitting at a table with a few other couples. One guy is an attorney. Reed spent a lot of time talking to him about things I tuned out of once I realized the woman, called Natalia, next to me had a dog. I saw a picture of the cute bundle of white fluff on her phone and that turned into a full-blown conversation about how she founded her own dog walking business for city workers. She’s had to take on more staff as demand has grown. She said they even have other animals on their books now, including a house goat. That led to us leaning over our phones, laughing wildly at funny animal videos. I caught the amused look on Reed’s face before I excused myself to come and freshen up.

I shake my hair out and have one more glance in the mirror before heading back out to the main ballroom. I spot Reed immediately, despite the place being crowded. He’s hard to miss, being one of the tallest men here. He’s standing by the bar talking to a guy I recognize from a show I’ve watched before work. I figured I should do some research if I’m going to

nail this fake political girlfriend thing. Some of it seems quite interesting and I bet I would do way better on a pop quiz now from my extended knowledge of current affairs.

I walk over and flash my friendliest smile as I reach the pair of them.

“Ah, good evening.” The older gray-haired man smiles back at me and holds out his hand. “I’m—”

“Tom Coulter,” I finish for him, taking his hand. “I watched your piece on global warming and the importance of tackling climate change two mornings ago. It was great.”

His eyes soften as he looks back at me. “Why, thank you. That’s wonderful to hear...”

“Harley,” Reed says as he steps closer to me.

I take my hand back from Tom and wrap it around Reed’s solid bicep as I sink into his side. He stiffens before he clears his throat.

“Tom, this is Harley Jacobs. My girlfriend.”

I swallow as he says *girlfriend*. It’s the first time I’ve heard him say it in public. It sounds weird.

“Oh?” Tom’s brows shoot up before he recovers quickly, smiling at the two of us. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Harley. How are you enjoying the evening?”

“Oh, it’s”—I glance at Reed, who’s looking down at my hand on his arm—“not nearly as full of stuffy bores as I had expected.”

Tom’s eyes light up before he tips his head back and laughs out loud. “Yes, my dear. You’ve hit the nail on the head there. That’s why my wife, Margo, doesn’t usually like to attend many of these things. She only agreed to come if she could have a dance with this young man again.” Tom looks at Reed, who’s smiling warmly at him.

“I would be honored. Your wife is a wonderful dancer. And she tells me some interesting tales about you when I get her alone.” Reed chuckles as Tom slaps him on the shoulder, then turns to wink at me.

“Watch this one, young lady. He’s a joker.”

I giggle as Tom averts his gaze to a woman who’s waving at us across the room. Then he bids us a good evening and goes to join her.

“Is that Margo? Wow, she looks amazing,” I say in delight as I admire her silver sequined gown.

“Yes, that’s her.”

Reed’s bicep twitches beneath my fingers, and when I look up, his expression has returned to strait-laced and serious.

“Reed,” I whisper, rising on my toes so I can whisper in his ear. “You need to relax.”

“I am relaxed,” he grumbles, his eyes scanning the room.

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow at him as I squeeze the thick, tense muscle of his bicep. “Because you feel so relaxed right now.” I give it another squeeze. There’s no give at all. It’s a solid rock of strength.

He keeps his head straight, but there’s a quirk at the corner of his lips as he side-eyes me. “This is how I always feel.”

“What, hard?” I blurt, my eyes widening as the amusement in his eyes fires up like a flare. “Reed Walker,” I tut. “You have a dark and dirty mind.”

He smirks and then falls serious again as his eyes fix on something. “You’ve no idea how dark my mind is, Harls.”

Harls.

He’s never called me that before. Only my family ever calls me Harls. I never hear that name in person here in New York. It should feel out of place, wrong. Yet, I kind of like the way it sounds in his deep voice.

I look up at his profile. Maria's right. He is good at his job. That's a technique for getting people to feel comfortable around you, isn't it? Call them by their name or nickname. Use it when you speak to them. I bet it's a trick he practices a lot. Reed Walker is one smooth operator.

I follow his eye line to a stunning raven-haired woman in a long crimson dress and the dark-haired man on her arm. I say on her arm and not the other way around, as it's obvious from the confidence seeping out of her in every graceful step that she's the one who's the top in that relationship. As they get closer, I recognize the man she's with.

"Isn't that Graham Hutchings?" I talk softly so my lips don't move.

Reed's gaze is glued to the pair of them as his bicep tension climbs another notch to rigid steel beneath my palm. He doesn't answer me. But I know that one of his running opponents is almost right in front of us now with his black widow partner. I'm not usually one to judge harshly and so quickly, but the way her eyes cast over my outfit, critically and with no shame, has me straightening my spine. Her eyes flick up to my face and then drop to the hand that is still wrapped around Reed's arm as they reach us.

"Walker."

Graham holds out a hand and Reed shakes it, the two of them displaying the expected politeness as he greets Graham back and gives him a charming smile. It's his public smile. I've seen him smile a million times over the years when he's visited Griffin. The smile he uses with friends is totally different from this. That smile reaches his eyes and has a certain peace and comfortableness held in it. This one is bright, but careful and perfectly measured.

It's both a weapon and a shield.

“I believe you know my partner, Bea,” Graham says as she leans in, kissing Reed on both cheeks, the beads on her dress scraping against my arm as she closes in on him.

“Reed. What a wonderful surprise.”

“Bea,” Reed replies in a monotone voice as she pulls back and tinkles out a laugh.

“Oh, you. Always a man of so many words. And who is your *friend*?” She turns to me, a thin smile spreading over her lips.

“Don’t take it personally.” She lowers her voice to me before Reed has a chance to answer. I glance at him, and his jaw is set hard. “I’ve heard he has trouble with names if he doesn’t need to remember them the next day.”

Bitch.

She has no right. She doesn’t know him... not really. I mean, he’s Griffin’s best friend. And he’s my... well, he’s Reed.

I take a deep breath to compose myself as I plaster on a smile, running my spare hand up over Reed’s chest and wrapping myself against him.

“Oh, he won’t need to use my name tomorrow. Saturday is our special day together, isn’t it, Babe?” I press my hand flat against his chest and let out a breathy sigh before looking directly at Graham. “I like him to call me baby girl on Saturdays. It’s my daddy day.” I pout and then glance up at Reed, catching his darkened gaze boring into mine. “Oh, don’t look so worried. It’s hardly unusual. I’m sure Graham and Bea have special days in their home, too.”

“Our home?” Bea’s polite bitch mask has slipped, leaving her sour-faced as though she’s just been told being a witch went out of fashion decades ago.

She scowls at me as I continue to talk. “Oh, sorry. I just assumed. Silly me.” I roll my eyes with a giggle. “You two just look so wonderful together. I assumed it must be serious and you live together.”

Take that, bitch. I know how to hand out shit disguised as sugar.

“It is serious, very serious. But we haven’t found the right place yet. Everything in the city we’ve seen so far is too... ordinary.” Bea’s gaze drops over me again, one brow raised, and I know she’s trying to get a rise out of me. I smile sweetly at her instead and she looks back at Graham, who is running a hand around the back of his neck and looks like he might break out in a sweat any second. I almost feel sorry for him.

“Oh, well, how exciting when that day comes. Although I bet you’ll hardly get any unpacking done. There’s something so *exciting* about a new place together while there are boxes everywhere, isn’t there, Babe?” I rub my hand over Reed’s chest, noticing the way Bea’s eyes follow my movement.

“Yes. There is, isn’t there?” Her gaze turns cold as she looks back at my face with a smirk. “I remember that all too well after I moved in with Reed when we got engaged.”

My hand freezes for a micro-second before I continue stroking Reed’s chest. His heart is pounding.

“Well, you two beautiful lovebirds wouldn’t be here today if that had worked out, so...” I give her another sweet smile and then turn to Reed, widening my eyes as the band begins a new song.

“You know I love this one. Can we dance?”

“Of course.” Reed takes my hand in his as he nods goodbye.

“So nice to meet you both,” I call over my shoulder, wiggling my fingers in a small wave as Reed leads us to the dancefloor and then pulls me into

his arms.

“What was that?” he hisses in my ear as we move to the music. It’s a slow song, so I wrap my arms around his neck as he rests his hands on my back.

“They’re looking this way. Put your hands lower.”

“What?” He leans back, but I grip him to me.

“Bea and Graham. She doesn’t look happy. Put your hands on the top of my ass,” I instruct.

“Harley, I—”

“Do it,” I whisper in his ear, feeling the low grumble from his throat as he slides his hands down and rests them on the curve of my lower back, his fingers lightly grazing the top of my butt cheeks. “Better,” I hum in his ear as we move to the music.

“So now, can you tell me what the hell that was all about?” His voice is low and gravelly against my ear as we move around the dance floor with the rest of the couples.

I shiver as his breath teases the side of my neck. “She was being rude about you.”

“So you thought you’d tell her I have a fetish for being called Daddy?” he growls as I fight to hold in my giggle.

“No. I told her *I* have a fetish about calling *you* Daddy, duh. Anyway, I was just doing what a real girlfriend would do.”

“Sharing our sex life with strangers?”

“No,” I groan, huffing out a breath. “Showing her I’m not affected by her whole ‘mean girl’ act.”

“By telling her about our sex life?”

“Our *pretend* sex life.” I pull back to look at his face. “Which is earth-shattering, by the way.”

The tiniest twitch of his lips draws my eye. “Of course it is.”

“Good.” I grin. “Glad we agree on something. You know, you’re going to have to get better at this whole pretend thing if you want people to believe we’re a real couple.” I wiggle my ass a little, encouraging his hands to slide lower so his fingertips are touching the fullest part of its curve.

“I don’t need to feel you up in public to look like a real couple,” Reed says, the heat from his body emanating into mine and drawing out a sense of calm from deep in my chest.

“Not all the time, but sometimes, you do.”

“Really?” Amusement laces his words, and his shoulders lose some of their tension beneath my arms.

“Really.” I reach one hand up and stroke the thick, silky hair at the base of his skull as we dance. “If you were my real boyfriend, I would expect you to be fighting a constant battle with yourself not to touch me all the time.”

“Is that so?” His deep voice rumbles against my neck where he leans close again, while he flexes his fingers against my ass.

The sensation makes my breath hitch in my throat for a split second, catching me off guard.

Weird.

“It is so.” I press my body into his, relishing in its solid warmth. “See, we should be close when we dance, like this. Close enough that people around us can feel the desire flowing from us in waves, taste the hunger in our breath as it mixes, and see the crackle in the air from the electricity our passion for one another creates.” My words tumble out as my excitement

grows. “Basically, Reed, I would expect you to look at me as if you’re recalling the way I had just ridden your face before we left home... so hard that you’d had to breathe through your ears.”

He lets out a chuckle as I giggle and continue, lowering my voice and whispering in his ear so no one around us can hear.

“*That* would look real. Because if you’re going to be my boyfriend in public—because it’s not just me playing a role here—then I expect you to give it your all. I don’t want people looking at you all stiff and moody with your giant arms and thinking I’m this mean girlfriend that never lets you choose the channel and flushes the toilet when you’re in the shower.”

His chuckle morphs into a laugh. A rich, free one.

It’s a beautiful sound.

His chest shakes against me as we hold on to each other and dance.

“I’m a really nice girlfriend. I mean, I think I am. It’s been a while since anyone can corroborate. But I’d like to think that’s how we would look together if this was real, you know?” I lift my head from where I’ve rested it against his shoulder and look into his eyes with a questioning gaze.

“I think I can manage that. I don’t want people to think I have a girlfriend who threatens to use her teeny tiny scissors on my *little* branch.” His eyes are glittering and dark as he watches me, his lips curled into a breathtaking smile.

I drop my mouth open in protest. “I did not threaten. I merely explained their abilities. Although I’m not sure Bruce likes to share.”

“Neither do I,” he growls.

Something about his tone makes my stomach flutter.

“So who’s the prize bitch you were going to marry?” I ask, my hand still stroking the hair at the top of his neck. I’m doing it to look authentic and

coupley. But it's been there long enough to achieve that now, so I should move it.

I really should.

"I would never have married her." He sighs, and his eyes shutter closed as I keep my fingers in his hair and trace my thumb around to his sideburns, stroking down the side of his face.

"I didn't know you were engaged."

"It was years ago, and it only lasted a few months." He opens his eyes and looks at me, and I'm struck by a flash of pain in them before he blinks it away. "She was what I thought I needed at the time."

A trace of the shield I saw earlier crosses his face.

"You were hurt," I state softly.

His eyes pinch and he stiffens in my arms for a second before Tom Coulter appears dancing next to us with Margo in his arms.

"Do you mind if we cut in?" Tom smiles.

"Of course not." Reed lets me go and graciously offers his hand to Margo, who beams at him. He gives her a charming smile and says something quietly to her, which has her laughing.

"He's a fine man," Tom says to me as I take his hand, and we dance away in the opposite direction.

I smile as I look over to where Reed is. He spins Margo out and back in again, the smile on her face bright and infectious.

"I've known him a while, ever since he started volunteering on some community projects supporting mental health I'm involved with. Of course, that was a long time ago, back when his family lived nearby. I didn't see so much of him when they all moved to California. Between you and me." Tom leans in conspiratorially. "I'm hoping he wins." He draws back again.

“Partly because I know he will do a great service, but also for selfish reasons. If he stays, then I may be able to rope him into some more projects again.”

I laugh as I glance at Reed. Maybe he senses eyes on him because he looks in our direction at the same moment and smiles at me.

I mouth the word, *Daddy*, at him and he chuckles to himself.

Tom follows my gaze, looking between us. “But something tells me even if he doesn’t, he won’t be going far.”

I frown at him, puzzled. But he just smiles softly and continues to dance.

Two hours later, we walk through the front door, and I kick off my shoes in delight, slipping my feet into my slippers, which I left right by the front door prepped for my return.

“God, this is almost as good as an orgasm,” I moan as my feet are encased by warm, fluffy coziness.

“Then I think you’ve been doing it wrong,” Reed says as he closes the door behind us.

I reach out to swat him but miss, earning me a deep chuckle as he walks into the kitchen.

“What did Bea do wrong, then?” I ask as I plod behind him. “Apart from being a bitch. Is that why she’s called Bea? It’s really just a B for Big Bitch Badge?”

I was itching to ask him in the car on the way home, but he was telling me Margo’s latest confessions about Tom’s filming bloopers, and he looked so light and happy as he regaled me that I didn’t want to interrupt and put a damper on things.

Reed grabs two bottles of water from the fridge and hands one to me.

“Like I said. She was what I thought I needed at the time.” He avoids my gaze, instead tipping his head back and devouring half the bottle down his muscular neck in one long glug.

I twist the cap on my bottle, but it doesn’t budge. Reed reaches over, opens it with one easy twist, and hands it back to me.

“Thanks. So, back to Bea,” I say before taking a sip.

“That’s all there is to it. It’s in the past. Where things from the past should stay.”

He finishes his drink and then drops the empty bottle into the recycling can.

“Okay.” I sip my drink again as he loosens off his bowtie and then runs a hand around his jaw with a deep sigh. I know he was up at the crack of dawn this morning. I heard him leave before my alarm even went off.

He looks exhausted.

“Are you heading to bed now?”

“Yeah.” He presses his thumb and finger into his eyes and rubs. “I told Griffin I would run early with him in the morning.”

“What an incredibly hellish way to start the weekend.” I snort. “Think of me while you run, curled up in my warm, incredibly comfy bed, won’t you?”

He smirks and shakes his head before heading to his room.

“You didn’t answer... Daddy,” I call after him, holding back my laugh.

“I promise to think of what you’re doing in bed, home alone without me, Baby Girl,” he calls back.

Our chuckles mix together in the air, echoing all the way from the kitchen and down the hallway to his bedroom before the door closes softly.

I stay in the kitchen to finish my water as I process the evening’s events.

It's in the past. Where things from the past should stay.

I doubt he would still say that if he knew about my past. Some things should be shouted and screamed about, not left in the past to be forgotten. Unpaid for. Not that there's any price that could ever be great enough for some sins. Some things only a time machine can fix.

I look at Reed's closed door as I head to bed, my steps slowing as I fight the strange urge to knock on it and see if he's still awake. I know I didn't imagine the flash of hurt in his eyes when I asked about Bea. She may be a bitch now, but maybe she wasn't always. Maybe once she was someone incredibly special to Reed. I mean, he was going to marry her. He must have loved her.

She must have meant a lot to him.

My stomach twists as I contemplate his words. *She was what I thought I needed at the time.* Maybe he thought so much of her that it still hurts to see her. Especially with someone like Graham Hutchings, who I know is shadier than an artist's pencil collection. He hasn't gotten to where he is through hard work alone, if the rumors are anything to go by.

It makes sense why Reed has only had brief flings since. And why Maria said the women she saw leaving his apartment were always blonde. Bea is striking in her beauty; dark, sharp, intense features. Hypnotic almost. The polar opposite of what Reed goes for. That's what some people do, isn't it? When they're trying to get over someone. They throw themselves into forgetting. Hiding their grief behind nameless hookups. Looking for a complete physical contrast of what they lost if it's still too painful to be reminded of that person.

A sickening ball rolls around the pit of my stomach as I wash my face, put my pajamas on and then climb into bed. I've figured it out. It's obvious.

The pain in his eyes when we were dancing. His reluctance to talk about it.

She hurt him.

He loved her.

Maybe he still does.



Chapter Five



Reed

“I KNOW YOU KEEP saying that, but I’m doing it. Please, let me. I’ll send the money over from my account as soon as I get to work... I’m running late, got to go.”

Harley’s phone conversation carries down the hallway as I finish my weight set in the penthouse’s gym.

“Oh, god, for fuc—Argh!” she curses, sounding annoyed.

“Everything okay?” I yell as I grab a towel and wipe my face, rushing out to see what the clattering sound was.

“Yes, it’s just...” Harley leans down to grab her phone, which has fallen on the floor.

“Here.” I stride over to her and take her purse and shoes out of her hands.

“Thanks.” She blows a wisp of hair out of her eyes and then clicks her tongue. “My alarm didn’t go off. I’m never late.”

“It’s only eight, Harley.”

I know for a fact she doesn’t start work until eight-thirty. I’ve been to visit Griffin first thing in the morning enough times to see her log on to her computer and then take Griffin in a coffee.

Her eyes drop over my chest as she looks at me properly for the first time.

“Do you always exercise shirtless?”

“When I soak my shirt through with sweat before I’ve finished, yes.”

“Hm.” Her brow wrinkles. “Oh, um, eight-thirty, yes...” She rushes down the hallway, turning to extract her high heels from my grasp and gripping on to my shoulder as she stands on each leg to slip them on her feet. “I do start then, but I always get Griffin a coffee on my way in, and the line can get ridiculous.”

She grabs her purse from me, then glances at the palm she’s removed from my shoulder before wiping it on the towel around my neck.

“Do you always sweat this much?”

“When I’ve gone at it really hard.” My eyes drop to her lips before I snap them away.

She casts her gaze over my sweat-soaked chest again, her eyes catching on the top of my shorts, which are slung low on my hips. “People say it’s your fat crying.”

“People do, do they?” I smirk.

Her blue eyes twinkle as she meets my eyes again. “Quit making me stand here and talk to you. I told you I’m going to be late.”

“Then go.”

I chuckle as she flips her middle finger up at me and rushes to the front door.

“Oh, Mrs. Walker?” I call, unable to resist the urge to mess with her. I know it winds her up when I call her that. I’ve been doing it every morning this week.

“Yes, *dear*?” she yells back, half out the door.

“Go straight to work. Griffin values punctuality over coffee.”

The beginning of her curse back drifts down the hallway toward me before the door falls shut and muffles out the rest.

Twenty-five minutes later, I stride up to Harley’s desk and deposit the take-away cup down onto it.

“Latte. Coconut milk, extra foam, two sugars.”

She lifts her gaze from her computer screen, her lips parting as she clocks the cup.

“Pardon?”

I tap my finger on top of the lid. “Do I need to get your ears tested, Mrs. Walker? I said latte, coco—”

“I take back what I said about you being a pain in the ass this morning,” she says as she removes the lid and inhales, her eyes fluttering closed.

“You never said I was a pain in the ass.”

She looks up guiltily, tipping her head to one side. “It might have been in the elevator, to the nice man who got on five floors below me.”

“Ah. So now you’re sharing our sex life, and your feelings about me?”

“Only one of those is real. So technically, I’m only sharing one thing about us.” She blows on the top of her latte and then looks up at me. “Is that...?”

I lift my hand, holding the tray with two other cups in it. “One for me, one for Griffin.”

“Did I tell you I love you today yet?” She grins, taking me by surprise as she jumps to her feet and wraps her arms around my neck. I can’t help pressing my nose into her hair, my dick twitching at the scent of her coconut shampoo. I’ve smelled it before; its sweet scent bursting from her room like a cloud after she opens her door in the mornings.

“If you were my real girlfriend, you could show me how much you love me,” I murmur against her ear, completely losing myself for a second.

“Ha, yeah, whatever.” She rolls her eyes as she sits back at her desk. “When did a sincere thank you lose its value and cease to be enough? It’s always the same with men.”

“But you didn’t say thank you. You told me you loved me.”

“Technically, I only asked if I had told you I loved you. Not actually admitted to such feelings.” Harley pouts.

I grin, and she narrows her eyes at me.

“Well, technically, I was really talking about agreeing to accompany me to Stuart’s niece’s birthday party this weekend to show your dedication and love for me... as my *girlfriend*,” I add. “What did you think I meant?” I twist my mouth into a scowl of mock outrage, earning a smirk from her pretty pink lips.

“A birthday party, huh?” She leans back in her chair, crossing her arms.

“Yup.”

“This niece... how old is she?”

“Five.”

She purses her lips, studying me. “Hm, too young to vote. This doesn’t sound much like mayor work to me. Not what I signed up for.”

I shake my head as her smirk grows. I swear she deserves to be taken over my knee and spanked. A thought that I should not be entertaining when this is all *fake*.

“You signed up for being my girlfriend. That means, as well as the *mayor work* as you put it, I need you to come to things like five-year-old’s petting zoo parties with me.” I know she’s just winding me up. She’s been out to dinner with me twice this week already to keep up public appearances.

“Petting zoo?” Her eyes light up. “Like, real animals?”

“No. It’s a dick petting party. Of course, real fucking animals.”

She glares at me as she bites her lower lip to fight her smile. “Good. I dread to think what venereal diseases might be at the other type of party.”

“This snake always wears his second skin. Don’t you worry about that.”

She snorts. “Please don’t put me off my latte.”

I smile at her as I move toward Griffin’s door. I wait until she has the cup to her lips and then I add, “I stirred it with my cock, especially for you. You’re welcome.”

“Bastard!” she calls back as I open the door, but I can detect a laugh hiding in her voice.

“She’s enjoying her new role, then?” Griffin says dryly as I shut the door behind me and walk over to his desk, setting the coffee down.

I slide into the seat opposite him. “She gives it back too. Don’t feel sorry for her.”

“I don’t. Anyone who agrees to date you does so at their own risk.”

“Fake date,” I interject, causing Griffin to raise his eyes from his cell phone and look at me.

“Sorry.” He pulls his brows together, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “I meant *fake* date with *fake* feelings.”

“Exactly.” I reach forward to take my coffee, leaning back in the chair. “So, how are things going?”

“Yeah, good. Business as usual here. It’s nice to have some smooth sailing for a change.” Griffin’s eyes darken, and I know he’s thinking about the past year and how bad things got around here, what with the spa formulations being stolen, and him almost losing Maria over the entire mess.

“You deserve it to be boring as shit for a while after what happened. Remember, it’s in the past now. Where it should stay.” I fix him with a look, and he runs his hand down over his tie, nodding in agreement.

We’ve been friends since school. I know him, and he knows me. What happened at The Songbird hit him hard. But not as hard as almost losing Maria. It’s one thing seeing your best friend struggling in business. Quite another to see him heartbroken. It’s something I never want to see again—people I care about hurting.

“How’s Maria?”

Griffin’s somber haze lifts away from his face like a curtain, leaving a contented smile.

“She’s incredible... actually, she said she saw you and Harley coming back from dinner the other night, but you were too far ahead to catch up with.”

“Did she?”

“She said you looked *rather close*.” Griffin smirks as I frown at him.

“It’s called acting. We were out in public. There’s press everywhere this close to the election.”

“I see.” He steepled his hands in front of him, looking smug as shit.

“That’s all there is to it. We’re doing each other a favor. I needed to look more committed. She needed the money. All there is to it,” I huff as I take another sip of coffee.

“Sure.”

I study Griffin as he drinks.

“Do you know what she needs the extra money for?”

“The therapy she will need after living with you?” he quips.

I shake my head. “Come on. You knew about the honey trapping. And you and I both know you can be ruthless at times, but you pay your staff well. So what is it? Is she in trouble?” My chest tightens at the thought of Harley having some shady loan shark chasing her, or a jerk of an ex she might owe money.

“She’s not in trouble.” Griffin holds my gaze.

“You bastard, you know, don’t you?” I stare at him, willing him to give me an insight into what’s going on in Harley’s personal life. I know it’s none of my business, but I have a sister, and the thought of any woman being in a situation where she needs help... it claws at my soul.

He places his cup down on the desk without breaking eye contact. “I do, yes. So does Maria. Harley told us a while ago.”

I drop my head into my hands and let out a frustrated groan.

“She’s fine, Reed. You can see that. You live with her. She isn’t in any trouble, I promise you.”

“But you’ll not tell me why she wants four fucking grand a month on top of her salary?”

If I didn’t live with her, I might be inclined to think it was a shopping addiction or a weakness for designer shoes. But she’d rather spend all her time in those fluffy pink monstrosities than in heels. The only thing I have learned about Harley since living with her is that she likes to be warm and comfortable. She names her plants and talks to them like they’re babies, and she smells fucking incredible. I walk past her room when that coconut shower cloud comes out in the mornings and it makes my dick spring to attention like a fucking soldier.

“It’s not for me to tell. I’m sure she’ll share it with you when she’s ready.”

I look at Griffin, then shake my head and look away. He's right. It's not for me to know unless she chooses to tell me. Who am I to her? I'm just her boss's best friend. I'm the guy she jokes with but never takes seriously because she thinks I'm only after one thing. And I've given her no reason to think otherwise. She's right. It is who I am.

"How's the campaigning going?" Griffin asks, steering our conversation back to work.

"Yeah, good. Great. Harley came along to a question-and-answer session that was filmed the other evening and hit it off with Stuart. So now I have both of them bossing me around."

I chuckle as I recall how excited Harley was to go to the news studio and visit a real green room. When we got back to the apartment, she emptied her purse out, and inside were the wrapped snacks they'd been handing out in there. She brought them for me, saying I would have missed out otherwise.

"You're getting good reception about your policies, I see?" Griffin lifts a newspaper from the edge of his desk and drops it down in front of me. It's open to a page about me, titled '*Walker wants you to walk home safely at night.*'

"Yeah." I run a hand around the back of my neck and clear my throat. "It's important to people. A city like New York has a higher number of sexual assaults than suburban areas. People want to be able to catch the subway home late or get a drink and not worry about who might put something in their drink or might follow them." I glance up and Griffin's eyes are trained on me. They soften as he gives the slightest nod of understanding.

"How's Riley doing?"

“Really well. Busting balls and getting promoted over her male colleagues.” My shoulders loosen and I grin with pride as I think of my twin sister.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Griffin says. “She was always the best at winning an argument, even when we were kids.”

I chuckle. “Yep, she was. Stubborn ass.”

Her chosen career as a prosecution lawyer suits her personality perfectly. She’s always been one to fight injustice and stand up for what she believes in. One honest voice is louder than a crowd, or so she reminds me on a regular basis. I’m so proud of her. I think she would have always found law as her career, even if it wasn’t for what happened that day. But I guess we’ll never know. That one event shaped her entire future. You never know when you wake up in the morning just how the day might end. How it might scar you for the rest of your life or make you uncover a strength in yourself you never even knew you had because it’s either that or let yourself be destroyed.

And Walkers don’t give in. We fight back.

“What’s the rest of your week looking like?” Griffin asks.

I blow out a breath. “More strategy meetings with Stuart. A couple of interviews, some on the street candidate meet-and-greet. Then this weekend is Paige’s party.”

“A whole yard full of five-year-olds high on sugar and excitement? Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I mutter with a smile. “Although I think Harley’s more excited about the petting zoo than the kids.”

Griffin snorts. “I’m sure she is. You know, she asked if we could get an office dog at her last review?”

“Really?” I raise a brow.

“I said no, of course. I’ve got enough problems with half the fucking pigeons in Manhattan thinking the hotel is the prime vantage point for perching their feathery shitting asses.”

I laugh. Griffin has had a problem with the pigeons around The Songbird for years. It’s eased up, but every now and again, it seems to go mental again and the sidewalk by the main entrance is littered in feathers and shit for a day or two. It’s like the pigeons have a wild blow out just to piss him off and keep him on his toes.

I glance at my watch and stand, making my way to the door, still laughing.

“I gotta go. Early bird and all that...”

Griffin takes one look at me, still laughing, and grumbles, “Fuck off”, as I open the door. I head out, past Harley’s desk where she’s stroking the petals of an orchid and whispering something softly to it.

“Later, Mrs. Walker,” I call, walking past.

“Bye, *Daddy*,” she coos, making my laugh grow louder. It’s still rumbling in my chest, cementing a smile to my face as I exit the elevator and cross the lobby toward the giant, ornate main doors.

Even the memory drudged back up in Griffin’s office isn’t enough to quieten it.

Daddy?

She definitely deserves a fucking spanking.



Chapter Six



Harley

“IS THERE ANYTHING LEFT in the store?” I look pointedly at the giant pink box complete with over-sized glittery bow that Reed’s balancing in one arm as we approach the front door.

“Last time I saw her, she said she wanted a Barbie dream house.” Reed looks at me as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world that he would buy it for her.

“You’re close, then? With Paige?” I look at his silky brown waves. He looks different today. I’m so used to seeing him in a suit, or sweaty with a lack of gym wear around the apartment. But this casual Reed in dark jeans and a green polo suits him. He looks like one of those men’s cologne ads. The expensive ones.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with Stuart, and he’s really close with his brother. So that means I’ve spent a lot of time with Book Page, too.”

“Book Page?” I snap back to reality at Reed’s choice of words.

“She likes it. You’ll see,” he adds as he looks at me.

I shake off my puzzled expression and look at the giant box again.

“I wish I’d been there to see you carry it out of the store.” I grin at the mental image of Reed, all smart and serious in his suit, manhandling a giant pink box with partying swimwear-clad dolls on the side in the middle of Manhattan.

“I only had to load it into the car. The saleswoman offered to help, but I said no.” He reaches his free hand up to ring the bell.

“You said no?”

“Yes. After she asked for my number.”

I roll my eyes and turn my body to him, ready to fire a witty comeback, but he’s looking at the door with a straight face.

He isn’t joking.

“Oh... That’s nice.” My stomach tenses and I close my mouth, pressing my lips into a firm line.

“It’s not, Harls.”

Harls.

The tension in my stomach is replaced by fluttering the second my name leaves his lips.

“She knew full well who I am. She was talking about the campaign with me.”

“And?”

A muscle in his neck twitches as he sucks in a breath through his nose.

“And we’ve been together a few weeks now. The press has been talking odds on when I’m going to propose.” He reaches forward and jabs the bell again, hissing with a clenched jaw. “She would have known about you. The fact she asked for my number is not *fucking nice*.”

“Hey.” I lay a hand on his bicep. “So what if she’s the type of woman who doesn’t care if a man is in a relationship? Why are you bothered?”

“It’s not the type of woman she is that bothers me.” He looks at me with darkened eyes.

“Then what?” I frown at him in confusion. He’s right. The press has been going nuts over our ‘relationship’. It’s the first time Reed has been known to have a serious girlfriend since he joined the political circuit. Some news channels are more interested in me and him than they are in his policies should he become mayor.

“It’s the type of man she thinks *I* am. I would never do that to you.” The way his eyes soften as they hold mine, he looks almost apologetic. Apologetic for something he hasn’t even done, and for something that isn’t even real.

“It’s fine.” I shrug. “Who cares what other people think? We both know in this thing”—I wave a finger between us—“there’s only you and me. And that’s everything we need.”

His brows pull together. “People are so fast to judge. That’s why Stuart suggested we do this in the first place. He thought it’d help people see me as a serious candidate, not purely a womanizer who wants the notoriety and position to bed more women.”

His eyes burn into mine for a few seconds before he looks away, his jaw still clenched tight. I never realized it bothered him what people think. I assumed he was happy with meaningless hook-ups. Some people don’t want full-on relationships, and that’s their choice. But then, I guess he was engaged once. To Bea.

My stomach sinks at his dejected expression. If I wasn’t sure before, then I am now. He must have been hurt badly when things ended with Bea, so he began burying his sorrows in different women, along with his dick. Only now that’s causing him pain, too. People expect him to screw up. To cheat

on me. To give them some sordid sex scandal to get all worked up over and throw on the front pages. They expect him to be a cold-hearted player. But it was because of his big heart that loved so openly that he ended up in this situation in the first place.

He thinks he will be judged on his past more than his ability to be a good mayor.

“Prove it to yourself.”

He turns to me.

“Prove it to yourself.” I raise my brows and look at him... really look at him. “You could be a great mayor, right? You really care about people and providing better services for them. Better services, education, stronger communities. That’s all true, right?”

“Yes.” He takes a deep breath as he listens to me.

“Then tell yourself, Reed. Be you and don’t worry what the hell anyone thinks. Show up for yourself. So that you can look back and think, you know what? I did it. I showed up, and I was instrumental in this process. I was on this journey, and I nailed it in the way only I can.”

He’s silent for a beat before he speaks.

“You’re right, thank you.” He smiles, looking into my eyes. “And you’re also unusually philosophical today?”

I rub at the burning in the center of my chest, my cheeks growing hot under his gaze. He’s right; I am feeling more in tune with my emotions today. I had to give myself a pep talk in the shower this morning and remind myself of Reed’s words about looking back. I can’t do that anymore. I need to look forward and own my feelings. Own them and not be afraid of them. I knew today would be a tough day. Too many painful memories. But

I need to change that into something positive. Turn that frown upside down, as Mom would say when we were kids.

And a kid's birthday party and petting zoo are perfect. Kids, animals, and cake. How can anyone not be happy with that combination?

I lift my gaze to meet Reed's, who's watching me, concern etched in the small creases around his eyes. Tiny valleys forged by understanding and compassion. I know I make fun of him, and he deserves it most of the time. But I also know, since spending all this extra time with him, that he's kind, considerate, and passionate. He's so many more things than I ever saw before and than I ever gave him credit for.

"Besides, you know what I'd do if you cheated?" I say, lightening the mood.

All this heavy thinking can wait. Today is not the day.

"Do I?" He arches a brow.

I bite my lip as amusement glitters in his eyes. I love it when he looks at me like this. It means that for a small moment, I have brought a little sprinkling of joy and happiness into the world.

And it's been felt by Reed Walker.

I stand on tiptoes and bring my lips to his ear, letting them ghost over his skin as I try not to get high on the incredible forest air scent that is him.

"Snip, snip," I whisper.

He draws back, looking at me as his face splits into a wide grin, and he laughs. It's deep and full, and it comes from low in his chest, making him appear taller as he embraces it.

It's like real-life magic.

I watch him, entranced, as the door opens.

“Hey, you two. Sorry to keep you waiting so long.” Stuart grins, standing back so we can walk in.

I kiss him on both cheeks. Then Reed shakes his hand as they pat each other on the back.

“Wow.” My mouth hangs open as I look around the beautiful hallway. It’s bright and inviting, with giant black and white family images on the walls. I assume they must be Stuart’s brother and family if the resemblance is anything to go by.

“Yeah... my brother married an interior designer. She can tell you any New York hotel, just by looking at its room décor. It’s bordering on an obsession requiring institutional intervention.” Stuart laughs. “Come on through. Everyone’s out back.”

We follow him to the back of the house into an open-plan kitchen and dining area. The giant folding doors are open, allowing the room to flow seamlessly out onto the large, flat manicured lawn and gardens. It’s stunning. I guess this is what you can get for your money if you live somewhere like Riverdale. It’s so much greener than Manhattan. A family’s dream.

Stuart introduces us to his brother, Reuben, and wife, Nina, and he points out his girlfriend, Shannon, who waves at us from across the lawn. I smile and give her a wave back, but then my attention is stolen by a whirl of giggles and party hats as a gaggle of children tear past us in the direction of a trailer where a man is unloading animals. I watch in fascination as a small pony is led out and placed in a pen on the grass.

“Reed!” I point over at the pony and then squeal as it’s joined by a micro pig and small sheep.

He looks down at me, eyes crinkling. “Why don’t I find you a party hat and you can join the kids?”

“Really?” I wiggle my hips side to side on the spot. “Look! There’s a goat!”

“I’ve seen a goat before, Harley.”

I shove him in the arm, but he doesn’t even wobble. It’s like pushing a boulder up a mountain. We’ve only just arrived, but I can already tell this was a great idea. I feel better about today already.

“I bet you haven’t seen one in a pink bow, though. Look.” I point over to the happy little goat whose tail is shaking as it bleats in its pen.

“It’s a goat. Why does it need a fucking bow?”

I lean into Reed’s side and pat him on the chest with my palm. Even though this is a friend’s party, only Stuart and his girlfriend know we aren’t a real couple. It’s getting much easier to be physically close to Reed when we’re out now. Maybe I’m just getting better at acting, but it feels so much more natural as each day goes by.

“Oh, shut up, party-pooper. It’s her party outfit. I think she looks sweet.”

Reed wraps his arm around my waist and dips his nose to my hair. “How do you know it’s a she?” He squints toward the goat’s little furry tummy.

“Just a feeling.” I smile and blow a kiss to the goat, who is watching us.

The grumble in Reed’s throat vibrates against my forehead where he’s pulled me into him.

“What?” I lean back to look at him.

“Harls, you’re blowing a kiss to a goat.”

“And why not? It’s the only thing I am blowing since our arrangement began.” I hold in my laugh for as long as I can until it bursts out, fueled by the murderous look crossing Reed’s handsome features.

“On second thoughts”—he pulls me back against him and leans down so his warm lips graze my ear, sending electricity dancing over my skin—“I’d rather see you French fucking kiss the flea-ridden thing than ever imagine what you might be doing if you weren’t mine at this exact moment in time.”

I crane my neck and look up at him as he pulls back, his eyes burning into mine.

His?

Fake his, obviously. That’s what he means. Still, the way he says it, his eyes dropping to my lips and back up again. If this was real, then I would be in serious trouble of falling deep. I don’t think there’s a middle ground with Reed. Just the way he says it, ‘*his*’, tells me that once you have his heart, you’ll never doubt the strength of love again. Bea was a fool. Whatever she did that hurt him, she’s paying for it now by missing out on him. Maybe that’s why she was such a bitch at the dinner. He’s never had a girlfriend since her. She was always the one that no one ever replaced. No one ever followed. She left too big of a hole behind. But then she saw me. She doesn’t know this isn’t real. She sees Reed finally moving on. She sees what she lost.

And for now, what she lost is mine.

At least, I get to pretend it is.

I screw my face up. “I do not want to imagine what you might be doing either, thank you.”

“What would I be doing?” Reed asks innocently.

I cock a brow at him and scoff. “Um.”

The thought of Reed with another woman, that ridiculously ripped chest of his, and his carved abs, dripping in sweat as he ‘goes hard at it’ like he

does in the gym invades every one of my senses, and I shudder as a ball of nausea threatens to swell in my stomach.

It makes sense. No one likes to think about their friends having sex, do they? Not actually picture it. Although some of the graphic stories Suze has told me about her dating adventures mean I may as well have been sat at the foot of the bed with them.

No, I do not want to picture Reed with another woman.

Ever.

“Um. You know what? It doesn’t matter.” I wave my hand half-heartedly in the air.

“You think I would be in bed with someone whose name I won’t remember?”

“No, I—”

“It’s fine, Harley. I know what you think about that. You’ve told me enough times.”

“I...” I close my mouth, stopping myself before I make it worse.

I’m such a bitch. He was opening up to me on the doorstep, saying he hates how people judge him. And I told him it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks, and yet here I am, seeming like I am judging him for his past.

“Besides, I like that you say it like it is. Your mouth is one of your best qualities.” His lips twitch. “Although if I were your real boyfriend, I think I would be stuffing something in it to get you to shut up sometimes.”

“Reed!” I bat him on the chest as the atmosphere lightens. He grabs both of my hands and pins them behind my back with a deep chuckle.

My breasts are forced forward, and I suck in a breath as my nipples harden beneath my blouse. Images of him feeding his cock into my mouth

assault my brain and any words I could use as a comeback wither and die on my tongue.

I mean, he's... I look back into his bright eyes, which are fixed on mine. God, I wonder if he looks at them like this when he's—No! I cannot think about Reed with other women. And what he does when he's naked with them. It's just weird and awkward, and weird, and... His lips part, and I stare at them, itching to hear what he's about to say.

“Weed!” A little girl runs over and wraps herself around his leg.

“Hey, Book Page.” He breaks eye contact with me, letting my hands go, and grins as he hoists the little girl up into his arms. She immediately presses his cheeks together and giggles as his face squishes up.

Weed? I mouth to him behind her.

He winks at me before turning his attention back on Paige.

“I wame wu wisch wu a wuppy wurfway,” he says before tickling her under one arm, so she lets go of his face. “I said”—he holds the hand up above her head as she stares at it, her eyes going wide and sparkling in delight—“I came to wish you a happy birthday.”

She erupts into giggles again, throwing her head of blonde curls back as he swoops on her tummy and tickles it.

“Stop, Weed! Stop!” she pants, reaching for his cheeks again the second he relents in his attack on her.

“No, you don't, Book Page.” He swings her around in his arms before depositing her on the floor. She beams up at him like she's just met her hero. “You having a fun time, superstar?”

“Yes. There's a pony. Did you see it?” She bounces on the spot excitedly, and Reed's eyes dart to mine.

“I did. It’s a fine little pony. You know what?” He reaches for my hand and pulls me to his side. “This is Harley. She loves animals, too.”

Paige’s face glows, her cheeks flushed pink, probably from a mix of being swirled around and eating party food. Her eyes pop as she looks at my pink top with a frill down its center, the same shade as the dress she’s wearing.

“Do you want to come and see it with me?”

I glance at Reed who smiles at me and tips his chin.

“I would love that!” I give Paige my friendliest smile as she takes my free hand. Reed squeezes my other fingers between his and then lets them slip from his so that Paige can tug me away in the direction of the pens.

One hour later, I have stroked, fed, petted, cuddled, kissed, and rubbed every fuzzy tummy of every animal that is part of the petting zoo. I’ve been the only adult in there the entire time with all the kids, and I couldn’t care less. I’ve had an awesome time.

“It feels funny.” Paige wrinkles her little button nose as she holds her hand out to Freddy the goat.

“You’re doing such a great job.”

“He’s hungry.” She giggles as he snuffles in her hand for more pellets.

“Having fun, Mrs. Doolittle?”

I turn to the familiar deep voice and lock eyes with Reed, who is leaning on his forearms on the side of the pen. He gives me a dazzling smile that makes me forget where I am for a second, until Freddy nuzzles at the frill on the front of my pink top, trying to nibble it.

“Hey, you.” I laugh as I place my palm against his nose and steer him away. “Are you going to come in and stroke him?” I look back at Reed questioningly.

“I thought *he* was a girl?” Reed says as he comes in through the gate.

“No. Sam said he has a willy,” Paige says matter-of-factly, dipping her head toward the grass. “It’s furry. Look!” She points to between Freddy’s back legs.

“Oh, yeah, a little furry one. Well spotted, birthday girl.”

Paige grins at my praise and then jumps to her feet. “I’m going to go and tell Uncle Stu that I found Freddy’s willy.”

I laugh as she leaves the pen and races across the grass toward Stuart.

“Aww, it’s so sweet.” I look back at Freddy.

“A furry willy?”

“What? No!” I groan at the smirk on Reed’s face.

“Ugh, you’re such a jerk sometimes,” I say with a smile, unable to stop it planting itself on my face like a sign. A great big neon one that tells Reed I find him amusing.

Sometimes.

God, he’s going to love this.

I shake my head and sigh as I stroke the smooth horns on Freddy’s head.

“Do not make a horn rubbing joke.” I arch a brow at Reed.

His eyes crease up beneath his dark brows. “I never said a word.”

His eyes are glittering, the way they do when he’s amused. “You didn’t need to. I’m learning a lot about you since I moved in. What have you been doing, anyway? While I’ve been playing with the kids?”

He casts his gaze over the lawn and tilts his chin toward an older man near the gift table. “See him? That’s Fred Yates, New York’s top defense attorney. And that”—he looks toward a woman with short brown hair around my mom’s age—“is Hilda Davenport, head of the board who runs three of the biggest hospitals in the city.”

“And here was me thinking we were just coming to celebrate and eat cake. Is this what all kids’ parties are like now? A chance for the parents to network with business associates?”

Reed looks back at me, pushing a hand back through his hair. It shines in the bright sunshine. “Nina made over their houses for them. It’s just a coincidence they live in the same neighborhood.”

“A lucky coincidence if you’re running for mayor.” I bump shoulders with him with a smile, then stand, calling over to Sam, the guy in charge of the animals.

“Hey, Sam? Do you have any feed left?”

“Sure.” He holds up a bag in his hand and brings some over to me, depositing it into my palm.

“Hold out your hand,” I say to Reed as Sam heads off to chat to the children fussing over the piglet.

“No.” Reed crosses his arms over his chest, his biceps straining the fabric of his polo.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.” I fix him with a look that I hope says I mean business. “Reed Walker, you are going to give Freddy a snack.”

“Why?” He glances from me to Freddy, his bottom lip poking out in a childish sulk.

“Because I want to video it. It’s the sort of thing a girlfriend does.” I force the feed into his large hand and hold my phone up ready, barely able to contain my grin as Reed glances over his shoulder.

Hilda looks over at us both and smiles.

“See? You have an audience. Don’t keep them waiting.” I giggle as I click record.

Reed mutters something unintelligible under his breath before he crouches down in front of Freddy.

“There. You happy now?” he grumbles as Freddy trots over and starts devouring the pellets in his hand.

“Yes.” I grin as I watch them on the screen on my phone. It’s so cute. Freddy’s little tail is wiggling around all over the place, and he’s started doing this little bounce up and down on his front legs.

“Good. I’m glad you two are happy.”

“I am. It suits you. I think he likes you.”

Freddy’s tail has gone into overdrive now and he’s put his front hooves up on Reed’s knees as he shoves into him, eager to get the last bits of food.

“Greedy little bastard, isn’t he?” Reed remarks, but I swear he’s enjoying it really. How can he not? Freddy is so sweet and the way he’s now butting Reed softly, it’s like he’s pushing in kisses with his head.

“Who’s a good boy? You like *Weed*, don’t you? You want to know if he’s scrummy-yummy-delicious, don’t you?” I coo from behind the camera.

“Oh fuck,” Reed mutters, dropping his voice to talk to Freddy. “She’s talking to you in that voice. Next, she’ll be spraying you with her water bottle and spouting positive mantras at you. If you see the tiny scissors... run!”

“How dare you?” I cry, laughing in shock.

Reed smiles, looking away from Freddy and at me through the camera. He looks insanely handsome. I grip my phone tighter, so I don’t drop it.

Photogenic bastard.

Reed's eyes snap away from mine and he lets out a garbled 'fuck' in the same breath as he topples backward from the force of Freddy's sudden headbutt to his groin.

"Freddy! What are you doing? No!" I dive forward, but he escapes my grasp, happily rearing back and butting his head into Reed again. I manage to grab the bow around his neck with my free hand and pull his head up from where he's buried his nose between Reed's thighs.

A low groan escapes Reed's lips as he sits on the floor.

Sam runs into the pen and takes over, leading Freddy away. "Sorry about that. He gets a little frisky with adult males sometimes. Must be the testosterone he picks up on."

"Now I know why he needs to wear that fucking bow. It's a restraining device," Reed hisses out through gritted teeth as he cups his manhood between both hands. "Fucking animals."

I bite my lip, fighting away my smile as he composes himself with some deep breaths, before finally standing and brushing himself off.

"Aww, he liked you." I giggle as I reach up and pluck a blade of grass from Reed's hair. "Maybe he could smell all that pent-up sexual energy from the last few weeks."

"Months," Reed interjects.

"Huh?"

He stares into my eyes as my hand hovers in his hair and drops his voice low so only I can hear. "It's *months* of fucking sexual energy. I haven't looked at a woman since that charity gala at The Songbird where my date threw her drink in my face."

"Oh." My hand freezes at the base of his neck. I remember that night well. I'd chosen to wind him up and ask him to introduce me to his date. He

got her name wrong, and she was less than impressed. “You haven’t—?”

“No,” he answers immediately, a gruffness in his voice.

I hold his gaze, desperately wanting to ask him why it’s been so long. I knew after we agreed there would be no one else while we pretend to date that it must have been a few weeks, tops. But to learn that Reed, the guy who was ‘entertaining’ a different woman almost every night at one point, hasn’t had sex in months? It’s like being told Santa is real after all.

“Oh,” I say again. It’s the only word I’m able to form, my tongue turning to jelly in my mouth. I swallow hard and eventually force out a croak. “Maybe that’s why Freddy *really* likes you.”

“The feeling is not mutual. My balls feel bruised,” Reed huffs and his eyes drop to my cell phone. “You can delete that.”

“Not a chance!” I grin, my normal voice returning as I stuff my phone into the back pocket of my jeans.

“Harls.” There’s a warning tone in his voice, but the fact that he said Harls again does not warn me of anything, except the imminent surge of the weird, warm, fuzzy feeling I get in my stomach when he calls me that.

“For my eyes only, I promise.” I wink at him as Paige calls through the side of the pen.

“When I hurt myself, Mommy and Daddy kiss it better.”

Reed turns to her. “They do, do they? That’s very nice of them.”

Paige nods enthusiastically, resting her chin on one of the horizontal bars as she watches us expectantly.

Waiting.

“Do you think Harley should kiss my hurt better?”

I look at his smug bastard expression. He’s enjoying this.

“I am not kissing your dick if that’s what you’re hinting at,” I whisper out the side of my mouth so Paige doesn’t hear the word ‘dick’.

“It’s her birthday. She’s the birthday girl. You shouldn’t refuse a request from the birthday girl.” Reed smirks at me as Paige looks between the two of us.

“My tongue would probably disown me. Pack up my tonsils and fuck off to Timbuktu if I had to do that,” I murmur. “The only thing hurting is your giant fucking ego from falling on your ass, which is covered in grass, by the way.”

“You’ve been looking at my ass?”

I narrow my eyes at him, and he laughs and looks back at Paige. “Sorry, Book Page. Harley doesn’t like kissing me in public. She thinks I taste like candy, and she’s scared she won’t be able to stop.”

“Would you kiss forever?” Paige’s eyes go wide.

Reed looks at me with a smile. “I think we would. I think I would kiss her until I’m all old and wrinkly.”

“Eww.” Paige screws up her nose and then lets out a shriek as Reed darts out of the pen and scoops her up into his arms.

“But you? You taste like gummy bears!” He grins before he lifts her stomach to his lips and blows raspberry after raspberry on it.

Her laughter rings out around the garden, and I can still hear it in my head as we say goodbye to everyone, and ride back in Reed’s private car, and as we walk inside our apartment, and I sink my feet into my slippers.

I can still hear it hours later.

It sounds like happiness.

Pure, unbridled happiness.

And I know that any time I think of her laugh again, it will make me smile like it is doing now.

Until I'm all old and wrinkly.



Chapter Seven



Reed

I ROLL OVER AND lift my phone, squinting as the screen lights up. 1 AM. What's she doing up at 1 AM? She better not be up with Bruce, giving him some ritualistic middle of the night watering under the moonlight. I would not put it past her.

I shift onto my back and listen as the odd squeak and snuffle drifts into my room. It sounds like she's in the living room.

It sounds like she's crying.

Maybe she is and wants to be alone. I know I like to be by myself sometimes. But my legs are already swinging out of bed before I have time to contemplate my actions.

I stifle my yawn, dragging a hand back through my hair as I head down the hallway and into the living area. She's curled up on the sofa underneath a giant blanket, the light from her phone reflecting off her face as she wipes her cheeks with the heel of her hand. She sucks in a breath as her shoulders shake, and for one god-awful moment, my heart plummets to my feet. But then she breaks into a grin and the cross between a squeak and snuffle exits her parted lips.

“Harls?”

She startles, her eyes popping as she drops her phone in surprise. “Reed. Don’t creep up on me like that. I could have taken you out thinking you were an intruder.”

I look at her pink fluffy slippers sticking out from beneath the blanket.

“What would you do? Suffocate me with fluff? Tie me up with miniature glittery ropes?”

“Jerk,” she mutters, but her eyes soften as she looks at me.

“What are you doing up so late?” I swipe her phone up and drop down onto the sofa next to her, lifting her feet and laying them across my legs. The screen is full of my face, contorted in a weird mask of disbelief and pain as Freddy the goat butts me square in the groin. “That little fucker could have cost me the future Reed juniors.”

Harley snorts, fresh tears spilling from her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sure it must have hurt, but it’s made me laugh. And I needed that.”

I hand her phone back to her. “Something on your mind?”

She chews her bottom lip, sniffing. “You could say that. Today was, well, yesterday now, I guess... It was a date that is hard for me, for... certain reasons.” She drops her eyes from mine, fiddling with the edge of the blanket. “The party was so fun. And I thought I was okay. I thought I had gotten through it unscathed. But then I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep again.” She lets out a deep sigh. Her chest deflates, so she looks even tinier and more delicate than usual. “I guess it was just waiting to surprise me instead.”

“You know...” I run a hand over the blanket, stroking her calf beneath. “There’s a date that sneaks up on me sometimes, too.”

“There is?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat as I push the images that the memory brings back down deep into the darkest depths of my soul where I’ve learned to keep them most of the time. “It’s been a long time, and I don’t think of it often. But sometimes I do, and... well, let’s just say I hate those days.”

“I get it,” Harley says softly.

The blanket is smooth underneath my palm, and the rhythmic up and down strokes I’m making on Harley’s leg are helping to control the burning in my chest and throat that always come when I think about that night.

“But it led me to where I am today, and I think at least something good came from it. Politics is a more stable profession than music.”

“You wanted to work in music? What, like a producer or a manager?” Harley looks at me with interest.

I barely talk about it anymore. That’s an old life. A Reed in a parallel universe is living that version of my life.

“No. A musician.” I drop my chin and watch my hand trace over the blanket.

“The guitar in your room?”

“Been snooping, have you? Did you sniff my underwear too?” I laugh and look back up as she recoils and sticks her tongue out at me.

“I didn’t even go inside. I just saw it when I moved in. Your door was open.”

“Hey. It’s fine. You can go wherever you want. This is your home, too.”

She nods, rolling her perfect pink lips together.

“Honestly, it’s fine.”

Her shoulders finally relax, and she lets out a slow breath as I convince her I’m not pissed. I really couldn’t give a shit if she went in my room or not. There’s nothing in there I wouldn’t happily show her myself. “Yeah,

the guitar,” I continue. “I wanted to be a singer. Used to write my own songs, joined a band in college. You know, typical stuff when you’re young and gullible enough to think you’ll be the next big thing.”

She grins at me. “I can imagine you doing that. Loving life on your tour bus with hordes of fans chanting your name and breaking into your hotel room so they can lie naked on your bed awaiting your return.”

She laughs as I chuckle and shake my head.

“Would you have been one?”

“A fan? Oh, absolutely.” She lays a hand over her heart. “Front row, throwing my panties up on stage for you.”

“Right, that’s it.” I pretend I’m about to stand up. “I’m changing careers. I can still be a rockstar.”

“Idiot!” she snorts, pushing me back into the sofa with her feet.

I continue stroking her legs as her smile wanes and she grows quiet.

“Someone close to me was hurt,” she whispers, her eyes shining in the dim light. “And I was helpless to stop it.”

“I’m sorry, that’s tough.” I lean my head back against the sofa, keeping my eyes on hers.

“It was. It is. Something was broken, lost,” she croaks. “Is that similar to you?”

I chew my cheek as I look into her open, trusting gaze. “In a way, yes.”

She searches my eyes. “And you still hurt when you think about it now?”

I tip my head and smile sadly. How can I answer that? I say things are better left in the past. And for the most part, it’s true, and I live by my own advice. But then there are those odd cracks. Those tiny slithers where the darkness seeps back in and licks at my soul, burning it, brandishing it, and turning it black, dark, and ugly.

“Oh my God, Reed.” Harley bolts forward and wraps her arms around my neck. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize. I knew you were hurting. I saw it in your eyes at the dinner after we saw Bea, and I... I just knew something had happened. But I didn’t know just how deep it ran.”

“It’s okay, Harls.” I wrap my palms around her ribs and ease her back so I can look at her. “It was a long time ago, and like I said, I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you.”

She tilts her head, her eyes following the direction of her fingers as she weaves them through my hair. I breathe deeply, watching her expression become calm as she threads her fingertips through the strands at the back of my head, and then traces them tenderly down my neck. I swallow at how good it feels.

“Aren’t you cold?” She takes her hands away and sinks back into the sofa next to me.

“Nope.”

She assesses my bare chest and low-slung pajama pants with a frown and then re-arranges the blanket so it covers the two of us. I’m probably going to overheat now, but I don’t say anything. She seems to need the distraction of doing something.

“Will you sit with me for a bit? If you don’t mind, that is?” she asks, looking at me with such sweet innocent hope in her baby blue eyes that only a bastard could refuse her.

“Absolutely. I can survive without my beauty sleep.”

She clocks my smirk and rolls her eyes. “Of course you can. I’m sure you’ll even get some voters purely crossing that box in the hope you’ll bring out a charity calendar or something, and they’ll see you shirtless. And you know I’m not joking.”

I laugh. I do get hit on a lot when I'm out campaigning. I even used to call some of the numbers I was given. But now? The idea of having sex for the night with a woman whose name means nothing to me seems pointless. I used to call them because I wanted to feel something—I wanted to feel in control. And sometimes I did, for a few hours. But as soon as my dick was soft again, I felt nothing. Numb. Which, in itself, is preferable to feeling helpless—my one setting since the event that led my family to pack up and leave New York and move to California. I was old enough to stay behind. But my parents thought it would be good for all of us to have a fresh start together, and in many ways, they were right.

But now I'm back in the city that started it all, and I'm intent on being the one in control this time.

“Why don't we put a movie on?”

“Really?” Harley's eyes light up. Her tears have stopped.

“Yeah. What do you want to watch?”

She grins and reaches for the remote, putting on some movie with a load of talking animals, and the tears are back in her eyes again as she creases up with laughter next to me. I relax back into the cushions with a smile. She looks at me in delight, probably thinking I love the fact that a racoon is now wearing a sweater.

But I'm not smiling at the movie. I'm smiling at how happy it makes her.

Seeing her upset is like a sucker punch to my gut, or having a hot poker being rammed down my dick.

Harley being upset makes me want to mute every sound in the world. Rip the vibrations and sound waves from the air. Because I don't think I want to hear any sound.

Not unless one of them is her laugh.



Chapter Eight



Harley

“I JUST NEED TO remember what the business was called. Ah-ha!” I bring up the website and clap my hands together. “I found it.”

“And you really think this is a good idea?” Suze leans over my shoulder, reading the screen.

“Yes. It’s an amazing idea.” I look at Maria for support, but she furrows her brow as she carries over three steaming mugs and sets them down on her and Griffin’s dining table, where I’ve set up camp with my laptop.

“Trust me.” I look between the two of them, then turn back to the screen. “She was so lovely at that dinner we went to, and she was there alone. And she loves dogs. I mean, she could not be more perfect.” I grin as I scroll down the page, searching for her contact details.

“You like dogs,” Suze says to me before glancing at Maria.

I ignore the looks they’re both giving me. “Natalia’s incredible. She built up her pet walking business from scratch, and now it’s the most successful one in the city. She has over one hundred staff. There’s a waiting list and everything.”

“Sounds like a prep school.” Suze snorts and then closes her mouth when I fix her with a look.

“I know you think it sounds silly. But, girls, you weren’t there. You didn’t see the hurt in his eyes. You didn’t hear what he said.” I turn back to the screen and sigh. “Bea broke Reed’s heart years ago, and it’s never healed.”

“And you think Natalia can heal it?” Maria perches on the edge of the table and eyes me over the rim of her mug, which is cradled between her hands.

“She has to,” I whisper, looking at Natalia’s smiling face on her website photograph. “Besides, she’s blonde,” I say, as though that proves everything.

“He does seem to have a thing for blondes,” Suze muses as she glances at Maria.

“Exactly. You said every woman you saw leave his apartment was blonde.” I pick up my mug and take a sip as I look at Maria.

“That is true.” She nods.

I swallow down the latte, but it burns my tongue, and its usual sweetness is tainted with thoughts of Reed spending night after night buried inside different women searching for a cure for his pain.

“I want to do this for him. The campaign won’t last forever. Once our arrangement is over and I move out, he’ll be back to where he started again. If I can set the ball rolling now, then maybe he won’t be miserable for long.”

“I can’t say he’s ever looked miserable when I’ve seen him,” Suze says. “I’d actually say he looks even happier recently.”

“He *is* smiling more,” Maria agrees.

“It’s all for show.” I dismiss their comments with a wave of my hand as I reach for my cell phone and add Natalia’s number to my contacts. “He’s got to look happy for the campaign. Gain the voters’ trust and all that. His campaign manager, Stu, told me as much. Perception is everything.” I save her number and then close my laptop.

“What are you going to do? Set them up on a blind date?”

“Of course not.” I look at Suze. “Reed would never go for that. I’m not exactly sure yet, but I’ll think of something. They got on well enough at the dinner. I’m sure a few little carefully orchestrated meetings here and there will sow the seed. Then once the votes are in, Reed and I can amicably part ways, let the press know he was the perfect boyfriend and I love him like a brother. Something that still paints him in a good light for when he’s mayor.”

“When, not if? You’re sure he’s going to win?” Suze questions.

“He’s going to win. There’s no one better for that job than him.” I take a sip of my drink and smile as I recall the way he looked this morning in his dark blue suit, his hair still damp from the shower. And he still had his glasses on as he called out his usual ‘Goodbye Mrs. Walker’ and headed out the door. He looked strong and invincible, ready to take on anything.

Suze gives Maria another of the same looks the two of them keep exchanging.

“What?” I huff.

“Harley. How long have we known each other now?” Suze asks.

“Two years, one month, eight days, and probably around fifteen hours.” I sigh. I know what’s coming. Suze always refers to how well we’ve grown to know one another in what could be deemed a relatively short amount of time for a friendship as close as ours. We didn’t go to school like Reed and

Griffin did. We didn't grow up together and go through teenage hormones, first crushes, and first jobs together. But I did catch her cheating husband for her. And ever since then, our friendship has morphed into something next level. Nights spent laughing and crying together while her divorce was finalized, kids' parties, and school plays when her ex, Curt, let them all down again.

I've been there for her through it all. And she has done the same back with me. And then Maria came and made our duo a trio. And it's just gotten better and better. I may not have known these two women for decades, but I love them like sisters, and they know me better than anyone else.

"I know you don't think this is a good idea. But I'm telling you. Reed won't totally get over his past until someone comes along and shows him a brighter future. He's capable and intelligent, and a downright pain in the ass most days with his ridiculous jokes. But living with him, I'm seeing this whole other side to him. He's caring and thoughtful. He buys dream houses as birthday gifts and then gets his balls bruised." I laugh and shake my head at the questioning looks I'm getting. I wish I could show the girls that video of Reed and Freddy the goat, but I promised it would be for my eyes only.

"It sounds as though he's grown on you. I remember when you used to complain about him visiting Griffin at work all the time and trying to lure you into conversation."

I roll my eyes at Maria. "He still does that."

"Yet you don't complain about it anymore." She arches a perfect brow as she brushes her long, dark hair over her shoulder.

"I..." She's right. I haven't complained about it. Not in weeks. "That's because he does useful things now, like bring me Griffin's coffee if I'm late. We're sort of friends, I guess. He helps me. I help him."

“By setting him up with a woman you’ve met once?” Suze crosses her arms as she frowns.

“She. Was. Lovely.” I glare back. “She’s perfect for him.”

Why don’t they get it?

“You’re perfect for each other,” Suze fires back.

“Exactly, perfect for each other—Hang on, what?” I stare at her, my mouth dropping open. I look at Maria for support, but she’s nodding in agreement.

They’re in on it together.

“What planet did you both wake up on this morning?” My voice rises in exasperation. “He’s Reed.”

“We can see who he is, can’t we, Maria?” Suze says, her eyes never leaving mine. “The question is, can you?”

“What are you talking about?” My eyes dart between them. This isn’t some cryptic crossword in the back of the paper, but they might as well be speaking a foreign language for all the sense they’re making.

“We think you would be good together,” Maria says. I snap my eyes to hers. “Great, actually. We’ve seen the way you are with each other. I saw you both coming back from dinner.”

“We were pretending,” I groan, wanting to laugh at the absurdity of what she’s suggesting. “Maria, it’s got to look real. For as long as Reed is preparing for this election, it has to look real. We’re just good actors.” My shoulders relax. She’s just reading into things from seeing us out in public together. If even her and Suze are convinced there’s something real there, then I must be delivering an Oscar-worthy performance. Because as much as I don’t like to think about Reed naked with other women, the idea of me

and him is just... It's just weird. But that doesn't mean I don't want him to be happy after all this faking it ends. He deserves that.

"There's deceiving the outside world, and then there's deceiving yourself," Suze says.

I shake my head. "Stop. Both of you. I'm flattered you both think there's something real there. It means other people will see that, too. And that will help Reed. But honestly, you're barking up the wrong tree. In fact, it's not even a tree you're barking up, it's a..." I scan Maria and Griffin's large kitchen. "... It's an incredibly shiny new gadget." I jump up from my seat and rush over to the kitchen side. "Maria? What is this?" I squint at the contraption.

"Um, an egg incubator."

I turn back to her, my eyes bugging out.

"It only arrived this morning. Griffin hasn't seen it yet," she adds quickly.

I rarely see Maria flustered. She is the queen of elegant calm. But now she's biting her bottom lip and fiddling with her giant blue diamond engagement ring that sits like a boulder on her finger.

I turn back to the machine. "There's an egg in it!"

She walks over to join me and smiles as she gazes through the clear viewing panel on the lid. "I know. Earl found it this morning when he visited. It fell from the bird box down the side alleyway."

Earl was The Songbird's doorman. He was here for years and is loved by all the staff. He knows everyone and would keep an eye on Griffin and his brothers when they were kids playing in the hotel while Griffin's dad was working. Even though he's retired, he can't keep himself from visiting. And we all love seeing him when he does.

“You’re lucky it didn’t smash.” Suze comes to join us, and we all peer at the small, white, delicate shell.

“I know. I think it would have if Earl hadn’t insisted the door staff put some old matting down beneath the box just in case something like this happened. I love that we have the pigeon roosting box down the side alley, and it does help to keep the birds from soiling the hotel’s sidewalk carpet if we encourage them to roost there instead of on the window ledges above the front entryway.”

“But?” I look at Maria’s pinched brow.

“But I couldn’t just leave it there when Earl called me.”

“So you brought it up here and got it an incubator?”

“I did.” Maria’s smile is maternal as she gazes at the little egg.

“You and Griffin are having a baby.” I giggle. “Can I please be here when you tell him?”

“What? No.” Maria laughs.

“Party pooper.”

I grin as I look at the egg. Griffin’s going to hit the roof. I’ve worked for him for years. He always has to be in control, and I know the pigeons living around the hotel wind him up like nothing else. He used to go mental over the amount of shit they left on the sidewalk by The Songbird’s main entrance. Then when Maria came along, he relaxed a little. I don’t know what she did to him, but he’s a lot less uptight. But still, the idea of him coming in after work later and finding an egg incubating in his kitchen. Classic. I hope Maria records his reaction. That would be something to play at the next staff party.

“Okay, I have to get back downstairs. Lunch break is almost over. Thank you for feeding us, Maria.” I give them both a hug and retrieve my laptop.

“Are you going to call Natalia?” Suze asks as I reach the front door.

“Did we not just spend half of our lunch deciding that I would? You can both help me if you like? Engineer some kind of accidental meeting?” I look back before I close the door. “Fine,” I huff when neither of them answer. “I’ll do it myself. Love you both!”

And with that, I head back to work, my mind whirling with possibilities of how I can get Reed and Natalia in the same place at the same time. It’s going to be amazing. They’ll be great together. And Reed’s heart will be healed.

I’m a genius.



“The Cavapoo is a toy breed, so great for the city because they don’t need as many long walks as a larger dog. You could just take them on a couple of shorter walks a day and they would be happy. They don’t shed, either.”

“Really?” I rest my elbows on my knees and lean toward Natalia. “Do you know any breeders, or any shelters that might have that breed for rehoming? It’s a bit hectic here with the election coming up, but if I talk to Reed, he can find the time to come and visit some with us. I’m sure it’s about finding the right fit with a dog, for both sides. A bit like when you’re dating.” I laugh lightly as Natalia carefully places her coffee mug down on the low table, her blonde hair falling forward over her high cheekbones.

“Has Reed changed his mind, then? At the dinner, I remember him saying he was happy with no pets for the time being.”

“Oh.” I wave my hand in the air. “Reed loves animals. *Loves them*. We went to a friend’s daughter’s birthday party recently and there was a petting

zoo. I had to practically drag Reed away.”

“Really?” Natalia’s brows shoot up.

“Yeah. He was totally head over heels, especially for this little pygmy goat, Freddy. He just loved that little guy.”

I grin as an impressed smile passes over Natalia’s beautiful features. It’s not strictly a lie. Reed *was* head over heels, sort of. Okay, he was on his ass after Freddy headbutted him. But there was love there. I could see it in Freddy’s little bulgy eyes. And Reed does love animals. He looked like he was living his best life the night we stayed up watching the movie together. Every time I looked over, he had this contented smile on his face.

Reed Walker, total animal lover.

“Well, you’re very fortunate. My ex didn’t care much for animals. He didn’t care much for me, either.” Natalia laughs without humor. “But that’s what gave me the determination to start up the business, and I’ve never looked back. Fuck him, I say.”

“Yes, fuck him!” I cheer enthusiastically.

“Fuck who?” A deep voice cuts in as Reed walks into the room from the hallway. He’s loosening his tie with one hand, his brow furrowed as he reads the front of the envelopes held in the other. He looks like sex in a suit, all big, broad shoulders, the mouth-watering scent that accompanies him only adding to his presence.

I sneak a sideways look out of the corner of my eye at Natalia. She’s watching him, her lips slightly parted. I knew it. She finds him attractive. This is going to be easier than I thought.

Reed looks up and smiles at me before he notices Natalia sitting on the opposite couch.

“Natalia? How lovely to see you. I’m sorry. I thought Harley was talking to someone on the phone.” He dips his lips to my ear and says, “Hi, Beautiful,” before kissing me on the cheek. He’s smooth, I’ll give him that. He slips into fake couple mode so easily when we have an audience. No wonder the whole of the city’s press thinks we are on the verge of getting engaged.

“Hi,” I reply, my eyes glued to the two of them as Reed steps toward Natalia and she stands to shake his hand and kiss him politely on both cheeks. I’m grinning like the Cheshire cat as Reed steps back and then sits next to me, where I’m patting the sofa.

“Good day at work?”

“It was productive.” His voice is so dreamy, it can vibrate to places in your body that you don’t even know exist. I glance at Natalia to make sure she’s experiencing the full Reed Walker effect.

“I bet you’re tired. You know what would be perfect to help you unwind? A short walk and some fresh air, with someone who’s missed you all day and been dying to see you when you get home.”

He looks at me, his eyes flashing with puzzlement beneath his brows.

“A canine companion.” I beam at him, then look to Natalia.

“I don’t follow.”

“Babe.” I roll my eyes and place my hand on his knee. “We’ve spoken about this. How much you’d love to get a dog as soon as the election is over? Natalia has been so helpful giving me information about breeds. She’s been amazing.” Reed looks at me like I have a screw loose, his brows jerking up. I want to elbow him in the ribs and tell him to catch up. I’m creating his perfect future right here. Marital bliss with a lovely, beautiful

woman who has her own business. For someone ridiculously intelligent, he can be stupidly slow.

I incline my head toward Natalia, widening and blinking my eyes subtly. “Natalia has some suggestions on where we can look for a dog. In fact, maybe the two of you could start the hunt this Saturday? I have this thing with Suze, so I can’t make it.” I feign disappointment in my voice. “But that doesn’t mean the two of you can’t go together.”

“I think you’d both need to meet any dogs to make sure,” Natalia says.

“Oh, we will. But you two could get started without me.” My eyes are still on Reed’s as he frowns at me.

“Do you have something in your eye? You keep blinking.” He cups my chin with strong, warm fingers and studies my right eye.

“No.” I shrug out of his grasp and his lips straighten into a firm line before he turns to Natalia and gives her his practiced, polite smile.

“Thank you, Natalia. It’s very kind of you to offer your help. But I agree, Harley and I should wait for a date when we are both available before we take the next step.”

I groan inwardly at how dense he’s being. It’s the perfect opportunity for them to get to know one another better. Can he not see that? He’s going to be pining over his bitch of an ex, Bea, forever at this rate.

“It’s no problem. Let me know if you have any more questions, Harley. We can have coffee again and go through anything you think of.”

“Thank you,” I say to Natalia as she stands and Reed says goodbye.

I chat a little longer with her as I walk her out. Then I stomp back down the hallway into the living area.

“What was that?” I huff as I throw my ass down onto the sofa.

Reed keeps his head tilted down to the paper he's holding and looks at me from under his brows, over the top of his glasses.

Damn it. Why does he have to wear them around the house?

I scowl at him as I struggle to concentrate. I have images of him ripping his shirt open and there being a giant 'S' there, before he flies out of the window to save a cat from a burning building.

He looks at me for a few seconds before calmly folding the newspaper and placing it down on top of the coffee table. Then he leans back into the sofa.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" I stick my bottom lip out and fold my arms across my chest.

"We are not getting a dog. But I think you already know that. What do you want me to say?" He looks at me, waiting.

"Why didn't you want to spend Saturday with Natalia? She's clever, driven... and blonde," I add, arching a brow at him.

"You want to know why I don't want to spend Saturday with a woman I barely know, looking at dogs I am not getting?"

I have his complete attention as I sulk like a child. "Exactly. She's perfect. You could get to know her more in a friendly capacity now, and then the foundations are laid for once the election is over."

"The foundations are laid for what? We're not getting a dog, even after the elections, Harls."

He takes off his glasses and drops them on top of the newspaper, pressing his thumb and finger into his eyes. He looks tired again. He's working so hard that guilt gnaws at my stomach for a second that I'm pressuring him. But I force it away. I'm doing him a favor. This is his long-term happiness. He needs this, and he will thank me one day for being persistent. And

frankly, the idea that Bea was the last person to hold even a tiny piece of his heart has me ready to do anything to make that not the case. To find someone new, erase her and the hurt she caused him.

“Forget about the dog,” I almost shout in frustration. “I mean you and her. The two of you. Dating in the future.”

Reed halts his assault on his eyes, and he drops his hand to stare at me. “I’m dating you.”

“Fake dating.” I sigh. “What about after, when this is all over? Then what will you do?”

His eyes darken. “You’re trying to set me up?”

The power behind his words steals the air from my lungs, and I stare at him open-mouthed.

“I-I’m trying to help you.” I spring to my feet and glare at him.

“By setting me up with another woman when *you’re* supposed to be my girlfriend?” He jabs his finger against his chest as he says ‘my’, rising to his feet and facing me head-on. His eyes are trained on mine and the pulse in his thick neck is going crazy, pumping out like the bass in an illegal rave.

I can’t believe he’s being such a jerk about this. Surely, he should be pleased that I care enough about him to actually consider his happiness and want to do something to help. But the way he’s glaring at me, his smoky quartz eyes almost black, he looks anything but pleased. He looks angry.

Really fucking angry.

I step toward him so we are toe to toe. I don’t care that he’s miles taller than me. I glower up at him with as much energy as I can muster, matching what he’s sending back down to me as he sucks in deep breaths through his nose. This is the last time I do something for him if he’s going to hit the

roof like this. I can feel the heat spilling from his body in waves, flooding the air around us as he leans toward me, filling my space with his scent.

“I hate knowing Bea hurt you. I hate it. You need to move on and meet someone else. Stop fucking around with one-night flings and find something meaningful. Then maybe you’ll be happy.”

“You think I’m messed up over Bea?” he grits out. “A woman I dated for a few months *years* ago?”

I take a deep breath, my nipples grazing the front of his shirt through my blouse as my chest puffs out. “You told me that night after Paige’s party you’d been hurt. That you still think about it sometimes.”

He screws his face up. “Not about Bea. Fuck, Harley. I never think about Bea. She was the same self-obsessed social climber then that she is now. I just couldn’t see it until later. Agreeing to marry her was a mistake.”

“Wait... *you* didn’t propose?” My voice falters.

“Fuck no,” Reed fires out, glancing to the ceiling before he runs a hand over the five o’clock shadow on his jaw as he shakes his head.

“Then how—?”

“It was her idea. We just sort of fell into it. We hadn’t even announced it properly or gotten a ring. I wasn’t in a great place when my relationship with her started. At first, it was a distraction. A way of not thinking about what was going on in my life. Then she asked to move in with me, saying it would save money. It wasn’t a healthy relationship. I couldn’t speak to her about what was going on in my head.”

“Oh.”

The tension between us is thick and stifling as silence stretches out. A million possibilities run through my mind. *If not Bea, then what? What was that flash of hurt I saw in Reed’s eyes? Because I sure as hell didn’t imagine*

it. I've known him long enough to recognize an emotion I've never seen in him before. I've known him long enough to feel my heart tear when he sits with me on our sofa and tells me there's a specific date he sometimes thinks about that hurts him, just like there is one for me, too.

I've known Reed Walker long enough to *care*.

I look up into his eyes. They're full of fire and anger, and I swear I could wither. Curl up and hide in the dark from the way he's looking at me. I got it wrong. *Painfully* wrong.

Someone like Bea couldn't cause the hurt hidden in that beautiful face.

It was something, or someone else.

Something much bigger.

Reed moves suddenly and wraps both hands around the sides of my face. His fingers cradle the back of my skull, and I freeze, completely at his mercy as I gaze up at him, my body on fire from the intensity with which he's looking at me. My heart pounds so hard against my ribs that he must be able to feel it against his chest. He has complete power over me. His hands are practically as large as my head, and he's almost twice my width. But I know he's not trying to scare me. It's something else. His eyes may be full of anger, but his hands are gentle. *Tender*.

He dips his head so his mouth hovers a fraction away from my own. I swallow hard and dart my tongue out to wet my lips. His eyes follow my every move.

"Don't try to control me." His voice is low and has a razor-sharp edge to it. "I won't have it. Not even from you."

I part my lips and search his eyes. "I wasn't, I—"

He brushes his thumb down my cheek and over my mouth, pulling my bottom lip down and letting it pop back up; his pupils dilating as he

watches.

“You’re fucking infuriating. I told you. I’m done ‘fucking around’, as you so tastefully put it. The next woman who gets my lips gets my heart.”

His hands leave my face so fast I gasp as though I’ve had a blanket whipped away in the middle of a snowstorm and been left standing naked, exposed to the biting cold.

“Reed?” I spin just in time to catch a glimpse of his back as he storms off to the front door, slamming it as he leaves.



Chapter Nine



Reed

“IT’S THE WAY SHE was so fucking proud of herself. Like that was the answer to everything.”

Griffin watches me as I tip my head back and finish off another scotch.

“She really thought this was about Bea.” I hang my head and trace the dark, wooden grain of the bar’s surface with unfocused eyes. “Fuck, if she knew...”

“If she knew, then it would make no difference. This is Harley,” Griffin interjects, sipping on his scotch with the reserved control I have failed miserably to execute since we stepped into this bar five blocks away from The Songbird. Five blocks away from Harley, who’s probably wondering where the hell I stormed off to.

Stormed off. Like a fucking petulant child.

She was trying to do a good thing. In a roundabout, messed up way. But this is her. She doesn’t do anything a normal person would. She does it the Harley way. I don’t know whether to be angry or jubilant that she cares enough in the first place to even entertain the idea to heal my supposedly ‘broken heart’. It means she feels something.

As long as that something isn't pity.

I never want to be fucking pitied.

"I know. Fuck," I hiss, pinching the bridge of my nose. "It's just messed up, you know? I gave her a glimpse, slipped up for one fraction of a second, and now I'm her new charity project."

"You're not." Griffin places his glass down and signals the bartender for another. "If you were her charity project, she would have you in a pot and be playing Disney love songs to you to see if you produced more flowers."

I snort at his accurate analogy. She would do that. It's not escaped my attention that Bruce now has a 'friend' on the hallway table—a rather pathetic looking bushy thing Harley said she rescued from one of the hotel admin girls' desks.

"Yeah, I know... I know that." I drag my hands down my face with a groan as two fresh glasses are placed in front of us.

But still, the thought that she's trying to set me up with other women is just... it's wrong. It is so wrong.

"Why don't you be honest with her?"

"That would be the obvious fucking answer," I say to Griffin, earning myself a smirk. "I know, you're right. I just... not yet. It's not the sort of shit you can bring up over morning coffee, you know, like, *Oh, by the way, did I tell you the reason my family all moved to California when I was twenty-one? Why my sister became a lawyer, and why I campaign for harsher punishments for sexually motivated crimes?*" I knock back half of my drink. "It's a conversation killer if ever there was one. Like a bullet to the fucking brain."

"Then don't tell her. Whatever you need to do." Griffin shrugs as I nod slowly, contemplating his words.

“It’s all in the past.”

“It is. And it can stay there if that’s what you want.”

I roll my lips, studying my glass. The past. All in the past. Griffin’s right; some things shouldn’t be dragged back into the harsh light of day. No matter how hard they seem to be trying to push their way back in recently.

Darkness suits the shadows.

“Tell me something that’ll take my mind off this shit,” I mutter, glancing at him.

Griffin swirls the honeyed liquid in his glass and then meets my eyes. “Maria’s incubating a pigeon egg in our kitchen.”

“What?” I almost spit out my drink as I snort.

“The fucking thing’s plugged into this contraption on the counter. She keeps checking on it with this weird, faraway look on her face,” Griffin groans, knocking back his drink with the same enthusiasm I was moments earlier.

“It’s a real egg?” I look at him, the fog of my mood lifting just a little.

“Yeah. I thought about accidentally knocking it off the counter, but she’d be heartbroken. She’s talking fucking names.”

I let out a deep breath, laced with the beginnings of a chuckle. I know he’s joking. Griffin adores Maria. He would open a pigeon breeding farm and sleep on a perch with the feathered bastards if he knew it would make her happy.

“You know, when that thing hatches, you’ll have to chew up worms and feed them to it.” I laugh as I conjure up the mental image.

“Fuck off.” Griffin grimaces.

“Happily,” I reply as I glance at my watch. I have an early meeting with Stuart in the morning and it’s already later than I thought. “You want to fly

back together now?” I tip my head toward the door as I throw some bills down onto the bar and catch the bartender’s eye with a nod.

“Ha, the fuck, ha,” Griffin replies, standing from his seat. He gives me a wry smile as I pat him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, man.”

His hand claps on top of mine. “Don’t mention it.”

We walk back together. Harley’s bedroom door is closed when I get home and I pause outside it, straining to hear if she’s still awake. Not that I would expect her to be at this time. A soft, sleepy moan, followed by the shuffling of sheets as she moves in bed are the only sounds that I can make out.

I’ll have left before she gets up in the morning. Maybe it’s a good thing. Because the more time I spend with her, the harder it is not to give in to the urge to pull her to me and see what those pretty pink lips of hers taste like.

But it’s like she keeps reminding me. This entire thing is fake. For show. *A lie.*

And if trying to set me up with another woman isn’t a blaring, flashing, loud enough signal that she does not see me in any other way than a ‘fake’ boyfriend, then I don’t know what is.



“We’re in good shape. Early whisperings are that you’re the front runner.” Stuart stretches his arms behind his head and the cracking of his back echoes around the room.

“Says who?” I circle a figure in the paperwork I’m reading. Sixteen hundred rapes in the city of New York in the previous twelve months.

Sixteen hundred. And that's only the reported ones.

Acid burns in the pit of my stomach as I throw my pen down on top of the paper and give my attention over to Stuart.

"Says everyone." He grins. "Of course, it does help that you have the panther on your team."

I look at his shit-eating grin and chuckle, despite the fact my main setting has been 'grumpy fucker' throughout our breakfast meeting. I can't shake the look on Harley's face as I stormed out last night from my mind. She was stunned. The way her mouth fell open before I left her standing there, the hint of panic in her voice as she called after me. She's probably wondering what kind of asshole she's living with.

"Come on, spill."

"Pardon?"

Stuart sighs and leans back in his chair, twizzling his pen between his finger and thumb as he surveys me. "You. There's something up with you. You've barely said two words all morning."

"It's nothing," I murmur. "Just a small misunderstanding with Harley."

"Right." He purses his lips and drops his pen onto the desk.

"Nothing worth mentioning."

"No, course not." Stuart holds his palms up toward me. "I guess it must suck, though. I mean, if you were a real couple, you could have banged each other's brains out during makeup sex and be over it by now."

The thought alone is enough to make my redundant dick stir in my pants. "Yeah, well. We're not."

"So go beat your frustrations out in another way. Have a run, hit the punch bag, go to one of those places where you get a bat, and smash shit up.

Do whatever you need to get your head back in the game. It's not long until the election and I need you focused. One million percent, you understand?"

"I am." I clench my jaw. "Nothing is more important to me than winning this thing."

Stuart nods. He knows I mean it. He knows I'm driven to landing the role of mayor, and he's sure as hell been witness to my determination and thirst for it since working together. But not even he knows what truly motivates me. Only my family and Griffin know that.

"Better still, go tell Harley you're sorry for whatever shit went down."

I snap my eyes to his. There's no use in pointing out that the 'shit that went down' might not have even been my fault in the first place. He won't care. All he will care about is that I've got my game face on. Plus, from the handful of times he's met Harley, he's already enamored by her, as most people are. She's got this easy, genuine way about her. Her eyes light up when she's speaking, and she gives everyone her full attention. You feel like you're the fucking king when you have her eyes on you. She shines like the sun. I swear, if her beloved plants were put in a completely darkened room, they would still flourish if they had her in there with them. Given the choice, if people were asked who they like more out of the two of us, I know what would happen. She would wipe the floor with me.

Every. Single. Time.

"And while you're at it, you can make sure she's free for the retreat?"

"Is Shannon coming?"

"Er, an all-expenses paid trip to a fancy hotel in the mountains, organized by the president of the United States himself. Hell yes, she's coming. I'm going to be drowning in grateful sex and blow jobs for the entire trip. I'm seriously setting a new bar in boyfriend standards here, you know?"

I shake my head, a smile playing on my lips. Lucky fucker. That is a giant perk when things like this happen. To be invited to a retreat with the other candidates by the president himself is a huge honor. Then to be able to take partners and treat the nights like your own private getaway is a bonus. During the day, we will be involved in conferences and press events. And there is a dinner being put on in the evening. But the partners can please themselves during the day. I wonder what Harley will choose to do with herself.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure I ask her about it. But I’m sure she’s free those days and she’ll be there.”

After our strict dating ban, she better be free. She’s mine.

For now.

It’s not long until the election, and the idea of what she might do after our agreement ends has me clenching my hands until my knuckles look like they might explode.

“Harley will be there,” I repeat, needing to hear the words for my own benefit as I crack my knuckles.

“I’ll be where?”

Our heads snap up and over to the open doorway where Harley is standing in a fitted pink dress that wraps around her body and hugs her curvy hips and ass tight. Her blonde hair falls around her shoulders in soft waves.

Fuck my life.

I’ve seen her wear the same dress once before, and I wanted to rip the damn thing open and bury my head between her thighs then. What makes it even sexier is that she literally has no idea how stunning she is. She doesn’t

notice the looks she gets, the guys that step out into the street, cabs swerving to avoid them because they're too distracted by staring at her.

But I do.

I notice every chancing prick who tries to eye-fuck her in broad daylight. And they know I've seen them. They fucking *know* I have seen them. But that's only when I'm with her. The thought of all the times she's out without me that it could be happening has me clearing my throat and fighting to stop my teeth from grinding together until only dust is left.

I stand from my seat and walk over to her, lowering my lips to her cheek, one hand curled around the back of her neck.

"Hey, Babe." I kiss her soft skin and inhale her coconut scent that's been warmed by the heat of her body.

She sucks in a small breath as I pull back. Her eyes dart from me to Stuart and back again, two lines funneling between her eyebrows.

"I love it!" Stuart gives us an impressed look. "No wonder the press is eating out of our fucking hand. You two are naturals. I even got a little hard there for a second with the fake sexual tension. Keep it up. It's only working in our favor. Damn, I'm a fucking legend for having the idea." He chuckles to himself as Harley gazes at me.

"I, um..." She looks back at Stuart, who is still reveling in his own deemed greatness. "I came to give you these. After yesterday and everything, I... well, I thought of you when I saw them, so..." Her smile is apprehensive as she looks up at me, lifting a small paper bag in her hand. I'm still standing as close to her as possible, my eyes fixed on hers.

"I was a jerk for storming off," I say, lowering my voice, even though Stuart can still hear us if he wants to listen.

“No, you weren’t.” Her baby blue eyes widen before she squeezes them closed and shakes her head. “It was my fault. I was reading into things wrong, and being a fool, and... I’m sorry.” She opens her eyes and blinks up at me shyly. “Will you forgive me if I tell you I brought truce cookies?”

“I could eat a cookie,” Stuart pipes up.

Harley hands the bag to him and he pulls out an iced cookie in the shape of a...

“Is that a dog?” I stare at what I think is the tail before Stuart bites it off and chews, humming his approval.

“I tell you what it is,” he speaks through his mouthful. “What is it they say in England? Oh yeah... it’s the dog’s bollocks.”

Harley giggles, pressing her hand to her lips, and I watch as she illuminates the space around her. “It really is. You’re eating its butt.”

Stuart winks at her, and she turns to me, her giggle leaving her lips in a sigh as she smiles. “Friends again?”

I stare back at her as she holds her breath, her eyes fixed on mine. The pulse in her neck flutters against her skin, and this time, I don’t hold back. I reach up and touch it, stroking my thumb lightly over it and watching as a blush spreads up her neck and her lips part involuntarily.

She gazes at me as I hold her eyes with mine. My words come out as a low whisper, just for her, and she struggles to swallow upon hearing them.

“Friends again, Mrs. Walker.”



Chapter Ten



Harley

“SO WHERE IS THIS luxury hotel you’re going to?” Maria asks as she pours us both a glass of wine and hands one to me.

“It’ll be mediocre at best,” Griffin grumbles from the other side of the kitchen where he’s eyeing up the egg incubator like it’s a nuclear warhead that could deploy at any given second.

“Don’t worry, boss. I will be sure to report back on all of the other hotel’s offending shortcomings.” I give him a small salute.

Maria stifles a giggle as Griffin walks over to us. “You know what you have here is perfect, Griff. You don’t need to view every hotel, including one that’s an hour’s drive away, as a threat.”

“Oh, I know what we have here is perfect, Sweetheart,” he growls against her neck as he strokes her long, dark hair over her shoulder. He kisses her exposed skin from behind, forcing me to rescue the wineglass from her hand just in time before the contents slosh out over the rim.

Maria laughs and turns to kiss him on the lips. His eyes linger on hers with a heat in them until I cough.

“Um, if you could just, like, stop looking at her like you want to devour her for one minute so I can have her to myself, please. Then she’s all yours for the rest of the night.”

Griffin smirks at me, then kisses Maria again. “You hear that, Sweetheart? You’re mine for the rest of the night.”

“Okay.” She smiles at him like an emoji with heart eyes as he looks back at her in the same way, but with a dose of wicked sexiness thrown in.

God, these two. They’ve been together a year now. You’d think I would be used to their complete infatuation with one another when they’re together, but it still has the power to render me speechless.

“I can’t wait to be looked at in the way he looks at you.” I sigh as Griffin disappears into his study.

“Oh, I don’t think it’ll be long.” Maria bites her lip with a smile.

“What planet are you on? In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not even dating at the moment. And we can’t count Reed, before you say it.” I hold a finger up in the air and Maria closes her mouth. “Which, by the way, is why I came to talk to you while he’s out at this community hall thing he’s doing tonight.”

“I’m listening.” Maria slides into the velvet bar seat at the kitchen island opposite me.

“Okay.” I glug a big mouthful of wine, then place my glass down.

She already knows about our fight, if you can call it that. And about me delivering the truce cookies during my lunch break today. I omitted the part about Reed kissing me hello, his lips lingering against my skin when there was absolutely no need for him to do so with only Stuart there as an audience, who already knows full well it’s fake. I also omitted the part about how my entire body heated up so much when his eyes were looking

into the depths of me that I thought there was a real possibility I was about to pass out.

I haven't worked out what any of that means yet. I've stored that little gem of a head fuck away for another time.

But what I do want to talk to her about is the realization that came to me while I was working this afternoon.

"I think I know what Reed's hurt is from," I say.

"Oh? Did he tell you?" Maria listens, sipping her wine.

"No. But I've figured it out. It's something that happened when he was younger. And when I said someone close to me was hurt..." I choke on the words, my throat burning, the way it does sometimes when I talk about it. Maria lays her hand over mine and gives me a reassuring smile. She's known all my secrets for a long time now. Both her and Griffin. They both know why I started honey trapping and why I need the extra money. I didn't tell them to begin with. But it was a weight off my shoulders when I did finally decide to share.

"Anyway," I continue. "He said it was similar for him, too. And I know he has a twin sister, Riley, who he was close with growing up. She's a lawyer who specializes in sexual assaults, and Reed... well, it's one of his policies he wants to change when he becomes mayor. He wants stricter laws. More safety for people. For women."

I roll my lips together and take a deep breath.

"I think his sister was sexually assaulted when she was younger and Reed found out about it, but was too late to do anything to stop it. I think he feels partly responsible and blames himself."

Maria looks down at the marble countertop. "That would make sense."

“What do you mean? Do you know something?” I lean forward in my chair, over the counter toward her. “Has Griffin said anything?”

“Only that it’s something Reed feels very strongly about. He hates sexual crimes with a passion. He was over here once when a news report of someone being drugged and assaulted came on the news. I thought he was going to melt the TV the way he was staring at it. It’s like something they were saying hit home with him. And it hit hard.”

I nod as Maria’s eyes meet mine. “It does make sense. And here I was thinking he was upset over Bea. No wonder he was so angry. He’s there, hurting over something serious. Over his sister being...” I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow. “And there’s me trying to set him up on a date because I thought it would fix all his problems. I’m so dumb.”

“No. You’re not.” Maria grabs my hand and waits for me to open my eyes and look at her. “You are not dumb. Don’t ever say that. You have the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met, Harley. You were the first friend I made when I came to New York, and you helped make it feel like home to me.”

“Aww.” My eyes threaten to well up with tears as she squeezes my fingers.

“You were just trying to help. You saw someone hurting, and you tried to do something about it with the information you had at the time. Okay, you were miles off target...” Maria smiles gently at me. “But your heart was in the right place. It always is.”

“Thank you,” I whisper back. “The thing is though, if I had been right, then I would have been able to help Reed... maybe.” I shrug. “But this? How do I help him with this?”

Maria brushes her hair back over her shoulder, and I wait, ready to hang off her every word. I know she's been through a lot herself to get to where she is today, running her own business, and a happy, respectful relationship with Griffin. If there's someone with life wisdom gained through experience, then it's Maria.

"Harley." She sighs. "You can't fix what's already done. You can only be yourself."

"Myself?"

Her lips curl into a kind smile. "Yes. And something tells me that will be more than enough."

I finish my wine as Maria and I chat about the retreat, and she updates me on Eggbert, as I've named him. Then I head back downstairs to our apartment, sliding my feet into my slippers as I enter.

The living room is empty. Reed must still be out. I'm about to flick the TV on when the sound of a muffled voice comes from inside his room. Maybe he's practicing his greeting for when he meets the president this weekend. It wouldn't surprise me. I've been running over what I should and shouldn't say if I meet him as well. Although, all I'm dying to do is ask how his dog, Lincoln, after Abraham Lincoln, is. He's the most adorable terrier and I would love to ask about him and what it's like having a pet in the White House. Who walks him and whether he flies in Air Force One or stays at home. Whether he has his own security detail assigned. Pet napping is a huge problem. Natalia told me as much when she was over.

I tiptoe along the hallway and press my ear against his bedroom door. I don't even know why I'm trying to listen in on him rehearsing, if that is what he's doing, but yet, here I am, my cheek squished against his door so hard that if he were to open it now, I would fall ass-over-head through it and

land in a pile at his feet. I've seen him do some public speaking at a couple of the small press events I've attended with him, and I'm not going to lie, the way his deep voice commands the room, demanding respect and silence is sexy as hell.

I shouldn't listen.

"Fuck... just like that."

I shoot back from the door like it's on fire. *What the?* Is he serious? Does he have someone in there right now? In our apartment? His voice is quiet, like he's trying to make sure he isn't heard. But it's also low, gruff, and gravelly.

Laced with sex.

Anger spikes low in my stomach, coursing heat through my veins. He said it had been months. The bastard couldn't wait a little longer until I had moved out? After he made me promise I wouldn't date while we were in this... arrangement. *This sham.*

My hand hovers over the handle, but I withdraw it when he speaks again.

"Wrap those pretty pink lips around it."

Fuck. My stomach flips and I swallow hard as I realize I'm listening to Reed getting a blow job, separated only by the thin sheet of wood that is his bedroom door. I turn away, sickened at what an idiot I've been. I knew he was like this. I knew he was unable to think without his dick being involved. I've been so accommodating. Going to all these stupid functions, playing the doting girlfriend, and he couldn't give me the same respect? Couldn't keep to his word? I bet she's not even the first. He's probably had half of Manhattan up here when I've been out. I should have listened to my gut. I've met enough assholes in my time to know that the chances were Reed Walker was never going to be any different.

There's a deep groan of satisfaction as whoever she is finishes and gives Reed what he was waiting for. I stand frozen to the spot, unable to make my feet move as blood rushes in my ears. I should be in my room now. In my room packing. There's no way I'm going to stay and give him the opportunity to lie to my face and try and talk himself out of it, try to...

"Harley?" Reed's door opens and his eyes widen as he finds me hovering in the hallway.

I drop my gaze over his bare chest and tanned abs to his low-slung cotton pajama pants. The outline of his still softening dick is visible through the fabric, and I swallow the bile in my throat at the hint of what she had to work with. I wonder if she can dislocate her jaw to fit it. Like when snakes eat a whole egg, just swallow the giant thing down in one go.

"How long have you been home?"

Reed hovers in his doorway, probably wondering how he's going to sneak whoever she is out.

"Not long." *Long enough.*

I meet his gaze and he looks uncomfortable for a brief moment, running a hand around the back of his neck. Over the exact spot where I know his hair is softest.

"Good." He gives me an awkward smile. I don't think I've ever seen Reed look awkward before. But then I've never caught him with his dick in another woman's mouth before. "How's Maria?"

"She's fine," I snap. If he thinks he can make small talk with me in the hope I will go in a minute and he can sneak his conquest out, then he's sorely mistaken. I'm not going to make this easy for him.

His brow furrows as I cross my arms and glare at him. He holds my eyes for what would feel like an uncomfortably long time under normal

circumstances. But seeing as I'm pissed enough to crack him over the head with his guitar, the length of time is nowhere near sufficient for my glare to convey all the insults I'm hurling at him in my head right now.

"Did you want a drink?" He arches a brow at me, his eyes darkening as he eventually breaks the silence.

I shake my head, and then he stomps off in the direction of the kitchen, leaving his bedroom door wide open.

"Feel free to go inside," he calls over his shoulder. "Check under the bed... in the closet."

I glance through the doorway before I rush after him.

"What?"

He's leaning against the kitchen counter, his legs crossed over at the ankle, arms folded, and an unreadable expression on his face as I storm into the open living and kitchen area.

"You heard me." He shrugs, tilting his head to the side as he grimaces. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," I sputter. God, how can he be so goddam blasé about this? He really doesn't give a shit about anyone other than himself.

Without realizing I've moved directly in front of him. My chest shakes as I draw in a deep breath.

"You're overreacting," he states, his words stinging like salt in a wound.

"I'm not." My voice rises as I square up to him. He looks down at me, the golden flecks dancing in his eyes.

"No? Then what are you doing?"

He's so casual, languidly resting his hips against the counter as he frowns at me. I wish I could punch him square in the nose. I grit my teeth and my

eyes dart to the hallway, waiting for movement, waiting for confirmation. I have every right to feel the way I do right now.

“I’m... I’m... angry. And I’m disappointed. And I’m—”

“An eavesdropper?” He cocks a deep brown brow as a muscle in his cheek tenses.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I interrupted your evening! I only live here, too.” My voice betrays me and pitches on the last word, letting him know that he’s affected me. That I was fooled. That I was really starting to believe Reed Walker wasn’t the total man-whore I always believed him to be.

I rip my eyes away from his in disgust.

“Why didn’t you knock? You could have joined in?”

“What?” I gasp. “Are you serious?”

I’m spun faster than I can blink as Reed lunges forward and spins us, caging me in with my back against the counter and his muscular arms either side of my body. Anger radiates off him in hot waves, licking at my skin and making my body vibrate in shock.

“Oh, I’m *very* serious, Harley,” he growls, his eyes darker than I’ve ever seen them, but their golden flecks are still there, like flames in the night. “Tell me what *I* was doing in *my* room when I thought *you* were out, hm?”

I lean back, sweat prickling on the back of my neck from how close he is, but he doesn’t stray even a hair’s breadth to allow me more space.

“Why?”

“Because I want to hear you say it. I want to hear you admit to me right now exactly who you think you’re living with.” His voice is low, and each word is spoken with precision, like a hunter who’s lining up his shot.

I tilt my head back and notice a vein on the side of his forehead bulging, and I transfer my attention to it, his eyes too hard to look at as I understand

what it really was that I heard.

“Look me in the eyes,” he snaps, making me jump.

I swallow, my throat dry and thick, as I do as he commands. “You were... alone.”

“What was I *doing* alone, Harley?” he grits out, pressing closer to me.

“You were—” I swallow again, wincing as my throat throbs. “You were... touching yourself,” I whisper.

“I was jerking off.”

I gasp as the word hits me in the face along with his minty breath. I’m not a prude, I’ve heard the phrase jerking off before. But never has it been said so brazenly to me, used against me like ammunition, intended to wound.

Reed reaches up and slowly twirls a strand of my blonde hair around his fingers, fixating on it with a strange look on his face.

“I used to hate blonde hair once.” His eyes narrow as he fingers the strand, his lips curling down. “Now it’s all I want to fucking see.”

“Reed?” I whisper, sickness unraveling in my stomach, spreading through my body, dark and poisonous, like oil in the ocean.

He brings his attention back to my face. “I told you I only needed you.”

My mouth drops open as the anger written across his face transforms to disappointment.

“Don’t judge me on my past. This may not be real, but I will respect you as though it is. And if I tell you that there won’t be anyone else, then there won’t be anyone else. Did you think I was lying when I promised you that?”

“No.” I manage to force the word out. It sounds small and pathetic in the tiny gap between us. “No, I didn’t,” I try again, with more conviction.

Reed reaches up and cups my cheeks between his large, warm hands, and his expression softens as he dips his face to mine. I don't even think about what I'm doing as I wrap my arms around his neck and stand on my toes, letting my eyes fall closed as I part my lips, tilting my chin up to him as butterflies erupt deep in my core.

"Get some sleep, Harls. It's late." His lips change course, away from mine, and press to my forehead in a brief kiss. Then he pulls away, and my arms drop to my sides as my cheeks burn with shame.

I'm a terrible person. Here I am, judging him. But it's not his fault, it's mine. It's every piece of dishonesty and betrayal I've witnessed. It's every broken heart and destroyed family that I've seen. It's my own shattered heart, my own battered family. My own sobering understanding of how much damage can be caused by sex and the lies that surround it.

Because I've felt it, deep in my soul.

Some people's actions have far-reaching consequences, and my family is living proof of that destruction. But I've taken it out on Reed, forced by my scars to strike out at him. Blamed him, when all he has done since I moved in here is be the perfect gentleman and friend. No wonder he keeps saying the past is best left there. He can see right through my thin disguise. See right through it to the surviving pieces that are left of me since that day, years ago.

"Reed?" My voice wavers. He's already halfway down the hallway as he looks back. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Me too," he says, pausing for a second. My heartbeat takes over my whole body until it's all I can hear, overpowering my eardrums.

Then he goes into his room and closes the door behind him.



Chapter Eleven



Reed

THE NEXT FEW DAYS pass by in a blur of meetings. I take part in two press interviews, and one photo opportunity at the opening of a new community garden, which I tell Harley she doesn't need to attend with me. If she's upset by my lack of interaction with her, then she hasn't shown it. In fact, I've barely seen her. Although, that is mostly on my part. I've been leaving early and eating out with business contacts the last three nights to give her space.

To give us both space.

The thought of seeing how little she thinks of me is too much. It's taken three days to accept it. To steel myself for it happening again. To prepare.

I've been an idiot. I thought asking her to play the role for the press was a wise decision. We already knew each other, and her job as a honey trapper meant she knew how to act the part.

Act.

I snort at my choice of word. I wish it were as simple for me as it has been for her. The only act I've managed to keep up in her presence is one of

an asshole, who clearly can't be trusted, judging by her reaction the other night.

I throw my pen down on top of the paperwork I've strewn across the coffee table. I finished up with Stuart after lunch today and decided to head back and work from the apartment instead. I wanted to be here when Harley returns home after work. Despite realizing how little she thinks of me and my promises, and how quick she is to expect the worst from me, I still want to see her. I *crave* to see her. Something that I'm only just realizing, yet no closer to fully understanding.

The last three days have been utter shit. She texted me to tell me she was sorry the first day when I didn't come home until she was already in bed. Then she texted each day since, telling me what's been happening at work and asking if she will see me that night. I've replied, but my messages have been curt and to the point.

What can I possibly say? She's made her mind up. I will always be that person in her eyes. The one who only cares about himself.

My phone beeps, and I click to open the message. It's a gif of a skunk, its tail in the air as it sprays. Underneath it is the caption, *Something stinks*. I look at the added text below.

**Just like my attitude the other night. I did overreact, and I'm sorry.
H.**

Three dots appear to show she's still typing, and then more text appears.

I've finished work early. If you aren't snowed under, can we catch up?

The sound of the front door opening and closing echoes from the hallway, and I rise to my feet at the sound of keys being dropped onto the hall table, followed by a weary sigh.

“Hi, Bruce. Hi, Beryl,” a gentle voice says.

I can't help but smile as she talks to the plants. It hasn't escaped my attention that Beryl, the bushy little thing, is happy as a pig in shit since Harley brought it home. It's even sent out these new little shoots, spilling over the sides of the pot in all directions, like a happy ending massage without the obligatory well-timed flannel.

“You both look happy, as though you've had a good day. Better than mine, I bet,” she continues, causing the smile to melt off my face at the melancholy in her voice. She's never sounded so lackluster, so... un-Harley.

She walks into the open living area in her pink fluffy slippers, her eyes cast down. For a moment, I think she's going to walk right past in the direction of her bedroom, but then she freezes and sucks in a breath.

“You're here?” Her eyes light up momentarily before they dim, a worried frown appearing on her face where her usual smile would be.

This is all my fault.

I should never have asked her to pretend to be in a relationship with me. To move in and put on a show. All it's done is cause trouble. And looking at her now, her usual sparkle gone, I can see how selfish I've been to drag her into it. So what if she thinks I'm a player she can't trust? I deserve it. I shouldn't have let it get to me. I should never have taken it out on her.

It hurt like a motherfucker knowing that's how she views me, how she will probably *always* view me. Some stupid part of me hoped she wouldn't care about the past. But I know that's naïve. Everyone has a past. And even though we try, some days we can't escape it, no matter how deep we bury that shit.

And I've dug deeper than most to forget mine.

“How are you?” She walks toward me slowly as I round the coffee table to meet her halfway.

“Okay. You?”

We stop in front of one another, and she chews on her bottom lip as if she’s searching for the right words.

I can provide her with some suitable options. Asshole. Jerk. Prick.

“This apartment feels really big without you,” she says after a moment’s hesitation.

I draw in a deep breath as she looks up at me through her lashes, her eyes searching mine. The remorse in them steals my breath and all I can do is look at her. Look at her and wish I wasn’t the reason for the lack of brightness they usually hold.

“I’m so—”

“Don’t. You’ve said it enough. There’s nothing to be sorry for. I shouldn’t have acted the way I did.”

“You were angry that I jumped to conclusions. I get it, Reed. I assumed. I judged you when I had no reason to. No right to.”

The empathy in her voice cuts into me, like a guilt-laced sword, straight to the heart. She’s right. I was angry. But most of all, I was gutted. Gutted at the realization that’s how she sees me. Still.

She glances at my paperwork on the table and then back at me. “I keep getting you wrong, don’t I? First about Bea, and then—”

“It’s fine,” I reply softly.

“It’s not fine.” The next thing I know she’s throwing her arms around my neck and pulling me to her. “I’m sorry. I really am. I know you better than that. I’ve just spent the last couple of years surrounded by men thinking

with their dicks and ruining everything.” Her voice shakes with emotion. “Please forgive me.”

I sink my nose into her hair and inhale the scent of coconut as I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly.

She feels so good in my arms.

Her hands slide up the back of my neck into my hair and she sighs as she sinks into me.

“After my brother, you’re the closest male friend I have. I’ve *missed* you.” Her soft lips graze my neck as she speaks, and it takes all my strength to fight to keep my dick from moving.

“You missed me?”

“I really did.” She sniffs, her fingers stroking the back of my neck.

“And you still want to be my friend?” I murmur into her hair. *Friend.* The word causes my heart to sink in my chest.

“Uh-huh.” She tightens her grip on me. “I do.”

“Even though I can be a giant dick at times?”

I hear the smile in her voice as she says, “Have you ever seen a video of a snake swallowing an egg?”

“A what?”

She giggles and her breasts rub against my chest with the motion.

“No, I’ve never... Fuck, have you been sneaking some of that chemical plant food you give Bruce?”

She giggles harder, and I grin into her hair as I lock my arms around her waist, soaking her up.

God, I’ve missed her, too. Her and her adorable weirdness.

“But now I have to see,” I murmur against her ear, noticing the way she shivers before she laughs again. “Show me.”

“Okay.” She swallows down her laugh, and I let her go.

The two of us relax into the sofa cushions together, and I spend the next half hour watching her face light up as she shows me video after video of animals doing silly shit. Each one seems to bring another part of her back until she’s beaming and looking as radiant as the Harley I would recognize with a mere glance in any lifetime.

Neither of us mentions the other night again.

And I certainly don’t tell her it was her pink lips I was imagining wrapped around me seconds before my dick exploded with enough cum to fill the Hudson.

There are exceptions... Some things really should be left in the past.



“This place is beautiful. You can’t tell Griffin,” Harley whispers as we walk into the elegant ballroom.

Giant chandeliers are suspended from the ceiling, and there’s a colossal champagne tower on a large circular table as we enter.

“I’ve always wondered what the point of those is. I mean, how do you even take a glass without knocking the whole thing over? It’s like this giant beautiful thing that no one knows how to use properly. What a waste.”

“Some people know what to do with big, beautiful things.”

She laughs and pushes my chest with her free hand, the other wrapped firmly around my bicep. “What, your big book of bad jokes, you mean?”

“Of course. What did you think I meant?”

She looks up at me and grins, her eyes sparkling. Ever since our make up the other day, things have gone from better to incredible. She’s been happy

and carefree, laughing easily and flitting around the apartment in her slippers, leaving pink fluffy glitter all over place. The nights we haven't been out to dinner together, she's curled up next to me on the sofa while I've looked over legislations and statistics. I've caught her looking at me, watching me read. But if I look up, she pretends to be engrossed in her own reading. She's working her way through a few books that Maria's grandmother sent over from England. Romance books with half naked men on the front. Maybe they're the real reason she's smiling, and it's nothing to do with me at all.

Either way, I'm grateful.

She's Harley again.

"What's he like?" Her eyes cast around the packed room, full of government officials, high ranking members of the military, and their partners.

It's been a full-on day of meetings, talks, seminars. I met the president earlier today, but since then I have only seen him from afar.

"A few inches shorter than me, gray hair, suit. Security detail watching his every move."

"Idiot." She giggles. "I mean, what's he *like*?"

"Oh, what's he *like*?" I mimic her as she rolls her eyes at me. I chuckle and draw her closer, pressing a kiss into her hair, which is swept up into a fancy style at the back of her head. It's second nature now. I do it without even thinking about whether it's necessary, whether anyone is watching. "Well, I only spoke to him face to face briefly this morning. But he seems... composed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harley smiles as a passing waiter pauses by us and offers us both a flute of champagne.

“It means.” I clink my glass against hers. “He’s very aware of what he’s doing. Very calculated, measured. Always noticing, always assessing. I can tell he’s a man that knows what he wants and goes after it. Good traits to have as the President of the United States.”

“Hm.” Harley sounds unimpressed as her gaze roams the room. “You should have asked him about Lincoln. I bet that would have been more interesting.”

“I’m not going to ask the president about his dog the first time I meet him.”

“Why not?” She blinks up at me, her eyes round. “People love talking about their animals. I’m going to ask him if I meet him tonight.”

“You do that.” I chuckle.

Harley gazes around the room again, catching eyes with someone and giving them a dazzling smile.

“Oh. There’s Kristen.”

I follow her eyes to the Head of National Security’s wife, who is smiling back at us.

“We got talking in the spa this afternoon,” Harley explains. “If I’d known these events could be so much fun, I would have dated New York’s Mayor years ago.”

“Dennis Vincent?”

Harley wrinkles her nose up at my mention of the previous New York Mayor, who left under suspicious circumstances amid allegations of pardoning a known drug lord following a covert raid. Rumors have it that he’s been aiding the head of the crime ring throughout his two terms in office. But conveniently, there hasn’t been enough evidence to make the shit stick.

“New York’s going to be so lucky to have you, Reed,” she says with a serious expression.

“Got to win it first.”

“You will.” She nods before sipping her champagne. “I have faith in you.”

Her choice of words renders me mute for a moment before she slides her other hand free of my arm and waves to Kristen, who is looking in our direction.

“Reed, I told Kristen I would talk about Bonsai trees with her. She’s having terrible trouble getting hers to settle since they moved house.”

“Go.” I smile, tipping my glass at her. “I’ll fend for myself.”

“Don’t you want to come?”

“And hear all about Bruce’s branch murdering scissors of doom? No, thank you. I still hear the snipping in my nightmares.”

Harley’s face erupts into a huge grin as she shakes her head at me. “Reed Walker, if I didn’t know better, I could have sworn I heard you talking to Bruce last night before you went to bed.”

“You’re hearing things.” I flatten my lips into a straight line to hide my smirk.

“Fine.” She reaches up and kisses me on the cheek. “I know the truth, *plant lover*,” she whispers in my ear before she turns and walks across the room.

The satin from her deep pink dress skims over the curve of her ass, flowing all the way down to the floor. She doesn’t wear her hair up often, but this dress calls for it. It has a high neckline at the front, finishing at her throat, but then the back is missing. There’s literally no fabric between the strap around her neck and the lowest point of her back. I can see the dip of

her spine and the cinch of her waist, her smooth skin on full display. I glance around the room, heat building beneath my collar as at least four other pairs of eyes follow her.

Keep your eyes to yourselves, fuckers.

I spend some time moving around the room, talking to people, and am in deep in conversation with Harry Ellston, ribbing him about his dildo factory office again when the hairs rise on the back of my neck, the way they do when your body knows some shit is about to go down.

“Reed?”

I grit my teeth and give Harry an apologetic smile and nod as I turn my attention to the source of the voice.

“Bea. I thought I may see you here. Where’s Graham?” I ask, referring to my less than honorable opponent. I would much rather talk old dildos with Harry Ellston all night than entertain that sneaky bastard’s company for one second. And judging by the grunt Harry makes, I know I’m not alone in my preferences. The fact that Graham’s from the Republican party, the same as Dennis Vincent, further reduces his standing in my eyes. I’ve seen the two of them together, laughing and joking like old pals. And with men like them, that is never a good thing.

“Oh, he’s around. Networking.” Bea smiles, her deep red lipstick like a survival marking, a warning to predators that she’s poisonous when provoked. “He needs to get to know everyone for when he’s elected.”

My shoulders stiffen, and I bark out a humorless laugh. “Now, Bea. Don’t go ruining it for the rest of us. Let us think we at least have a chance.”

“Like the chance the president thinks he has with your girlfriend tonight?” She grins at me wickedly, flicking her eyes to the far end of the

bar, where Harley is tucked away, almost hidden from view behind a pillar, masculine fingers stroking the bare skin on her back.

“Excuse me,” I snap, side-stepping Bea as she smirks, striding across the ballroom, avoiding eye contact with the people who try to catch my attention.

The smarmy fucker’s voice is dripping with superiority sleaze as I approach.

“You’re a beautiful woman. Pink really is your color. You wear it so well.”

I can’t hear Harley’s response. But I don’t miss the way she leans away, trying to peel her spine away from his lingering hand. But he’s got her cornered, the bar to one side of her, the pillar to another. She can’t move out of his reach.

“You know. I have lots of photographs of Lincoln in my suite. Why don’t I show you? The party won’t miss us for half an hour.” His hand slides lower, pressing against where the fabric starts again. A few more inches and his hand will be on her ass. Her back flexes and her muscles stiffen at his touch.

Rage explodes in my chest like dynamite thrown into a furnace, and I reach forward and grasp his wrist in my hand, sliding in next to Harley as I close my other hand around his and grip it.

Hard.

“Mr. President, Reed Walker, running independently for New York Mayor.” I shake his hand, squeezing it between both of mine as my eyes fix on his. His pupils widen before he regards me coolly. “We met this morning. You told me how interested you were to hear more about my research into the NYPD’s statistics. Specifically, those around harassment

and assault, and how I plan to increase the number of cases successfully making it to trial.” I give him a measured smile as he holds my gaze.

“Yes. I recall. Nice to talk to you again.” His eyes slide to Harley, who’s moved to my side.

I tighten my grip on his hand so his eyes return to mine. “Where is the First Lady this evening?”

“She felt unwell and didn’t accompany me.” The president’s smile is tight as I finally release his hand.

“That’s such a shame. Please give her our regards.” I wrap my arm around Harley, my palm curling around to cup her hip, and note the way his eyes narrow as he follows my movement.

“I will, thank you. And thank you, Ms. Jacobs.” He looks at Harley, who meets his gaze, her face emotionless. “I enjoyed our chat.” His attention moves to behind us and he tips his head at someone. “Please, excuse me.”

I turn to Harley as he walks off.

“You okay?”

She looks up at me, her eyes steely. “Win this election, Reed. Do whatever it takes. And then go after his job next. Men like him should never be in positions of power.”

“They shouldn’t, you’re right.” I search her face, looking for a trace of the unease I expected to see. But all I find is pure, focused determination.

“Good.” She blows out a tense breath. “Now let’s go meet more people... and get another drink.”

She wraps her arm around mine, and a wave of complete admiration washes over me as I see a new facet of the sparkling diamond that is Harley Jacobs.

Belief.

Belief and hope in a system that is corrupt on so many levels. But that also has people within it who are true, honorable warriors fighting for the same things.

Equality. Justice. Peace.

And so much more.

Things I gave up daring to hope for on the darkest days of my past.



Chapter Twelve



Harley

“YOU KNOW WE WERE destined to only have one bed, right? It’s like the law in situations like this.”

“I told you. I’ll sleep on the sofa.” Reed pulls off his bowtie and undoes the top button of his shirt.

“No way. I’ll sleep on the sofa. You’ve been working all day.” I walk past him with a pillow, preparing to set up my sleeping spot for our one night here.

“Harls.” He reaches out and clasps my wrist with a gentle stubbornness I’ve noticed he can execute with precision.

I raise my eyes to meet his and he cocks a brow at me, not needing to use words. I know exactly what he’s going to say.

You’re not sleeping there. I am.

I leave my wrist cradled in his hand. He makes no attempt to break our contact, either. Ever since the president laid his hands on me, making my skin crawl, I’ve wanted nothing more than to feel Reed’s touch. I stayed glued to him after that, his reassuring, strong presence calming the racing of my heart like no one else would have been able to do. Being near him,

feeling his muscles tense and relax underneath my hand as I held his arm for the remainder of the night, erased all thoughts of other hands, other unwanted touches, unwarranted suggestions about hotel suites and private talks, and getting away for a while together.

I shudder at the memory. I could tell the moment I felt the president's eyes on me, trying to penetrate the thin satin of my dress. I've experienced that coiling of dread in my stomach many times. A tightening as my body prepares. In nature, it would be fight or flight, but in a multibillion-dollar ballroom with one of the world's most powerful leaders, it's not as simple. Survival takes on a whole new meaning when the man you're about to turn down could likely make you disappear without a trace. You'd just become another cold case, another dead end of loose trails that lead nowhere.

My eyes are drawn down to where Reed's thumb is stroking gentle circles on my inner wrist.

"You okay?"

"Yes." And I mean it. I am okay. "Are you? You're on the president's radar now."

His eyes darken and he presses his lips together. "So be it."

He lets go of my wrist and takes the pillow back from me as I protest, walking over to the bed and placing it back on.

"You're not sleeping on the sofa. End of discussion."

"Neither are you." I cross my arms over my chest.

He sighs.

"Fine. I suppose the bed is kind of huge." I cast my eyes over the enormous luxury bed in our suite, piled high with sumptuous looking white pillows of varying shapes and sizes. "We can share."

Reed's gaze follows mine as he unbuttons his shirt. "If you're happy, then so am I."

"Good. That's settled." I linger for a moment as he pulls his shirt off, revealing his solid, defined torso and huge arms. I've seen it numerous times before. When he's sweaty from his workout, when he goes to the kitchen for a drink before bed in just his pajama pants, when he walks down the hallway in just a towel around his waist to grab his ringing cell phone.

I've seen it.

And yet, I haven't. Not really. I've had blinkers on this entire time. Because if I had really looked, then I would have noticed just how beautiful Reed is. It's like I'm seeing him for the first time.

He was willing to sacrifice everything tonight.

He could have blown his chances at ever becoming mayor by pissing off the president.

He could have lost it all.

Yet he didn't seem to contemplate that for a second. He wasn't thinking of himself.

He was thinking of me.

"Can you please get the top for me? There's a couple of hooks." I move in front of him and turn so he can access the back neck strap of my dress, another beautiful loan from Maria. I swear she chooses pink dresses on purpose purely for me. I never see her wear them. She prefers red or cream.

"Of course."

His breath fans over the back of my neck as he unfastens my dress with ease. I hold the front of it to prevent it from falling. His fingers dust my neck, and he slowly runs his hands down over each of my shoulders and down the tops of my arms, sending goosebumps scattering over my skin.

“You look beautiful tonight. No wonder the president considered starting a war when I came over.” His hands stay resting on my bare skin, a little above my elbows as my heart rate picks up in my chest.

“You were lucky he didn’t.” I breathe slowly, aware that every hair on the back of my neck is standing up from where his breath is ghosting over my skin.

“No. *He* was lucky. If he had started it, then I sure as fuck would have finished it.”

I twist my head to look back at him over my shoulder.

“I would end every war for people I care about, Harls,” he says slowly, holding my gaze.

People he cares about.

I stare back at him as his eyes drop to my lips and back up again. The subtle movement unleashes a bubbling energy, which dances its way through my body.

I turn away. “I’m just going to get changed.”

I head into the bathroom and close the door, falling back against it and letting out a deep breath. Tonight has been crazy. In fact, this entire day has been. First, we drove for hours to get here, a beautiful hotel in its own private grounds, nothing in walking distance at all. Then I spent a day in the hotel spa while Reed worked. I met Kristen and some of the other partners, who all seemed down to earth. Except Bea, the bitch. Thank God we’ve managed to avoid her and Graham so far. I saw them across the ballroom tonight, right before the president cornered me, but I never saw them again after that.

I slip out of my dress and underwear and change into my white cotton shorts and top pajama set. I should have thought this through properly. I’ve

packed what is probably the smallest nightwear set I own. But my big, comfy ones are still in the laundry basket after having my period a week ago. When I head out into the bedroom, there's a soft, flickering glow from the TV. Reed's laid out on the sofa, watching the news with his arms folded behind his head. He's changed into dark blue pajama pants, and nothing else. The light illuminates his skin, then drops away leaving shadows as the image on the screen changes. The contrast of the alternating patterns draws my attention to each line, dip, ripple, and valley on his broad, muscular body. The butterflies that have moved into my stomach over recent days stir up once again.

"Bathroom's free," I call as I walk over to the bed and climb in, pulling the cool duvet up over me as I lie down and sink into the pillows with a sigh.

I must fall asleep as the next thing I know, I'm shivering and it's dark. I glance at the bedside clock. 1 AM. I've been asleep less than two hours. I turn over as my eyes start to adjust. There's a long, dark outline in the bed next to me, slow, steady breathing coming from it.

Reed.

I gather the sheets up around my neck and hunch into a fetal position. How can he be sleeping so soundly? It's positively Baltic in here. Maybe the air conditioning is broken and stuck at 'freeze your tits off' level, because I swear they're about to do just that. I mutter and tuck my chin underneath the duvet, attempting to blow hot air into it to create a makeshift sleeping bag of heat. It does absolutely nothing, and so I fidget about some more, huffing and puffing. How can such an opulent hotel have such an antiquated, shitty heating system?

I glance at Reed again. He's sprawled out on his back, one arm flung behind his head, the other on his uncovered chest where he must have thrown the duvet back. He's always like a heater, walking around our apartment in no shirt. I don't get it. He's probably part Yeti. Minus the body hair.

I'm glaring at him, thinking about the unfairness of it all. Women get periods, childbirth, freezing tits. What do men get? A toasty self-regulating furnace and maybe some nose or ear hair that's prone to overgrowth. Although Reed lucked out there. The bastard looks like a walking billboard for sexy pajama pants that hang low on hips.

Hips with that V shape you see on male underwear models.

I grumble and roll back over so my back is to him.

"Come here, Harley."

My ears prick up, and I incline my head in his direction. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was before you started wriggling about and making the bed shake." His voice is deep and a little gruff from where he's just woken up.

I shuffle about a bit more, testing his theory. The bed base moves the tiniest amount, barely anything at all.

"No way did that wake you up," I huff as I tuck the duvet around my neck again.

"Fine. It was the way you were puffing and panting and grumbling like a puppy that hasn't realized its tail is attached to its own butt."

"Shut up." I consider throwing my pillow at him, but that would require moving and letting precious heat escape.

He chuckles, his voice still laden with an extra depth from sleep.

It sounds so sexy.

“Come here,” he repeats.

He doesn't wait for me to answer. Instead, he reaches both arms underneath the bedding and drags me across the mattress, pulling my back straight to his front and wrapping his arms around me.

“Now quit fucking complaining and I'll warm you up.”

I stiffen in his arms, but as the solid heat from his body begins to transfer to mine, I melt, relaxing back into him and letting out a contented sigh.

This is so much better.

“You might as well be naked wearing this.” He brushes his fingers over my ribs and the sudden jump of my stomach leaves me expecting his fingerprints to be etched into my skin if I were to lift the fabric away. “Why didn't you pack your warm pajamas, the ones with the deformed cats on?”

He means my period pajamas.

“They're caticorns.”

“They're fucking hideous is what they are, but at least you'd be warmer.”

I elbow him in the stomach, and he laughs easily, dipping his nose into the hair above my ear as his arms tighten around me. “I'm joking, Mrs. Walker. Don't divorce me.”

“Fuck off, Daddy.”

He laughs again, and I find myself smiling in the dark as my body hums with tingling warmth encased inside his strong arms.

“How do you do it?” I ask, settling into the pillow and shuffling my ass a little to get comfier.

Reed clears his throat behind me and re-positions his legs further away from mine.

“Do what?”

“All of these events? Talking to all these people and making speeches?”

I was thinking about this today in the spa. I've seen Reed address large crowds of people and walk into full rooms, eyes going straight to him, seeking him out. Yet he never loses his cool, never gets flustered.

"I would be a gibbering wreck if it were me."

"You get used to it." His chest vibrates against my back as he speaks. "Someone once gave me the advice that I shouldn't think of my own nerves, but that I should think of the other people there. How they might be feeling, unsure of what to say and do. He told me I should think about how I can serve those people, help them feel more at ease. When you're focusing your attention on helping other people, you forget about your own problems."

"That's actually quite beautiful." I turn my face and can make out Reed's eyes shining in the dim light. "Did you use that thought process when you approached the president tonight, too?" I joke.

"I did. I thought about serving him his own ass," Reed growls, his chest growing hotter against my back. "But my first thought was getting you away from him. Someone being in a situation that makes them uncomfortable, like I could tell you were... that you didn't... I hate it, Harls. *I fucking hate it.* I would do anything to prevent someone from feeling that way."

The strength behind his words shocks me, and we lie together in silence for a few minutes as I think about Riley. I don't want to ask him about it. It must be so painful for him to think about. *His own sister.* Knowing someone did something so wicked to her. Took away her control. Violated her. I swallow hard as I try to push the mental images out of my head. She's come out the other side. She's a survivor who now dedicates her life to putting these sick bastards behind bars. I wonder if being a prosecution lawyer

specializing in sexual assault cases is something she would have ever considered as a career if it weren't for her past.

“You feeling warmer?” Reed’s voice cuts into my thoughts. He sounds calmer, more relaxed, and I snuggle back into him, letting out a happy hum as my ass brushes against something hard.

I still, my breath stalling. Slowly, I rotate my ass side to side again to make sure it is what I think it is.

Fuck, it is!

I don't know why, but I perform the same move, slower this time, just to triple check.

Reed clears his throat, and his lips graze my ear. “You need to stop doing that, Mrs. Walker.”

Every cell in my body seems to vibrate as I suck in a breath. His arms are still around me, his solid body pressed tightly against mine, sharing the inferno that his body kicks out with mine. His lips are against my ear, and his dick...

His dick is rock hard and digging into my ass cheeks.

I incline my head to the side. Reed doesn't move, so my own small twist brings us nearly mouth to mouth. His lips are so close to mine I can almost taste, as well as smell, the mint from his toothpaste that's still evident on his breath.

My eyes are adjusted enough to the dark now that I can see him almost perfectly. His dark brows, pulled together into a deep look of concentration, his long eyelashes cast down over his cheeks as his gaze falls onto my parted lips.

I roll my hips slowly, fascinated by the way his lips part and he sucks in a breath through his teeth. I thought his body was hot, heating me up like the

hard, hot stones they used in the spa today during my massage. But his dick... the energy radiating from it is like a blazing fire that's had more fuel thrown on. It feels like it might scorch me any second. Brandish me.

"Harley," he growls out a warning as I turn my head a little more, and the corner of my mouth brushes against his.

"Reed."

"You need to stop this right now," he hisses deep from in his chest as I grind my ass back against him again, relishing the hardness of him.

Heat pools between my legs. It's been a long time since I was with a man, and I could lie to myself and say that's all this is. A moment of weakness when I'm feeling horny. But that's what it would be.

A lie.

Because as much as I may try and tell myself that I'm not attracted to Reed Walker.

I can't.

Not anymore.

The reasons I used to have for disliking him, namely the man-whoring and the irritating jokes, are gone. He says he hasn't been with a woman in months, and I believe him. Living with him has shown me that there's so much more to him than I first thought. The jokes remain, but I kind of like them now, not that I would admit that to him. But him? Who he is. The way he's so passionate about fighting for justice. The way he cares so deeply about others, about his sister.

There is so much more to Reed than I ever gave him credit for.

"What if I don't stop?" I whisper, grinding back harder against him, reveling in the low groan that rumbles inside his chest.

“Then you need to understand something, Harley.” His voice is strained as I circle my ass over his cock again.

“What’s that?” I let out a small moan as his arms flex around me and his cock jerks.

He moves one hand up, so it’s clasping my chin, keeping my lips in a position millimeters from his.

“Once you let me touch you, there’s no going back.”

There’s fire in his eyes. A promise of so much that I almost want to plead and beg for him to show me just what he means.

Show me exactly what no going back with Reed Walker looks like.

I hold his eyes, more aroused than I’ve ever felt before in my life as I fight to keep my voice even.

“Reed?” I whisper against his parted lips as his fingers tighten around my chin.

“Yes, Angel?”

I flutter deep in my core at the way his voice drags out the word.

Angel.

I keep my eyes fixed on his face as I slowly place my palm over his other hand, which is against my hipbone, and slide it underneath the hem of my top, inching it higher and higher until our joint hands graze the underside of my breast.

Reed holds his breath, his thumb resting against the curve.

Waiting.

“I want you to touch me everywhere,” I say against his lips. “Touch me all over and don’t miss a single part of me.”



Chapter Thirteen



Harley

“TOUCH ME EVERYWHERE, REED. I want to feel your fingers on me tomorrow, and the day after, and next week... I want you to touch me, so I never forget what it feels like.”

“Holy fuck,” he groans as he slams his lips to mine at the same time his hand pushes up and cups my breast roughly.

I open to him, moaning into his mouth as he kisses me with the skill and passion I knew he would, his tongue seeking out mine and claiming me. Making my mouth his own. Every curve of my lips, every flick of my tongue, all now his to do with as he pleases as he holds me still, with a vise-like grip on my chin.

“I’ve wanted you for so long.” His lips move along my jaw as he tilts my head back to give himself access. Then he runs his hand down to my throat and curls his fingers around my windpipe, holding me in place as his mouth finds my ear. “So fucking long,” he murmurs.

He has?

I whimper as he squeezes my breast and then rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Reed,” I moan, unable to do much else. He has me pinned in place as he begins to plant fiery kisses down the side of my neck. The hand caressing my breast makes my nipple ache to feel his hot mouth engulfing it. “Please.”

“Please what, Angel? What do you want?” His lips continue their trail down to the juncture of my neck, and he bites hard enough to make me moan out loud before sucking and kissing the tender skin.

“I want your mouth,” I whimper.

He rolls me onto my back and before I can blink, his lips are on mine, kissing me with purpose. I arch my breasts up to get closer to him, unable to touch him the way I want to because he’s pinned my wrists to the mattress above my head.

“Where else do you want it?” He pulls back and sits me up, ripping my top up over my head before he pushes me back down onto the bed. His eyes roam over my bare skin and he groans, pausing to really study me. I shiver in anticipation before he brings his face to my chest. “What about here?”

I gasp out loud as he covers my pebbled nipple with his mouth and sucks.

“Yes, oh fuck, yes.” I writhe underneath him as one large hand pins my wrists together over my head again. It feels even better than I imagined—hot, measured, controlled. He moves to the other side, flicking his tongue over me and biting gently in between sucks until I’m bucking off the bed.

“My girl’s got sensitive nipples on these incredible tits of hers, has she?” Reed says as sucks one into his mouth again, grinding his cock against my leg at the same time. “Do you feel how fucking hard you make me?” His face is over mine again as he looks at my mouth. “You and your perfect pink lips.”

He kisses me again, driving his tongue into my mouth as I whimper and writhe underneath him, trying to get friction between my legs.

“Your perfect pink lips.”

Memories of how his voice sounded that night when I heard him through his bedroom door come flooding to me, bringing a rush of wetness between my legs. Now I know what he was doing, I can't help but remember how hot he sounded. Deep, gruff... A voice laced with sex.

A voice made for sex.

“I like it when you talk to me,” I pant as Reed sucks my nipples again.

“Do you?” He looks up at me, his eyes even darker in this light, a slight gleam in them from the small sliver of moonlight making its way in through a crack in the curtains. His lips move around my nipple as he speaks. “I've wanted you for so long. I've fucking dreamed about you for weeks asleep in the room next to me. Wishing that I could come to you in the night like this and sink my tongue and my cock deep inside you. Taste every damn inch of you, fuck every part of you.”

Holy shit.

“Tell me,” I plead, equal parts both fascinated and turned on by his brazen, unapologetically filthy words.

So hot.

“You're going to scream my name so loud everyone on the East Coast is going to know just who's fucking you, Angel. I'm going to make you forget everything else exists, except me, my fingers, my mouth, and my cock. They're going to know every part of you by the end of tonight.”

“Oh, God.”

Reed grins wolfishly at me as he shifts slightly and then drags my shorts over my hips and down my legs. The sight of him, all toned abs and messed

up hair makes my pulse throb deep in my core.

“Knees up.” He grips my calves and pushes my knees to my chest so I’m exposed to him. The cool air of the room hits me, making me shudder. He looks between my legs for what feels like a long time and then, when I think I can’t wait anymore, he slowly reaches out and drags the pad of one thumb all the way from my clit, down through my wetness to my asshole, hissing out a breath as he does so. “You’re perfect. I can’t wait to fuck you everywhere.”

I gulp, realizing he means *everywhere*.

He drops down between my thighs and pushes them farther apart with his hands, so I’m stretched wide open for him. There’s a deep growl, and then a slow, deliberate intake of breath. He’s sniffing me.

He’s actually *sniffing* me right now.

I’m glad it’s dark because I’m sure my cheeks are probably burning a fierce red. No one has *ever* done anything so forward, so obscene, something that makes me feel both dirty and horny as fuck at the same time.

“You smell incredible,” Reed groans before sinking his tongue inside me and eating me out.

I always used to wonder why it was called that. Guys I’ve been with before generally just licked around my clit a bit—if they could even find it. But now I understand. *This* is what eating out means.

My back rises from the mattress of its own accord as Reed groans and murmurs filth as he feasts as deep inside me as he can reach. Each word he utters is like music to my ears, making me wetter and wetter until I’m grinding shamelessly against his face, my hands fisting his hair.

“You’re so good at that. God!” I cry, throwing my head back and squeezing my eyes shut.

“You taste like heaven, Angel. A heaven that’s going to come all over my face while you scream my name.”

“No. Not yet.” I try to push Reed’s head away, but he sucks on my clit and then buries his face against me again. As he sucks, a new wave of arousal rushes straight from my body, and Reed laps it up, growling deep in his chest.

“Let me have it, Angel. I’ll fuck you all night long and give you more. Let me have this one on my face, just where I want it.” His tone is almost pleading, even though we both know I won’t say no to him.

Reed has full control tonight. The way my body is a quivering wreck at his command shows that much is obvious.

“I... ca—”

“Yes. You. Can,” he grits, cutting me off as he clamps his mouth down over me again and slides his tongue over me, rubbing it back and forth over my clit.

I’m being turned inside out as a blinding pressure builds inside me until I’m bucking against him and crying out. He presses one hand flat to my lower stomach, pinning me down as his other hand squeezes one of my ass cheeks hard.

“Fuck, Reed... I...” My hands twist and pull at his hair as I pant.

He dives into me deeper and something presses against my ass, gently at first, until my body begins to accept it, and then it slides in deeper, creating an extra fullness I’ve never experienced before.

“Reed,” I scream as I come hard, every nerve in my body tingling and shaking. My entire lower body spasms in one giant, long orgasm as I come and come and come, crying out loud as he keeps the same pace going with his tongue. I shake and squirm beneath him. He doesn’t let up. And then it’s

there, a second orgasm, sending my body into a shaking mess as he devours me, groaning in pleasure as he sucks and swallows, fingers, and kisses, takes and gives.

I pant, sweat gathering between my breasts as my chest heaves up and down. Reed slides his thumb out of my ass and his tongue from my clit, and then rises over me, grinning, his face glistening with my arousal as his deep brown waves fall forward.

“Do you know how good you taste?”

I stare at him, unable to form a coherent word as I catch my breath.

He leans down and presses his lips to mine, coaxing them apart gently, before he swipes his tongue through them until I kiss him back. I can taste myself all over him. It starts gentle and slow as he moans and tells me how sweet I taste and how wet I get. But as soon as my breathing slows and I begin to peel my spine away from the mattress to get close to him again, he picks up the pace once more, kissing me like I’m everything he needs to survive.

“I want to fuck you, Angel. I want to sink my cock inside this pretty pussy so bad,” he groans against my lips as he rises over me and uses one hand to yank his pajama pants off. “I’ve thought about fucking you for so long. No one’s ever driven me so fucking crazy before.”

His lips are on my neck as he kisses and nips. He groans as I sink my hands into the hair and tug gently.

“You knew what that did to me at that first dinner we went to, didn’t you? When you made me put my hands on your ass? You fucking knew how hard you were making me.”

My mouth drops open, and I gasp as Reed bites my neck and then sucks and kisses where my skin smart.

I had no idea.

“That first dinner?”

“You knew. You must know what you do to me. I’ve never jerked off so much in my life,” he groans as he grinds against me and the head of his cock slides through my wetness.

“I didn’t,” I moan, circling my hips as he moves with me, the smooth, fat head of him dipping into my wetness again and making me tremble. I’ve never had sex without protection before, and I will feel like an idiot if I let myself get carried away now. “Condom,” I groan as his cock presses a little further inside me, and I part my legs wider, inviting him in.

“Okay, Angel.” He kisses me, holding my neck with one hand as his tongue dives into my mouth.

I roll my hips underneath him, encouraging his cock between my legs again. It feels so good. So hot, hard... and *big*. He’s got the biggest cock I’ve ever been this close to. And it’s perfect. I looked at it earlier when I got the chance to glance down. It’s thick and long and smooth. Held up by insanely perfect balls that would never fit into the palm of my hands. I’ve never even considered a guy’s balls to be attractive before until...

“Oh, that feels so good,” I moan into his mouth and lift my hips off the mattress, managing to slide another inch of him inside me.

What the hell am I doing? This isn’t me. I don’t take chances like this. I don’t get carried away. I haven’t even let ex boyfriends go there bare before. Not even just the tip.

But I’ve also never been this turned on before.

Ever.

“Reed,” I whimper, lifting my hips again and gasping as I get more than just the head of him inside me. I stretch around him, and my pulse pounds

between my legs. “Fuck me, Reed. Please.”

The bed dips, and I’m cold as he disappears, going to his bag across the room and coming back, climbing up over me on the bed. He rips a condom packet open with his teeth, never breaking eye contact with me.

“I know when you mean yes, Angel. And when you just want to mean it.”

He rolls the condom down onto himself and then leans over me again.

“Get your knees up.”

I do as he says, holding my legs up against my chest as he rests his forehead against mine and pushes inside my body confidently, filling every space inside me until my eyes pinch at the corners and he shushes me.

“It’s okay, Angel. It will fit.”

His dark, glittering eyes hold mine, and I nod, sucking in a breath as he pulls back and sinks in again, further this time. He repeats the move, over and over, never taking his eyes off mine until I start to pant and pull at him, grabbing at his hair, his face, his ass cheeks. Anywhere I can get a hold of to pull him deeper inside me.

“Please, Reed,” I groan.

He sits back onto his knees and holds my hips, dragging me back down onto his cock as I cry out. His eyes fix on the point where our bodies meet, and he growls.

“You look so hot getting stretched by my cock. I told you that you’d fit me.” He thrusts forward, burying himself to the hilt, his balls slapping my skin as my eyes roll back in my head.

“So good,” I pant as I’m thrown up the bed, and it shakes beneath us with each thrust.

“So fucking good,” Reed echoes, his eyes now on my face as his hands run up my body, over my breasts, and to my neck. He wraps his hands around it and holds me gently as he increases his pace. The bed bangs against the wall and I’m moved up the mattress by each forward drive he makes.

I stare up at him, my breath coming in short gasps as I’m overcome with pleasure.

“I’ll rub that swollen clit for you all night long, Angel. Make you come a million times. But let my first be with my hands wrapped around your pretty throat.” He grits his teeth and his arms and chest tense as he increases his pace.

I try to nod at him, but I can’t because his hands are clasped around my neck. He thinks I won’t come without him rubbing my clit, but the angle at which he’s pumping into me has him perfectly rubbing my G-spot. If he didn’t have the condom on and I could really feel the thick rim of his head, I bet it would be even better.

I sink my nails into his forearms as I tense underneath him. Our eyes lock onto each other’s as the first pulse of pleasure sears through me.

“I’m coming,” I pant, fighting to stop my eyes from squeezing shut. I want to watch him. I want to see him come undone.

“Good girl. Fuck, Angel. You’re such a good girl.”

He groans and increases his pace as he sucks in a deep breath. “I’m going to fuck you so full of my cum at the same time. You ready?”

I cry out in reply as I begin pulsating around him, the strength of my release knocking the air from my lungs.

He keeps his hands on my neck and then sucks in a giant breath before he tenses and holds it in. Then he releases it in one long string of ‘fucks’ and

'good girls' as he pounds me into the mattress.

"Fuck, Angel. I'm coming so hard for you. Into your perfect, tight cunt."

I watch in awe as he fucks every last ripple of pleasure from both of our bodies. Wrings them dry until there isn't a drop left.

Then he collapses on top of me and pulls my lips to his with a grin.

We kiss and kiss, taking our time savoring each other, with him still inside my body. He gets up to dispose of the condom and climbs straight back into bed again, pulling me into his arms, his hands going into my hair, his tongue going into my mouth, and his words spoken softly against my lips.

"You're beautiful. You're so damn beautiful. It's almost more than I can take." His fingers trace down my face and he pulls me against his body. "Told you I would warm you up."

I giggle and slide my hands up into his hair. "I'm definitely warm now."

"I meant *warm* you up, Angel." He catches my lips in a kiss with more pressure.

Shit. That was my warmup?

"Now that I know you can take it, we can have a lot more fun." He smirks at the way my eyes widen, then reaches for another condom, tearing the packet open with his teeth.

"Get on all fours."



Chapter Fourteen



Reed

“GET ON ALL FOURS,” I instruct, pulling Harley up onto her knees and spinning her around. I press down gently on her back, encouraging her to lower it and really open up to me.

“You’re fucking stunning,” I say as I roll the condom down on to my angry, swollen cock. I should last longer now that we’ve already fucked once. God, I can’t believe she’s really letting me have her. Letting me be with her. I’m the luckiest fucker on earth right now.

I lean forward, prising her ass cheeks apart with my hands, and slowly lick all the way from her clit to her puckered asshole, chuckling at the way she sucks in a breath as I tease her with the tip of my tongue, pushing it inside her a tiny bit. I’m going to have to work up to her taking my cock. Judging by her reaction, I’d say no one’s ever put a finger there before. The thought that there’s a part of her that will only ever have been mine makes my dick swell painfully inside the condom.

“You’re soaking, Angel,” I rasp as I cup her pussy with my palm from behind. She whimpers as I curl my fingers, driving one inside her. “Anyone

would think you're begging to be fucked again. Your juice is running down your thighs."

"Reed," she whimpers, bringing a smug-as-shit grin to my face. I will never tire of her moaning my name like that when she's dripping wet for me.

"You want me to help you with it, Angel? You want Daddy to fill you up with his cock so you feel better?" I pause as the phrase rolls off my tongue before I can stop it. This could go either way. She could be horrified and run out of here at my use of her joke name for me, burst into laughter, or she could—

"Yes," she whimpers, pushing her ass back toward me.

My cock might explode at how flushed her cunt is.

"Yes, what?" I can't keep the smile off my face. I'm ridiculously turned on by this game that she started. I wonder if she's regretting it now.

"Yes, Daddy," she practically shouts.

Well, fuck. My sweet, pink, animal, plant-loving girl is a naughty thing once she gets going.

"Sit back on Daddy's cock," I murmur.

She struggles to take me in this position. She gasps and wriggles side to side with determination, finally sinking back against my balls as she lets out a breathy moan that has me twitching inside her.

"That's it, Angel. Your pretty little cunt knows just how to make it fit. Now squeeze."

She does as she's told, and I tip my head back and close my eyes as her tight little body hugs me *hard*.

"Am I doing it right, Daddy?" She turns her head to the side and her eyes meet mine in the dark. A smile plays on her lips as she bites the bottom one

between her teeth.

“Yes, Angel, you’re doing it perfectly.”

I fuck her twice more like that. The first time with my thumb in her ass and my other hand stroking her clit. And the second time with two fingers in her ass and my hand rubbing her clit. She comes twice the first time, but three times the second time. Three fucking perfect releases that make her ass cheeks shake and her thighs tremble as she convulses around my cock and cries out my name. I told her the entire East Coast would know my name, but I think they probably heard her over in the UK, too.

It’s getting light outside, the tiny break in the curtains letting the early morning sun stream in as I bite her neck with a deep groan and pump her full of cum one more time. Her ankles are hooked around my back and her hands are in my hair as she gasps out the last pulses of her orgasm.

“Good morning.” She giggles.

I roll off her and onto my back, pulling her with me so she’s laid out on my chest as I yank the condom off and throw it to the side, along with the growing pile from the night.

“Good morning,” I reply as she traces her fingers along my jawline.

Her eyes are bright and full of energy, despite not having slept longer than the couple of hours she got at the beginning of the night. She thought I was asleep then, too. But the truth is, I wasn’t, not deeply, anyway. The knowledge that she was so close to me, in the same bed, kept my mind too occupied with all sorts of filthy thoughts.

None were a patch on the reality, though.

Fucking Harley is like nothing I’ve ever done before. Spending all these weeks getting to know her, really know who she is, has done something to me. I would’ve been out the door by now if this was anyone else. Or I

would've been showing them the door. Either way, it would be over. No one's held my interest in years. Not since I made the decision that sex was merely a physical motion our bodies go through. A transaction. And once I'm spent, I'm not interested in buying from the same store again.

But Harley? All night inside her, and I feel as though I've just gotten started. I want to have everything. Her sweetness, her cute giggle when she watches those ridiculous animal videos, the softness of her voice when she's talking to her plants. Even the pink glittery fluff I keep finding stuck to my suit pants. And then discovering she's an angel to fuck, placing so much trust in me, letting me do whatever I choose to her...

I'm a fucking lost cause.

"Are you going to be okay to drive us back? You've hardly had any sleep."

I reach up to stroke her cheek with the back of my hand. "I'd offer myself as a vampire sacrifice, so I never have to sleep again if that's how I get to spend my nights."

She laughs and then kisses the smirk off my lips. "You'd have to drink blood if you did that."

"I know where I'd start." I lie back and fold one arm behind my head, pulling her closer with my other. "I'd be a vigilante, drinking the blood of all the sick fuckers. Cleaning the streets up at night."

"Ones like your sister helps put away?"

Harley's gaze is open and trusting as I lower my lips to hers. "Yeah. Like them." I kiss her softly, smiling against her lips as she lets out a quiet sigh. "You're beautiful."

"So are you," she murmurs as I draw back. "I never thought this side of Reed Walker existed. You'd come and visit Griffin at work and annoy the

hell out of me just by being there. And then everything Maria heard...” Two lines appear between her eyebrows.

I frown, hating that she knows about the way I used to act. “Harley, everything that Maria heard is—”

The hotel phone rings. I reach over, lifting it off the hook.

“Hello?”

Harley runs her finger down my chest and over my stomach, tracing around each muscle with a serene expression on her face.

I mean it. She is fucking beautiful.

I listen to the voice on the other end of the phone, my jaw tensing before I answer.

“Yes, that’s fine. I’ll come down now.”



When we arrive back home, Harley’s eyes light up as she spots her slippers inside the hallway when we walk back through the door hours after leaving the hotel.

I shake my head as she slides her feet inside. “They still as good as an orgasm?” I growl in her ear, making her jump.

She looks at me with a smirk. “Maybe not. But they do relieve my aches, rather than inflict them.”

I pull her into my arms. “You should have told me you were aching, Harls. I would have done something.”

“You can’t do anything. It’s your...” Her eyes drop to my groin. “I’m just a little sore, that’s all.”

I hold either side of her face as I seal my mouth over hers and kiss her leisurely. I love how she's all sweet and pink and girly and can't even say the word cock to me right now. Despite the fact she was screaming as I fucked her all night until I thought my dick might fall off.

All. Fucking. Night.

Like I was ever going to let her go once she gave me the green light. If we hadn't had to check out of the hotel and drive back, I know I would still be inside her right now, drawing moans from her perfect pink lips.

"I'll kiss it better for you."

She giggles against my mouth and pushes my chest. "I know how that'll end."

"I mean it." I grab her back to me and kiss her again. "Let me take care of you."

She shivers in my arms as I dust my lips down her neck and press gentle kisses to the red marks I left on her skin. I'll have to remember she marks easily. I never want to hurt her, despite feeling like I could lose control with her and be rough. *Really rough.*

"I'll run you a bath and you can dig out those deformed cat pajamas to put on."

"They're catcorns." She huffs and wriggles out of my arms playfully.

"Whatever the fuck they are, you can wear them and get comfy on the sofa and have a nap until we go out later."

"We're going out later?" Her brows rise.

"Yes, I need to drop some papers to Stuart. He's got Book Page for the day and they're going to be in the city, so I said we'd meet them for dinner. If that's okay with you?"

“Of course.” Harley grins. “I haven’t shown Paige the gif I made of you and Freddy yet. She’s going to love it.”

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” I call after her as she walks past Bruce and Beryl and whispers something to them. “Harley? Harley?”

She ignores me and carries on into the living room as I sigh and take my keys and wallet out of my pocket and deposit them onto the table.

Half an hour later, she’s in a bath with so many bubbles I’m beginning to think I’m at one of those nightclubs from the nineties with a foam machine and sticky carpet.

“Are you still under there somewhere?” I laugh as I stand at the mirror and shave.

“It’s so good,” Harley moans, the sound sending my blood racing.

I rinse off my razor and lift it back to my jaw, tilting my head so I can see better in the mirror. I look like I haven’t slept. But that’s nothing new. I average just a few hours a night by the time I’ve read over more policies, made more notes, written more speeches, and put the paperwork down for the night.

At least when I make mayor, when, not if—I have to believe I can do this—I will be able to make changes. Make a difference. Feel like I’m doing something.

“I can’t believe the president’s assistant said those things to you today.” Harley blows some bubble foam in the air and watches it float back down.

My shoulders tense at the thought of this morning’s phone call and the request to attend a meeting with the president’s assistant before we left the hotel.

“I believe it. He wasn’t going to say it himself, was he? Too much of a coward to admit when he’s been caught out.” I rinse the razor again and

glance at Harley in the mirror.

“It’s good though, right?” Her innocent eyes meet mine. “I mean, she said he was interested in hearing more about your thoughts on stricter sentencing in sexual assault cases, and how to make more cases stronger so they end up making it to trial.”

“Yes.” I smile at her as I towel off my face. She’s right. He may only be doing it to avoid a scandal. To keep my silence. There was already some talk about high class call girls that the First Lady got wind of last year. Her and the president weren’t photographed out together for weeks afterward. I doubt he wants even the slightest whisper of anything that could drag him into the press for the wrong reasons again. In this case, the ends justifies the means. If he’s willing to discuss legislation with me, then I’m more than happy to use it to my advantage.

The water sloshes around inside the bath as Harley steps out and wraps a towel around herself.

“I like your bathroom. Your tub faces the other way to mine.” She gazes around before looking at my shampoo and shower gel bottles inside the walk-in shower.

“It’s your bathroom as well now.” I grab her around the waist and press my nose into the soft skin behind her ear to breathe in her scent. She hesitates in my arms. “We are not having separate rooms anymore,” I growl.

“I didn’t—”

“Harls?” I pull back to look at her. “Did you think we were coming back and carrying on like before?”

Her lips part as she hesitates. “No, I didn’t. I wasn’t sure what would happen. I—”

I silence her with a kiss as I wrap one hand around the back of her neck and tug her towel loose with my other. “Fuck, Angel. Don’t piss Daddy off.”

Her breath hitches and then she gasps quietly as I drop to my knees on the floor in front of her.

“I won’t,” she whispers, her eyes fluttering closed as she grabs the sink to brace herself, just as I seal my mouth over her clit and kiss it all better.

Just like I promised.



Chapter Fifteen



Harley

I KNOCK ON MARIA and Griffin's door. It's early, but I know from Griffin's schedule that he has a breakfast meeting today, so he won't be home. And I should be in time to catch Maria.

"Hey." She smiles as she answers the door, her head tilted to the side as she fastens her blue diamond studs in her ears.

"Hey yourself." I grin as I hold up the garment bag and walk into their apartment. "Thank you so much for the loan of this. It was definitely a head turner."

"So I've heard." Maria arches a brow at me as she does her other earring and then smooths down her long, dark hair.

I roll my eyes. "Reed?"

"Him and Griffin were in his office for ages last night talking," Maria says as she takes the dress from me and drapes it over the back of one of the velvet chairs at the kitchen island.

Maria gives me a knowing smile. After an early dinner with Stuart and Paige last night, we came back to the apartment and Reed said he was going upstairs to see Griffin. He was gone for more than an hour, but I didn't

mind as it gave me, Maria, and Suze plenty of time to have an extended video call about the events of the hotel stay. Reed may have been telling Griffin about the president trying to put his hands on me, but I was talking about how Reed *did* put his hands all over me.

The two of them weren't even a little shocked as I told them Reed and I had shared bed, and what went on in that bed. I didn't go into full details, but enough for them to both be looking at me with these strange I-told-you-so smiles on their faces. Suze was slightly more pressing about his sexual appetite, but I think my blush said it all. And then she caught my minuscule wince as I sat down on the sofa. You'd think she had won the jackpot by the way her eyes lit up. She took delight in reprimanding me, one finger pointed at me accusingly as she told me that's what happens when I 'bounce around on giant dicks'. But it was said in the fondest way, like she actually approves.

Maybe she does. Maybe they both do.

"So, what're the plans for this week?" Maria asks as I wave at Eggbert across her kitchen, who's still toasty and silent in his incubator.

"Um, Reed has some public interview in the park tomorrow lunchtime. I said I'd go and watch." I smile, thinking about how he told me about it as he pulled me into bed with him last night after he came back from seeing Griffin.

His bed. Curled up and warm in his arms. Toastier than I've ever been at night before. And boy, did I sleep... after he spooned me from behind and made me come twice with him buried deep inside me. But after that, I slept right up until this morning when he was already in the shower. The previous night's activities took it out of me. But despite that, I'm energized from all the excitement, and I'm glowing when I look in the mirror.

Reed Walker is a force to keep up with.

I swear he would have kept me up all night again last night if he could have. He's insatiable. I smile goofily. He's rough and commanding, and so confident in the way he takes control with sex. But when we are hanging out in the apartment, or out at dinner with Stuart and Paige, he is so tender. He kisses me for no reason, looks deep into my eyes, strokes my face whenever he can, wraps his arms around me from behind when I'm brushing my teeth. He's a sweetheart.

Reed Walker is a romantic at heart. A fact I'm discovering more each minute I spend with him.

I give Maria a goodbye hug and head back downstairs. I have twenty minutes until I need to leave for work myself. I don't need to get coffee this morning for Griffin as he'll be out, so I chose to forgo my own in exchange for an extra bit of time in bed this morning. An extra bit of rest for my expertly pounded body.

I walk into our apartment and through to the kitchen, stopping suddenly as my eyes land on Reed, fully dressed in a navy-blue suit with a crisp white shirt and deep red tie. His shoes are the same deep, rich brown as his hair and the fresh and earthy scent of his cologne hangs in the air. He's leaning back against the kitchen counter, a newspaper in one hand and my sloth mug in the other.

"Hey, Babe." He looks at me from under dark brows and blows steam from the top of the mug before he takes a sip. "Do you want one?"

I stare at his lips as they wrap themselves around the side of the mug and take another deep pull, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"Why are you using that mug?" I stare at the offending sloth as Reed's lips quirk.

“It was at the front of the cupboard. Why? Are you territorial over your mugs and I’ve only just noticed? Should I have looked for a deformed cat one and used that instead?”

I stare at him as he smirks, licking his sinful lips.

“That should have been at the back of the cupboard. Right at the back. Way at the back.” I walk over to him and glance inside the mug. It’s almost empty.

His smirk turns to puzzlement as his brow furrows. “I’m sorry, Harls. I won’t use it again if it’s special to you.” He pushes off the side and places it in the sink, then presses a kiss to my forehead, followed by my lips. “I’ve got to go. See you tonight.”

“Wait.” I grab his hand.

God, this is awkward. But I don’t want him thinking I have some weird attachment to a mug and won’t let him use it. How mean is that? It’s like him saying I can’t use his expensive shaving foam on my armpits. Although technically, I guess he could say no, seeing as I never asked him this morning. But I just liked how it smelled of him so much that I couldn’t help it.

“It’s not a special mug. It’s just a mug.”

“Okay.” He nods slowly, his deep smoky eyes holding mine. “But?”

“But I use it for things that aren’t drink related. And I don’t think you should drink out of it. I mean, it gets sterilized and everything and I put it in the dishwasher, but—”

“So, what’s the problem?” Reed looks at me.

Damn, he’s sexy. Especially in this suit. The color, the tie, it’s working for him.

This look always works for him.

How have I been so blind for so long?

“I use it for... things.” I widen my eyes and tilt my head, urging him to get with the program. I sigh as he looks at me blankly. “I sterilize my menstrual cup in it. After I’ve already washed it, obviously,” I add quickly when he frowns. “It’s clean and everything. But you’re supposed to put them in boiling water as well, and that mug’s the perfect size. I mean, I could use a bowl, but then that would be a waste. And I want to conserve the planet and consider these things. For example, that sloth on the mug is probably losing members of his family daily to deforestation or global warming or something. And I—”

Reed cuts me off with a kiss, his hands holding either side of my face still as he presses into me and delves his tongue inside my mouth, kissing me with meaning until I’m panting and breathless.

“If you think I’m bothered by that, then I haven’t done a good enough job of showing you how much I love everything about your body,” he rasps against my mouth before he drops both hands to the hem of my dress and forces it up around my waist.

I gasp as he rips my panties to the side and sinks two fingers deep inside me, where I’m already soaking from the kiss he gave me. He pumps in and out of me slowly, his eyes on my mouth as the sound of my arousal echoes around the room.

“Your smell. Your taste. It’s all I want.” He lifts his hand up between us and holds my gaze as he sucks his two glistening fingers past his lips, licking them clean before drawing them out. “You think a cup bothers me? I’ve had my tongue inside your body. I’m a man, not a boy who hasn’t grown the fuck up. Nothing you do will ever be gross to me. Do you understand? Your body and all it can do is fucking incredible.”

I nod mutely as he slides his fingers back down between my legs again and groans in appreciation as he slides them inside me.

“I will taste every inch of your body and still beg for more. You hear me? I will fucking *beg* for it. Whether you’ve got your period or not. I don’t give a fuck as long as everything you have you share with me and only me. Angel, I will eat you out every fucking day until you believe me. You. Are. Perfect. Don’t you ever be ashamed.”

“I.. I’m not,” I murmur as his fingers find my G-spot and stroke. “I’m just a little embarrassed.”

Reed hisses in my ear before he sucks on my neck. “You *never* have to be embarrassed with me. I know shame, baby. In all its forms. Don’t you ever feel like that. And if you do, you tell me, and I will worship you until you believe me when I tell you; you are *fucking* perfect.”

I sink against his chest, holding myself up with the lapels of his jacket as he swirls his fingers inside me, and his thumb rubs deliberate circles over my clit.

“Reed...”

“I know, Angel. Let it go.”

I shudder and my knees give way as I come on his fingers. His free arm grips me around the waist as he holds me up, his lips lingering over mine, breathing in every gasp I cry out as my body clenches and sucks him in greedily. His other arm continues working me, a low growl in his throat as I come undone for him.

“You’re so beautiful.” His lips are on mine, and he kisses the last of my orgasm out of me as I return to earth slowly. My fingers, my toes, my ears... everywhere tingling.

“Now all I’m going to be able to think of at work today is getting home to you tonight,” he whispers against my lips as he places my panties back in position and smooths my dress down over my thighs.

He kisses me again before he turns to leave. “I miss you already.”

I watch him go, then sink back against the counter as the door closes, running a hand around the back of my neck. The sloth mug catches the corner of my eye from its place in the sink, and I wash it out and put it back inside the cupboard. At the front.



It’s a bright day and the sun is out in force, along with a lot of people with very strong views on politics, it would seem, judging from the roasting the members of the public are giving the four men on the makeshift stage. They are the four main party candidates running for mayor. Reed, who’s Independent; Harry, who’s Democrat; Graham, who’s Republican; and another man I recognize from the president’s hotel trip who I think is Conservative. I find it hard to keep up. I’ve never learned so much about New York Office since agreeing to this thing with Reed.

I look up at him on stage. He’s a vision of authoritative calm as he listens to Harry talk about care for the elderly and pre-natal maternity care availability for low-income parents. I listen as the topic moves on to education and Graham answers a question about his views on rumored budget cuts.

“It suits him up there, doesn’t it? Being in charge.”

I turn to the voice next to me, struggling to hide my annoyance as Bea comes to stand next to me, dressed all in black. The color suits her and her

personality.

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on him being in charge. He’s got stiff competition,” I say as I turn my eyes back to the stage at Graham, who is still speaking.

Bea laughs lightly. “I’m not talking about Graham. I mean Reed.”

I turn to face her as she says his name. Just hearing it leave her lips makes my mouth taste sour.

“Oh, come on. Aren’t I allowed to state the obvious? Reed always was good at being in charge. Although, I’m sure you know that.” She gives me a calculated smile as her eyes assess me.

“For such a large area of open park space, you sure did have to find a close spot to stand.” I assess her back, which only causes her to smile.

“The view’s nicer from this angle. Brings back memories.” She casts her eyes over to the stage.

I follow her gaze. We are perfectly lined up to see Reed’s handsome profile. He smiles at someone in the audience as he answers a question. His soft brown waves catch the sun, and he smiles, showing off his dimples. Cute little ones that are ridiculously sexy when he teams them with his reading glasses.

“Such *fun* memories,” Bea hums to herself.

“Why are you still talking?” I keep my eyes on the stage, trying to ignore her and put some space between us, but the crowd has grown around us and there’s nowhere to move.

“I can see why he’s with you. He has a thing for blondes,” she says, keeping her eyes on him, drinking him in with a smile on her face as though she’s imagining what they used to do together.

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat. I'm not a jealous person. But the thought of Reed being with her, even if it was years ago, makes me sick to my stomach. Thinking of him with her, kissing her, telling her she's beautiful, sharing a bed with her, having sex with her.

"They never last, though. It's one after the other. A never-ending revolving door that leads to that man's bed."

I bite my cheek to stop myself from hurling something impulsive at her. She's trying to get a rise out of me. She wants to sow doubt into my mind, and I have no idea why. Maybe it's pure old-fashioned jealousy at seeing your gorgeous ex with someone else. Your gorgeous ex who is a front runner in a campaign to become a very influential man in New York. A role that provides exclusive serviced residences and a hefty salary package and privileges. Reed said Bea has always been a social climber.

I join in the applause that breaks out in approval of Reed's answer to a question. I've no idea what was said, and I wish I could snap my fingers and make Bea disappear so I could pay better attention. Either that or throw her in a bush of poison ivy. Anything to get her the hell away from me.

"He's really something, isn't he?" She leans closer to me as her eyes stay fixed on Reed. Her musky perfume claws at my throat, and I cough.

Reed looks over in our direction and locks eyes with me. His eyes soften at the corners, and a small smile spreads over his lips. Then he notices Bea, and his face closes off, darkening as quickly as a cloud passing in front of the sun.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Bea whispers.

"Graham's looking for you," I say, which causes her to plaster a fake smile on her face and give him a small wave.

My eyes stay on Reed. His jaw is tense. He looks like he's only just managing not to fly off his chair and storm through the crowd toward us.

“Does he always fuck from behind? Barely kiss you?”

My eyes widen, but I don't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing, so I keep them firmly trained in Reed's direction.

“I have no idea what you're talk—”

“How about using your name in bed? Or letting you go on top.” Bea lets out a small huff of victory as I stiffen next to her. “Reed's got issues that only people who've known him a long time will understand. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

“What do you even want?” I snap, tearing my eyes away from Reed's and to the empty space beside me. I look through the crowd, but Bea is already making her way over to Graham as he exits the stage now that the session is over.

What the hell does she mean, issues? Reed kisses me all the time, and we have had sex in all sorts of positions. He loves being on top of me. It's not like he has a weird eye contact thing. He gets as close as he possibly can to me. And the way he talks is so arousing and...

Angel.

Has he ever called me Harley during sex? I can't be sure, but I don't think he has. But he calls me Harley or Harls all the time during the day when he's cuddling me and kissing me. He's attentive and thoughtful. He brought me a latte to work again yesterday morning after the sloth mug incident. And he even bought one of those re-usable eco-friendly cups to put it in from the coffee place. He told me I could enjoy it without the worry of any sloths being harmed from otherwise having to throw it away.

He's thoughtful, and he's funny, and he's sweet with me.

He's Reed.

Bea doesn't know what the hell she's talking about.

"Hey, Mrs. Walker." Arms encircle my waist from behind and I turn inside them and gaze up at him, hugging him back.

Reed pulls me close to him and kisses me in a way that attracts a whistle and the bleep of a camera. We glance to the side as a member of the press gives us a wave. "Another one for tomorrow's front page?"

Reed smirks and then plants his lips over mine again. My stomach flutters as he cups my face between his hands and lets out a soft groan, only loud enough for me to hear.

"Show pony." I tut when he pulls back.

He smiles. "Stallion, Angel."

I laugh as he drops his hand to my lower back and leads me toward where Stuart is waiting.

"What did Bea want?"

"To be Bea." I shrug.

His voice drops, and there's an unmistakable edge to it. "What did she say to you, Harley?"

"Just stuff about the past. Stupid stuff that meant nothing."

"Harley?" There's an undercurrent of carefully contained fury to his tone. A frisson of unease runs through me as I think about what Bea said.

"She was trying to make me anxious about us, that's all. Saying it won't last and insinuating I was just another blonde in a long line of flings. I don't even know what she thinks she has to gain from saying things like that."

"Nothing," Reed states flatly. "She has nothing to gain."

"I've never understood women who aren't girl's girls, you know? Ones who lie and cheat to get what they want. Step on other women to get

ahead.”

“Women can be sharks, Harley. It’s not just men.” Reed flexes his hand against my back and dips his nose into my hair. “Fuck, I’m going to miss you this afternoon. Will you wait for me naked on the bed when I come home? Get yourself warmed up with your vibrator? Actually, don’t. Do not dare touch yourself until I get there... unless you’re going to film it for me.”

I swat him on the chest, and he laughs quietly, his mood from mentioning Bea lifting.

“Please take him, Stuart. I can’t stand him anymore, he’s all yours,” I announce with a grin as Stuart looks between the two of us with a knowing smirk on his face.

“You told him about us?” I round my eyes on Reed.

“Nope. But you just did.” Stuart laughs as I drop my mouth open in mock outrage. “Come on. I could see that one a mile off. It’s media gold, though.” He lifts his chin to the press, who are packing up. “They love it. You two are the royal couple of the New York political circuit. Just don’t go making any sex tapes. Media management of those is not in my job description.”

Reed smiles at the pout on my face, pulling me to him and pressing another kiss on my lips.

“See you later, Mrs. Walker. Remember where I want you when I get home.”



I shuffle around on the bed trying to get comfortable, then click record on my phone. I only need it for a few seconds for what I have in mind. I turn

my phone back and press play. *Perfect!* Reed is going to go nuts.

“Video yourself with your vibrator.”

I laugh as I open the editing software. I mean, I could do that. God knows he’s seen me from every angle and had his fingers and tongue *everywhere* in my body now. I bite my lip as arousal warms my core from the memories. He just hasn’t put *that* there yet. But I know he wants to. And I’m curious to try it. Everything sexual with Reed is like an awakening for my body. He does things to me I’ve never considered before, and he makes me feel things in places I didn’t even know existed. But sometimes it’s nice to be the one giving the surprise, even if it’s not in the way he expects.

I finish editing the video and watch it back. I’ve made a gif of me naked, his guitar propped up between my legs. It moves to one side just enough that you’re about to see something, before the gif starts over and it pops back into place, covering me. I type out a message and attach the gif.

When was the last time you played with me?

I click send and watch as it’s delivered. My phone rings in my hand immediately, and I smile as I answer it.

“Prepare to be strummed to within an inch of your life,” Reed growls.

“Really?” I bite back a grin.

“Angel, I’m getting in the elevator now. Get your legs open wide for me because I’m coming straight in.”

I jump up from the bed, my heart racing as I put the second part of my plan into action. I didn’t expect him to be home early. I had it all planned out. He was supposed to spend at least another hour getting all worked up as I text him dirty messages. I wanted him so worked up that he would barely notice what I’m planning to wear.

I don’t even know what possessed me to do it. It’s just a joke really.

I run into my room and open my drawer, pulling out my pajamas with rainbow caticorns all over them. Reed is going to freak. Maybe he'll spank me for teasing him. Get me to call him my special name for him. It's weird, and completely unlike how I've been with boyfriends in the past. But what started as a joke of me calling him Daddy has morphed into something else. He doesn't do it all the time. Just every now and again. But I can't get enough. It's like bargain hunters racing to a sale sign on Black Friday. Every aroused feeling and reaction my body can possibly create floods to my pussy when he says it. His voice is just so deep and commanding. It could make anything sound sinful. But that word... it's filthy and naughty... and I love it.

I throw the pajamas on and pull my hair into a messy ponytail and then I park myself on the sofa with the TV on.

And wait.

Less than a minute later, the front door crashes open and I hear Reed dump his phone down on the hall table and kick his shoes off. He strides into the living area, throwing his jacket off onto the back of the sofa, yanking his tie loose at the same time.

He's on a mission.

I stare at the curve of his tight ass in his suit pants as he stalks in the direction of the bedrooms. Then I clear my throat quietly and his eyes snap to mine as he freezes. They drop over my outfit and back to my face.

He pulls the rest of his red tie loose, wrapping it around his hand as he walks over to me. He doesn't say anything as he sits on the sofa next to me and leans back into the cushions, dropping the coiled tie to one side.

I chance a look over at him. He's staring at me, his eyes dark, but his expression unreadable. I expected some sort of reaction. Not this.

I swallow as I gaze up at him. Maybe I read it wrong, and he's really pissed. I mean, I thought he might be, but in a joking way, after he ripped the pajamas off me or something. That's what I was expecting. Him to maybe laugh and tear them off me, throw a slap on my ass, maybe grab my hair a bit harder when he fucked me after.

Maybe I don't know Reed as well as I think I do.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what it is you plan on doing while wearing those, Angel." His eyes have darkened even more as he stretches his arms across the back of the sofa. His shirt is unbuttoned at the neck, and he's rolled his sleeves up so his veiny forearms are on display.

"I was planning on you taking them off."

He shakes his head at me. "No."

"No?"

"You wore them for a reason. Maybe it was to tease me. But now? Now you keep them on."

I wrinkle up my nose as I look down at them. They are the baggiest, most unsexy thing I could possibly wear.

"You keep them on," Reed grits out as he glares at me.

I open my mouth to protest, but something in his eyes tells me to close it again.

"Make me like them," he grunts.

"Pardon?"

"Make me like them." He smiles at me coolly. "Get on your knees on the floor and make me fall in fucking love with them. Make every time I see them from now on spark one horny as fuck memory that I can't forget."

Goosebumps scatter up my spine as I do as he says and slide to the floor and onto my knees. I look up at him and he glances down at me and then

leans further back as his eyes fall on the news on the TV screen.

“Good girl. Now suck my cock.”



Chapter Sixteen



Reed

“TURN THE TV OFF, then,” Harley huffs between my legs.

I look at her, my dick already rock hard from seeing her down there, looking up at me through narrowed eyes. The light blue of them sparkles dangerously. She’s got spunk; I’ll give her that. She’s sweet and cute and makes me want to wrap her up in my arms. But I know she can hold her own just fine. She only lets me do what she wants me to do to her, even if she does act as though it’s all me in control. And it suits me fine that she likes a bit of filth. I’m hardly going to fucking complain. But the truth is, she has all the power. She just doesn’t realize it.

If her heart was a cage, I would happily lock myself inside and lose the key.

I tut. “You wanted to play with me, Angel. But I’m the one who makes the rules.”

She glares at me, her eyes darting to the weather report on the screen and back to me. She’s so cute when she’s angry. I know she’s only fucking around with me putting those pajamas on when I told her to be naked and

ready for me. But she underestimates how much I like to play games with her, too.

I hold back my groan as she unfastens my belt and unzips my pants, dragging them and my boxers down.

“I might slip and bite it off,” she murmurs.

I hold back my laugh and clear my throat. “You like the way your Daddy fucks you too much to do that.”

She grumbles out a huff of annoyance and then her lips are on me, wrapping around my head in one hot, wet, perfect motion.

I suck a breath in through my teeth and release it, letting my chest relax slowly as I part my legs wider and tilt my head back, savoring the way my girl sucks me. Fuck, she’s incredible. Her perfect mouth and those pretty pink lips are what fueled my fantasies for months.

I’ve wanted her for so long. Waited for her.

“Do you like that, Daddy?” She smirks around my cock, and I lift the remote and flick the TV off.

“You’ve gotten my attention, Angel. Now, what are you going to do with it?”

She keeps her eyes on mine as she sucks the full length of me down her throat and back out. My cock shines with her saliva as she dips her head and runs her tongue over my balls. The sensation causes my cock to twitch, and her eyes glitter up at me.

“God.” I squeeze my eyes shut as precum leaks from the end of my dick, dripping onto my stomach.

Harley rises up and sticks her tongue out, lapping it up from my abs in one swift swipe. Then she wraps the base of my cock in one hand and cups the other around my full, aching balls. I’m unable to tear my eyes away

from her mouth as she parts her lips, wetting them with her tongue and then taking me in her mouth again.

It's like every nerve ending in the lower half of my body comes alive at once and I hiss out a deep 'fuck' as she sucks me, building a rhythm.

"Fuck yeah," I growl, sinking one hand into her hair and guiding her mouth up and down my cock. It's slick with a mix of precum and saliva as she moans and hums around me. The vibrations pass from her lips into me, and my balls pull up toward my body.

"You suck my cock so well." I place my other hand in her hair and watch the blonde strands fill the gaps between my fingers as I apply more pressure to her head, encouraging her to increase her pace.

She sucks harder, swirling her tongue around me at the same time. Heat pools in my balls as my ass clenches against the sofa.

"Fuck, Angel. I'm going to come in that perfect mouth."

She lets out a small whimper, and it's the final push I need. I keep my hands in her hair as I explode, shooting a steady stream of hot cum out, which she swallows down with a moan.

"There's more. You're too fucking good, Angel, there's more," I pant as my balls draw toward my body again and continue to send liquid fire racing up my dick to her waiting mouth. She moans louder, sucking it all down, swallowing every drop. The movement in her throat sends a shudder from the tip of my cock all the way into my chest, and I sag back into the sofa as the final surge of my release ends and my body relaxes.

I inhale slow, deep breaths as I pull her up and into my arms. She wraps a leg on either side of me to straddle me, but I flip her over and deposit her back on the sofa instead, my lips finding hers and kissing my taste from hers.

“The pajamas stay.” I kiss her again. “They’re my favorite fucking item of clothing you own,” I groan into her mouth, and she giggles underneath me.



“Reed—” Harley stops talking abruptly as she comes into the bathroom and sees me with my hand on my hardening cock in the shower. “Again? You’re going to have to buy me more, you know. That stuff’s from The Songbird spa, and it isn’t cheap.”

I smirk at her as she tries to look unimpressed with her arms folded over her chest. I hold her eyes and squirt more of her coconut shampoo into my palm. Then I slide my soaped-up hand along the length of my dick and back down again, washing it. I lean one hand on the shower wall and watch her reaction as I move to my balls and soap them up as well.

“Order a crate. I’ll pay.”

The corners of her lips twitch, and her eyes sparkle.

“It’s shampoo, you know. Not body wash.”

“I like smelling you on me. Especially here.” I wink at her as I tug on my dick again. It’s now fully erect and raring to go, despite being inside her only twenty minutes ago when I woke her up in my favorite way. I’ve deduced that every morning that I wake Harley up with my tongue buried inside her, and follow it up with a deep, leisurely fucking, I have the best day.

The. Best. Day.

For example, yesterday I got named as the official leader in early poll predictions. The day before, Riley called me and told me she won the case

in court that she's been preparing for, for over a year, and the day before that, the guy who makes Harley's lattes I like to get for her gave me a complimentary bagel.

Shit does not get better than this.

Basically, she's my good luck charm, my talisman, my lucky clover.

And right now, she's looking at me through the steamed-up shower screen when she should be in here with me.

Her eyes widen as she seems to realize what's coming next. But it's too late. In one swift move, I open the shower door, grab her around the waist and pull her inside with me, pressing her back against the tiles as I dip my mouth to hers and kiss her before she even has a chance to say a word.

"You're crazy," she cries. "I'm still dressed."

I grin and rub the pad of my thumb over the peak her nipple has created underneath her soaking pajama top. "We can sort that." I drag the top up over her head and let it fall to the shower floor with a splat. "Come on, Angel. It's Saturday. We don't have to be anywhere today. Let me have my fun and I'll make you pancakes after."

"Hmm." She tilts her head in thought.

"I make amazing pancakes." I reach around and squeeze her ass cheeks with both hands, groaning as her wet shorts rub against my dick. "I'll even play some motivational power tracks Stuart tries to get me to listen to before interviews to Bruce and Beryl."

She snorts out a laugh, dropping her forehead onto my chest.

"Can I take that snort as an agreement for my very generous offer?"

She bites her bottom lip. Her eyes are bright as she looks up at me and wraps her arms around my neck, pushing her naked breasts against my chest. "They better be good pancakes."



“What’s that supposed to be?” Harley asks forty minutes later as I place a plate down in front of her at the breakfast bar.

“Pancakes.” I take a seat on the stool next to her.

“I don’t get it. Is it supposed to be that shape? It looks like a T.” She frowns at my creation.

I smirk and twist her plate one hundred and thirty-five degrees. “There. That’s probably more accurate.”

“You made me dick pancakes.” She looks at me and shakes her head slowly. “You have an IQ of what, one-fifty?”

“One-fifty-six,” I interject.

“And you made me dick-shaped pancakes.” She looks back at her plate. “God help New York.”

“Wait until you taste them.” I pile some on my fork and watch her sideways as she tries to hide the smile that’s growing on her face. “If I were you, I’d start at the tip and work my way down to the balls.”

“You’ve eaten enough dick to know the best technique, then?” She glances at me with what’s turned into a smirk.

“Nope.” I chew my forkful and swallow. “But I’ve seen you do it enough times to know that’s how you like it.”

“Reed Walker,” she cries, slapping her hand over her mouth and then pushing my shoulder as her eyes widen.

I love it when the sweet, innocent Harley reacts like this. But I know all too well the other side of her, the one who mewled out her orgasm on my cock while I fingered her ass earlier, is still in there as well.

One wouldn't exist without the other, and I'm addicted to her just the way she is.

I grab her hand before it leaves my chest and kiss the inside of her wrist. "Eat up, Angel. You need your energy for what I plan to do with you all weekend."

She takes her hand back and uses her fork to sever the head of her pancake dick clean off. She looks to check if I noticed and then smiles to herself as she eats.

"This week's going to be hectic now that the election's almost here. You know what'll keep me going?"

"Stuart with his foot up your ass?" She laughs.

"Smartass."

"What then?" Harley moans softly as she chews her pancake.

I watch her lips as she licks them. "The thought of going to the movies with you to watch that new movie with the talking dog."

She snaps her eyes to mine. "You want to watch that?" She's practically glowing with undisguised joy.

No, Harls. I want to watch you watch it. Watch your face illuminate like it's doing now.

Her face clouds over and her shoulders droop. "Uh, I forgot. I planned to go and see my family next weekend. It's my little sister, Rose's birthday. She's turning twenty-five. She moved back in with Mom and Dad after she broke up with her boyfriend."

"That's okay. We can go another time. I bet they can't wait to see you." Harley's brow creases and she looks down, picking at her food. "Harls?"

"Oh. Yeah, they're glad I can make it."

I look at the anguished expression on her face and unease coils in the pit of my stomach. Something isn't right.

“Why don't I come with you?”

“Really?” She looks at me in surprise, her shoulders relaxing as I place my hand on her thigh and squeeze it.

“Yes. Is that okay, Mrs. Walker?”

She places her hand on top of mine, interlocking our fingers. “Yes, it's okay. Just don't ask me to make you dick pancakes for breakfast.”

“Wouldn't dream of it.”

I wait until she takes another mouthful.

“I'll ask your mom.”



Chapter Seventeen



Harley

“IT SERVES YOU RIGHT for using my shampoo. You’ve probably had an allergic reaction to it or something. Will you keep still?” I huff at Reed, who’s fidgeting and scratching at the back of his head.

“It’s completely organic. What’s there to be allergic to? Besides, I use it to jerk off with, not wash my hair.”

He grunts as I smack him around the shoulder.

“Just let me look. Then I can ask Maria what she suggests. She makes all her own home remedies for things; she’ll know what to do.”

I run my fingers through Reed’s hair again as he sits on the sofa in front of me.

“Fuck, Harls, that feels good. Do it again, harder.”

“Um, Reed? I think I’m going to go see if Maria’s home.”

“What? No. It’ll be fine. Just give it another scratch, Angel, and then let me take you to bed. I’ve had a bitch of a busy day and just want to get naked with you.”

“You have visitors.”

“Yeah, tons. All at the office. All fucking day long.”

“No, Reed.” I search again to confirm my suspicions. “I mean, *you* have visitors.”

He’s silent, so I add, “You know, cooties, lice, nits, crawlers, whatever you want to call them. You have them. In your hair.”

His shoulders stiffen in his immaculately starched work shirt he’s still got on after coming in the door ten minutes ago.

“I’m a grown man, Harls. I do not have cooties.”

I fight to hold in my giggle at how sulky he sounds. I bet if I look at his face, he even has his bottom lip poked out.

“I’m well aware what a *big boy* you are, Reed. But I am telling you. You have them. I can see them walking around and—”

“Stop. That’s... Eww.” He scratches his head again and then inspects his hand. “What the fuck? How... Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He scratches again with both hands and lets out a long, low groan.

“I don’t know. We all had them when we were at school. It’s usually kids who spread them. Don’t tell me you never got them?”

“I didn’t,” Reed grumbles.

“Maybe they couldn’t afford the tuition fees at the snooty boys’ school you and Griffin went to.” I laugh as he looks at me darkly.

“Book Page.” He sighs.

“You think Paige gave them to you?”

“Probably. Stuart said after we went for dinner with them the other week that her mom had found some.” Reed drops his head into his hands and presses his finger and thumb into his eyes. My heart squeezes at the sight of him. He’s exhausted. He’s worked really hard this week. I’ve already been in bed some nights when he’s finally gotten in. The election is a little over a week away, so things have been even busier than usual.

“I’ll run up to Maria and Griffin’s and we’ll sort you out. Don’t worry, Daddy, I’ve got you,” I whisper in his ear, earning myself a small smile from him. I plant a soft kiss on his cheek and then rush upstairs.

Ten minutes later, I’m back down, sitting on the sofa with a very quiet, somber Reed sitting on the floor between my legs with a towel around his shoulders.

“This stuff smells delicious.” I sniff the home remedy Maria gave me as I pour a little of the oil between my hands and rub it into Reed’s hair. He leans back toward me with a soft moan as I massage it into his head. He’s been so quiet this evening and I’m hoping it’s just because he’s tired and there’s nothing wrong.

“This won’t take long. I just need to rub it all in and wait fifteen minutes. The oil will suffocate them, and I can comb the dead ones out. In fact, I will just comb as soon as the oil’s all in. I can take my time, so I don’t miss anywhere.”

I run my hands through Reed’s hair again and smile as he leans into my touch. This feels weirdly intimate. I mean, sure, we have wild and dirty sex every day, but he’s always the one leading it, the one in control, the one on top, literally, or behind or wherever. But never below. Reed never lets me ride him. Never even lets me straddle him when he’s sitting up. Sex with him is incredible, but he always controls the pace, whether it’s hard and fast, or slow and deep. It’s always him. Never me.

I try and push Bea’s words to the back of my mind as they threaten to come and cause me unnecessary paranoia. She insinuated Reed doesn’t kiss, only likes sex from behind, which is just not true. He kisses me all the time. And he loves being on top of me and holding my gaze as he fucks me slowly. It’s not like he has an issue with intimacy, because he clearly

doesn't. Sickness creeps into my stomach and sits there like a weight, pulling me down inside as I recall what else she said about him using my name and me going on top. That much is true. He never calls me Harley, or Harls, when we have sex. I never noticed before, but after the day in the park, I realized Bea is right. And the going on top thing... she's right about that, too.

"That feels nice." Reed sighs as my fingers massage his scalp.

I try to shut all thoughts of Bea out and concentrate on what I'm doing as I rub the oil into his hair.

"You'll probably have to wash your hair a couple of times to get the oil out, and we should probably treat me as well. They like to transfer. And don't go believing that nonsense about them only liking dirty hair, or clean hair, or whatever the rumor is, because I can tell you, me and my brother and sister all had them as kids and Mom used to make us wash our hair every other day. I think that's a lot for a kid at that age. I'm sure they don't need to wash it that often, it doesn't get oily. Do you know how often Paige washes hers?"

I pause and lean around so I can see Reed's profile. He's chuckling. His dark brown brows pulled together as his eyes crease up.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't think you need to treat yourself, Harls. They'll have jumped off your head so they can get some peace—Ow!"

I tug on a few strands of his hair and then pick up the fine-toothed comb Maria lent me. "Oh, did something hurt? It must have been a cootie biting you, trying to get through your thick skull."

Reed's shoulders shake as he hooks his arms around the back of my calves and strokes his hands up and down my legs. I can hear the

amusement dancing in his tone as he talks. “Harley?”

“What?” I mutter as I comb.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I sigh.

“I mean it.” He squeezes my legs with his large hands. “It should be me taking care of you.”

“I’m not taking care of you. I’m doing it for the cooties.” I sniff. “They’ve had enough of you as well. We are the worst couple for cooties. They hate us. Me for talking. You for being annoying and unfairly handsome. They’ll never return. They’ll put up a sign warning all future cooties to proceed at their own risk.”

Reed laughs as his fingers knead into my calf muscles and he massages them before letting out a deep groan. “Fifteen minutes is a fucking long time.”

“It’s been five already.” I keep combing as I sigh in ecstasy at the way his skilled fingers are working me. “You’re impatient.”

“When it comes to you, I am. I need you, Harls. I need to be in our bed with you. I needed it hours ago.”

I recognize the extra weariness creeping into his voice tonight. It’s the same as every night this week so far. And each of those nights he’s fucked me deliciously slowly, spooning me from behind. He must be exhausted with everything at work.

“Won’t be long,” I whisper.

He turns around and gifts me with the most beautiful smile. His smoky quartz eyes hold mine, and I lean down and kiss him, ignoring the fact he’s covered in oil that will go all over my t-shirt. I kiss him and kiss him and kiss him.

When I open my eyes, he's looking at me in a way that makes hidden parts of me fizz and flutter and explode into showers of warm stars. I oil my hair quickly, and then we go to the bathroom and wash in silence. I wash Reed's hair and he washes mine. We don't seem to need more words tonight. We are both content to just smile at one another. As I rinse the shampoo suds from my hair, Reed strokes me, keeping his eyes glued to mine the entire time. He strokes my face, my neck, my breasts, my stomach. Featherlight touches everywhere, except between my legs, where I so desperately ache for him.

After we get into bed, I expect Reed to want the tired, slow spoon sex, but instead he pulls me to him as we lie facing one another and wraps one of my legs around his waist. Then he puts a condom on and slowly sinks inside my body with his eyes on mine.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs as he kisses my cheeks first, then my eyelids, then my nose, and finally my lips. "You're so beautiful, Harley."



"Is Reed all set for the election next week?"

"Yeah, he is." I smile at Suze across Maria's kitchen island as she pops another chip in her mouth.

We've decided to have a girls' night in. Reed and Griffin are out at a bar, so we've taken over Maria and Griffin's penthouse. It looks like an explosion in the snack aisle at the grocery store. Bowls of chips are scattered about, along with various dips, hot baked doughballs, vegetable sticks, and spring rolls. And two empty bottles of wine so far.

“He seems calm about it. Tired, but calm,” I say, thinking about how worn out he’s looked this week. But despite it, the attention he’s giving me has only increased. It’s like something shifted between us since the cooties were evicted. He would always kiss me goodbye before work in the morning. But now he’s taking twice as long to do it, holding my head in his hands, stroking my face. We often end up having sex against the wall in the hallway minutes before we both have to leave. Him in his suit, me with my panties pushed to one side and my lips on his as we pant out our pleasure together and he tells me how much he’s going to miss me. Then he kisses me in the elevator if we’re alone, before holding my hand until the very last moment on the sidewalk where we have to part ways.

Reed Walker is firmly embedding himself deeper in my heart each day.

“He should be. I’m sure he’s going to win,” Maria says, refilling Suze’s empty wineglass.

“I hope so. He deserves it. He’s worked really hard, and he’s passionate about it.”

“He’s passionate about you,” Suze pipes up, taking a large sip of her wine.

I drop my head with a smile. “He’s... he’s pretty great.”

“I knew it. I told you, Maria, I’m going to need two wedding outfits at this rate. One for you and Griffin, and one for Harley and Reed.”

I shake my head and hold my hands up. “Whoa, Suze. That is totally jumping the gun. I’ve no idea what’s going to happen after the election, let alone years down the line.”

Reed hasn’t mentioned anything post-election. I guess he’s too busy to even consider it. But I know if he wins that he’ll be given Gracie Mansion, the mayor’s official residence to live in for the length of his term. And I

imagine he might have his own personal security. Or will he? I have no idea how these things work.

“What are you going to do when he stops paying you?” Suze crunches down a chip, the sound disguising the rumble of dread I swear I just heard roll in the pit of my stomach.

I haven’t thought about what happens when this all ends. I’m still getting four thousand dollars per month at the moment. Money which I need. But after the election, our fake dating arrangement, the money—which feels weird accepting now with how things are between us—it all stops.

“Um.” I chew on my bottom lip and Maria places her hand over mine on the counter.

“You don’t need to worry about that, Harley. I’m sure we can work something out. Griff—”

“No,” I cut in, more forcefully than I intend. “No,” I repeat softly. “Griffin does a lot for me already. All that time off I needed when it happened, and then my last pay rise. He’s a great boss. I would never expect more from him. I’ll... I’ll figure something out.” My shoulders slump as a million options run through my head. None of which are viable. Reed won’t want me to go back to honey-trapping, not that I’d want to. That is if Reed and I are still together. “I haven’t told Reed what I need it for yet. But we’re visiting my family for the weekend, and he’s coming with me. So I guess he’s about to find out.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Is it?” I look at Suze. “It’s good that he’s about to see how messed up things are?”

“All families are messed up.” This time, it’s Maria I look at, who gives me a comforting nod.

Guilt weighs heavily in my stomach as I look into her eyes. She's had it worse than me. Her parents, her dad... they were hardly model examples of strong family values. But my parents? They are. Or at least, were before the incident. We were the sweetly sickening family who always got along, always helped out the neighbors, were always laughing and joking. We looked perfect to the outside world. And we were. *Before*. Now we're a shell of what we used to be, and I don't see a way back. Ever.

"Yeah. I suppose they are." My thoughts flit to Reed and what Riley went through. How his family moved them all to California afterward.

No one passes through life without collecting scars along the way. Some are just harder to hide.

"Are you going to sleep in the guest house when you go home?" Suze chimes in, raising a brow at me with a smirk. "Or are you going to have to keep the noise down in the main house?"

I shake my head with a laugh. She always knows how to lighten the mood. Suze has been sex obsessed ever since her and her ex, Curt, divorced. It's like she's had a new lease of life. She's always going on dates, some funny, a few too many disastrous, and some with the kind of wild, experimental sex stories I didn't expect to hear first thing on Sunday mornings when she likes to call me and share the previous night's antics. Thankfully for me, she hasn't had any really weird ones for a while. The last one was when the guy, Hank, liked his cat to watch. He'd talk to Mr. Sunshine, as the cat was called, during sex. Suze said she gave up on any ideas of a serious dating future together when all Hank did was look at Mr. Sunshine mid-thrust, telling him not to be jealous that he was enjoying another pussy. She did give Hank a second chance, which I couldn't believe at the time because apparently, he had an unusually curved dick that rubbed

in all the right places—Suze’s words, not mine. But the final straw was when he jumped off Suze when she was just about to come and ran over to help Mr. Sunshine hack up a furball on the carpet.

All great reasons, along with the men I met honey trapping, to be single.

Until Reed.

“We’ll probably be in the guest house. They’ve made some changes inside the main house, so we couldn’t stay there now.”

“Well, that will be nice for you and Reed. Like Suze said, it will be more private for you both,” Maria says.

I love how different my friends are. Suze will just come out with what’s on her mind, whereas Maria is all grace and elegance. The two of them together means I always get the best advice. Direct and to the point, no holds barred, as well as considered and diplomatic.

“Actually, can I ask you both your opinions on something?” I reach out and take a chip, scooping a giant lump of guacamole onto it.

They both look at me, waiting. There’s no need for them to answer. We all know that we can discuss anything together.

“It’s something Bea said that’s been bothering me.” I chomp the chip down, barely tasting it. “She said Reed has issues that only a person who’s known him a long time will understand.”

Maria nods in understanding. She and I both worked out about Riley being assaulted in the past. But I know that’s not what Bea was referring to. She was talking about Reed and what he does, or doesn’t do, when it comes to sex.

“She asked if he kisses me and uses my name during sex, and well... he’s always kissed me a lot, like constantly. I just thought she was making shit

up, you know? Trying to rile me for whatever reason. But then I thought about it, and I realized he never used to use my name during sex.”

“Used to?” Suze asks.

“Yeah. He’s only said it once, the other night.”

I cast my mind back to cootie night. It seems so long ago now, given the number of times we’ve had sex since, and he hasn’t said it. But that night, he did. I know I didn’t imagine it. He sank inside me and held my gaze, and he said it with such an emotional tinge to his voice that I can still hear it now. “*You’re so beautiful, Harley.*” I swear I felt so close to him that night. But since then, although he’s been extremely attentive and showered me with kisses and gifted me with intense orgasms while his body is connected deeply with mine, he hasn’t said it again. Not once.

“And then she said, does he ever let you go on top? And I don’t know... it bothered me. Because she’s right. He never does. I’ve tried, and he moves me.”

“Maybe he’s just overcome in the throes of passion and just wants to be the one controlling it. Can’t help himself but fling you around and fuck you ten ways until Sunday. It’s probably a compliment. Sex with him must be —”

“Incredible,” I finish for Suze, heat blossoming in my cheeks. “*Really* incredible.”

“Maybe it was just a one-off,” Maria suggests. “He probably doesn’t realize he did it. Why don’t you try telling him it would turn you on to set the pace?”

“Tell him you want to ride him like a prize bull at rodeo,” Suze practically shouts as the front door opens.

We turn to it guiltily as Griffin steps into the apartment.

“I heard nothing,” he says as he walks over and kisses Maria on the cheek, before saying hello to me and Suze.

We catch each other’s eyes and bite back our laughs as he wisely excuses himself and disappears off toward their bedroom.

“How’s he feeling about the impending fatherhood?” I ask Maria.

“Um, pass.” Maria laughs, looking at the egg incubator sitting further along the kitchen counter.

“What are you going to do with it when it hatches?” Suze questions.

“I’m not sure. I’ve been looking for a sanctuary. But because he’s a pigeon, no one is interested.”

“Could you put him in the nesting box? Maybe one of the pigeons will adopt him as their own and take care of him?” I suggest.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure whether they can smell us on him and then not accept him. I’m researching it at the moment and calling around for advice. It’ll all work out.”

I smile at Maria’s calm confidence. She’s never easily fazed.

“Oh God,” Suze whines. “It’s late. I have to get back for the sitter. As always, ladies, it was lovely.” She jumps up and begins tidying up bowls and glasses, but Maria shoos her away.

We say goodnight and I go down to the street with Suze and see her into a cab before heading back up in the elevator. She told me again on the way down that I should just pounce on Reed, pin him down and have my way with him because he would probably love relinquishing control for once.

By the time I walk through our apartment door, I’m more determined to set my unease over Bea’s words to rest once and for all. There’s nothing Reed isn’t telling me. Maybe he couldn’t get close to lovers in the past and didn’t kiss them or use their name, and preferred to fuck from behind, like

she implied. But I know that isn't true anymore. He's passionate, and he's present when we have sex. He's not avoiding eye contact with me, or only fucking me hard. Reed kisses. Reed does gentle. Reed does slow.

A soft melody is drifting through into the hallway as I take my shoes off and close the front door behind me. I recognize the song, "She's the one." I didn't realize Reed knew it. It's an old one, but I've loved it ever since we went on a family holiday to London as kids and it played on the radio the entire trip.

I walk into the living room and lean against the doorframe, watching him. He's sitting on the sofa in just his cotton pajama pants and his reading glasses, guitar across his lap as he plays the chords and sings the words softly.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest; its rhythmic beat pulsing in my ears, perfectly matching the tempo of the music. Reed's eyes are closed and he's in his own world. His deep voice rolling out each word with such emotion that my eyes prick with tears, and a lump lodges itself in my throat.

Everyday Reed Walker is beautiful.

But like this? He's *devastating*.

As if he can hear me thinking about him, his smoky eyes open and rise to meet mine as he sings the last note. Then he smiles at me and places the guitar down, propping it against the sofa.

"Don't stop," I beg.

He stands, opening out his arms, and I run straight into them, relishing their warm strength as they wrap around me. I dream of staying like this forever, with his softly sung words in my ears and his protective arms holding my heart against his.

“You were playing. You were *singing*.” I beam up at him and he looks embarrassed, dropping his eyes to the floor with a shy smile.

“It’s been a long time. I’m pretty rusty.”

“You were perfect.” I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his lips down onto mine. “Completely dreamy. You could sing me into your bed, no problem at all with a voice like that.”

He grins against my lips. “Or I could entice you there with the promise of what else my mouth can do.” He grabs my ass in both hands and squeezes, pulling me tighter to the erection, straining against the fabric of his pants as he sucks on my bottom lip.

“My memory’s hazy. I don’t recall what your mouth does exactly.” The words have barely left my lips before Reed swoops down and kisses them away until I’m whimpering into his mouth. “Oh,” I whisper as he pulls back, leaving his lips lingering over mine as my body hums with electricity. “Now I remember.” I smile softly and run my fingers over his jaw.

“I’ve missed you today, Angel. God, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” I gasp as he slides a hand under my dress and inside my panties, finding me hot and wet.

“Fuck, Harls, you’re always ready for me. I want to fuck you so bad, Angel. You’ve no idea how many hard-ons you give me. It’s a miracle I get any work done, knowing this perfect pussy belongs to me.” His voice is low and gravelly, and it only serves to make me wetter as he finger-fucks me with delicious, slow strokes.

“Reed,” I cry as he presses the pads of his fingers to my G-spot. It feels so good. He’s so in tune with my body that he knows exactly just where and how to touch me to have me quaking in his arms within minutes.

I'm at his mercy. There's no doubt about it. Reed thrives off dominating me, and what's more, he knows it turns me on. He knows nothing makes me wetter than relinquishing control to him.

But not tonight.

Tonight, I want to be the one choosing how hard we fuck, how deep I take him. Tonight *I* want to be the one taking the lead.

He holds me around the waist with one arm while he continues the erotic assault between my legs. I grip his shoulders as my breath shallows. I can't come yet. It's too soon. I want to come riding him, looking down into his eyes as I sink down over every hard inch of him, feeling the way he stretches me.

He takes his glasses off, smiling at my disappointed huff as he drops them onto the sofa. Then he lifts me, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

"I'll fuck you wearing them another time, Angel. Promise."

"You better," I whisper, heat spreading through my body as his lips find mine again.

He carries me to our bedroom, kissing me the whole time. I sink my fingers into his hair and stroke the back of his neck, which elicits a deep groan from his throat.

"You're perfect. So fucking perfect." He drops me down onto the bed gently and grabs a condom from the bedside drawer, pulling his pants off and sliding it down onto his thick cock as I lie on my back panting from our kiss.

"I could live in your pussy for the rest of my life and die a happy man."

I laugh as he peels my soaking panties down my legs and throws them across the room. And then he's on me, his thick head nudging against me.

“Reed?” I moan, as his lips go to my neck, and he groans a deep, masculine sound that sets butterflies free throughout my body. I’m too wrapped up in the pleasure coursing through my veins to get the words out. To voice my fantasy and tell him I want to ride him until I explode around his cock.

“Yes, Angel?”

He circles his hips, stretching me around the tip of his cock. I arch up toward him and moan, getting carried away. I could so easily dig my heels into his gorgeous, tight ass and allow him to fill me like no one else ever has. The way I love. The way that has fueled me every day for the past few weeks.

But I don’t.

I can’t.

I want to banish Bea’s words out of my consciousness once and for all and this is the only way to do it. She has no right taking up space in my head, making me doubt, for even a second, that what Reed and I have isn’t completely real, or that he’s holding back from me. I should never have let it get this far. I should’ve forgotten every word the second they left her lying, distrustful lips.

I kiss Reed harder, moaning into his mouth as I wriggle below him until he moves back instinctively to give me space to get comfortable. The second he pulls back, I push on his chest and roll us so I’m on top of him, our lips still locked together. I lift my hips away from him so I have enough space to slide my hand down between us. Then, without missing a beat, I position his cock against me and sink down onto it, my body trembling as I stretch to take him.

“Reed,” I moan against his lips. “That feels so—”

He freezes beneath me and breaks our kiss, both of his hands gripping my upper arms so tightly that I swallow down the cry that's bubbling in my chest. His gray eyes are staring at me, but he's not seeing me. It's like looking through a window at the storm that's raging on the other side.

"Reed," I whisper. "What's wro—"

He flips us back over, his eyes suddenly on fire. They look almost black as he grips my wrists and pins them on either side of my head. Then he thrusts into me hard, knocking the air from my lungs.

My mouth drops open and all I can do is stare at him as he fucks me. Fast, deep, punishing hits that drive me up the mattress underneath him.

"You like that? Tell me you like that." He juts his chin out, growling the words.

I nod, my cheeks burning, because despite his reaction hitting me like a blow to the chest, my body is a traitor when it comes to him. Everything about the way he fits inside me, like he was made for me, and me for him, has me racing toward a climax before I can even process what just happened. Before I can feel hurt, or confused, or angry. Before I can feel anything else, blinding pleasure silences everything.

"Reed," I pant as he stares at me with a dark intensity I've never seen in him before.

"Tell me how much you like Daddy's cock filling you." He bucks into me wildly, his heavy balls slapping against my skin, and I whimper, my wrists burning beneath his palms. "Tell me!"

"I l-love it," I cry, my legs shaking as he pauses to circle deep inside me, giving my clit friction against his body.

"Good girl. You're mine, Angel. You're fucking mine." He thrusts so hard that I cry out as my breasts bounce in the small space between us. "Say

it!”

“I’m yours.” It’s an effort to get the words out as each pump of his hips forces the air from my lungs. I look up at him and wonder how I’m still breathing, let alone speaking.

“Don’t fucking forget it. You. Your cunt. Your ass. Your pretty pink lips. All mine. And I will fuck them whenever and however I see fit. Understand?”

I nod mutely, but Reed tightens his hold on my wrists as he circles inside me again, dragging across my clit with his body until I’m trembling beneath him.

“Understand?” he hisses, circling again as the peak of my build up slides within reach, my stomach coiling in anticipation.

“Yes. I’m yours, Reed. I’ve been yours since the first night you touched me.” I suck in air as though I might pass out any second. My head is light, and I force myself to focus on Reed’s voice.

“Wrong, Angel. You were mine a long time before that. You’ve always been mine. And you always will be.”

“Yes,” I cry, bucking in his firm grip, my eyes wet at the corners from the overwhelming need to come. The need to be his and have him own me forces my concerns and doubts to the far corners of my mind.

“Good girl. Now come on my cock. Come all over my cock, Angel. Scream my name,” he grits out, causing my chest to shudder.

His name. Call his name.

The first wave hits me moments after his words, and I writhe underneath him, lifting my lips toward his for a kiss. Desperate to have him closer to me, to feel him swallow my cries; sucking them in and replacing them with kisses like he so often does when I fall apart.

Not this time.

This time, he screws his eyes shut and clenches his jaw as I come undone around him. Alone and unseen.

He leaves me to shatter around him, with his body buried deep inside mine.

Without him.

Physically, we couldn't be any closer, but it feels like there is an ocean separating us. Reed, my Reed, leaves me trembling beneath him as he pulls up a mask, closing me out for the first time ever. Fucking me with only his body, his beautiful heart missing.

And my traitorous body ignores the voice in my head that's screaming that something isn't right as I come again a second time, and then a third, one orgasm rolling into another as I whimper and my eyes blur.

“Fuck, I love your cunt, Angel,” Reed growls, his eyes screwed shut, lost in his own prison as he keeps fucking me. He swells inside me, every muscle in his body tense as droplets of sweat drip from his broad chest down onto the fabric of my dress. “Angel, you're so... fuck, Angel, you're —”

“Harley!” I cry as my body continues to suck his in greedily and pulsate around his. “Call me Harley, Reed. Please, please,” I beg, sucking in giant breaths as my orgasm takes over my senses to the point I'm delirious, like an observer to my own body's pleasure.

An observer to whatever the hell is going on right now.

Reed freezes, his eyes snapping open like I've broken a spell he's been under, and they widen with shock as he stares at me. I search them, my body still coming in ripples around his, stealing the breath from my lungs. He swallows so hard I can hear it over my own panting. Then he releases

my wrists suddenly, like they've burned him. He holds himself up on one arm, his free hand flying to my face and cupping my cheek with sudden tenderness.

"Harley, Angel, I'm so sorry." His eyes search mine with a wild, haunted look that makes my breath catch in my throat and ice scatter up my spine.

He's still nestled deep inside me, my body reeling from his touch, but my throat burning with unexpressed emotion.

"Reed?" I croak.

"I'm so sorry." He drops his forehead to mine, and presses kiss after kiss to my lips as I clench around him, feeling his unfinished desire still burning through the hardness of his cock inside me. "Harls," he whispers as I flex my hips, encouraging him to keep moving. I don't want him to stop. I don't want it to end like this. I need to see pleasure on his face again. I need it more than ever.

"Please, Reed. Look at me."

He lifts his head to mine and begins to mirror my movements, slowly sliding his cock into me. His eyes are laced with the same darkness as before, but I can see Reed in them again. *My Reed.*

Nothing has ever looked more beautiful.

Relief swirls through me as he gazes into my eyes, his pace increasing as he looks at me in that familiar way I'm used to. Only there's an extra depth to his eyes now, like he's seeing something new for the first time.

"Harley, Harley, Harley, Harley," he chants quietly, his voice thick with emotion as he drives himself deeper.

"I'm here," I whisper as I hold either side of his face between my hands.

The intensity in his gaze ratches up a notch to blinding and his body shakes as a pained groan leaves his chest and he comes hard inside me.

Hard enough that I feel like a piece of his heart just broke off and fell onto me.

I look up into his smoky gray eyes and see that the storm in them has passed.

“Fuck, Harls. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. I need you, Angel. I need you.”

His whispered pleas are desperately kissed into my lips and breathed into my body as I wrap my legs around him and hook my ankles at his back, wanting to touch him with as much of my body as I can. I hold his face in my hands and welcome every promise he bathes me in as he says my name again and again.

“Harley,” he murmurs, kissing me again. “Harley.”

My name falls from his lips so many times it begins to sound like a melody.

I press our faces closer together as I kiss him back. I don’t know what just happened. But I know one thing, and it turns the blood in my veins to ice as the realization settles.

Bea was right.

And what’s worse is that she knows something about Reed that I don’t.



Chapter Eighteen



Reed

AS I DRIVE, I glance over at Harley who's staring out of the passenger window. She's been quiet since last night.

Too quiet.

She got up to use the bathroom and when she came back, she never said a word about what happened. I felt her soft body curl into my side as she settled back into bed. I heard the concern in her voice as she whispered my name and kissed me goodnight. And even though it was dark, and I couldn't see the hurt and confusion on her face. I know it was there.

You can't hide everything forever.

I keep one hand on the steering wheel and slide my other onto her thigh. She slips hers inside it and entwines her fingers with mine, but her gaze stays firmly on the sky outside. She's spoken to me this morning. But she hasn't asked about last night and what happened. Hasn't mentioned the colossal fuck up I made. It was instinct. A pure reflex reaction that I never even understood existed until she called me out on it. Until she pulled me back to her in that moment, and I saw myself through her eyes...

A selfish bastard who doesn't deserve her.

Harley is pure and sweet and good. She's all the things that I can so easily ruin if I don't get a handle on myself. In fact, I'm already ruining her. And I didn't even know I was doing it.

I'm a fucking idiot.

"It's the third house on the left." Harley points to a brick two-level house with white shutters at the windows.

I pull into the driveway and put the car in park, looking out through the windscreen at the house. It looks nice, a regular family home. I don't know what Harley seemed so uneasy about when she talked about visiting this weekend.

We get out of the car and I grab our bags from the trunk as Harley waits for me. She seems hesitant to go inside.

"You okay, Harls?" I hold our bags in one hand and place the other on her lower back, hoping to be reassuring.

"Yeah, I'm good." She smiles at me, but it doesn't meet her eyes.

She looks away and toward the front door. That's when I see the ramp.

"Mom had it put in for my brother." Sadness seeps from her as she stands next to me like a wilted flower, weighed down by the rain. Not the usual full, bright petals that I know her to be.

I've rarely seen Harley sad. But the couple of times I have are enough to know that it's the sight I most despise in the entire world. Nothing else makes my heart feel like it's been ripped in half, like the dullness in her eyes when she is.

"He uses a wheelchair now." She chews on her lip and lets out a sigh, her shoulders dropping. "It's a long story, and I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything, Reed." She glances at me. "But first, can we go inside? I always find the first hello the hardest when I haven't been home in a while."

“Of course.” I stroke her lower back, wishing I could wipe away the pain that’s radiating from her. Even her bright pink floral dress can’t distract enough to hide the loss of her usual glow.

We walk up the ramp to the door and ring the bell.

“Harls!” A blond guy in a wheelchair answers the door. His face lights up at seeing her.

She leans down and throws her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. “Hey, big bro. Been working on the guns, huh?” She squeezes his impressive biceps, and he laughs.

“Yep. It takes a lot of muscle to lift this godly body in and out the chair, you know.”

She laughs again and then stands back and looks at me. “Brett, this is Reed, who I told you about.”

“Reed, this is my brother, Brett.”

The guy holds his hand out and I shake it, struck by how alike he is to Harley. His hair is a little darker, and so are his eyes. But they have the same sparkle in them as Harley’s do when she’s happy, like an infectious joy for life is waiting to burst out at every given moment. Exactly the way Harley’s usually look.

Just not today.

And not last night.

“It’s nice to meet you, man. Harls told us you’re going to be the next Mayor of New York.”

“Well, that’s the hope.” I smile as Brett lets go of my hand and wheels backward so we can get through the door.

“He *is* going to be.” Harley lays her palm against my chest. “Reed deserves it. He’s brilliant.”

I stare at her, lost for words as she takes our bags from my hands and places them down on the hardwood hall floor.

She thinks I'm brilliant?

I've fucked her without even calling her by her name for weeks and she thinks I'm *brilliant*?

I'm a fucking jerk is what I am.

"Is Mom home?" Harley asks as we move further into the house.

"Yeah, in the garden." Brett wheels ahead of us, the muscles in his shoulders rippling beneath his light blue t-shirt.

"And Rose?" Harley whispers.

Brett looks at her, giving her a weak half smile. "She's out back, too."

Harley exhales slowly as she follows Brett, and I reach out to take her hand. She looks back at me, pain now replacing the sadness in her eyes.

I'm okay, she mouths when she sees the concern on my face. "I'll explain later."

I nod, stroking my thumb over her knuckles, and follow the two of them through the small, homely kitchen and out onto the back porch. Like the front door, there's a ramp which takes us down to the lawn.

Brett wheels down, a grin plastered to his face. "Look who's here!"

A woman who's sitting in a garden chair by the side of a wrought iron table jumps to her feet and comes over, pulling Harley into a hug.

"Oh, my girl. It's so good to see you."

I hang back a little as Harley's mom embraces her.

"And you must be Reed." She smiles at me kindly before pulling me into a hug as well. Harley and Brett exchange a smile as she presses her face into my chest and squeezes me with more strength than I would think a lady of her petite frame could possess.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Jacobs,” I say as I hug her, then move back. She swats me lightly on the chest with a tut, the gesture instantly making me think of Harley.

“Call me Della. No time for that Mrs. Jacobs nonsense. I sound like my mother-in-law, and she could be a right old battle-axe. God rest her soul.” Della crosses her chest, glancing skyward, and then grins brightly at us. “Shall I fix us all a drink? Rose?” she calls over her shoulder to a young blonde woman sitting at the table. “Can you give me a hand?”

“Sure, Mom.” The blonde, who looks like a younger, waif-like version of Harley with empty eyes, stands and walks over.

“Hi, sis.” She gives Harley a tight smile and Harley wraps her arms around her in response. Rose stiffens and doesn’t hug Harley back.

“Hello, Reed.” She nods at me and I nod back.

“It’s nice to meet you, Rose. Harley’s told me about you.”

Her eyes flick to Harley. “Oh.”

“She said it was your birthday. Happy Birthday.”

Rose’s expression barely changes as she looks back at me. “Oh. Yeah. Thanks.” Then she turns and follows Della.

“Don’t take it personally.” Brett gives me a reassuring smile. “That’s the most interaction anyone new has gotten out of her in a long time.”

Harley takes my hand and squeezes it. “He’s right. It’s not your fault. It’s not you.”

And for once, I believe her.

We spend a couple of hours out in the garden drinking homemade lemonade and eating muffins Brett said he made that morning. Brett’s a joker, and he and I laugh over some shared interest in music and bands.

After we help Della clear up, Harley pulls me toward the front door to fetch our bags.

“Mom, Reed and I are going to go freshen up. We might take a walk and come back before dinner. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Do whatever you kids want to do. As long as you’re back in time for tacos later.”

Harley rolls her eyes, smiling. “Okay, Mom.”

“I can’t believe she still calls us kids,” Harley says quietly as she grabs a key off a hook by the front door.

“She’s your mom. I guess you’ll always be kids in her eyes.” I follow Harley out the front door and down the ramp to the large garage at the side of the house.

“True.” She unlocks a side door into the garage and I follow her in. “It’s under renovation,” Harley explains as I look around at the space.

There’s an open plan living area with an area for a kitchen along one wall, and one small hallway that looks to have two doors leading from it. There’s no furniture in the room at all, and the walls aren’t even plastered yet. The floor below us looks like it’s had a concrete leveling agent poured on, but no actual boards or carpeting have been laid.

“Dad started it for Brett after...” Harley’s eyes roam the space. “Well, it never got finished, as you can see.”

I’ve heard Harley mention her dad before in stories from when she was a kid. And I recall Griffin saying over a year ago that he had passed away. But that’s all I know. I figured Harley will talk to me when and if she wants to. On her terms.

I know how hard it can be to bring up painful memories.

“Can you put our bags in the bedroom, and then maybe we can take a walk before dinner?” She smiles at me briefly before her eyes are distracted by the unfinished state of the room again.

“Sure.”



We wander through the town and end up in a graveyard. I doubt it's by chance, even though Harley didn't seem to lead us here purposefully. We just kind of strolled and drifted, my arm around her shoulder as she held me around the waist and talked about Maria and Griffin's egg situation and how she wondered how you could tell the sex of a baby pigeon.

I held her close, content to listen to her light musings. But I know they're a front. Harley loves to talk at the best of times. Even more so when there's something bigger on her mind. The bigger the problem, the more varied and whimsical her conversations.

“Do you mind if I take a minute?” She gestures to the headstone.

Alec Jacobs, loving husband and father.

“Of course.” I let her go and move away, walking over to the treeline, keeping my eyes averted from her private moment. I've seen and touched every inch of Harley's naked body. But watching her at her father's graveside feels intrusive and wrong. Like I'm taking something that doesn't belong to me.

And that's something I could never do.

“Thank you.” She appears next to me five minutes later and wraps her arm around my waist again as we walk. “I don't come as often as I should.

But I like to keep him updated on what's going on in my life. I feel like he can still hear me. Does that sound stupid?"

I stop and turn to her. "It doesn't sound stupid at all, Harls."

Her eyes flinch a miniscule amount when I say her name. It's tiny, but it's there. No one else would probably notice. But I do. I notice everything about her.

She takes a deep breath and nods as she looks up at me, as if steeling herself for what she's about to do. "I miss him. He died suddenly of a heart attack two years ago, and I never got to say goodbye."

"Harls." I pull her into my arms, but she places her hands against my chest and steps back, waving me off.

"Do you remember the night of Paige's party? When you found me sitting up because I couldn't get to sleep?"

"Yes." I brush the silent tears away that have run down her cheeks with my thumbs.

She nods, swallowing, before she continues. "I couldn't sleep because it was two years to the day Brett was hurt. He was hit by a car walking along the roadside in the middle of the afternoon. It wasn't dark. The driver hadn't been drinking. But he still left him there, lying in the road, broken. Do you know why?" Her voice is a whisper as she looks up at me.

"He was rushing to get home to his wife and children. He'd been having an affair for nine months, and the other woman was on her way to tell his wife. He mowed my brother down and left him, not knowing if he was even alive, to save his own, lying, cheating ass." Harley's eyes burn with a silent anger. One I recognize all too well. One that's deadly and destructive if you let it fester.

"That's why you hate cheats."

Harley nods. She's never made a secret of how she felt. I thought maybe an ex betrayed her, or it was seeing what Suze went through with her ex-husband, Curt. But now that she's told me, it makes more sense. A new piece of Harley I never understood before, but now I do.

"Harls." I stroke her face. She leans into my touch and gives me a sad smile. "Is that why you started honey trapping? To catch out cheaters?"

Her eyes cloud over, and I instantly regret speaking.

"Not exactly, although it was an added bonus. Why people are so selfish, I'll never understand. To cheat in the first place is vile. But to lie about something for so long, take advantage of the love and trust people have in you... He should have told his wife. Left her if he was that unhappy. He's affected so many lives." She sighs and her chest sags. "After Brett's accident, there was a huge investigation. But it never went to court. We were told there was a lack of evidence. The man who hit him denied all knowledge. Something underhand went on, I'm sure of it. He had money, and he knew people. What happened to Brett was swept under the rug, like he was a nobody. Like him being unable to walk afterward was nothing. It changed his life, and it left our family unrecognizable. Dad took it hard, seeing his son, who was so strong and athletic have his life altered like that. The doctors said the stress probably contributed to his heart attack." She sniffs and looks up at the sky.

"If only he knew how well Brett would cope. He's doing okay, you've seen him. He still finds joy in life, he still dates... he dates a lot." Harley laughs and the sound of it tugs at my heart.

"Dad started the guest house conversion for Brett, but then he... well, he got as far as you've seen before he died. Mom tried to get the money to finish it, but she'd already had to cut down her hours at work to help care

for Brett. He's independent now, but in the early days, he needed Mom a lot. It hit her hard, financially." Harley raises her eyes to meet mine and I see the strength in them. The resilience. The love she has for her family.

And I understand.

"You've been helping your mom out with money? That's why you needed it? Not for Manhattan rent prices?"

She snorts and her eyes light up. "Good cover though, right? Rent prices are crazy. I expect you to address it once you're mayor." She smiles at me, trying to mask the sadness that's still held in her baby blue eyes.

"Harls, I would abolish them altogether for you, if I could. The whole city could live for free. Every man, woman, child, dog, sloth, caticorn. They'd all have a home."

She laughs, and I break into a grin as she sighs and looks into my eyes. "You're nothing like what I originally thought."

I hold her face in my hands as I pull her closer. "No, I'm probably a much bigger jerk."

She laughs again and presses a kiss to my lips. "Stop. You're not." She takes my hand from her face and wraps her fingers through mine as we walk again.

"Is that why Rose seems so withdrawn? She misses your father?" I ask gently as we head through the graveyard gate and out into the street.

"Rose is... Rose is complicated. She blames herself for what happened to Brett."

"Why? I'm sorry... you don't have to answer that. I'm being insensitive."

"You're not, Reed." She gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Anyway, I want to tell you. I don't want there to be secrets between us."

I force down the dry ball in my throat.

No secrets.

“Rose was the reason Brett was out, walking on that stretch of road. He was out looking for her. She had a fight with her boyfriend and had stormed off. Brett went after her. He wasn’t supposed to be there when that guy sped past and lost control. He wasn’t supposed to get hit. No one blames Rose. Brett tells her all the time that it’s not her fault. No one has, for even a second, thought it was her fault. *Except her.* She’s trapped herself in this cage of blame and self-hatred. If you’d known her before, then you wouldn’t even recognize her as the same person now. She was fun, and feisty, and full of passion. What happened to Brett changed her. And then Dad died, and she blamed herself for that too. I don’t even recognize my own sister anymore.”

“I’m so sorry, Harley.”

The pain in her eyes is more than I can bear. I feel it like it’s my own. And what’s more, I feel helpless. Fucking helpless that she’s hurting. She’s been carrying this around with her all this time and I had no idea.

What kind of self-absorbed prick am I?

“It is what it is. I hope in time she’ll realize what we’ve all been telling her all along, that none of it is her fault. But until then, I have to believe that a miracle will happen. Something or someone will help her, make her listen, because we’ve tried so hard, and we’ve failed.” Harley’s voice cracks and I pull her into my side and hold her close as we walk back to her mom’s house.



The five of us have dinner together that night. Rose is quiet, but the conversation flows easily with Brett and Della steering it. They switch between filling Harley in on the neighborhood updates and asking me multiple questions about the role of mayor and what it entails. Della makes me laugh when she voices her opinions of the president and how she thinks he and his ‘ugly combover’ should do us all a favor and lose themselves in the next gust of wind. I squeeze Harley’s thigh under the table at the mention of him, and she smiles at me, her eyes sparkling. That was our first night together. A night permanently seared into my memory, and from the way she looks at me, I know it’s in hers, too.

We help tidy up and then say good night, heading into the guesthouse.

“Harls?”

I walk up behind her while she’s standing at the bathroom sink in her tiny lace nightie. I swear for someone who feels the cold at night, she doesn’t own any useful pajamas. Except those ugly caticorn ones, which I’ve grown fonder of, for obvious reasons. Still, I guess whatever she wears doesn’t usually stay on long once I get my hands on her. And she always says I’m like a furnace and keep her warm at night.

The thought spreads a calm stillness through my body.

She looks at me in the mirror’s reflection, her clear blue eyes hooded as I sweep her hair to the side and press a kiss to her skin where her neck meets her shoulder.

“I’m sorry about last night.” I keep my eyes fixed on hers as I kiss her again. Her lips part and her nipples pebble into peaks through her nightie as she drops her hips back so her ass cheeks hug either side of my hardening cock. “I would *never* hurt you.”

“I know, it’s okay,” she says, easily. Too easily. She’s so ready to trust me when I haven’t been completely honest with her. I don’t deserve her pure, sweet heart. Her understanding, her forgiveness.

“It. Is. Not. Okay.” The harshness in my tone makes her eyes snap fully open, and I kiss her again, on her neck this time, placing my lips over her fluttering pulse. A featherlight touch, a complete contrast to the rough admission of disgust I have in myself that is laced in my tone.

“Reed—”

“I would never hurt you physically, Harley,” I repeat, more forcefully than before. “But I never realized I was still hurting you, anyway. I never knew I was doing it. I am so sorry, Angel.”

She never takes her eyes off mine as I kiss and suck my way up to her ear, drawing a shudder and a sharp intake of breath from her lips.

“You’re mine. I will protect you with my life.”

She whimpers as I whisper the confession in her ear, and then she turns and wraps her arms around my neck as her sweet lips meet mine in a deep and urgent kiss.

“I know. And you haven’t hurt me. I just don’t understand everything about you, that’s all.” She kisses me again, letting her lips linger against mine. “I know you probably crave control after what happened with Riley, and I understand. I felt helpless after what happened to Brett. I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t know what was going to happen. And neither did you. What happened must have been awful. She’s your sister, your twin. And your parents moved you away from New York after. Coming back must be hard for you with the memories. But just know, I am here for you, Reed. You can talk to me.”

She kisses me again and I could so easily devour her. Dive right in and lose myself in her. Not come up for air for hours until I have quenched the insatiable thirst I have for her. But her words have dread filling the air around us. It's so thick I could pull great big thick black clumps of it away with my hands. Tear away the ugliness in the hope of finding light beneath it.

“Riley...? Harley, what are you talking about?”

She looks at me, her mouth dropping open as she searches my eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up. I shouldn’t have said anything. I just thought after what Bea said about your past and you saying there was a date that creeps up on you that... I mean, I think it’s amazing that you’re campaigning for tougher sentencing in assault cases. And Riley... her career, putting these monsters away. It’s... it’s inspiring. She’s an incredible woman, and I can’t wait to meet her. I hope I do, I mean, with you and I being...” She lifts a small hand but can’t wave it between us because I have her pulled so tightly against my chest that I can feel her heart beating against mine.

“I mean, I understand why you might need to feel control when it comes to sex. Why you don’t like me being on top of you.” Harley bites her bottom lip and the dread in the air closes around us like a dense fog as I realize what she’s talking about. A fog so deep and insidious I can’t see anything through it. Or at least, I never used to be able to. Now I see color. Bright, dazzling blue, shining back at me. Understanding, pure.

Her.

Her eyes look back at me, and I pray to God they look at me the same way in a few moments.

“Harley... I—”

“I’m so sorry you went through that, Reed. I’m so sorry that happened to her. Riley being assaulted must have been horrendous for her, for you, for your parents. For all of you.”

“Harl—”

“You can talk to me, though, if you ever want to. I’m always—”

“Harley,” I force out, making her stop and stare at me. “Harley,” I repeat more softly. “It’s okay, Angel. Riley wasn’t raped.”

“She wasn’t?” Harley’s lower lip trembles before relief flares in her eyes.

Part of me wants to seal my mouth shut, stop it from saying what it’s about to. But I know that I can’t do that to her. She’s been honest with me about her past. I owe her the same.

No secrets.

“No, Harls, she wasn’t,” I whisper. “I was.”

Confusion knits her brows together as she looks at me. All I can hear is my heart thumping in my ears as I wait through agonizing seconds for her to speak.

I tighten my arms around her to keep her from falling as her smile falls away.

“Y-you? Reed?”

I rest my forehead against hers, her reaction to my confession making her breath shallow as she stands deathly still in my arms.

“Yes, Angel,” I breathe against her lips, wishing I could kiss her and make her forget everything I’ve just said, because I’m not sure if she will ever look at me in the same way again. *And I couldn’t fucking bear that.*

Her voice cracks and comes out coarse. “You’re saying—”

I hold her tighter against me, hoping that she never asks me to let her go.

“I was raped. Not Riley. Me.”



Chapter Nineteen



Harley

THE CLOCK IS TICKING.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

It's loud. So loud that it's sending deep tremors through my body.

Only, the guesthouse doesn't have a clock.

I swallow the creeping sickness back down my throat as the *tick-tock* thuds in my ears and my chest, so hard the back of my ribs will definitely be bruised.

It's my heart. It's the sound of my heart trying to keep beating as Reed's admission floors me. Three short words that has my heart feeling as though it could stop at any moment. Rendered useless from the knowledge that the man standing in front of me has been subjected to something so... so... *despicable*.

"I was raped."

"It's okay, Angel. You're okay. I've got you." Reed's deep voice is calm, and it reaches into my chest and wraps itself around my heart, soothing it until it feels less like a grenade about to detonate.

He kisses me, his lips tenderly moving in my hair, on my forehead, over my cheeks.

I search his eyes for pain. But there's only worry and concern, pouring out of him as fast as the tears he's wiping from my cheeks.

"It's okay, Harls."

Wait. He's soothing me?

He kisses my lips, then scrunches his eyes shut. "Please kiss me, Harley. Let me know this hasn't changed anything." His voice is soft, but there's an undercurrent in it. *Pain*. It's saturated in his words as he presses his lips to mine again. "Harley?"

I draw in a shaky breath and sink my hands into the hair at the back of his neck as I kiss him back. I kiss him with everything I have, opening so he can slide his tongue past my lips to meet mine. I kiss him and grip him to me as if my life depends on it.

"God, don't look at me any differently, Harls. I couldn't stand it. Not you..."

I kiss him again with more force, pushing my silk-clad breasts against his naked chest. His dick, hard as stone, presses into my hip through his pajama pants. Surely, he can't think for one second this would change the way I see him, the way I *feel* about him?

I can't let him doubt for one second the way I feel when I'm with him.

I press myself harder against him, relishing the way his arms tighten around me in response. "It changes nothing. I want you, Reed," I pant against his lips.

He growls, low and deep, from his chest.

"Fuck, Harley. I want you too, Angel. I always want you."

His eyes fix on mine, and we hold one another's gaze.

He needs this.

He needs me.

I yank my panties down with one hand, kicking them off when they reach my ankles.

“Fuck me however you want me, Reed,” I pant into his mouth as I kiss him again. “Rough, fast, hard, dirty. Whatever you need. Whatever you want.” I push his pajama pants down and palm his cock as he hangs his head and hisses.

“Harley...”

“If you need to hurt me, hurt me. I trust you.”

He brings his head back up and looks at me darkly, the golden flecks in his eyes flashing. “You want me to hurt you?”

“I know you won’t really hurt me. Just like you didn’t last night. But if you need to be rough with me, it’s okay.”

“Angel.” He swipes his thumb over my swollen lip, the pad of it grazing my teeth as his eyes follow its path.

I stare up at him. Waiting. I would do anything for this man. Let him choke me, spank me... degrade me. Whatever he needs. I want him to know he can trust me. Just like I trust him.

He needs this. I can see it in his eyes. We have so much to talk about...

Later.

Right now, he needs to know he still has me. I need to show him I’m here with him.

That I will always want him, no matter what.

“Take it off.” He trails a finger up my thigh, causing goosebumps to dance all the way up my spine as he inches my nightie higher. The words

are quiet but spoken with a confident authority that has arousal spilling down the inside of my legs.

I cross my arms, taking the lace hem between my fingers, and slide the silk up my body and over my head, letting it fall to the floor next to us.

Reed sucks in a breath as his eyes rake over every inch of my body. “You’re so beautiful. And you’re mine.”

I gasp as he grabs me roughly, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass cheeks as he hoists me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist. Heat is racing around my body, and my heartbeat has started up a wild, punishing beat between my thighs. I grind myself against him, my wetness smearing over his hard abs.

I brace myself, expecting him to rest me against the sink and fuck me right here where we stand. But instead, he carries me across the hallway and into the bedroom, dropping me down onto the bed and crawling up over me.

My legs drop wide in anticipation as I crave what’s coming. Reed can always fuck me deeply when he’s on top of me. He either wraps my legs around his waist or throws them over his shoulders like he did on our first night together. That grants him deeper access inside me, and I know he loves it. Bea may think he only fucks from behind, and he does love that, too. But Reed’s favorite way to fuck me is with my knees up around my ears and his lips against mine as I moan his name into his mouth. He always comes extra hard when we do it like that. To the point that he’s joked about wearing two condoms to withstand the strength at which it hits him.

I gaze up at his blazing body hovering over mine, his warm brown waves falling forward. I brush one back from his eyes so I can see them in all their deep, magnetic brilliance as he drinks me in.

“I love it like this,” I whisper, bringing my knees up.

“I know, Angel. And I love it, too. But we’re not doing that tonight.”

Before I can protest, Reed rolls onto his back and grabs a condom from the table next to the bed, tearing it open and rolling it down onto him.

“Come here, Harley. Come here, Angel.”

Come here, Harley.

The same words as that first night together. The night that started it all.

I hesitate, unsure what he means. Then his strong hands grasp my hips, and he lifts me over him, so I’m straddling him while he lies on his back.

“Reed...?” I look down at him. His jaw is clenched, and his eyes are black and blazing like pools of molten tar.

“Don’t hold back. I want you to fuck me like you’ve wanted to all this time. Show me what I’ve been missing.”

“But you don’t want this, you don’t...” My words die in my throat as Reed slides his hands up to my breasts and pinches my nipples.

“I’ll tell you what I want, Harley. I want *you*. I want you to fuck me like this while your pretty tits bounce. And you’re going to come *three* times on my cock. Only then will I pump you so full of my cum that if I wasn’t wearing a condom, it would still be running out of you next week. Do you understand?”

I stare at his serious face, my eyes widening as I nod. Goosebumps break out along my spine at the thrill his words bring to my body.

“Now, come here,” he says softly, his lips curving into a smile.

He holds the base of his cock, and I rise over it, then stop.

“Take the condom off,” I whisper.

“No, Harley.”

“Yes,” I say more forcefully. “You said this snake always wore his second skin, right?”

Reed smirks at my referral to what he said at Paige's party. "Yes, but you said you'd never—"

"I know what I said." I keep my eyes on his as I roll the condom back up over the head of his cock and throw it to the side. "But I changed my mind. I want to still feel you next week. I want to feel you *everywhere*."

Reed's eyes glitter at me as I echo words from our first night back at him as well.

"Unless you'd rather I put it back on?"

"Don't you dare! My first bare sex, and I get to watch you sit on my cock? It's what fucking dreams are made of, Harls. Now get on with it."

I smile at him, my eyes glued to his. But as I rise above him and sit down onto him slowly, inch by inch, rocking side to side to take him, a trace of alarm fires in his eyes. His breath hitches and his jaw ticks. A bead of sweat gathers on his brow, and his hands freeze on my breasts.

"Reed?" I whisper, stalling with him halfway inside me.

"Don't stop." His breathing is shallow as he starts to stroke my breasts again, his eyes on my nipples. "Fuck, your tits look incredible from this angle."

I sink all the way down onto him, letting out a soft moan.

His eyes rise, holding mine for a beat as I sit with him buried inside me. Then his chest rises with a slow inhalation before he lets out a low, deep groan that has my clit throbbing.

"I love your cock," I say as I move again, a little faster, spurred on by the increasingly deep groans Reed is making beneath me as his hands drop to my hips and his gaze returns to my breasts. "Is this okay?"

His eyes snap to mine, and he focuses on me with laser-sharp precision. "What did I say, Harls? Don't go fucking easy on me."

Desire floods my body, setting fresh arousal free inside my core. It soaks Reed's cock, and he hisses out in delight as he watches the wet shine of me on his skin as I pull back and then sink down onto him again.

He feels incredible skin to skin with me. Every ripple and vein in his cock is pronounced, every pulse of blood throbbing through him is a caress deep inside me. It's not long before I'm fucking him hard, grinding down onto him, loving the way his balls slap my ass every time he thrusts up to meet me.

To meet me.

Reed is here with me. He's not lying back, going through the motions to please me. He's meeting me thrust for thrust, groan for groan, shudder for shudder, as our bodies climb together, chasing their release.

"Three times," he pants. "Start coming, Harls, or I'm going to have to stop for a minute."

He rubs his thumb over my clit and I go off like a rocket, a mix of teetering on the edge from the feel of him stretching me out, and the knowledge that he's struggling to hold back himself. He likes what we're doing. Despite avoiding it for so long. Here with me, right now, he likes it. He likes it so much that his cock is swelling inside me and his balls are pulling up toward his body.

"Harls," he growls in warning as he pinches one of my nipples with one hand, the other still rubbing my clit.

I come again, intense waves rippling through me and squeezing him tight.

"Fuck." I tip my head back and shudder.

Reed sits up and takes my nipple into his mouth, and I bring my eyes back to his, threading my fingers through the hair at the back of his head as

he grasps me around both hips and drags me up and down over his cock.

“That’s two, Angel. The next one we do together. You ready?”

I nod with a garbled cry as he lies back down and tips his chin up to me. “I’m holding it back, Angel. You’re so fucking sexy. I want to watch you come on my cock as I fill you up.”

“Yes,” I moan as I grind down, and he rubs my clit again. He’s caught me before I’ve fully come down, so a few expertly executed strokes is all it takes before the pressure starts building inside me again.

“Harley.”

I look down into his eyes as he moans my name. There’s no wariness in them, no unease. Just pure, unbridled passion and sexual energy.

“You’re killing me,” Reed growls, his fingers flexing against my hips, his cock slick and hard as the sound of my wetness coating him ricochets around the room like a wonderful, dirty symphony.

“Reed... I’m going to... I’m going to come,” I cry as the first wave slams through my body.

“Fuck, Harls. Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I squeeze around him, clenching and releasing as each wave steals my breath and has me crying out his name. His eyes hold mine. His body tenses.

Then I feel it.

Hot liquid heat filling me. Filling me and filling me until it runs down my thighs as he thrusts up inside me.

I choke back a sob, overwhelmed as my body tingles all over and goosebumps cover my skin. My vision blurs and my ears ring.

Then strong arms pull me down into something solid and warm.

“Harley, you’re incredible.” Reed scrunches his face up against mine as his cock twitches inside me. He cradles me against his chest, easing his eyes open as the last pulse of his orgasm fades.

He looks into my eyes, our wet cheeks pressing together as he grabs my face and pulls me in close to kiss me. I taste the salt on my lips and know it’s from both of us. His eyes shine as the corners pinch from emotion. The sight of him here, baring his soul to me, knocks the air from my lungs.

Each hot droplet is another move forward.

Another step into the future.

We’re washing away the past.

Together.



Chapter Twenty



Harley

“I WAS TWENTY-ONE,” REED says as I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heart beat a comforting pace in his chest. The sound soothes me, and I snuggle into him. Our hands entwine, and I press little kisses to each of his knuckles one by one, before starting over again. *Repeat, kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss, repeat.* Doing something helps. I can’t change what he’s telling me. But I can press myself into him and kiss him tenderly, showing him that I’m here for him. That I’m not going anywhere.

“I was at a bar for a friend’s birthday. He got a little worse for wear, so the other guys bundled him into a cab and took him home. I lived in the opposite direction, so I planned to head home by myself. I did it all the time. I was a young man. A strong, fit one. If I was worried about anything happening when I was alone, it was being mugged for my wallet, not...”

I look up as he pauses, and I kiss his jaw gently. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

His brow furrows, deep lines coursing through it. Never did I imagine having this conversation with him. It’s the last thing I ever expected him to tell me. The last thing in the world I thought I would hear from his lips.

Yet here we are.

I settle my head back down and angle it up so I can watch him as he speaks, my heart heavy in my chest.

“I want to tell you, Harley. Of all the people in the world, you are the only one I’ve ever *wanted* to tell.”

“Okay,” I whisper, waiting for him to continue. The knowledge that he’s choosing to share this with me is bittersweet. Him telling me I’m the only person in the world he wants to share something with makes my heart swell with happiness. But at the same time, what he’s about to tell me is the sharp needle that will inevitably pop it before shredding it into a million pieces.

“I stayed to finish my drink, and this woman sitting next to me at the bar started chatting. She was older than me by at least ten years. She was flirty, made it obvious she found me attractive. I was twenty-one and fueled by hormones, so of course, I was flattered, and... I flirted back.” Reed’s jaw tenses, and his mouth flattens into a grim line.

“She bought me another drink, and that’s the last clear memory I have of the night. The rest is just pieces, fragments. Flashbacks here and there... dreams. Blonde hair. A woman’s voice talking, saying words I don’t remember. Being completely out of it, lying on my back, my head spinning, as someone moved on top of me.”

Blonde hair. Someone on top of me.

“She was blonde?” I search Reed’s eyes, nausea clawing its way up my windpipe.

“Yes.” He reaches up and fingers a wisp of my hair.

I swallow down the solid, scratchy lump in my throat as I remember all the times Maria heard Reed through her old apartment wall. She would hear him having sex with different women all the time. Rough, wild, hard sex.

They were always blonde, and they would always leave shortly after. No one ever stayed. Reed always ended the night just as he started it.

Alone.

“Is that why...? All those blonde women?” I hold my breath; not sure I want to hear his answer. I just thought he was a man-whore who thought with his dick. How I wish that was the truth now.

He looks at me with such self-loathing in his eyes that my heart cracks right down the center.

“I’ve been an idiot, Harley. All those women I barely knew. It was something so deep-rooted, I didn’t even recognize it at first. At least, that’s how it started. I saw blonde hair, and I needed to be the one taking back control. I hated it. *Despised* it. I couldn’t see a woman with blonde hair without wanting to take her, use her, and discard her. Like what was done to me. Then it became a habit. I didn’t need to do it anymore. I didn’t even think about it like that as time went on. But I couldn’t stop.”

He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Then I met you. And blonde wasn’t the color of the devil anymore. It was the color of an angel. Everything about you, Harley, it’s so good, bright, and pure. I curse myself for touching you with my stained hands.” The arm Reed has around me tightens, pulling me closer to him. “But I can’t fucking control myself. I want you. All. The. Time. And it has nothing to do with my past or the color of your hair.”

I stare at him, letting his words sink in, letting the pieces fall into place.

“That’s why the other night when—”

“Yes.” He draws me closer and looks into my eyes. “Another habit. A reflex left over from a faded memory. I don’t think about it anymore. I swear to you, I’ve left it in the past. And what we just did, watching you on

top of me. God... I'm glad I never did that with anyone else until now. That memory, Harls. It belongs to you now. All I will ever see from now on is *you*. You're so fucking sexy. I could look at you all day."

"A new memory," I repeat, as Reed dusts his lips over mine.

"I need new memories, Angel. The others are shit," he says, so matter-of-factly that I laugh unexpectedly.

He pulls me to him for a kiss, his lips curling into a small smile against mine.

"They're really spectacularly shit," he adds, before falling serious again.

I know there's more. So much more. And I steel myself to hear it. I need to listen to everything no matter how hard it is to hear because it must be a million times harder for Reed to say it.

But he is. And he's telling *me*.

Knowing he trusts me enough to share it has me scared I will cry again. But I must hold it together. This is his story.

"Go on," I urge gently.

He strokes the back of his hand down my cheek as he speaks. "It took me a long time to accept the flashbacks were memories. I think I knew deep down, but to admit it was like saying it out loud to myself. I knew I'd accepted her drink and flirted back. So I questioned myself, you know? Maybe I had gone with her and wanted it? I was the guy, after all. How does a woman even rape a man? Force him to have sex if he doesn't want to? They're the kinds of things I'm ashamed to admit I might have thought before it happened to me."

"Oh, Reed..."

He catches my lips with his and sucks in a deep breath as he kisses me.

“I’m going to tell you everything. And then I need to have you again. I don’t want the last words we speak to each other tonight to be about the past. Okay?”

“Okay,” I breathe against his lips. My soul already feels like it’s being tortured knowing what he’s been through.

“The next day I woke up alone in a dingy hotel that I had no recollection of going to. I was naked with lipstick on my dick and a banging head that made me want to barf just by opening my eyes. I didn’t know where the fuck I was or how I got there. It wasn’t like those mornings when you have a drunken night and you wake up feeling rough. This was different. I was scared, Harls. I knew something wasn’t right. I could feel it. It was like my body had been steamrollered. And…” Reed clears his throat. “And I *hurt*. In ways I never had before. In places that didn’t usually hurt after.”

I wrap my hand around the back of Reed’s head, pulling our foreheads together. “That should never have happened to you,” I choke out as a tear slides down my cheek.

“I know. At the time, I didn’t understand it. I got dressed and left. Caught the subway home in the same clothes from the night before. My parents were angry. They’d worried when I didn’t come home without calling. But Riley? She knew just by looking at me something was up. She refused to leave me alone until I told her. Then she wanted to go to the police, but I’d already gotten in the shower and scrubbed myself raw by that point. I didn’t think they’d believe me, anyway. *I* didn’t believe me. I’d never heard of it happening to a guy before. I thought I must have been drunk and compliant, otherwise, how would it have worked?”

“It can happen, Reed.” I stroke my fingers along his cheek, my forehead still pressed against his. I don’t want to move away. I can’t move away.

He's speaking every word with his mouth so close to mine, and I wish I could swallow them all, make them disappear to where they can't hurt him anymore.

"Riley wouldn't let it go. She called Griffin. He'd been with his dad the night before and missed the drinks. But he was a resourceful bastard, even back then. He knew people. He got me an anonymous drugs test done within a few hours. They found traces of Viagra and Rohypnol in my system. She'd drugged me. Probably put it in my drink."

Reed's fingers flex against my waist where he's holding me as I catch the gasp in my throat before it exits my lips.

She drugged him. She drugged him and raped him.

"I kept it a secret from my parents and got on with life. Made Riley and Griff swear to keep silent. I didn't know who she was. All I had was a fake first name, a blurry memory of her, and a sheet of paper proving I had drugs in my system. That's all. She paid the hotel in cash, and they had no camera footage. Griffin checked. Riley checked. They both tried. And I did nothing. I just wanted to forget it ever happened. I didn't think anyone would really believe it. Why would they? Women can pick men up in bars for sex if they want to. They don't need to drug ones over a decade younger than them."

"That's not how it works, though. You know that. She hurt you, Reed. She planned that and she—"

"I know, Angel." He presses a kiss to my lips. "I know that now. But I was young, and I just wanted to ignore it. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of moving on. I was working for a record label. Just entry level stuff. That's when I met Bea. She was at a concert for this big band we'd signed. I had a backstage pass around my neck, and she thought I was more important than I was. We started dating, then a couple of months later, she

moved into the place I was renting. The next thing I know we'd argued about something, and she told me if she stayed, she wanted more commitment. She wanted to be engaged. I didn't agree. I just didn't correct her."

A surge of jealousy rises in my gut as he talks about Bea. It's stupid and irrational. I know he never loved her. He's told me as much. That they were wrong for each other, and she only wanted to be with him when she thought he was moving up in the world and she could hitch a ride with him. But still, hearing him talk about her, knowing they lived together and were engaged. Knowing she was there for him, being *that* person when he needed them most. Even though I didn't know him then. It stings like salt in a wound.

"Harls." He smiles at me, reading my face like a book.

"It wasn't like that. I didn't confide in her. She read texts from Riley on my phone and confronted me about it. I never told her. I didn't want to. Partly because I wanted to pretend it never happened, and partly because I didn't share things with her. Not things like that. Our relationship was never like that."

"What happened when she found out?"

Reed's eyes darken, and he looks away from me.

"Nothing. We carried on. She never mentioned it again. We broke up a few weeks later, and I moved with Riley and my parents to California."

I assumed the move was to help Riley when I thought it was her who had been hurt. But now I know it wasn't.

"If your parents didn't know, then why did you all move?"

I don't miss the way Reed's eyes close and his brow tenses, a deep furrow running along the width of it as he draws in a deep breath. Whatever

he's about to say is hard for him. But nothing can be worse than what he's just told me. Nothing is worse than the thought of someone hurting him.

"I was having thoughts... dark ones... about harming myself."

Wrong.

His words smash into me like an axe to the heart, pulverizing it into a sludge that threatens to force its way out of my mouth as my stomach heaves.

Wrong. That is worse. So much worse.

"Griffin found me in time," he says as I stare at him, my eyes hot and burning. "He talked me down off a ledge. Literally."

My vision blurs and blood rushes in my ears as I search his eyes. "I can't... I..."

"Kiss me."

"What?"

"Kiss me," he repeats gently.

I press my lips against his and swallow down my sob as he kisses me deeply, holding the back of my head with one hand.

"I'm okay, Harls," he whispers against my lips, making me sob out loud as he kisses me again. "It was a long time ago. I went to a therapist. I talked to my parents. I learned to deal with it. I moved on, Angel. I kept living."

I nod as he keeps kissing me. I know what he's saying is true. Reed doesn't lie. And he's been living his life for years, more than a decade since it happened. He's successful, and he's calm and in control. He's brilliant and charming and confident. *He's living.* He's strong and healthy. But the thought that he was once in a place so dark that he considered not being here anymore lances through me, shadowing over everything, churning every cell in my body up until I realize I'm crying. My body shakes and my

chest burns as I imagine a world without Reed in it. A world where the sun never rises.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay, Angel. It’s okay.” He kisses the tears from my cheeks, holding me tighter, and then his lips are on mine again, coaxing them apart, reaching inside me and soothing me with long, loving strokes. “I hate to see you cry. Nothing in the world is worse.”

He kisses me again and I pull him closer, pressing the length of my body against his and welcoming the heat of his skin onto mine. At least it reminds me that we are both here, in this moment. This is real. He’s here with me. He’s okay. It’s all in the past.

“She was never caught?”

“No. We filed a report before we moved. After what happened, I told my parents everything. They needed to understand why I almost...” He clears his throat. “Nothing ever came of it. Not enough evidence. I wouldn’t even know her if I saw her. I could pass her on the street. I could speak to her. And I wouldn’t even know. It took a long time to accept that’s the way it will always be. But I’ve made my peace with it. It’s something that happened to me. It’s something that should *never* have happened. But it did. I’m not going to let it wreck the rest of my life.”

“That’s why you always say the past should be left there, where it belongs?”

“You do listen to me, then?” He lets out a low chuckle and wipes a lingering tear from my cheek. “I promise you. I’m okay. I never really think about it now. It’s in the past. And that’s where I want to leave it. The thought of someone judging me or pitying me because of one moment in my life... it makes me sick, Harley. It makes me physically sick. And I know it happens to people. They can never leave their past behind them

because others won't let them. That can destroy you more than the event itself. I promise you, it's in the past. I only want to think about the present and the future now."

I sniff and nod at him in understanding. He's chosen to leave it in the past and not let it define him. He takes strength from knowing he survived it and has moved forward to live his life. And the rest? He leaves that where it belongs.

Behind him.

"Some good's come of it. I try to focus on that. Riley went into law, and she's great. She's a ruthless attorney. She's helped so many people get justice. People that might never have gotten it otherwise. And it's why I went into politics. I want to make changes. Do things that make a difference to people's lives."

"You already do that, just by being you," I croak, my voice raspy from all the tears. "I mean it, Reed," I say as he looks back at me. "You're amazing."

He exhales a long breath and chuckles. The sound sends warmth radiating through my body, loosening my muscles, and easing all the tension I'm holding without even realizing.

"Careful, Mrs. Walker. I might start to think you mean it and aren't just saying it as you're on the payroll."

"Jerk." I smile.

He laughs and rolls me onto my back, kissing me again, all my tears finally dry.

"Am I amazing, or a jerk? Make your mind up, Angel."

"You're..."

He maneuvers my legs over his shoulders and pushes my knees up to my chest.

“I’m...?” He arches a dark mahogany brow at me.

“You’re...”

He slides into me in one slow, fluid motion, groaning in pleasure as I whimper beneath him.

“You’re...” I try again, tingles racing over my skin like electricity around a circuit.

His mouth is on mine as he begins to move inside me slowly. “I’m what...?”

I gasp into his mouth as he reaches to my breast and pinches my nipple, fucking me in deliciously slow, deep strokes at the same time. The sensation of his skin against mine with no barrier between us heightens every sensation as my body buzzes and vibrates around him.

“You’re...”

“Yes, Angel?”

He’s enjoying this. I can tell by the amusement in his voice and the way he’s sliding into me at the angle he knows full well rubs my G-spot.

“You’re...”

He told me he was going to have me again before we go to sleep. And fuck, is he having me, his strong body on top of mine, his weight creating the best feeling of safeness there is. My eyes roll back in my head as arousal races through me, soaking him and leaking out, spreading around my thighs every time he withdraws.

“I’m what, Angel? Apart from making this beautiful pussy of yours drip as I fuck you... what am I?” he growls against my lips before gently taking my bottom one between his teeth.

“Reed...” I say as he releases my lip.

His pace increases and he drives his tongue into my mouth, claiming me, obliterating any other thoughts I can have. The past melts away, and all I can focus on is him. Him inside me. Him stretching me. Him *completing* me.

“Reed what? Tell me,” he commands.

“You’re...” I pant, my breath coming in short puffs as he tilts his hips and hits my G-spot harder.

“I’m...?” He grins as my mouth drops open against his, and I moan loudly.

“You’re...you’re... amazing! And you’re going to make me come,” I cry.

He lets out a low groan from deep in his chest. It rolls through me and has me shaking and shuddering.

“Do it, Harley.”


His words are my undoing, and I come. I come with a force that has me crying out his name, my fingers fisting his hair and holding his face to mine as he fucks me with a satisfied smile on his handsome face.

“Yes, Angel,” he breathes. “Good girl.”

Then he spills into me, pushing himself as deep inside me as he possibly can.

“Harley,” he murmurs against my lips. “You’re beautiful. You’re fucking beautiful.”

“No... You... are...” I finally manage to say as I tremble in his arms.



Chapter Twenty-One



Reed

I TOLD HARLEY THAT I didn't want the last words we spoke to each other last night to be about the past.

And they weren't.

But I can never get enough of her, so despite me fucking her in my favorite way, and the words *you're going to make me come*, spilling from her lips, I wanted more.

I needed more.

I kept her up until dawn broke, worshipping her. Having her in every position that allowed me to see her eyes widen and her cheeks flush as she came for me. Again, and again, and again.

And that included watching her ride me twice more. Watching pleasure bloom through her body. Pleasure I created. It's pretty fucking spectacular to experience from below. She looked even more like an angel up there, the morning light shining in through a crack in the blinds behind her.

My girl. My beautiful, perfect girl.

I smile over at her sleeping on our sofa. We said goodbye to Della, Brett, and Rose after brunch and I drove us back to the city. Harley sat down

when we got back, and by the time I'd come back from putting our bags in the bedroom, she was fast asleep.

I pick up the spray bottle and begin to mist Bruce.

My phone rings on the table and I answer it quickly, so it doesn't wake her.

"Hey, Stu," I answer quietly.

"Hey. What you doing?"

"Watering Harley's Bonsai tree." I frown and purse my lips at Bruce as I spot a small brown leaf on one of the branches.

"Water—? Is that a kinky thing I haven't heard of?"

"Yeah. It's called horticulture," I grunt, grabbing the tiny nail scissors from the drawer to carefully snip off the offending brown appendage.

Stuart laughs. "Pretty sure it's called being pussy-whipped."

I grumble, making him laugh harder.

"Can't even deny it, Walker. You've got it bad. Never thought I'd see the day."

I cut him off before he finishes laughing. "What do you want? I'm seeing you in fifteen hours."

"We've got a small problem. Nothing we can't sort, though." His tone turns serious, and I place the scissors down and lean back against the table.

"Define small."

I recall Stuart's last interpretation of 'small'. It was when the previous mayor, Dennis Vincent, started sniffing around the candidates for this election. He turned up at the office one day to wish me luck. Stuart was wary, of course. He's no fool. But me? I know a rat when I see one. I don't trust that corrupt asshole any more than he should trust his 'business associates' not to kidnap and torture his wife should he cross them. Maybe

he got dragged into the organized drug ring supplying the city with enough smack to sink a small country. But whatever his sob story is, he used his position to aid known criminals, people who destroy the lives of others. I'd cut out my own heart with Bruce's tiny scissors before I ever allow myself to get drawn into something like that.

"Harley."

I glance over to check she's still sleeping on the sofa and lower my voice. "What do you mean, Harley?"

"Or should I say, Julia?" Stuart blows out a breath. "Some jerk who's recognized her from photos of the two of you said he met her on a night out and she told him her name was Julia. I told him he's mistaken, that they must look alike. But he insisted. Said she was gagging for it until you showed up and said you were her boss. He's threatening to go to the press."

I suck in a fast breath, my nostrils flaring.

"Give me his name." I snarl, but I already know who this asshole is.

"Now, hold on. I know that voice. I'm not letting you ruin your position as a front runner because you've broken some bastard's nose."

"I'll do more than break his fucking nose, Stu!" I crack the knuckles on my free hand, forcing myself to take deep breaths and keep my voice hushed. Harley is still sleeping, and the thought of her hearing any of this, worrying about it, has an acrid taste spreading over my tongue. That fucker will curse the day he ever thought to use Harley's past against her when I get my hands on him.

"Listen... I've thought about it. Harley said the agency doesn't have her real name on file. Or any of the girls' photographs. It's all for safety and discretion, right?"

“Correct.” I look at Harley again and my heart constricts. Stuart knows about the honey trapping. It’s his job to know everything as my campaign manager. Well, almost everything. He doesn’t know about my past. I never bring it up. As far as I’m concerned, that part of my life is over. But imagining the hurt in Harley’s eyes if she were to hear this. All because there will always be some lowlife who will bring up anything to try and discredit you.

It fucking guts me.

She deserves better. There’s no way in hell I’m letting anyone judge her for something she did. Something she had to do to help her family financially. I know her personal reasons for honey trapping, and they make me even less tolerant of this guy’s shit.

“We use it to our advantage. Say Harley uses a fake name when she’s out sometimes, for her own personal safety. It leads nicely into talking about your proposals for more robust investigations and tougher sentencing for sexual predators. This guy won’t have any comeback from that.” Stuart sounds pleased with himself. This is why he’s great at what he does. He always looks at the bigger picture. He could swing just about anything in our favor if he had to.

But when it comes to someone threatening my girl... all bets are off. I’d be swinging for their head and deal with the consequences after.

“Fine. But I’ll be the one to tell him.”

“Okay.” Stuart sighs. He knows when it’s useless to argue with me.

“Give me the asshole’s details.”

I write them down on a pad as Stuart warns me not to go overboard. I don’t make any comment to appease him, but I’m not stupid. I know phone calls are easily taped. This jerk will get the message. It’s what I won’t say

that will have the loudest impact. I'll make sure he doesn't come sniffing around again. Fucker was probably hoping for a pay-off to keep his mouth shut. Once I'm done with him, he'll think twice about ever trying to pull a stunt like this again.

She was gagging for it.

Fucking asshole.

I make the call; pretty sure I hear him piss himself on the other end when I'm only half done. As I jab the end call button and throw my cell down onto the bed, two arms snake around my waist from behind.

"Who was that?"

I turn, pulling her into my chest and dipping my nose into her hair.

"I thought you were asleep." I kiss Harley's head as she yawns and burrows into me, resting her cheek against my chest.

"I was. But someone growling down the phone woke me up. It sounded serious. Is everything okay?"

She tilts her head back and gazes up at me, her blue eyes still misty from sleep. I really did wear her out last night. If it hadn't been so incredible, and exactly what we both needed, then I might feel guilty.

"It's fine, Angel. All sorted. Just some asshole trying to cause problems." I brush a thumb over her cheek, my heart swelling in my chest as she smiles softly and leans into my palm.

"Graham Hutchings?"

"No." I chuckle. "Although he's an asshole, too. No... this slimy bastard isn't quite as clever as Graham. Don't worry about it, Harls. He picked the wrong couple to mess with."

"Wrong couple?" Her brow creases as she leans back to get a clearer view of my face. "This was about us?" Her eyes widen when I take too long

to answer. “This was about *me*, wasn’t it?”

“It’s sorted. Just some guy trying to stir up trouble. Said you’d been going around using a false name.”

“A honey trap client?” Harley visibly swallows as I nod. “Reed, I don’t want to cause trouble for you and the elections. If my past is causing problems for you—”

I silence her with a kiss.

“Your past is not a problem. I’ve told you. There will always be fuckers ready to use it against you. But he knows nothing. He doesn’t even suspect it. He’s just a jerk mouthing off. He’s probably still nursing his tiny dick after you turned him down. And you know what?” I take her face in both of my hands. “Even if he told the world about your old job, who cares? You’d have the support of all the women out there, and all the decent partners who would never cheat. People go to the agency when they’re vulnerable, maybe heartbroken. And you help them. You help give them the evidence to make the decisions they need to make.”

“You sound like a recruitment pitch for it.” Harley smiles, and I raise my brows at her.

“It’s all my speech giving practice. Do I sound convincing?” I smile back at her as her eyes sparkle, setting a soothing blanket over the inferno that has waged inside me since Stu’s call.

“Yes.” She places her hands over the top of mine on her cheeks. “You convinced me a long time ago.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “It’s all dealt with. Don’t even think about it again. I will always look out for you. You have nothing to worry about. Your past doesn’t define you, Angel. And yours isn’t even bad. Trust me.”

“I do, Reed. I do trust you.”


I move my lips down over her face, pressing kisses to her skin as I go until I reach her pink lips.

“Good. I will always put you first. Always. Don’t ever doubt for one second how far I would go to protect you. I would sacrifice myself for you if it meant no one would ever try and hurt you, especially by using your past against you. Okay?”

I kiss her, savoring the small sigh she makes as I coax her lips apart.

“Okay,” she whispers.

Then I pull her closer and lose myself in her.



Chapter Twenty-Two



Harley

“IF HAPPY EVER AFTER is real, then she’s here in my arms.”

The faint harmony washes over my bare skin in waves, gently lapping me to full consciousness.

“Did you just make that up?” I murmur, snuggling into Reed’s bare chest as he kisses my head. “Oh, don’t stop. There’s nothing I’d rather wake up to than my very own poetic dawn chorus.”

I giggle as he rolls me onto my back and pins my arms above my head.

“I mean it. I love your singing.” I giggle harder as he attacks my neck with his mouth.

“I know, Angel. That’s why I sing to you. But now it’s your turn to show me what your lips can do.” He kisses down my body, pausing to suck both of my nipples on his way south.

“Reed, we can’t. It’s THE day. We need to get ready and go to your office. Stu’s probably already there going mental.” I sigh, my protestations melting from my lips as Reed swipes his tongue between my legs, making my core clench with need.

“I know. That’s why I woke you up early. No way am I going to spend a day waiting for the final count to come in without tasting you first. It’s going to be a long-ass day. I need my sustenance.”

I giggle more as Reed grabs my ass cheeks and lifts my pussy toward his face, groaning as it makes contact with his mouth again. “Fuck, Harls. You taste so damn sweet.”

“I…” I let my eyes roll back in my head, my giggle fading as rippling pleasure spreads through me, dancing over my nerve endings like bubbling water on a riverbed. “Fine,” I moan as his tongue dips inside me, making me arch against his face. “Fill yourself up.”

“I intend to,” he groans as he brings his tongue back to my clit. “And then I’m going to fill you. I want to know you’re still feeling me all day while we’re surrounded by people and I can’t have you.”

Today is everything he has been working toward, planning for, and gearing up to.

Election day.

And he’s right. We aren’t going to get a second to ourselves until all the votes are in, which could take hours. It could go well into the night. Stuart’s already insisted we meet early in the office. He’s laid on a breakfast for the entire campaign team and all the volunteers who’ve helped. It’s going to be mayhem. Edge of our seat, nail biting, torturously long, mayhem.

Hell, it might even be tomorrow by the time we get any privacy again, and that’s if we’re lucky. If Reed wins, as I hope he will, then it’ll probably turn into celebratory drinks and then a quick sleep before interviews and whatever official things that need doing begin.

God, it could be days until we are properly alone again.

I part my legs wider and grab his hair, sudden urgency communicated by my fingers digging into his scalp and an urgent groan of “more” from my lips.

“Good girl,” he groans against me. “Good fucking girl.”



“Ladies and gentlemen, it looks as though we have the final results in.” The news anchor presses her manicured fingertips to her earpiece as she looks straight into the camera. “Yes, I can confirm that all votes have been counted.”

There’s an excited gasp and murmur around the office as we all stare at the giant projector screen that Stuart has set up.

I slip my arm around Reed’s waist and am met with the taut, corded muscles of his back. He’s focused. I’ve seen him at work before, but never like this. This means everything to him. His eyes haven’t left the screen for the past forty minutes since they announced the count was almost complete. He was calm up until then, laughing and joking with the rest of the team. He even gave a couple of short interviews to the news crews set up outside. Then he invited them in, and they joined us for take-out as the count continued. We’ve been here hours, and now the moment of truth is here.

“I believe in you,” I whisper as I watch the screen. I don’t think it’s loud enough for anyone except me to hear. But the warm lips that graze my temple tell me Reed heard.

“The next Mayor for the city of New York is...”

Silence falls around the room.

“Reed Walker with a record-breaking seventy-one percent of the votes.”

Oh my God.

“Reed! You won! You won!” I jump up and down, my grin almost splitting my face as I turn to him.

He’s being enveloped by a sea of arms patting him on the back, hands squeezing his shoulders, and party poppers firing paper streamers off over his head that are tangling themselves in his warm, brown waves.

Then I see his eyes. Shining with emotion as he reaches for me and pulls me to him.

“I can’t believe it, Harls.”

“I can. You deserve this. You’re going to be amazing,” I squeal in delight as I wrap my arms around his neck and jump into his arms. He catches me, and I wrap my legs around his waist to the sound of cheers and whistles. Unable to stop myself, I grab his cheeks and plant a kiss firmly on his lips.

“You can do all the things you wanted, Reed. You can make a difference.” I hold his eyes, unspoken understanding filling the air between us. “You can do anything,” I whisper.

His eyes glitter back at me, and then he’s grinning, too. Matching my own until we probably look like a ridiculous pair of overexcited children’s toys with permanently ecstatic expressions painted on their faces.

But I don’t care.

Seeing the pride in his eyes, the excitement, the sense of value and purpose in what he’s achieved today, and will achieve now that he has the position to be able to do so...

It’s breathtaking.

This moment is everything to him. And because of that, it’s everything to me as well.

He is everything.

My breath catches in my throat as he kisses me. It catches, and it stays there until the kiss ends. Until the man I love reluctantly prises his lips away from mine and places me back to the floor so that he can accept the congratulatory hugs and handshakes from everyone else in the room.

The man I love.

I smile as I watch him talk and laugh with everyone and thank them for their help. It's like looking at a completely different person to the Reed Walker I knew a few months ago. Back when I thought he was a shallow womanizer, and I didn't care to know if there was more to him.

But there is so much more.

He's shown me all his scars. And he's seen all of mine. And I know beyond doubt that I was wrong. I was so wrong.

Reed Walker is everything I never expected him to be. And I've never been happier to be proven wrong.

I love him. I've fallen completely in love with him.

I beam at him as he seeks me out from across the room. He's just given a quick collective interview to the news crews that are here. I don't know how he managed to look and sound so calm. I'm pretty sure my heart is about to break out of my chest from beating so fast.

His eyes hold mine as he makes excuses to who he's talking with, before making his way to me.

"It's about to get very loud," he says as he reaches me. A second later, music blares out from a speaker, and the room erupts into shouts and cheers again, one of the loudest being from Stu.

"Oh, God." I laugh as people around us begin to sing and dance. There is a steady stream of champagne and hard liquor flowing, again courtesy of Stuart's organization skills, no doubt.

“Come with me.” Reed grabs my hands and pulls me from the main communal office area, down the short corridor to his private office.

He clicks the latch after closing the door and then pulls me to him.

“You okay?”

“You’re asking me if I’m okay? Reed. You just won the election. You shouldn’t be worrying about me. You should be out there chugging champagne and throwing your tie off and dancing on the table or something.”

He laughs, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I love the way your mind works, Harls. And the things you come out with.”

“You do, huh?” I bite my lip and giggle. “What, words like *Daddy*?” I lean forward and let my breath tickle his ear as I whisper.

“Especially words like that. Fuck,” he hisses, grabbing handfuls of my ass through my dress. “Today has been torture. Do you know how hard it is keeping my hands in respectable places when we haven’t had a second alone all day?”

“It’s been hard, huh?” I smile up at him as I rub him through the fabric of his pants.

“Angel...” His eyes darken as he flexes his fingers against my ass. “I need you. I can’t wait any longer.”

He moves me back and unfastens his belt with one hand, maneuvering me over to the desk with the other.

I walk backward, drinking up the lust in his hooded eyes as he rolls his lips and lets out a low groan when I wriggle out of my panties and hand them to him. He lifts them to his nose, keeping his eyes on mine as he inhales, and then he pushes them into the pocket of his suit pants.

“We don’t have long before they realize you’re missing and wonder where you are,” I say as I turn and rest my palms on the smooth, cool surface.

“Let them fucking wonder,” Reed growls as he pushes my dress up around my waist and sucks in a breath. “You’re stunning, Harley. Now bend over for me.”

He pushes me down so my chest is on the desk and my cheek is pressed against the neatly stacked paperwork. Then he strokes his hand over my ass, sliding it over the curve. There’s a slight break in the air before his palm connects with my skin, slapping me, sending a sting racing over my skin before he soothes it with his mouth, kissing and sucking gently. The contrast of pain and pleasure has me groaning as arousal floods between my thighs, calling out for him to touch me.

“Reed... please.”

“Please what, Angel?” he growls, his lips leaving my skin.

“I need you. Please,” I whimper, feeling exposed, spread out like this for him with my ass in the air.

There’s the sound of a zipper being undone and then warm, slick skin between my legs as he rubs the head of his cock through my folds.

“Yes. More.” I reach back blindly with one arm to pull him closer. He catches my hand in his and puts his solid cock in my palm.

“This, Angel? You want me to fuck your tight little cunt with this?”

“Yes,” I whimper as his precum smears over my forearm.

“Suck it off,” he instructs, guiding my wrist to my lips. I dart my tongue out greedily and lick off the wetness that’s glistening on my skin.

“Good girl.” He sounds like he’s smiling, but it soon turns to a growl as he pushes inside me from behind, forcing my cheek into the paperwork.

“God,” I cry out. “Please, Reed. I need it hard. I need you... I need—”

“You’ve got me,” he groans as he pistons into me, driving himself in to the hilt until his thighs meet mine. “You’ve got me, Harley. You’ve had me such a long fucking time.”

I unravel beneath him, shuddering as he pumps into me, one of his hands grasping my hip, the other reaching around and stroking my slick, swollen clit. We fuck like that, the desk creaking beneath us. The sound will be drowned out in the main office by the loud music. But here, where it’s just the two of us, it echoes off the walls as my body vibrates to a different bass. One that’s running through it with every movement of his. One that’s growing and swelling inside me, telling me he’s close.

“Come for me, Harls.” He keeps rubbing my clit as his pace increases.

It’s more than I can bear, and I squeeze my eyes shut and scream as I come. Hard.

“Fuck, I can feel you squeezing me, sucking in my cock... Oh God, fuck...”

Reed’s hand on my hip tightens, and he keeps rubbing my orgasm out of me with his other as he groans and spills inside me. The two of us are a mess of pants and moans as we come together, riding it out in one delicious, wet, hot wave.

He stills, his breathing heavy as he folds forward, laying his chest over my back and kissing my shoulder. “You’re perfect, Mrs. Walker.”

I pant out a small giggle. “Technically, my employment ended when the results were read out.”

“Really? It’s like that, is it?” He kisses my shoulder again. “You know, that can only mean one thing.”

“What’s that?” I sigh dreamily as his kisses move to my neck, sending warmth radiating through me.

“It means you really *wanted* to fuck me this time.” He flexes his cock inside me, the movement making me shudder.

“Were we both just pretending the other times then?” I suck in a breath as he nips my neck gently.

“Never. You had me Harley-trapped from day one,” he murmurs against my skin, kissing me again.

I laugh. “Harley-trapped? I Harley-trapped you?”

“Sure did, Angel. I’m a total fucking goner.”

I laugh again as his chest vibrates, and he joins me in a moment of blissful silliness.

“Reed?”

“Yes, Angel?”

I bite my lip, hesitating over what I’m about to say. I should know beyond doubt that this is real for him after all we’ve been through and shared. But still, my heart flutters and my stomach is in knots, knowing that he could send it all crashing down.

“It’s not a trap if you want to stay,” I finally say.

“I want to stay,” he answers before I even finish, making me laugh again. “Please. I want to fucking stay.” He laughs as he pulls his body from mine and brings me to my feet and turns me around to face him.

His laugh fades to a breathtaking smile as smoky-quartz eyes sear into my soul.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Then his lips are on mine again. Kissing me. Scrambling my thoughts. The only one I can still decipher is...

I want to stay, too.



“Here they are!” Stuart pipes up as we slip back into the party. His eyes flit to mine and he gives me a knowing smile, summoning a flush of heat to my cheeks.

“I’m going to grab a drink. Do you want one?” I ask Reed, gesturing to the table the makeshift bar has been set up on.

“Sure, whatever you like, Angel,” he says as he’s pulled into a back-slapping hug by someone.

I smile at him to let him know I’m all right and then make my way over to the drinks. Reed was right. Today has been crazy busy. I look around at the sea of elated people, dancing and drinking. It doesn’t look like the night is anywhere near over, either.

My cell buzzes in my small clutch that I kept in Reed’s office for the day. I only picked it up now as it has a mini packet of wipes for me to clean up with in it.

I place my purse on the table and take out my cell with one hand as I pick up a glass of water and chug a long, cool drink with the other. The message is from an unknown number and has a video attached.

Unknown: Blast from the past.

I click play, my eyes widening as the grainy image comes into view. My fingers lose their grip on the glass of water, and it crashes to the floor, splintering into pieces.

No.

Sickness ravages my body in one merciless strike. Like a guillotine, cutting off all light until only darkness remains. Goosebumps claw their way over my skin as I struggle not to retch. Not to retch and then crumble into bloodied pieces across the floor.

“Are you all right?” someone asks.

But their voice sounds far away.

Phone clutched to my chest, I snap my head side to side, frantically searching for Reed.

“I... I’m fine, thank you,” I mutter.

I spot him. He’s right over the other side of the room, deep in conversation with somebody. As if sensing me, he looks up and I give him my best ‘everything is fine’ smile as he looks at me, puzzled.

“Are you sure?” the same someone asks.

I nod apologetically in her direction. “I’m just a little dizzy. I’m going to get some air.”

My feet weave their way through the room as if on autopilot as my blood pounds in my ears. When I push through the doors and down the lobby steps into the Manhattan night, I gasp. I bend over and gasp, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. Each one reduces the pounding in my ears by a trace amount. But the sickness remains. A suffocating toxin that’s threatening to take over my entire body and mind if I let it.

I raise my cell phone. I’m gripping it so tightly that my knuckles have turned white.

Then I click play to watch the video again.


It can’t be what I think it is.

The image is grainy, but the man... the brown wavy hair...

My stomach heaves and I lean one palm against the side of the building and gag, bringing up the glass of water, tinged with acid.

It can't be.

Please, God. It can't be.



Chapter Twenty-Three



Reed

“WHERE’S HARLEY?”

“She stayed at home. She’s exhausted. Griffin and Maria’s baby pigeon hatched yesterday, and she’s been helping feed it every two hours.”

I crack my knuckles as I look at Stuart and slide into the seat of the backstage waiting area. We’re at a news studio, and I’m fresh from the make-up room, about to do a live interview. It’s been two days since I was announced as the Mayor Elect for the city, and I feel like all I’ve done is interview after interview. It’s all good, though. It gives me time to voice my gratitude to those who voted for me and to try and win over the support of those who didn’t. I can talk about the improvements I plan to make, and the benefits they will bring to the city.

“She told me that was going to happen any day.” Stuart shakes his head, his lips curling into an amused smile. “Wow, that must be more full-on than this. She likes animals though, doesn’t she?”

“She does.” I crack the knuckles on my other hand, not finding any relief.

“You know, for a guy who just landed his dream job, you sure look pleased. In fact, I’d go as far as to say you look about as happy as if you’d

landed in a nest of biting ants... dick first.”

I mumble an incoherent response, but Stuart won't leave it damn well alone. He knows me too well and can tell when something's off.

“C'mon, Walker. Tell me what I can do to get that charming smile on your face in the next”—he checks his Rolex—“ten minutes. Because that's how long it is until you're up.”

“I'm fine. I'm great,” I lie. What else can I say? That my girlfriend has practically moved out to look after a featherless chick around the clock? That I miss her more than anything? But that I could deal with it in the short term if I knew it was making her happy?

Except I can't because she's not.

Maria named the bird Rosie. Looking after her like this would usually mean Harley would be in her element. Her eyes would sparkle the way they do when she's excited, and she would likely talk non-stop about baby bird stuff and random facts she's read about them while pacing around in those pink, fluffy slippers. But the slippers have been abandoned in our hallway, taunting me with her absence each time I pass them. And when I went up to their apartment last night, Harley was taking a nap and never woke when I sat next to her on the guest bed. Then this morning, she was in the shower with the door locked, and I could barely make out what she was saying through the door. A mumbled 'see you later' or something to that effect.

Something's wrong.

I can sense it. This isn't her. The one time I managed to get her on the phone, the dullness in her voice told me enough. Something has sucked the essence out of her. Sucked out what makes her Harley. She told me she's just tired from Rosie's intense schedule. Maria has sourced some bird charity to take her that will release her into the wild once she's big enough.

They're coming tomorrow morning to collect her. So, for now, at least, it looks like Harley won't be coming home. She insisted Rosie shouldn't be moved to our apartment overnight, as it wasn't good to disturb her. And she also refused to have me stay at Griffin's with her, despite me trying to convince her. She said I need my sleep with all the work I have going on. But she doesn't understand. I *can't* sleep when she's not in my arms. I had the worst fucking night's sleep of my life last night, knowing something has upset her and she won't tell me what.

That's what fucking hurts the most.

She won't tell me. After everything, she still doesn't what? Trust me? Want to share her life, her worries with me? Can't talk to me?

The not knowing is hell.

"Just a bad night's sleep, that's all," I say to Stuart, avoiding looking him directly in the eyes.

I hate lying. Not that it is a lie. But it's a half-truth. I can't say any more, though. Not when I don't even know what the fuck is going on myself. She started acting differently on election night. She disappeared, and I found her outside saying she had gotten hot and needed some air. But there's more to it than that. I know there is. I've been wracking my brain as to who she spoke to that night and what could have happened to upset her, but I have nothing.

Nothing.

Except this gut-wrenching rawness low in my stomach. Deep and instinctual, like a warning. Fight or flight.

I know without a doubt I will fight for Harley. There's no scenario in the world where I wouldn't fight for her if she's in trouble. So that leaves the other half of the equation...

Flight.

Why do I get the sickening feeling Harley is distancing herself from me? Not just physically, but emotionally? And why the hell would she when everything between us is so perfect?

The only thing that's changed is me winning the election. And the joy on her face when it was announced was genuine. The light in her eyes, the beaming smile on her face... I didn't make that up.

She was happy.

What the hell could have changed so drastically in less than forty-eight hours?

A studio assistant comes into the room and gives me a nod that it's time. It's a welcome distraction from where my mind was taking me.

"See, it's all good." I turn and flash Stuart my practiced smile as I rise from my seat and button my suit jacket with one hand. This is my signature setting, calm on the outside, in control. No matter what headfuck scenarios are playing out in my mind. A trait that will serve me well in the role of mayor. Only show them what's on the surface. What they need to know.

"All right, Mr. Mayor." Stuart cocks an eyebrow and smirks. "Just keep your face like that and we're all good."

Yeah. We're all good.

If only it were as easy as a perfect fake smile.



"I think that was one of your best interviews to date." Stuart chews a mouthful of his sandwich as we take a short break from discussing who I want to appoint to different city departments. One of my powers as mayor

allows me to select who I wish to run as Commissioner for the Fire, Police, Education, Housing, and Transport Departments.

“Good. I’m glad I got my key points across.” I finish my lunch and throw the wrapper across the room, expertly landing it in the trash can.

“That was luck.” Stuart chuckles as I shrug my shoulders. Humble in victory. “But I’m glad you’re looking less like you just smelled a week-old shit. Whatever’s cheered you up since this morning has my extreme gratitude.”

I don’t tell him that it’s the gif Harley texted me earlier. One of a sleepy puppy that keeps almost dropping off, until finally, it lands face first in its dinner bowl. She’d written the words, *‘This is me’* underneath, and then sent another text immediately after saying, *I’m sorry I’ve not been home. I miss sleeping in your arms. I miss finding you’ve stolen my shampoo again. I miss running my fingers through the hair at the nape of your neck. And I miss hearing you call me Angel. It’s been less than forty-eight hours and I miss you as if it’s been forty-eight years.*

Her words brought a lump the size of Brooklyn to my throat, and I dialed her immediately and we had a few moments to talk before I let her go, hearing the exhaustion in her voice, and knowing she needed to nap while she could.

But it was enough.

It was enough to tide me over until tonight. Because there’s no fucking way I’m spending another night apart. I will camp on Griffin’s kitchen floor and feed Rosie every second, if that’s what it takes to be back with Harley again.

“You know what is going to cheer me up even more?” I ask Stuart as I pick up some paperwork from the desk. “Getting the men and women I

want running these departments. The ones I know will put their heart into it, see it as a privilege to serve the people of this city, and do the role justice.”

“Amen to that.” Stuart grins, tossing his sandwich wrapper toward the trash can and smirking at me when it goes in. “Who’s first?”

“Okay. So, Lisette Gregson in housing. I want her to stay. She’s made some great decisions. She was one of Dennis Vincent’s smarter choices.”

Stuart snorts. I know what he’s thinking. She was the previous Mayor’s *only* smart choice. Turns out even jerks like Dennis get it right sometimes.

“But as for George Yates?”

“I know what you’re going to say.” Stuart grimaces. “And I agree. No doubt about it. He’s got to go.”

I nod as we decide the fate of the current Police Commissioner, who’s served two terms under Dennis Vincent. Two cockroaches sticking together. I had my suspicions even before Dennis leveraged his position to pardon a known drugs kingpin and got him off with a light warning and slap on the wrist. He would have had assistance inside the NYPD to help sink that shit. I can’t prove it. But I can do this. *Bye-bye, George.*

“See.” The corners of my mouth lift as I look at Stuart. “Told you this would cheer me up.”

An hour later and we’re heads down, discussing my final choice for the position of Deputy Mayor, when there’s a knock at the door. One of the campaign team pokes his head around the door.

“Sorry to interrupt, but you have a visitor.”

“Oh?” I rise from my chair, almost knocking it onto the floor with eagerness. My chest lifts as I hope to see Harley appear in the doorway.

“She said her name’s Bea.”

“Oh.” The sound falls from my lips like wet earth sliding off a churchyard shovel.

“What does she want?” Stuart echoes my exact thoughts, and I throw my pen down on the desk before I cross the room.

“I’ll speak to her. Give me five minutes, then we’ll get straight back to where we were.”

I walk out into the main office. Most of the team has gone now that the election is over. And the few that have stayed to help and will probably have roles once I officially take office in six weeks’ time are at lunch.

Bea stands in the center of the room in a royal blue dress, black heels that look like weapons, and a shiny, red-lipped smile that may as well be a poison apple. I find it hard to believe that we ever dated, however brief. I may not have had the most honorable intentions in my encounters with the opposite sex since our relationship ended, but none of the women I used to acquaint myself with shared the same hardness in their eyes that Bea does.

When I hit my low point all those years ago, she was the first one out the door. She realized she wasn’t engaged to an up-and-coming music producer, as she had allowed herself to believe, and that was that. She did me a favor. I’ve always hated break-up conversations. Finding her gone one day with a note that simply said, ‘We aren’t going to work. It’s over’, was the best luck I’d had in months.

Bea knows what she wants. And that’s her priority every time. She’s heartless and places value on her status rather than in her relationships. Her and Graham are a fine match.

“Bea. This is a surprise.” I keep my tone polite but clipped. Whatever she’s come to say, she can say fast. Stuart and I have a few more things to

go over, and then I'm going home to see Harley. And no one, especially not Bea, is going to make me miss a second.

"Yes," she drawls as her eyes assess me, a brow arching as her gaze passes over my crotch and to my hands on my hips. "Well, I wanted to congratulate you in person. I understand why you were voted in."

I tip my chin, my back remaining ramrod straight. "Thank you."

"I expect you have a lot to figure out now. Who you're going to appoint, and everything else you need to arrange." She glances around the room, an amused curl to her lips as she looks at a campaign poster with my face on it. As far as pictures of myself go, it's not bad. Harley even joked she wanted one for home to talk to when I'm out.

I take a slow breath, my shoulders relaxing as I picture Harley's smile.

"Actually, the majority of the decisions are already made. I knew before the election where my faith lies should I be in the position to choose." The hairs on the back of my neck rise as Bea smirks at my words.

"I'm sure you did. You always were organized. And skilled at taking control." Her eyes drop down my body again, and I clench my teeth, irritation flaring inside me and puffing my chest out.

"I appreciate you stopping by," I say, allowing the suggestion in my words to invite her to leave. Instead, she walks closer to me and reaches out, trailing a blood-red nail down the lapel of my jacket. Her perfume invades my lungs as she closes the distance and suddenly hugs me, pressing her face against my neck and her tits against my chest.

What the hell does she think she's doing?

I grip both of her shoulders and move her back swiftly, every muscle in my back tightening. She looks up at me through her lashes.

"I've thought about you a lot over the years."

“I can’t say the same,” I grunt, letting her arms go. The corners of her eyes pinch. But it’s not hurt causing them to do it. Not unless hurt pride counts. Bea always fed off attention. Especially from men. She’s an attractive woman. Dark hair, tiny waist, big tits. Puffy full lips that look like she’s a natural at giving head. But even though I can see all that, the knowledge of who she is beneath it all couldn’t make me less attracted to her.

Especially now.

All I think about is blonde hair, baby blue eyes, pink lips, and a soft voice that makes me feel like I’m in fucking utopia when it sighs my name.

My Angel.

“Why are you here, Bea?” I try again. The little reminiscing for old time’s sake hasn’t worked, so I know she’ll give me the real reason for her visit.

“Like I said. I wanted to congratulate you.” She wets her lips as her eyes glance to my neck and quickly away again. “How does Harley feel about the upcoming move to Gracie Mansion?”

The tightened muscles in my back are joined by the muscles in the rest of my body hearing Bea say Harley’s name. She says it so sweetly through her parted red lips. Deadly poison.

“You didn’t come here to ask after my girlfriend.”

The corners of Bea’s lips curl down at my refusal to discuss Harley with her.

“Fine.” She tilts her chin up at me and sniffs. “I want you to consider talking to Graham. He has some very strong contacts in the city. His knowledge would be useful when choosing your commissioners.”

I swallow down the ball of rage, burning a route up my windpipe and threatening to erupt, incinerating everything in its path. I'm not surprised in the slightest. Honestly, I'm surprised Bea hasn't come sooner. The fact it's her approaching me and not Graham tells me one of two things. Either he doesn't know she's here. Or she's convinced him she can sweeten me up first. Make me remember all the non-existent good times we had together all those years ago. I can't remember a single good thing about our relationship, except the fact that she was happy to only be fucked from behind and not ask questions about why I liked it that way. Even after she saw the texts from Riley and found out about what happened, she never questioned it. She didn't care then. And she doesn't care now. Not unless it's about her.

"I'm aware Graham is very well informed to make such decisions," I say, noticing Bea's brows incline. "But I have it handled. Do thank him, though." I let the practiced smile spread over my face as her brows drop and she purses her lips.

"Okay. I see how it is." She straightens up and something flashes behind her eyes before she quickly blinks it away. "Well, good luck, Reed. Do give my regards to Harley, won't you?"

I stare at her, because like fuck am I going to do that. Harley can't stand Bea any more than I can. And Harley likes almost everyone. She even talks to plants, for fuck's sake. My lips soften at the mental image of her in those ugly cat pajamas, talking to Bruce and Beryl.

The movement of Bea flicking her long, dark hair over her shoulder brings my attention back to her as her lips lift into a tight smile. "Goodbye, Reed."

"Bea," I counter, walking her to the door and holding it open for her.

She lifts her eyes to meet mine one more time and her chest rises as though she's going to say something else. Then she breathes out slowly.

“You’ll be a good mayor, Reed.”

I watch her leave, holding my breath until she’s gone.

What the fuck was that?



Chapter Twenty-Four



Harley

“YOU NEED TO GO back at some point? There are only so many times I can tell Reed you’re asleep.”

I look at Maria as I cradle the mug of hot chocolate in front of me. Griffin took one look at my face when he came in and made it for me without saying a word and then headed into his office to give Maria and I some space. Although, I noticed he whispered a soft hello to Rosie and stroked the golden strands where her feathers will grow before he left. He’s definitely a keeper. A complicated, intense man. A lot like his best friend, Reed. Griffin is a man with a huge heart when it comes to Maria. The biggest heart for those he cares about.

Just like Reed.

“Whatever it is, I’m sure you two can work it out,” she offers.

I swallow the sweet liquid while it’s still too hot and let the burn on my tongue be the excuse I will give for the tears in my eyes, should Maria ask.

“It’s... complicated,” I whisper, my chest tightening like I’m being crushed like you see in horror movies. Two spiked walls closing in, pressing closer and closer together until they meet.

With me impaled at their center.

I think that would be less painful than this.

“Is it about him being Mayor and moving to Gracie Mansion? It’s not that far. And you’ll have that view over the water there.”

I try my best to lift my lips into something resembling a grateful smile at Maria’s attempt to help. She’s right. Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the New York Mayor, is only a half hour walk.

“Yeah.”

Maria places her hand over mine around my mug. “You’ll be on the East side and have East River and Carl Schurz Park. Granted, it’s not the size of Central Park. But it’s policed around the clock. You could take up midnight jogging if you wanted and still feel safe.” She raises her brows and we both giggle as I shake my head.

“I can definitely say that will not be happening.”

“That’s if you want to even move there. Don’t feel like you must. Living here with Reed is different. You had an arrangement. I know things have changed, but if you don’t want to move in with him permanently, then that’s your decision to make. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

The air leaves my lungs and my shoulders sag. Maria’s right. He would let me move back into my apartment if that’s what I say I want. I know he will try and talk me out of it and possibly hit the roof first. Just the idea of the confusion in his eyes if I were to say that to him has my chest constricting in pain as though a billion miniature daggers are piercing it. But he would let me if he believed I would be happier. I know he would.

“You’re mine, Harley. I will protect you with my life.”

He said that, and a whole lot more. Reed will do anything to protect me. He’s shown it, most recently when he dealt with the man who tried to

expose my Julia pseudonym from honey trapping. Thank God nothing came from it. I don't care about me, but the thought it could have affected Reed's campaign and cost him the election, it doesn't bear thinking about. He asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend to improve his public image, not destroy it. My reasons behind working for the agency won't matter. There will always be people ready to judge me on my past actions. Just like Reed said.

"People will always use your past against you."

And now someone is trying to do just that to him.

And they're putting his fate in my hands.

I look into Maria's kind eyes and give her a weak smile. "You're right. Thank you. I'll speak to him. I think I'm just a little overwhelmed with all that's gone on with the election, and then Rosie stealing our sleep." My heart is heavy in my chest as the lie rolls easily off my tongue. I've never lied to Maria. But I can't tell her the truth.

I wish I could.

Maria's eyes dart over to the small box we've set up as Rosie's temporary home. She's currently snuggled up in a couple of bamboo face cloths underneath a heat lamp. I've welcomed the distraction her regular feeds have brought.

Maria and Griffin had a staff member from the ornithology department at Bronx Zoo on standby to come and help at the first sign of any shell cracking. But I insisted they shouldn't bother and managed to convince Griffin I was the better choice, rather than having a stranger in their apartment. He's always found it hard to trust people, and maybe it was wrong of me to exploit that to my advantage. But it seems I'm about to start making a lot of decisions I'm not proud of. Whether I want to or not.

“She certainly is. This must be what it’s like as a new parent. I’m surprised Griffin is taking to the lack of sleep so well.” Maria rests her arms on the kitchen counter and sighs happily.

“He’ll be an amazing daddy when the day comes. You two are made for each other.”

“Thanks, Harley. We got here eventually. But it wasn’t easy. It isn’t always simple where the heart is concerned.” She meets my eyes and the understanding and compassion in them almost breaks the dam holding my tears back. I swallow down the lump in my throat and nod at her. They didn’t have a simple start. So much was working against them in the beginning. Unseen forces. But they still found their way back to one another.

I wish I could say the same can happen for Reed and me.

But I don’t see how it can.

I slide out of my seat and crush Maria into a hug, hiding my face over her shoulder. It’s one thing lying to one of your best friends. But to have to look her in the eyes as I do... it breaks my heart even more. I’m surprised it’s still working, the hammering it’s taken since the election night party.

Maria’s arms tighten around my back, and she squeezes me. “Why don’t you go down and see if Reed’s back yet? Talk to him about the move. Griffin and I can manage the feeds tonight. And you can come back in the morning to see Rosie before the person from the sanctuary comes to collect her.”

“Okay.” I sniff, barely holding it together. “See you in the morning.”

I know she can sense that so much is wrong. And I wish I could share it with her. I wish I could ask for her advice, or even just sob on her shoulder at the unfairness of it all.

But I can't.

It isn't my secret to share.

I gather up my purse and tell Maria I'll collect my things in the morning. Then I decide to take the stairwell down a level instead of riding the elevator. My footsteps echo off the empty walls as I descend to mine and Reed's apartment.

Mine and Reed's.

Nothing will ever be mine and his again. It can't be. Not now.

I stop on the final step and give in to the pressure rising in my chest as I break out into gasping, wracking sobs. My back hits the cold hard wall and I slide down it until my ass lands on the step. I curl my feet underneath me and cry. Cry for me. Cry for Reed. Cry for ten years ago and what he went through.

And I cry for what I must do now.

I take my phone out of my purse and bring up the video I was sent the night of the election from an unknown number. It's the first time I've allowed myself to watch it since that night. Just the thought of what it contains has had me running to the bathroom in Maria and Griffin's apartment to throw up so many times they would probably think I was pregnant if they'd seen me.

I click play and watch as the grainy image begins to move. It's a poor picture. Like it's been filmed on an old camera. The angle makes me think it must have been positioned on a table or desk near the foot of the bed.

Hidden?

There's no sound. And I'm grateful for that, at least. It would make it even harder to witness.

Blonde hair appears first. She walks into the hotel room and then stops, looking back over her shoulder, appearing to be speaking to someone. Then she moves out of frame and returns, her hand in someone else's, pulling them along, almost playfully. But the way he sways on his feet and staggers to the side tells me he is either extremely drunk.

Or drugged.

She strokes the side of his face, brushing warm brown waves of hair away from his eyes. Then she begins to undo his shirt. His hands go up to hers and he holds them still, but she bats him off and laughs before carrying on.

She takes his shirt off, and then her hands are all over him. Touching his biceps, his shoulders, his chest. He stands there, swaying, not reciprocating her attention at all. He looks like he could pass out on the floor any second.

Then she leads him toward the bed and pushes him back. He falls onto it with all the grace of a tower block crumbling after demolition.

Out cold.

Then she climbs over the top of him.

I pause the video as I retch. Swallowing down hot cocoa laced with vomit. The video still has more to play. The menu bar isn't even a quarter of the way along. But I can't watch it any further. This is as far as I got the night of the election. I know what's on there. I don't need to see it.

Reed said there was no evidence. That the police couldn't help him when he reported it. Griffin and Riley couldn't find anything to help uncover what had happened to him. But they were wrong. For whatever reason, it was so well hidden that no one found it. No one ever saw it.

Until now.

Now I have a video of Reed's assault from ten years ago sitting on my phone. Burning a hole in it. And searing a giant wound into my chest at the same time.

To start with, I couldn't understand why I was sent it. Or by who. The message gave nothing away. And I spent the first night when we got home after the election lying in Reed's arms in bed pretending to be asleep so he wouldn't worry. But the truth is, I never slept that night.

Maybe I will never truly sleep well again.

There was no explanation with the video.

Nothing.

Why was I sent it and not Reed?

Then earlier today, I received another text from the same number.

I wipe my eyes and swallow down my hiccups as I open it and read it for the millionth time.

Unknown: Make sure Walker re-elects George Yates as NYPD Commissioner. Or this video gets released for the world to watch.

Maybe I was stupid to reply, but I did.

Me: Who is this? Why are you doing this?

Unknown: Make sure he chooses George Yates. We know you can convince him.

I've never felt so hopeless in my life. I'm numb. So numb that even silence seems to have a sound. One that rings and rings in my ears as I try to shut it out. Whoever it is has targeted me. Reed would never be blackmailed. Never. He's stronger than me. He would never let anyone have that power over him.

"People will try and use your past against you, Harls."

They must know that. They haven't chosen him. They've chosen me. We've been in the press, attending events together. We've looked like the couple in love. The couple who only have eyes for each other.

In the beginning, it was an act.

But it stopped being pretend for me a long time ago.

Anyone who has seen us together will think if they can't get what they want from Reed, then they should try me. That, if I love him, then I will do anything to protect him. Like he has done for me.

And they're right.

I will do anything for him.

I know he'll question me if I show anything more than a mild interest in who he's electing as commissioner. He knows I don't have the knowledge of the New York political circuit to understand what I'm suggesting. He would see right through me.

But that's not why I can't do it.

Reed wanted to run for mayor to improve residents' lives. To bring positive changes. Whatever reason these people want George Yates to be re-selected can only be sinister. I can't do that to Reed. I can't do anything that will darken his dreams. Anything that could stand in the way of what he has fought for all this time. What he has worked so hard for.

I can't let anyone use his past against him. He told me it was something he could never accept.

"Don't look at me any differently, Harls. I couldn't stand it."

"It makes me physically sick... people... they can never leave their past behind them because others won't let them. That can destroy you more than the event itself."

“I would sacrifice myself for you if it meant no one would ever try and hurt you, especially by using your past against you.”

Whoever this is obviously thinks I can persuade Reed because of our romantic relationship. But if that were to end...

I draw in a shaky breath as I slide my phone back into my purse and pull out some mints, crunching a couple down quickly, and then throwing two more into my mouth.

If that were to end... if we were to end... then they wouldn't have that leverage anymore. I'm probably being stupidly naïve. They will try something else. They might still release the video, anyway.

But it could buy me time.

Buy me time to try to figure out who's behind this.

I'm going behind Reed's back. But I've asked Griffin for help. Reed told me he saved him when he was at his lowest. Griffin knows everything. Him and Riley. And maybe Stuart. I don't know. Maybe not Stuart, but he's his campaign manager. Would he know everything about Reed? Isn't that their job? To pre-empt horrendous situations like this?

Griffin told me not to worry. That we would get them. That they wouldn't get away with it. And I wish I had his optimism. He's livid someone is doing this. But I've worked with him enough years to know the lengths he will go to when he's determined. He will help. It will work. It has to.

He said we should tell Reed. And the police. He insisted. Griffin might be my boss during working hours, but this isn't his call to make. If the police investigate, then it means handing over the video to them. More people will see it. They will all see what Reed went through.

I can't allow it.

I can't let people see it.

What would that do to him? What would it be like for him? Knowing people are watching and scrutinizing every minute detail of something that was done to him. Something he can't even remember fully himself.

There must be another way.

I told Griffin I would resign and never speak to him again if he tells Reed when I've asked him not to. I said I would leave New York and Maria and our friendship behind. It was an awful thing to say, and it would cut me far deeper than it would them. But I'm desperate, and it's all I have.

He was livid at me, of course. But I also saw understanding in his eyes, and maybe even respect at how much I care for Reed and will do anything for him.

He begrudgingly agreed to give me one week. One week until he tells Reed what he knows. Unless we figure it out before that.

The press will be waiting for Reed to announce his decisions over the commissioners of the agencies. And anyone who knows him and who has followed his campaign will know he's organized. They'll expect him to announce it fast. For it to take too long will arouse the blackmailer's suspicions. They might assume I've failed.

It's better that they don't think I'm an option at all.

It's the only way.

I texted Reed earlier to tell him how much I miss him. Then he called, and we spoke on the phone. Hearing his voice caused my emotions to come pouring out of me, which will only make what I must do even harder. He'll be suspicious over why I seem to have a sudden change of heart about us. But it's better for him to think I'm having doubts, rather than...

I squeeze my eyes shut as I force away the threat of more tears that burns along my lower lashes. Then I swallow down the creeping nausea that's


taken over my stomach. I'm lying to myself. I can tell myself I am just buying time. If it makes it easier, then I can lie to myself. But I know that once I leave, I won't be able to come back. Even if Griffin can find out who sent the video, they may have copies. There's nothing to stop them from releasing it one day, coming back to try and use me as a weapon against Reed. Target my love for him and taint it until I agree to their demands to protect him.

This is for the best.

I'm making the only decision I can right now, in an impossible situation.

Now I just need to decide how to do it.

How do I break up with the only man I have ever been in love with?



Chapter Twenty-Five



Reed

“HARLS? WHERE HAVE YOU been?” I bolt up from the sofa as she comes through the front door.

The second she sees me, she flings her purse on the marble floor and runs to me. I catch her in my arms as she almost knocks me flying. She feels even smaller in my embrace than usual. Like the past forty-eight hours have worn her down. Chipped away at her somehow.

“I went straight to Maria and Griffin’s when I got back, and they said I’d just missed you. That was half an hour ago, Angel. Where have you been?”

“I... I called Mom for a chat. I went out on the roof terrace for some air.” Her voice is muffled against my shirt.

“Okay.” I dip my face to her hair and inhale her familiar scent.

“How was your day?”

I kiss her hair, stroking her back as she stays glued to me. “It was productive. Stuart and I got a lot done... And Bea stopped by.”

Harley jolts back from me but only manages to create a small space between us because I’m holding her so firmly. Her eyes dart to my shirt collar and they widen before she looks at me.

“Did she kiss you?”

“What? Of course not. Why would you even think that?”

Her fingers brush my jaw, and my breath stills as I revel in her skin on mine after what feels like a lifetime.

“You have red lipstick on your collar.”

Harley’s fingertips trace a featherlight route down the side of my neck to my shirt. It takes all my strength not to groan out loud at how good the contact feels. If this were any other day, and I wasn’t so concerned over what’s going on in her head at this moment, then we would both be naked, and I would be claiming her body with my own by now.

My Angel. Me. Together in every sense of the word.

I swallow, heat stirring in my dick at the way Harley’s fingers have moved back to my jaw. Tiny strokes, one after the other, back and forth as she gazes into my eyes.

“She congratulated me on winning the election. And then she hugged me and said she had thought about me over the years since our relationship ended. It was weird.” My spine stiffens and I get the urge to crack my knuckles before Harley’s soft voice washes over me.

“Who can blame her? Especially when you wear these.”

Her breath is soft as her eyes roam over my glasses. I just watch her. Taking in her beauty, and the fact that she is content to just look at me, and me at her.

Nothing else matters when it’s just the two of us like this.

“I forgot to take them off before I left work. I was in too much of a hurry to come home.” I reach up with one hand to remove them, but Harley’s eyes constrict at the corners, and she shakes her head.

“Don’t... will you...will you keep them on a little longer? I like seeing you in them.” Her eyes soften and she brings her other hand to my jaw as well.

“I’d do anything for you, Angel,” I say, with a soft smile, expecting her to return it, or to say something.

She doesn’t.

Instead, she stands on her toes and crushes her lips against mine in a deep kiss that I feel in every fiber of my body. I hold her close as she sinks into me, kissing me like she has the saddest love song playing in her head. I screw my eyes up and cup her face in my hands, wanting whatever it is that’s upsetting her to leave her. If only I could kiss it away. Let my lips show her exactly what she means to me. Let them reassure her that she’s safe with me. That she can open up and tell me what’s going on.

Let me *help* her.

Because I know what it feels like to need help and not know how to ask for it.

We drop down onto the sofa and I pull her into my lap, our lips sealed together as I encourage her to wrap her legs either side of mine and straddle me. To think I never did this with her before. I avoided it, albeit subconsciously. But now? Now I couldn’t love it more. Holding her, seeing her above me. I love having her any way I can. But this is special. Her on top of me, controlling the pace, is for her and her alone. A new memory that completely eradicates even a trace of old, lingering ones.

Harley’s fixed the tiny broken part of me I didn’t know still existed. The tiny remnant of darkness that was still embedded in my soul. She’s done that. She shone her light on it.

Her.

“Harls... I...” I break our kiss and hold her eyes, the words held in my heart rushing to the tip of my tongue. The words that will tell her exactly what she means to me. How I feel about her. How much I adore her and never want to spend a day without her.

“Reed.” She presses a finger to my lips and her eyes shine as she draws in a shuddery breath. When she sees me exhale, she takes her finger away and slips her hand between us, pulling down my zipper. “Please, Reed. Don’t say anything. I need you to kiss me. Kiss me and make me... make me...” Her lip trembles.

“Hey... hey,” I soothe.

My heart twists in pain seeing her like this. This isn’t her. She’s bright and bubbly. A light to my dark. Anything less than a luminescent Harley is soul-shattering. Whatever this is, I need to fix it.

I wrap her face in my hands. “Whatever you need, Angel. Just tell me.”

“You, Reed. I just want you,” she says, her voice tiny, but weighed down with sadness.

“I want you, too. Always,” I promise her.

I drop my hand to hers and free my cock, then drag her panties to the side beneath her dress. She rises, then slides down onto me, gasping softly against my lips as I moan against hers and our bodies lock together. We kiss over and over until she pulls back to ride me.

I hold her hips and watch as her eyes flutter closed while she tilts her head back, savoring the way I’m filling her. I move one hand down and stroke her clit in deliberate circles, matching her pace.

She’s beautiful. She’s really fucking beautiful. And it’s not just because she has her warm, tight, silky little cunt wrapped around my cock.

It’s her.

It's always been her.

She's in her own world right now. Wrapped up in pleasure. The anguish in her voice gone as she sighs out my name and sinks down onto me. The tension in her shoulders, in her chest, gone, as she rotates her hips and grinds against my thumb.

And her eyes...

She opens them and I'm blasted with baby blue that has the power to reach down and caress my soul. They search mine, an unspoken confession held in them the second before she clenches around me.

"I know, Angel," I whisper.

Then she comes, pulling my lips back to hers again as I spill inside her at the same time.

"Reed," she cries, and I swear I taste salt in her kiss, but as our bodies slow, she drops her head against my shoulder, pressing it into the crook of my neck. "Just hold me like this. Hold me like this and pretend you never have to let go." Her breath is warm against my neck, and her arms are tight around my neck. But her voice is tired, weary, and flat.

"I never will let go, Harls. I told you. You're mine."

I stroke her hair and press kisses to her forehead, losing track of how long we stay like this. Of how long we just hold each other without saying anything, our bodies still connected. I hold her until her breathing slows and the shaky breaths leave her body, replaced by slow, rhythmic ones.

"Harls?"

She doesn't answer and I know she's asleep.

"I've got you, Angel," I whisper as I ease us apart and carry her to bed. She doesn't even stir as I lay her down and take her dress off, so she's just in her underwear.

I tuck her beneath the covers and climb in behind her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her against me to keep her warm. Just like that first night. God, how much has changed? I used to think she hated me. Well, maybe not hated, but strongly disliked. I chuckle at the memory of how pissed she would look each time I stopped by to see Griffin. Like I was a major inconvenience. For someone so gentle-natured, she sure knew how to make her feelings known back then.

Now... now I'm the luckiest man on the planet.

I lift my head and watch her sleep. She's peaceful like this. I only hope that peace stays with her when she wakes and that she can find it easy to let her feelings known again.

Because fuck, I need to know what's going on in her head.

I need to know where my girl went.



“Reed?” A soft voice breaks into my dream, and I couldn't be more relieved. It was more of a nightmare. Harley was in it. But she was with someone else. Another man with his arm around her. And when I tried to talk to her, she just walked right through me. Passed through like I was a ghost.

I blink my eyes open.

I'm lying on my back and it's dark. Only a soft glow from the city's lights from where I forgot to close the drapes provides a little light to the room.

“What's wrong?” I pull her to my side and dust my lips over her forehead. It's still the middle of the night. She was exhausted. Something

must have caused her to wake.

“I need you to make love to me... Please.”

I tip my chin down so I can see her face. Her eyes are shining in the dim light. And her cheeks are glistening too.

Fuck. She's been crying.

How can I have been asleep and missed her crying next to me? Guilt envelops me like a dark fog, making my voice hoarse as a lump sticks in my throat.

“You don't need to ask, Angel.”

I roll on top of her and press my lips over hers, kissing her gently. Then I kiss her cheeks. I kiss away the warm, fresh tears. I kiss her eyelids to keep more from falling. And only when I've kissed every inch of her beautiful face more times than I can count, do I seal my lips over hers, and kiss them again.

Her hands slide to the nape of my neck, stroking my hair, her tongue searching out mine as I push inside her. She wraps her legs around my back and pulls me close, holding me.

“Whatever it is, Harls. We can deal with it together,” I whisper against her lips, catching the sob that's threatening to leave them in another kiss. “Nothing is stronger than the way I feel about you, Angel. Nothing. You just need to talk to me.”

She tightens her grip on my hair and keeps kissing me.

“Just talk to me,” I plead gently as I slide inside her over and over. She moans against my lips and her body shudders beneath me. “Are you pregnant?” I kiss away another small sob as she clutches me hard. “Because if you are, you don't need to worry. I couldn't think of anyone I'd want a family with. Other than you.”

“No,” she mumbles, sounding almost regretful.

“Then what is it? I know something’s wrong.”

“I...” She looks into my eyes and swallows. “Tomorrow. It can wait until tomorrow. I need you tonight, Reed. *Please.*”

The turmoil is in her eyes again and my heart feels like someone is carving into it as I clench my teeth so hard, I’m surprised they don’t crack.

“Reed?” she says again, stroking the back of my neck. “I’m okay. I promise. I’m just tired and emotional.” Her eyes flick between mine. “And more than anything, I want to just be together. You and me. And not think of anything else. Can we do that? Please?”

“Will it make you happy?”

Her lips drop open as if she’s about to speak, then she closes her mouth again and nods.

“Then I will make love to you until dawn breaks, Angel. Longer if you want me to.”

She lifts her head, placing her forehead against mine.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I would do anything for you.”

Her eyes flash with something, but she blinks it away quickly and drops her head back down, granting me access to the fluttering pulse point in her neck. I kiss and suck it, savoring every moan and whimper that leaves her lips as I start to move inside her again.

And I make love to her all night long.


Just like she wants.

A part of me wishes that for the first day in the history of creation, dawn doesn’t come.

Anything to stay here with her.

Even an apocalypse.

Because something tells me that once the sun comes up, everything is going to change.



Chapter Twenty-Six



Harley

REED MURMURS AGAINST MY lips, and I kiss him again. Just like I've kissed him every other time that I've been afraid he's about to say something I can never unhear. Something that will make this morning and what I must tell him even harder.

“Harley, I...”

“Ssh.” I press a finger to his lips and replace it with my lips again. “I love kissing you too much.”

“Harls... I need to piss,” he groans with a chuckle, and I finally let him go, admiring his muscular ass as he walks into the ensuite.

We barely slept a wink. We spent the night tangled up in each other. Our bodies joined more often than they were apart. A mess of limbs, mouths, slick arousal, and orgasms. *Lots of orgasms.*

My muscles protest as I stretch. I ache. A delicious ache. But one tinged with heartbreak. The ache will fade, but some weird part of me is glad that I will still be feeling Reed days from now.

Not that I could ever forget.

But our time is almost up. Every love song comes to an end. Even the ones sweetest to the ears.

I don't think I will ever be ready for today. Maybe I should have said what I needed to last night. But I couldn't. I just needed one more night with him. I knew the second I walked through the door and saw him last night that I couldn't do it then. My feet ran to him before my brain could even process how selfish I was being by prolonging the inevitable. But I couldn't stop myself.

I want him like the desert wants the rain.

The few months we've had together have been a blessing. Even though it hurts, and I know it will only get worse today, not better, at least I can *feel*. At least I've known what it's like to feel like this. To find that person.

To find my lobster.

The honey trapping and Brett's accident all made me closed off. I didn't believe in happily ever after. I believed in happy until someone else came along and caught your eye. Like a part of a person is always still looking. Never satisfied. Never grateful for what they have.

But I know that every part of me has only seen him these past few months. He satisfies me in ways I never even thought possible. And not just the sex. He supports me, he makes me laugh, he makes me stronger, makes me see things differently.

And he sees me.

For that, I will be forever grateful.

He's always done what he thinks I've needed. Even last night. He did exactly what I asked him to. He made love to me all night. He never stopped. Each time rolled into the next as we kissed and held each other. He talked softly to me, asking me if I remembered our first night together. If I

remembered Freddy, the goat. If I remembered sitting up watching movies together. Dancing together on our first fake date. Getting photographed by the press during our first real public kiss.

Reed Walker made love to both my body and my soul all night long.

Maybe he was never going to say the words that I've kissed so desperately off his lips before they can form. Before they can change things between us forever by being said. Before they can make me question everything I am about to do.

But he doesn't have to.

Last night told me everything I needed to know.

I *am* doing the right thing.

I need to do what's best for him now.

Because this man... this *incredible* man. Deserves the world. He deserves it all. I can't let anyone threaten that. I can't let anyone use his past against him. I can't let anyone taint what he is trying to do by following his heart and giving it to the city.

I can't do that.

They will always have something to use against Reed. An axe suspended so dangerously above him. And for as long as they think we are a couple who are madly in love, they will have it over me, too.

I can't be the one who makes it crash down.

Leaving is the best option. It's the only way I can ensure that he's okay. For now, at least. But that's better than nothing.

"Are you going to talk to me now?" Reed lies down on the bed next to me, resting his head on his elbow as the smoky-quartz eyes I love so much assess me. The morning light catches the golden flecks in them, and the sight makes my throat constrict.

“I have to say goodbye.” My voice is unsteady, and I gulp in a breath of air to calm the shaking that’s threatening to overrun my body.

Reed’s beautiful eyes screw up as he looks at me. “Harls, what are you —?”

Panic grips me, making the inside of my chest feel like it’s turning into ice.

I can’t do this.

The way he looks at me... like I’m the most precious thing in the world... I can’t bear to see that look vanish.

Not yet.

“To Rosie!” I jump up out of bed and rush to the bathroom, leaving Reed lying on the bed. “I have to say goodbye to Rosie!”

My voice is shrill as I turn on the shower.

“Right now?” Reed’s deep voice rumbles behind me, and I jump as his warm, strong hands hold the tops of my arms and his thumbs caress my shivering muscles. I’m grateful he can’t see my face as I spout lie after lie about how the bird charity might come early, and that I cannot miss a minute of goodbye time. That I promised Maria I would be early.

I talk and talk. Filling the silence.

I don’t shut up long enough for Reed to get a chance to say or ask anything. But he seems more than happy to listen, smiling down at me as we shower together, and he washes my hair for me.

The scent of my coconut shampoo impregnates the steam around us and makes it seem like we are in our very own tropical hideaway.

One where the past can’t hurt us.

If only.

It's still ridiculously early when we knock on Maria and Griffin's penthouse door. It takes a while for anyone to answer. Eventually, Griffin throws the door open, looking irritated and wearing just a pair of fitted boxer shorts.

I clear my throat and keep my eyes on his face.

"Morning!" I try to sound bright and breezy as I walk in.

Griffin gives Reed a puzzled look, but he just raises his brows and shrugs his shoulders.

"Maria knew I was coming," I say, hoping to avert Reed's attention away from the fact that Griffin was obviously not expecting visitors this early.

Griffin looks at me. "I'll go get her."

I silently thank the ceiling that he didn't correct me. Didn't let Reed know I just told him another lie. One lie of the many which are about to come. Griffin might know about the video. But I didn't tell him that I'm leaving today.

Saying those words once will be hard enough. And Reed deserves to be the first to hear them.

"Morning." Maria walks into the room and over to me. Her dark hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and she's wearing loungewear that looks like she just threw on quickly. She always looks immaculate, so I know us arriving early has caught her off guard. But I couldn't risk staying alone in the apartment with Reed any longer.

"Sorry," I whisper in Maria's ear, so only she can hear as we hug.

"It's no problem," she whispers back.

"I just wanted to make sure I had time to say goodbye," I explain, as we approach Rosie's box. I peek inside and my hands fly to my mouth as

warmth radiates around my chest. She's snuggled inside the makeshift facecloth nest underneath the glow of the lamp. "She's so gorgeous."

Reed comes to join me, and his brows pull together as he tilts his head to the side. "Yeah, she's..."

Rosie shifts in the nest, her bright pink skin visible underneath her sparse fine yellow feathers. Her beak looks naked and lumpy. And she has large gray circles around her eyes. As far as baby animals go, she's... well, she's peculiar looking.

"I know she's funny looking." I reach in and stroke her back gently as she watches me with one eye. "But she's small and new to this world. And all she knows is how to love."

"I'm pretty sure all she knows is how to eat and shit and keep me up all night," Griffin grumbles from across the kitchen where he's returned, fully dressed. He wraps an arm around Maria's waist as she presses the heels of her hands into her eyes and rubs them.

"Bet you're glad you didn't stay another night," Griffin adds, directing his comment to me.

"Yes. I expect you got more sleep than us." Maria yawns, and I instinctively lean into Reed's side as his hand closes around my hip.

"Oh... yeah." I return my gaze to Rosie. Staying up all night, my body, joined with Reed's, should bring butterflies and joy. And usually it would. But all I can taste today is dread, curdling like sour milk in my gut.

Before I can stop myself, hot, fat tears are coursing down my cheeks. Burning rivers of wet, stinging despair into my skin.

"Angel," Reed murmurs into my hair, holding me to his side. "She's going to be okay. This is what she needs. She's a wild bird. They're going to take good care of her, and she'll thrive."

“I know.” I sniff, wiping my cheeks on my sleeve. There’s a fraction of a second where they are dry before more tears fall, soaking them again.

I can’t tell him that only a small percentage of these tears are for Rosie. Of course, I am sad she’s leaving. But I know it’s for the best. I know she will be happier. She’ll be wild and free. Just like anyone should be. Allowed to live their life.

Free.

“Maybe she’ll even find her way back here and grace The Songbird’s sidewalk carpet with tokens of appreciation for Griffin,” Reed jokes.

“She better fucking not!” he calls, eyeing Rosie. But his face softens, and his mouth lifts into a smile when Maria pokes him in the stomach.

The two of them start talking in quiet voices, moving around the kitchen, flicking the coffee machine on, and getting out mugs. They offer one to me and Reed, but we decline. I spend another ten minutes talking softly to Rosie and stroking her while Reed hovers nearby. He seems reluctant to leave me, even though my tears have dried to something resembling a trickle.

After my hundredth ‘last look’ at her, and another photograph snapped with my phone, we leave and head back to our apartment. Opening the front door, the weight of dread hits me in the chest immediately. My arms stiffen by my side, my fingers turning cold as I walk inside.

“She’s going to be fine,” Reed says, coming up behind me and pressing his lips against the juncture where my neck meets my shoulder.

I suck in a breath, making him pause.

“That’s not the only thing that’s been bothering you, is it?”

I turn and swallow the thick lump in my throat. But it only shifts lower, sitting over my heart instead, bringing with it a dull ache.

“No.” I shake my head, fighting the tears back. *I will pass out from dehydration at this rate.*

“Harls, what is it?”

The softness in Reed’s voice, the concern, the warmth. It’s making this so much harder. No matter how I say it, it’s going to hurt both of us.

“It’s time I leave.”

His hands are resting on my waist, and I take them in mine and look at them, studying his long, skilled fingers. Fingers that play beautiful music on his guitar... fingers that have held themselves entwined with mine when I’ve needed them. Fingers which have left imprints on my heart.

Forever.

I let them go and I bring mine back to my sides as my heart squeezes.

“What are you talking about?” Reed’s brows knit together, his eyes searching mine.

If there was any other way...

“It’s time I move out, Reed. Our arrangement’s over.”

He pauses for a moment, then his eyes crease at the corners, and he laughs, pulling me to him, wrapping me in his arms and kissing my hair.

“Fuck, Angel. I thought you were serious.” Relief floods his voice, and his chest relaxes as he exhales. My heart squeezes painfully in my chest. *He thinks I’m joking.*

I screw my eyes up and take a deep breath. My voice doesn’t even sound like mine as I speak. “I *am* serious.”

His arms stiffen around me, then he draws back so he can see my face. “What?”

My stomach bottoms out as he stares at me, his eyes going round the moment he realizes I mean it. The sight of it alone would be enough to

break me if I didn't already feel wrecked beyond repair. But I need to do this. I need to leave to protect him.

I drop my eyes down, breaking his gaze long enough so I can breathe again.

“Why the hell are you even thinking about our arrangement? We are way past that.” Reed’s voice has taken on a darker edge.

“It was just pretend, Reed. The election is over. You won it. You’re going to be mayor.” I pull completely free of his arms, putting some distance between us.

His mouth gapes open, and he steps toward me, but I move backward, further out of reach.

“If you still think that, even for one second...” He drags his hands down his face and then pushes them back into his hair. “If you even believe that for one second, then I’ve failed you. I’ve failed us. None of this has ever been fake to me. The way I feel... the way we are together... I’ve never pretended. Not once.”

I shake my head. The movement so small anyone else would miss it.

But not Reed.

“You think I won?” He stares at me.

“You did. You’re going to be mayor in a few weeks. It’s what this whole thing was about. You and me... you winning the election.”

“Christ, Harley. Can’t you see?” He screws his face up as he looks at me. “If you really believe that all of this... us... that we had an expiration date the second the election was over, then I haven’t won. I’ve lost. I’ve lost everything, Harls.”

“Reed—”

“I want you. I’ve always wanted you. I always *will* want you.” He looks at me with such intensity burning in his eyes that I have to look away before I splinter into a thousand broken-hearted pieces.

He shakes his head and exhales loudly, bending forward, dropping his head into his hands. “Are you saying it was all an act to you? Everything was... what?”

“No!” I cry suddenly, cursing myself for screwing this up so badly.

I can’t let him think that this was all fake for me. There’s no way anyone can do the things we have and not feel anything. It’s just not humanly possible. And even if it was, to have love and lose it is cruel enough. But to be told by the other person that they never truly had feelings for you at all. When you gave them all of you... Well, that’s vile.

I could never do that to him.

“Of course not... It’s just... I don’t know, all right? All I know is I can’t stay here with you.”

“Jesus Christ,” he hisses, straightening back up.

My mouth goes dry and all I can do is stand and wait, steeling myself for when his eyes meet mine again.

But nothing could prepare me for the shock and disbelief that’s clear in them as he lifts his head and stares back at me. The golden flecks are burning brighter than I’ve ever seen them.

Bright enough to see right through me and my lie if I stay here too long.

I fight to keep my voice even.

“I’m going to pack my things, Reed. And then I’m going to leave. This is what was always meant to happen. You are the mayor, just like you wanted. I got money to help my family, just like I needed. The rest was... a surprise... and I... I don’t know... It’s just all too much for me right now.

It's best if I go. I need some time alone. And you'll concentrate on work better without me."

I sound pathetic. I know I do. None of what I'm saying makes sense. How can you go from what we had to saying you want to leave? There's just no logic to it. But then, relationships and emotions defy logic most of the time. The only hope I have of convincing Reed I genuinely need this time apart is for him to accept it makes no sense. But that it is at least, real. And I mean it when I say I have to go.

Because I do.

That much has never been truer.

"That's it?" He jolts back like I've struck him. "That's fucking it?!"

I wince, watching the flames take hold, as though they're preparing to burn anything Reed felt for me straight out of his heart.

All I see is rage.

He hates me.

"I can't stay here, Reed. I can't be with you right now. I'm sorry." My throat is thick, like I could choke on my own deceit at any second. Lie after lie, protecting the small truths that are mixed in. Preventing him from seeing what's really going on.

That I'm leaving because I love him.

Because I'm in love with him.

"After everything, you just want to walk away?" His lips curl down as he sucks in a breath through his nose.

"I—"

"You're supposed to be with me, Harley. You know that. Everyone who knows us can see it. They saw it months before we did. Where is all this coming from?" He moves toward me, and I hold a hand up, afraid that I will

lose my nerve if he touches me. That I will crumble into him and confess everything.

About the video.

About his past.

About how being with me could lead to it all being used against him in the worst way.

That I will be the ruin of him.

“Don’t, Reed. Please.”

He snorts out a disbelieving breath as his eyes bulge.

“Don’t what? Don’t tell you how I’m struggling to take any of this in? That I’m struggling to comprehend the fact that my girlfriend, who I thought I had the most amazing relationship with, is now telling me she doesn’t know if she feels the same way I do? That she’s not sure about any of it. That she wants to leave?”

“Stop,” I whisper, hot tears pooling along my lower lids.

“Why, Harls? Is it too fucking hard to hear? Is that maybe because it’s a load of shit?! You think I’m fucking stupid, don’t you?”

“No... I don’t think—”

“Who the fuck is he, Harley?”

“What? Who?” I choke out, blinking back tears.

“The guy who’s about to know what it’s like to die painfully by my hands.”

My eyes freeze and I’m unable to blink. Unable to do anything except throw my hand to my mouth to stop myself throwing up. He could say anything else. Anything at all. And it wouldn’t hurt as much as what he’s insinuating. It wouldn’t send ice hurtling around my body, through my

veins as I glare at him, my tears freezing in my eyes as my hopelessness turns to anger.

Anger that he would *ever* suggest I could do something like that.

“There is no one else, Reed. And if these last few months have taught you anything about me, then it’s that I would *never* cheat.” My voice wavers more with each word as I scream at him.

He watches me, his hair falling forward as he draws in large, deep breaths, his tense shoulders rising with each one. He looks like one giant ball of pent-up fury about to explode. But all I can think about is how he assumed I would cheat.

“I can’t believe you would think that!”

“I don’t. I shouldn’t have—”

“You don’t know how hard this is for me. You don’t know anything. For someone so intelligent, you’re being a giant asshole!” I yell.

Bang.

White chips of paint fly into the air as Reed’s fist penetrates the wall a couple of meters away from where I’m standing. It goes straight into the plaster, leaving a large dent from which broken pieces fall, scattering onto the floor as he draws his hand back and curses under his breath.

The force behind his words and the punch make me jump, and I stumble back into the hall table, knocking it so hard that another crash follows almost immediately.

I look down. The floor is sprayed with dark brown and black. A mix of spilt earth and jagged, broken parts of Bruce’s pot. My face crumples and my vision blurs until all I can see is brown and black mixed together.

And green. Blurry green leaves.

“Shit, Harls. I’m sorry. He’ll be fine.” Reed’s voice rushes past me in a flash as he bends and sweeps away the green until only brown and black remain on the floor, like a pool of blood in an old black and white movie.

“It wasn’t your fault.” I suck in a breath. It shudders on the way in, making me sound like I’m gasping. “None of this is your fault.”

“Christ.” Reed’s voice has lost its edge, and instead, it’s weighed down by what sounds a lot like guilt as he moves back to stand in front of me. His eyes are shining, and his giant frame is moving up and down with slow, deliberate breaths.

The heat from his body reaches across the few inches of space between us.

We are so close. And yet, miles away.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.” His eyes follow mine to the wrecked wall. “I’m not angry at you. I’m angry at myself for saying it. I know that’s not you... Fuck. It was an asshole thing to say. You’re right, Harls. You’re right. Look at me, please.”

I force my eyes away from the wall reluctantly. I almost envy it. It will get patched up and no one will ever know how damaged it was.

I doubt either of us will be so lucky.

I look back at Reed, noting that the golden flecks have lost their wildness. But they’re still shining with a brilliance that steals my breath. Glowing with emotion.

“I don’t understand. What we have is real. You know that. If I ever for a second made you think that I was acting. All those times we... *any* of the times we... None of it has been an act for me. Not one single thing.” Reed’s shoulders straighten as he takes a deep breath to calm himself.

“Talk to me. If you’re scared because the election’s over and now we have to... I don’t know, put a label on us? Fuck, we don’t have to do anything like that. We can call it whatever the hell we want to.”

“It’s not that...”

What can I say? There’s no reason to explain it. I’m not being honest with him about the real reason I’m leaving.

“Is it Gracie Mansion? Moving in there together? We don’t have to. We can stay here. Wherever you’ll be happy.”

“Reed...” I let all the air exit my lungs, deflating them. The same way my heart feels.

Empty.

Like everything that made it complete is escaping, rushing out with each word I speak.

I grasp at straws for something to say as he waits for me to answer, concern etched into his face, causing deep lines to form between his brows.

“Yes, that’s part of it... It’s scary, and... I’m... I’m not sure how I feel about it. I just... I’ve never lived with anyone before. And now this isn’t a work thing.” I screw up my nose, searching for something else to say. “I’m not sure how I feel about it. I have my apartment, and I liked living there before, and—”

“We can do whatever you want. We can live in a fucking tent in Central Park for all I care. As long as you’re there with me.” He reaches for my hands, but I pull them away.

“It’s all gotten too serious, too fast, and it’s more than I can handle right now.” I force myself to sound strong. “I didn’t know what was going to happen between us. I didn’t plan it. I didn’t expect it. I don’t know if I want

the life that comes with being the mayor's girlfriend. Our life will never feel like our own. We won't have any privacy."

Finally, I'm saying things that are true.

"It'll be like being scrutinized by the press every day for the things we say and do. The things we wear. The places we go." I swallow and take a gamble with my next words. "And that man who could have caused so much damage if he'd known the real reason behind why when I met him, I told him my name was Julia... There will always be people like him."

I pause, knowing Reed's next words could be the most important ones I ever hear.

"He would never have gotten anywhere, Harls. I told you. I will protect you with my life. I will never let anyone use your past against you. I will never let anyone hurt you." His eyes search mine in desperation, and a strange calm settles over me, summoning a stillness in the center of my scattered thoughts.

There it is.

My sign.

The sign I am doing the right thing. Reed is telling me he would do the same for me. He *has* done the same for me. Only now it's my turn. And I don't have an option that includes staying by his side when I do it.

"I know you wouldn't. And if there was a way I could protect you, then I would do it, too." I smile sadly as he will never know just how much I mean these words. How much I am already trying to live by them.

For him.

I swallow, knowing that the next lie will be my final one. I need to leave before he sees right through me.

"It's not the life I want, Reed. I can't live like that. I'm sorry."

“Harls...”

I shake my head, silencing him as my tears begin to fall.

“Please, Reed. Let me go.”



Chapter Twenty-Seven



Reed

“YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT.”

“Fuck off,” I mutter as I throw my jacket over the back of my chair and roll the sleeves of my shirt up.

“Did you actually go to bed at all last night?” Stuart asks, refusing to let it drop.

Tenacious bastard.

“Yes.” I sit down at my desk and grab the file on school funding I was reading yesterday.

“And did you actually sleep when in bed?”

I shoot him a filthy look.

“That’ll be the reason you’re such a joy to be around this morning, then.” He sighs and takes a seat opposite me, leaning back in his chair and resting one ankle over the other.

I grunt in response.

“You want a coffee from the place on the corner? Beats the ones we have here, and I’m even offering to pay.”

“No, thanks.” I keep my eyes fixed firmly on the document in front of me, even though I have read the same line three times and still have no idea what it says.

“Turning down free coffee? It’s worse than I thought.” Stuart picks up a paper and starts flicking through it.

“Hey, what the fuck? Is this today’s?” I grab it clean out of his hands and slam it down on the desk so I can read the headline.

‘He’s won the city. But has Walker lost the girl?’

Underneath is a picture of Harley getting into a cab outside The Songbird’s private entrance, and me watching her with a grim expression on my face.

I scan the story and my jaw tightens at the mention of her being seen ‘visibly upset’ and ‘traveling with two suitcases’. They fail to mention what happened before the photos were taken. The longest embrace, where I held her in my arms and stared into her eyes, telling her she didn’t have to do it. That we could go back upstairs and talk about it. Followed by me loading her luggage into the trunk when she refused. And then watching her drive away, feeling the most confused I think I have ever been in my life.

None of it makes sense.

The Harley I know is buried underneath a sad cloak she’s now wearing. She’s worried about something. Maybe even scared. I’m convinced there’s more to it. She has this way about her, this aura. But yesterday when she told me she was leaving and gave me a load of shit about it being because of the spotlight of me being mayor, it was gone.

Completely extinguished.

And I know worrying about me taking office wouldn’t be enough to do that. It just wouldn’t. It’s something else. Something she won’t tell me.

“Shit, man.” Stuart turns the paper so he can read the headline. “Is this true?” He looks at me and I tip my chin and nod once. “Wow, I don’t know what to say. I thought you two were... You okay? Or is that a stupid question?”

I crack the knuckles on my good hand, grateful for the loud snap that echoes around the room, accompanied by short-lived relief. My other hand is still bruised and a little cut up from punching the wall in the apartment like a moron and then causing Harley to knock Bruce over. I’ve never felt like such a jerk before.

I look at Stuart. “So did I... Turns out she didn’t agree.”

“Shit,” he says again, his eyes returning to the paper.

Yeah. Shit.

I don’t tell him how not only did I not sleep last night after watching Harley pack up all her things, but that I almost lost my shit when I saw her shampoo in the shower today. The smell of it just made me picture her. I lubed my dick up with it so aggressively, I’m surprised I didn’t start a fire.

But it did nothing to quell this sickening emptiness I’ve had since she left. Even when I came, I felt nothing. It’s like she took all my pleasure with her. Packed it into her suitcases and left me with none.

Then I opened the kitchen cupboard and was greeted by a sloth smiling at me like some smug-ass little motherfucker. Reminding me that if Harley has her way, I will never taste her again, never sink to my knees for her and lose myself in her. Never wrap her in my arms and be the reason for her laugh. Never see her walking around in those fluffy slippers and ugly deformed cat pajamas while she talks to her plants.

I will never have *her*.

“I’m sorry. You want to talk about it?” Stuart’s question breaks into my pity party for one.

“No.” I jerk my head roughly. The last thing I need is to get behind on preparations for taking office and give the press more ammo to hurl my way. I grab a new file and open it. “We’ve got lots to do. Let’s get on with it.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur of paperwork, interviews, and meetings over at city hall. I’ve shaken more hands than I can count and faked a perfectly happy smile until my face felt like it might fall off. The only time it slipped was when I introduced myself to the City Council leaders, and one of the females said she hoped I was feeling okay. She didn’t have to mention Harley, but I knew from the extended time she held my hand and the way her eyes softened as she spoke that she was talking in a personal, and not a professional capacity. I recovered quickly enough. She probably didn’t even notice the split second that my heart crashed to my feet. As nice as she was, I was relieved when Stuart and I joined some of the staff for dinner afterward and she didn’t join us.

Talking about work is easy. But talking to strangers about Harley? Absolutely not. I may have a believable, fake smile. But today taught me that where she’s concerned, it’s not as impenetrable as I thought.

Dinner went well, and it’s only fueled my desire to really make a success during my time as mayor. Although, I have my work cut out for me. Especially when the previous mayor let the city down so much. People are cautious to trust. But this is a challenge I’ve spent years preparing for.

I wanted it and I fought until I had it. I fought for an entire city. I’m thankful that it wasn’t an easy fight. It taught me how to stay focused. How to strategize. How to gather facts, improve my knowledge. Make myself the

best person for the role I can possibly be. And my own past taught me to recognize despair in someone else's eyes when I see it. To see that hopelessness that I once felt. To understand that desperation you feel as you struggle to grasp what's going on. As you fight to see a way through the darkness.

The same emotions I saw in Harley's eyes yesterday.

She doesn't want to be apart any more than I do. I would bet my life on it.


My past taught me to recognize when there's something to fight for. And running for mayor taught me how to build stamina and use all my resources to get what I want.

And I want *her*.

Fighting for the entire city was my warmup.

Now I have the biggest fight of my life.

To get my Mrs. Walker back.



Chapter Twenty-Eight



Harley

“WE DON’T NEED THAT. Give it to me.”

Suze’s frantic voice calls after six-year-old Emmerson as she runs into the kitchen, brandishing the newspaper like a trophy before holding it out to me with a gap-toothed grin.

“Mommy wanted me to give it to her. But you’re our guest, Auntie Lee-lee. You should read it first.”

My heart squeezes at Emmerson’s sweet little face. “That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

Suze appears in the kitchen doorway, flustered, and her eyes pinch at the corners as she looks at me with sympathy. “I’m sorry. She grabbed it before I could check it.”

“It’s fine, honestly.”

I sound more certain than I feel as I unfold the paper and hold my breath as the front page comes into view. Yesterday’s front page was a shock. I had no idea anyone from the press had seen me leave with my suitcases. But in a way, I’m grateful it made the front page. At least the blackmailers will

have seen it. Although, having my heartbreak splashed across every newsstand in the city is not my ideal day, either.

Probably one of my worst days ever.

And today is also going to be added to that list.

“He looks good. Maybe a little stressed. But... Damn, Harley. I’m sorry, but that man is fine. I’m always on your side, no matter what, okay? Even though you won’t tell me what the hell you two fought about. But I can’t deny it. He must have done something bad for you to choose to move in with me and this...” She peels something that resembles a gummy bear but is now furry off the coffee machine.

Suze opens the trash can and flicks the furry goo inside. Suze has my back. She always has. And I know that ultimately, if I’d told her anything negative that Reed had said or done, then she would defend me with all the savageness of a lioness for one of her cubs. I’ve seen her in action and there is no way would I wish to be on the receiving end.

But I haven’t been able to give her any reason to change her opinion of Reed because he hasn’t said or done anything wrong. In fact, I’ve done nothing but sing his praises since Suze let me stay on her sofa two nights ago. I know I could have asked Maria. But her and Griffin’s place is too close to Reed. I’d risk seeing him in the elevator or even when he goes to visit Griffin. Suze’s place was the safer bet until I get my apartment back. The girl I’ve sub-let mine to asked if she could stay longer a couple of weeks ago. And at the time, things were perfect, so I said yes. I can’t let her down. I can stay with Suze while I figure something out.

“Right. School breakfast club time. I love you.” Suze hugs me from behind.

“Love you, too. Have a great day. I’ll probably work late tonight. Get caught up on some things for Griffin that I had to delay when I took election day off.”

Suze heads toward the front door, and I call goodbye and blow kisses to Emmerson and Mason as they grab their school rucksacks and bustle out of the door.

I bring my attention back to the paper and the dazzling man on the front page. Reed is going into a restaurant with a group of people. He’s wearing his gray suit with a crisp white shirt and red tie. The same one I watched him take off and coil around his hand the evening I wore my caticorn pajamas to wind him up.

The memory makes my stomach sink. That’s all it will be now. A memory that fades.

Looking at Reed’s smile as he talks to the attractive young woman next to him, I suspect the memories of us will fade for him long before they do for me. He’s going to be busy running the city. Another few weeks and he won’t even have time to think about me. That’s if he isn’t too busy already.

Suze is right. He does look stressed. His smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

I study the picture again, my heart squeezing in confusion. I want him to be happy. But at the same time, if he looked like he had completely forgotten about me already, like I meant nothing to him, then I know that would hurt even more than it does now.

I fold the paper back up and leave it on the counter. At least I have lots to do at work today. Both of us will be kept too busy to think about anything other than what we need to concentrate on.



It's only 9:30 AM and I can't concentrate.

All I can think about is Reed.

I got into work a little later than I planned this morning as Suze lives in Brooklyn and I screwed up my estimations over how long the commute would take. I wasn't late, but I didn't have time to grab a coffee for Griffin and a latte for me from my favorite coffee place. I was planning on heading straight there once I checked Griffin didn't need anything else first. But when I got to my desk, there was a hot take-away cup there already, the name 'Angel' written on it in thick, black ink. And when I peeked into Griffin's office, he had a matching cup on his desk.

Reed.

He'd been here moments before I arrived. If I had been on time, then I would have seen him. Is that what he was hoping?

Flutters dance in my stomach at the thought, and I squash them back down. I can't allow myself to think like that. It won't do either of us any good.

I've made a decision and I have to stick with it.

I knock on Griffin's door and enter when he calls out.

"I brought you those contracts that need signing for the decorators." I hand him the list of papers for The Songbird's private residential foyer, which has been having a re-paint the past couple of weeks.

"Okay." He frowns at them as he signs each one. He's managed to delegate signing rights for most things to the hotel management team. But this is Griffin Parker. He's a control freak. So now and again, he'll ask me

to intercept random contracts and paperwork for him to spot-check. I guess it's how he puts his mind at ease. I know it drives Maria mad, as it's the main thing they used to clash heads on when she used to manage The Songbird spa.

But that same facet of his personality is also why I'm praying that going to him for help with the video was the right move. If there's a way to find out who's got a copy and why, then he will be able to.

"Could you please add this when you send them back?" Griffin hands me another signed invoice and my stomach churns as I read it.

"This is for the wall in mine and Reed's—I mean, in Reed's apartment?"

"It is." Griffin lifts his eyes to meet mine and I'm met with cool blue.

"It was my fault. I'm sorry." I swallow as I look at him. Thank God we weren't in a regular apartment block with thin floors. Griffin and Maria would probably have heard every one of the lies I told Reed if we were.

"It's no problem. Don't even think about it, Harley. Reed explained when he came by."

"This morning?"

"Yes. He came to apologize and to offer to pay for the damage. I told him I'd bust the rest of his knuckles if he mentioned it again." Griffin's lips stretch into a smile as he runs his hand down over his tie. "Stupid fucker. He's lucky he didn't break his hand."

I stand mute as my mind whirls. Reed came to offer to pay for the wall. He wasn't here just to bring coffee and try to bump into me. Or was he doing both? Did he want to see me as well? I screw my eyes up and rub my temples. God, this is a mindfuck. Disappointment drags me down like lead weight at the thought he wasn't here just for me. But I should be glad. I

shouldn't want him here chasing after me, trying to talk to me. It will only mean I have to lie to his face more than I already have.

"He also told me you had moved out."

I nod weakly, opening my eyes to meet Griffin's. "Yes. I'm staying with Suze. I told Maria."

"I thought so. But I didn't ask. What you girls talk about between yourselves is private."

"What about the conversations between us? Is that private, too?"

"I promised I wouldn't tell him for a week and I meant it. I've only spoken with people who I need to in order to find out what's going on." He watches me closely as my chest sags in relief.

"Thank you. It's Reed's past and... I feel guilty enough talking to you about it, even though you already knew. I mean, you were there for him. You lived through that time with him. If I can talk to anyone then it's you, but..."

"I might be getting somewhere." Griffin gives me a pointed look and raises his hand as I open my mouth. "We're not there, yet. But I've been talking to someone who has been able to analyze the beginning of the video. *Only* the beginning."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding as Griffin confirms that whoever it is has only seen the beginning of the video. The part before she pushes Reed down onto the bed and keeps undressing him.

That's as far as I got the last time I opened it. Once I saw her naked and starting to pull Reed's clothes from his semi-conscious body, I switched it off and ran to throw up. It's poor quality and too grainy to make out their faces properly. But I couldn't stomach another second.

I haven't watched the whole thing.

I can't.

Griffin took my phone from me and gave me a temporary one. He didn't tell me what he saw, but he told me enough to confirm that there is more on the video. A lot more. And that my suspicions were right about it appearing to be Reed's assault filmed from start to finish.

"You can have your phone back soon, Harley," Griffin says.

"It doesn't matter." I drop my eyes to the floor and to a small patch of rainbow light that's been created by the sun shining through a vase of flowers on Griffin's desk. If only there was a pot of gold at the end of it. A pot of gold in the shape of a solution to this giant mess.

I give Griffin a tiny smile. The upside of me not having my phone is that I can't stare at photographs of me and Reed that I took on it and cry myself to sleep at night.

I Google him and cry that way instead.

Most of the images are of him alone. Doing interviews, press conferences, and things like that. But there are some of the two of us looking happy together, as well as the awful breakup day images. Of the ones of us together, there's a mix of both before and after the president's retreat. When we were a fake, and then a real couple. Reed's eyes don't change between them. That's the main thing that struck me as I stared at one photo after another after another. My eyes change. The way I look at him softens with each photograph, and my smile widens. It's too subtle for anyone but me to notice.

But Reed?

His eyes don't change.

He's looking at me with the same glow in them in every picture, from the very first one, until the last. He's looking at me as if he's always known

something special would connect the two of us one day.

And he was right.

We *were* special. Both of us held pain in our hearts from the trauma in our pasts. A trauma he claims he is free of. But I don't think he could make such a claim if he knew this video exists.

I don't know what it would do to him. And that terrifies me. What if it pushes him into that dark place again and there isn't anyone there to pull him back from the edge? The thought of him drowning him in the past again frightens me so much that for the past two nights, I have shaken and cried on Suze's couch. Only sleeping when exhaustion finally wins, giving me a few hours' respite.

"We'll sort it out, Harley," Griffin says, his voice steeped in steely determination. "I won't let the woman in that video almost ruin his life again. Or steal what he's only just found for the first time now, with you."



When I get in after work, Suze's house is empty. She texted and said they may try to catch dinner and a movie tonight as a treat, and did I want to join them. But I declined. As much as I love her and the kids, I would be terrible company.

I change into some sweatpants and a t-shirt. I can't bring myself to put on my pajamas, even though they're the comfiest thing I own. They just make me think of him. Maybe I should put them in the trash. It's not like I can ever wear them again without feeling like my heart is being ripped out.

I pour a large glass of wine and flop down onto Suze's sofa. I'm flicking through the TV channels half-heartedly when my phone rings. I've only

given my new number to a handful of people, so I answer it without even looking at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Harley?”

“Stu?” I sit up straight. “Why are you calling me? Is Reed okay?”

“He’s fine.”

I slouch back against the cushions as I exhale. *Hang on, I didn’t give Stu my number.*

“I got your number from Griffin,” he explains before I ask. “I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“Me?” I pick a glittery pink thread off my sweatpants and frown at my slippers. Reed was right, these things do shed everywhere. I slip them off and curl my feet underneath me on the sofa. Perhaps they will be joining the caticorn pajamas in the trash can of heaven where the clothes from breakups go.

“Yes, you. Reed says you haven’t spoken to each other since... well, since...”

“Since I left?” I drop my head against the sofa cushions and close my eyes. “We haven’t. I... I had a problem with my phone. Griffin’s getting it fixed for me, but until then I have a temporary number.”

“I see.”

“How is he, Stu?”

“I called to ask how you are, Harley,” Stuart says gently before sighing when I don’t answer. “He’s focused. Reed is... being Reed. Only more intense, more determined, and more motivated. Even more so than when the campaign was running.”

“Oh.” I swallow the dry lump that’s lodged itself in my throat. “That’s... good.”

If Reed is throwing himself into work, then he’s either coping better than me, seeing as I can’t concentrate on anything right now, or he’s not as affected as I thought he was.

“I’m not sure it is. He’s going to burn out before he moves to Gracie Mansion at this rate. I’ve known him a while. This is a new level of obsession, even for him.”

Stuart sounds worried and that worries me. Stuart’s feathers never get ruffled. He’s smoothed over major scandals for political clients he’s worked with in the past. And he does it without ever breaking a sweat. Reed always said he’s excellent at his job, always calm, level-headed, knowing what to do in any scenario.

“I don’t know what to say.”

My thoughts immediately picture Reed cracking his knuckles too harshly, the way he does when he’s stressed or anxious. I first noticed it when Maria and Griffin broke up for a while. It was ages ago now, but we all cared so much for them both, and to see them hurting was hard for all their friends. I would see him do it whenever he visited Griffin at work. His lips would be in a grim line as he sat and cracked them one by one. The sound made me shiver, like nails on a chalkboard. I didn’t notice him doing it when I lived with him. Not to that sound level and intensity, anyway.

“Look. I don’t know what’s happened between you both. And it’s none of my business. But if it’s Bea making trouble, then I—”

“Wait? Bea? Why are you bringing her up?” I sit up straight again.

“She came here the day before the press ran their story about you moving out. And then she was back yesterday. With a gift basket.”

“A gift basket?” I screw my nose up. That’s so weird.

“Yeah. Odd, right? She said it was from her and Graham as a congratulations on winning the mayor role. But Graham wasn’t with her either time. A guy wouldn’t send another guy a basket of fruit and shit, anyway. It was obviously only from her. I doubt Graham even knew she had brought it.”

“Why would she do that?” I scramble through my thoughts to think of any reason Bea might start being nice when she has all the empathy of a praying mantis that rips its old mate’s head off and then eats him.

“I don’t know. But Reed was in a foul mood afterward. Look, Harley. I’m not telling you this to suggest there’s anything to worry about. I can easily tell you that Reed would never go back there. I wasn’t even going to mention it. I just called to see how you are. Paige was asking after you.”

“She was?” Warmth flickers in my chest as I picture her adorable little face and the way she calls Reed, ‘Weed’.

“Well, you can tell her that I’m fine next time you speak to her. And you can tell her that I have some cute bunny videos to show her when we next...” My heart sinks. There will be no reason or circumstance where I will spend time with Paige again. Not now that Reed and I aren’t together.

“Actually. I’m looking after her just while her mom goes to an appointment tomorrow. Why don’t you meet us on your lunch break? We can walk in the park?” Stuart says.

“Are you sure?” I ask, but my lips are already stretching into the first smile I’ve had in days. There’s no room for heartbroken moping with a cute as a button five-year-old who shares my love of animals and funny videos. “I would love that.”

“All right, then. See you tomorrow at twelve-thirty.”

I end the call, feeling more positive than I have all day. This is how I will have to do things. One day at a time. Something nice to look forward to that keeps me moving forward.

I drain the remnants of wine from my glass and put it on the floor next to my discarded slippers. I'm staring at them when my phone rings again.

"Hello?"

"Harls."

The deep voice on the other end has my stomach leaping into my throat. It's been two days. Two days of not hearing from him. I purposefully didn't give him my new number so that he wouldn't call me. Although, I also asked him not to. So maybe he hasn't even tried until now. Maybe this is the first time. But then how would he have gotten it? I've only just ended my call from Stuart. Could he have told him so quickly? Could he have—?

"I can hear your brain thinking from here," Reed says, his voice warm and sprinkled with amusement.

"It's... yes, it's certainly thinking." I whip my eyes around the room and then to the window. I get up and tiptoe over there, peeking through the drapes. I don't know what I'm expecting to see. Reed on the doorstep? But he's not. The street outside is empty except for one woman walking past carrying grocery bags.

"I forced Griffin to give me your new number when I saw your old phone in his office. Maria's already threatened to have his balls for letting me have it, so go easy on him." I can hear the smile in Reed's voice before he exhales heavily. "God, I miss you."

"Reed, we—"

"It's all right. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. I just... I just really fucking miss you, Harls."

There's a cracking down the phone and I drop my head forward into my hand to rub at my temples, attempting to ease the pounding that's building there.

"Are you cracking your knuckles?"

There's a pause.

"Guilty," Reed confesses with a soft chuckle.

"Stuart said you'd been doing it more." The corners of my lips lift at the sound of Reed's amused grumble.

"You've talked to Stuart then? But you can't talk to me?"

The tiny smile drops from my face. Reed's voice is soft and not accusing in any way. Yet, the undercurrent of hurt and confusion screams through his words. I wish I could tell him that there's nothing I want more than to be with him tonight, instead of drinking wine alone on my friend's sofa.

But I can't.

"I..."

"It's okay..." He sighs. "No. That's a lie. Honestly? It's far from fucking okay to me that you don't feel you can tell me everything that's going on. Because I know you're not telling me everything... But that's on me. If you can't talk to me about anything, and I mean *anything*, then that's my fault. Not yours."

"Reed..." My voice pitches as I squeeze my eyes closed. "It's not because I don't want to... It's... There are things... I'm sorry," I whisper finally, my chest sagging.

What else can I say? Sorry will never explain it. Sorry will never be enough. But it's the only safe word I have.

"Griffin mentioned you haven't been sleeping?" Reed says, changing the subject.

I look up to the ceiling and shake my head. Unbelievable.

“What else did he tell you? That I had a pee break at seven minutes past eleven and that I sneezed a grand total of nine times through the day?” I roll my eyes and wrap one arm around my body.

Despite the conversation feeling heavy only moments ago, Reed laughs, immediately lifting the cloud away that was threatening to engulf us both.

God, I’ve missed his laugh. I’ve missed everything. But especially his laugh. Whenever I hear it, I know that in that exact moment, he’s happy. And that makes my heart full. Talking to him has always lifted my spirits. Even though I should be ending this call before things get harder, I can’t. Hearing his voice and laugh again feels too good.

“How are you?” I ask.

“I’d be better if you were here,” he answers immediately.

My heart hammers in my chest, and I sniff as hot tears spring to my eyes. “You would?”

“Yes, Angel.”

I clasp my hand over my mouth to stifle the small sob that spills from it.

Angel.

“Reed, I can’t... we shouldn’t be—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. I don’t want to upset you. I just called to say goodnight. Are you in bed?”

“Not yet.” I suck in a breath and wipe my eyes with my free hand.

“Go and get ready. I’ll stay on the line.”

I look at the pile of bedding on the floor by the sofa, ready for me to make up my bed for the night.

“I need to set it up. And brush my teeth.”

“Go do it. I’ll wait.”

“Okay.”

I leave the call connected and put it onto speaker as I make up the bed, pausing as I finish and hesitating over what to say next. Reed beats me to it.

“Go use the bathroom, Harls. I’m still here.”

I nod even though he can’t see me, and I do as he says. When I come back, I flick the lamp off and slide beneath the blankets.

“I’m back.”

“Good.” The tenderness in his voice is calming and soothing, the same way it always was when he whispered goodnight to me and kissed my hair when we went to bed. Two nights without it. Two nights missing him.

Missing everything.

“Now close your eyes. I’m going to stay on the line until I know you’re asleep.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I say into the dark.

His voice fills the room, chasing away the shadows. “I do, Angel.”

And as I close my eyes, the gentle chords of his guitar carry through the phone’s speaker, followed by his deep voice singing a song that I’ve heard on the radio, Jason Mraz’s “I won’t give up.”

He’s singing it to me. He couldn’t make it any clearer. He doesn’t want to give up on us.

But he has to. Otherwise, he could lose everything.

I screw my face up tight and bury it in the duvet to muffle my crying as I listen to him. Every word is impregnated with meaning. Every syllable, a promise to me that he will fight for us. But he doesn’t know what he’s fighting against.

The song comes to an end, and I freeze, afraid to move or speak.

Afraid to do anything.

I'm not strong enough to lie to him in this moment when he's just opened his heart so honestly to me.

So I say nothing. I do nothing.

Reed stays on the line for a long time, probably trying to work out if I'm asleep.

Then finally his voice cuts through the night.

"Harls, I lo—" He clears his throat, thinking better of whatever he was going to say, and simply says, "Sleep, Angel."

Then he hangs up.

A pair of large, light-colored, feathered wings is centered at the top of the page, rendered in a faded, ethereal style. The wings are spread out, with individual feathers visible but soft and translucent.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Reed

I WALK AROUND THE corner toward my office and can make out Stuart on a call with someone.

“I’m glad you agreed to it. I know someone else who will be extremely happy to see you.” His laugh echoes down the hallway, and as I turn the corner, he’s leaning back in one of the chairs that surround the meeting table. His eyes meet mine and his expression remains unchanged. But I sense that he wasn’t expecting me yet. I stepped out to get us both a coffee, my turn this time, and the line was unusually non-existent. I’ve been gone half the time it would usually take.

“Okay. See you later.”

I place his cup down on the desk in front of him as I walk around it and place mine down, unfastening my jacket before sitting down. He takes a sip without meeting my eyes.

“Thanks. You even got it right. Hot and dark, just like me.”

I smirk and shake my head. “Don’t you mean bitter and ready to scald if mishandled?”

“Ouch. You just described my ex-girlfriend.”

I run my hand over my jaw, amusement creasing my eyes and quirking my lips.

“Careful. All this frowning you’ve done the past couple of days, your face might fall off if you now expect it to perform something resembling a smile.”

“Fuck off,” I fire back.

Stuart’s shoulders shake and then he draws in a breath and sighs as he looks at me.

“Harley?”

“What about her?”

“Your setting is a degree above arctic compared to yesterday. Have you seen her?”

“No.” I look around the room as I lean back in my chair, before bringing my eyes back to meet Stuart’s. “But I spoke to her last night.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Fine.” He holds his hands up. “Just give me the heads up if your relationship status changes, will you? The press will have a field day if you’re back together.”

“We aren’t.” I take a sip of my coffee, resisting the urge to crumple the cup in my hand at the reminder that we are not together. Not even close.

But speaking to her last night is a start. Hearing the hesitation in her voice and her admitting that she wishes she could talk to me; it’s all the confirmation I needed.

Something is forcing her away from me. And if I find out it’s a who, then they’re going to beg for a quick death.

Nothing in the world is worse to me than Harley's tears. And I could hear them, clear as anything last night when she was pretending to be asleep. She forgets how well I know her. How many times I've watched her fall asleep first in my arms. How many times I've woken before her and just laid listening to her soft breaths.

She can't hide from me.

I know every part of her. Her body and her quirks, what makes her laugh, smile, and feel anxious.

The only thing I can't read is her mind when she's closed off from me and keeping her distance. She knows as well as I do that if I were to see her face to face, she would have a much harder time hiding her true feelings from me. And that knowledge is only fueling me further. There's a reason she doesn't want to see me. There's something she doesn't want me to know.

I intend to find out what the fuck it is that's got her running.



I spend the morning working on my commissioner and deputy mayor announcement. Stuart heads out early, saying he needs a longer lunch as he has Paige to watch for his sister. Finishing up my speech quicker than I expected, I decide to do the same and leave half an hour after him.

“All right?” Griffin asks as I walk up the steps to The Songbird's main entrance, toward where he is standing chatting with the doorman.

I greet them both and then the two of us head inside and to one of the smaller restaurants The Songbird has. I wait until we're sat at the table and

the server has taken our order before I lean my forearms on the table and drop my voice.

“There’s something going on with Harley.”

“I know.” Griffin meets my eyes, his mouth turned down as he runs a hand down over his tie.

I pull back in confusion at his bluntness. “What do you mean, you know?”

He rolls his lips, his eyes never leaving mine as he picks his next words carefully. “She came to me for help a few days ago. She didn’t want me to tell you.”

“A few days. Jesus fucking Christ,” I hiss across the table, leaning closer. His words making a realization dawn on me. A few days is before she left... right after the election.

I knew something was wrong.

Griffin’s eyes narrow, but he stays in the same calm, unflustered pose while I’m about ready to leap over the table and squeeze it out of him. It’s been years since we had a fallout that ended in fists. In fact, it’s been since we were kids, but I’m not totally opposed to making him talk.

“Calm the fuck down,” he says quietly, without moving.

I glance side to side in the restaurant. It’s getting busier, filling up with the lunchtime crowd of business guests, and those here for pleasure, their tables surrounded by bags from every store on Fifth Avenue.

“We’ve been friends for years, Reed. You know I’ve got your back. The reason I didn’t tell you sooner wasn’t only out of loyalty to Harley, but also because I had to know what I was bringing to you first. I needed to understand it myself.”

I force myself to take a couple of deep breaths and ease back into my seat. As much as I hate to admit it, Griffin's right. I've done the same for him in the past. Sat on something until I've known the right time to tell him. It's what friends do. Look out for each other. I'm sure he wanted to pound my face in at the time, too. But in hindsight, he knew I had made the right call. I hope this time he has. Plus, causing a scene in the restaurant is not going to help me get Harley back any quicker.

"Is she in trouble?" I struggle to keep my voice even as I stare at him with wide eyes, no doubt filled with desperation.

"No. You are."

"What?"

I lean back as our server returns with our drinks. My eyes are fixed on Griffin's across the table as she sets two large scotches that Griffin ordered down on the table and then fills two glasses with iced water before leaving us.

"Big enough trouble that I need a scotch in the middle of the day, huh?" I grimace and knock half of it back in one.

"Someone's been trying to blackmail her." Griffin holds his glass around the rim, swirling it slowly so the amber liquid rolls around inside catching the light.

"What the hell? Who? Why? Are they using the honey trapping against her?" Blood races through my veins and my grip grows so tight on my glass that I have to force myself to loosen my fingers before it shatters all over the white linen tablecloth.

"We'll get to that," Griffin replies, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Why the hell didn't she tell me? Is she okay, is she... Fuck, Griff. How could she not tell me?" I search his eyes, and he slowly places his glass

down before he speaks.

“She has her reasons. I don’t agree with them. But she’s doing what she thinks is best... for you.”

“For me? What the...?” I shake my head, my thoughts reeling over Harley and what she’s been going through. I should have done something. I should have pushed harder to find out what was wrong. “Is she okay? That’s all I care about. That she’s okay.”

Griffin nods once, as calm and collected as ever. But I know it’s a front. Beneath the surface, he will be incessant with rage like me. Griffin hates anyone trying to exploit someone else. And with good reason from his history when someone he trusted betrayed him and stole from him.

He will be ready to start a war. He’s just better at hiding it than me.

“She’s okay. They can’t hurt her, Reed.”

My shoulders drop as I exhale.

Thank God.

“But they want to use her to get to you. They want her to persuade you to re-select George Yates.”

“That fucking corrupt bastard?” I lean over the table again, dropping my head into my hand and pressing my finger and thumb into my eye sockets. “His morals stink worse than our old fraternity house bathroom after that party with the firebomb jello shots.”

“They sure do.” Griffin smirks at the memory.

“I don’t need a magic ball to guess why. It’ll be something to do with Dennis Vincent. He’s a shady motherfucker. And I always knew the two of them were close. You don’t turn up with a new sports car a week after a known drugs ringleader gets a convenient pardon from the mayor.”

“Exactly. The city is better off since it took out the trash.” Griffin takes a sip of his drink and eyes me over the glass. “Whoever it is has gone after Harley. Not you. They’re using her feelings for you against her. They must think they wouldn’t be able to influence your decisions, but that she would. That she would be able to make you choose the name they fed her. If she hadn’t left, that is.”

“*If* she hadn’t left.” I swirl the rest of the scotch in my glass, then tip my head back and finish it. “You were right,” I say to Griffin. “Scotch, in the middle of the day, was a good idea.”

Griffin grunts. “When we’re talking blackmail, scotch at any time of day is a good idea.”

“It’s got to be someone with something to gain. Someone who wants George Yates back in a position to be their little bitch for them at the NYPD. I still don’t know why they went after Harley. What do they have they can hold over her?”

“They have her feelings for you. That’s what they were preying on. You two were the city’s golden couple. One look at any picture of you two online together or in the paper, and people could see she would do anything for you, just by the way she looked at you. She thinks if she keeps away from you that they will stop. They’ll stop thinking she’s useful to them if she isn’t with you. She’s not stupid. She knows we have to find them, otherwise, they’ll find another way. But she’s doing what she thinks she has to.”

Lightness overcomes my chest, making my head spin. I was right. I knew that talk about the press attention and living at Gracie Mansion was a pile of shit. She’s my Angel, and every single second between us was real and

meant something to her. Hearing Griffin confirm it has relief spreading through my veins, like oxygen.

She never wanted to leave. She thought she had to.

“How, though? What are they expecting her to do? Persuade me to select someone else? Then what? Come back to her with something else to do, then something else, and on and on? What would they have done if she couldn’t persuade me? Why would they even approach her and not me? Is it the honey trapping? Or something else? Are they threatening her family? Her brother Brett is—”

“I know.” Griffin relaxes in his chair slightly. “I know about Brett, and that she sends money to help her mom. It doesn’t involve them. But they are threatening to hurt someone she cares about.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“They can bring it the fuck on!” I bang my fist on the table, making the cutlery and glasses shake. I turn and give an apologetic nod to the table nearest to us.

I look back at Griffin and meet his cool blue gaze. “There is nothing they can do to me that can warrant Harley thinking she needs to keep away from me. She means *everything* to me.”

“I know she does. Welcome to the club. Our balls might as well have a neon sign hung on them advertising that they now belong to Maria and Harley.”

“Not just my balls, Griff.” My lips pull into a small smile. “She owns every fucking part of me. And I would give her more if I could.”

“You’ve always been a romantic underneath, eh?” Griffin’s lips twitch.

“Takes one to know one.”

Griffin chuckles. "I suppose it does."

"So now you need to tell me. What the fuck is this asshole holding over her? What has her thinking it's so bad that she can't come to me about it? What's made her run? Tell me."

I crack my knuckles as I wait for him to answer.

"Tell me what stupid fucker thinks they can threaten my girl and get away with it?"



Chapter Thirty



Harley

MY PHONE VIBRATES IN my purse, and I reach in to pull it out, seeing ‘Reed’ flash up on the screen, but before I can answer, a small voice screeches out from behind me.

“Harleeeeyy!”

The next second, small arms are wrapping around my legs as a little warm body presses into them, and I let my phone drop back into my purse.

“Hey, Paige.” I crouch down level with her. “You look different? Have fairies been pulling on your toes at night and making you grow?” I narrow my eyes and wiggle my fingers against her belly as she laughs.

“I don’t know. Have they, Uncle Stu?” She turns to look up at Stuart, and he smiles at both of us.

“Oh, I think so. Although, how they put up with these stinky little things I don’t know.” He lifts her in the air, pretending to sniff her feet and screw his nose up before he puts her back down.

“Oh, he’s just mad because I bet his feet are all hairy like monster paws.” I grin at Paige as she giggles, her curls bouncing around her cheeks. “Oh,

hey, I got you a little something. Here.” I reach into my purse and pull out the small bleating goat stuffed toy.

“He’s just like the one at my party!”

“I know. I thought you might like him.” I stand up, joy warming my heart for the first time in days as I look at her delighted face.

“Raa!”

“Hey!” Stuart laughs as Paige butts the goat into his thigh.

“It’s what Freddy did to Weed.” She butts the soft goat against Stuart’s other thigh as he laughs.

“I know, I remember. Best thing I’ve seen in ages,” Stuart says.

I fight to hold the smile on my face as Paige skips a few steps ahead of us as we walk. That day at her party was before all this began. When I was just getting to know who Reed really was. When things were simpler. God, I would love to go back. Just for the day. To remember what it was like to be together. Before anyone was trying to sabotage him. Trying to use me against him.

“I have a confession, Harley,” Stuart says, pulling my gaze from Paige, skipping and singing. “There is a reason I wanted to talk to you today. Away from Reed.”

“Oh?” I twist my face to his, so he has my full attention. “You said he was focused and determined, and…” My mind wanders to our telephone conversation last night. Stuart said Reed was obsessed. That he was worried he was going to burn out. But when I spoke to Reed afterward, he sounded almost regretful. Like he blames himself for me leaving.

“He is.” Stuart glances at Paige, but she’s in her own little world talking to her goat.

“Then, what? Has something happened?” I scan his face for any sign of alarm, any hint as to why the hesitation in his voice has my lungs burning as though they’re filling with acid.

“You could say that. I...” Stuart runs a hand around the back of his neck. “He’s about to announce who he’s selecting as the commissioners for the agencies. The NYPD being one of them.” The corner of Stuart’s left eye twitches as he talks.

“Right,” I reply, confused about where this conversation is going.

“He... He knows who he wants. And who he doesn’t.”

“Sounds like Reed,” I say. “He’s always known his own mind. Especially when it comes to who he wants working alongside him. He’s going to make a great mayor.”

We slow down so Paige can walk her goat along the seat of an unoccupied bench.

“Yes. He is. And he’s going to make the decisions that are right for the city. Not the ones that are right for him personally.”

“What do you mean?”

Stuart presses his lips together before releasing them with a soft smacking sound. “I mean. He can’t let anything get in the way of what’s best for the city. Even if it isn’t what’s best for him. He can’t let the past dictate the future.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice and my feet stop moving.

“Why are you talking about the past?” I stare at Stuart as he stops walking and calls to Paige to wait for us. “Stuart?” My voice rises as I step closer to him.

“I know, Harley.” His chest deflates as he confesses. “I know about everything. It’s my job to know *everything*. Past, present, even future, to

some extent.”

“But...?” I step backward, unsure of what to say next.

“It’s my job to find out everything. When you’re running for something like mayor, you have to be prepared. You squash an ant when you’re six years old, and someone will find out and try to use it to discredit you. It’s the way it works. I’m not saying it’s right. But it’s how it’s always been.”

“You know about what happened to him?” My voice is barely a whisper. If Stuart found this out, then anyone could find it out. There must be ways. It must be possible. I thought Griffin would be able to find out who was behind sending me the video. It must be someone with a motive. Someone who has something to gain from George Yates being the NYPD commissioner.

But what if it’s just some crazed person who thrives on drama and attention? What if they have no real reason, except for the fact they’ve discovered this huge, damaging part of the future mayor’s life? What if finding out about Reed’s past wasn’t as hard as I thought? Stuart knows. Whoever sent the video knows.

What if the net needs to be cast wider than I thought? What if Griffin, even with all his contacts around the city, and beyond, can’t find out who sent it. What if we never find out?

Reed will never be free of his past. Someone will always be able to discover it and use it against him.

“I do. I’ve always known about the assault. But Reed didn’t mention it, and it didn’t matter. Until now.” Stuart looks at me intently.

“Now?” I try to fight the rising nausea from my stomach back down.

“I know you’re being forced to do things you don’t want to, Harley.”

“How?” My shoulders shake and my throat burns as I blink to keep the tears at bay. Hearing Stuart say it out loud reminds me that it’s real. Watching Paige, the sun shining down on us in the park, I could almost believe it was all a nightmare and not real at all.

I wipe at my eyes and Stuart wraps his arms around me and pulls me into him. He smells of expensive, spicy cologne and coffee.

“Like I said. It’s my job to know about it all. And I’m sorry you’re being dragged into this. I’ve seen some shit in this job. But this is the lowest of it all.”

The muscles in his chest tense against my cheek, and I take a deep breath to compose myself. I don’t want to upset Paige if she sees me crying.

“Are you two going to get married?”

I pull back and Paige is looking up at us, her nose wrinkled, the little goat held firmly in both hands in front of her chest.

“No. Why would you think that?” Stuart laughs.

Paige ignores him and turns to me.

“I want you to marry Weed. And I want you to have Freddy and the other animals at your wedding. And pony rides.” She fixes me with a serious look, her bottom lip poking out.

“Well.” I crouch down and use my finger to gently press her lip back in, which makes her giggle. “I don’t know about the wedding. But maybe another day when you’re with Uncle Stu, I could join you.” I glance at Stuart, who nods. “And maybe, just maybe, we could go for a pony ride.”

“Eeee!” Paige’s face lights up as she flashes a set of tiny, perfect little milk teeth at me. “Can we, Uncle Stu?”

“I don’t see why not.” His lips curl up as Paige starts talking to the toy goat, telling it how she’s going to ride a pony.

“I just wanted you to know that I’ll be there for Reed. He’s a friend as well as a colleague.” Stu reaches out and takes my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze in his. “And I’m here for you if you need to talk as well. We’ll get to the bottom of what’s going on. Secrets aren’t easy to keep hidden in this city.”

I nod at him, then drop my eyes away and back to Paige, feeling calmed by her beautiful innocence. The childlike ability to only see things through the eyes of love.

Secrets might not be easy to keep hidden in this city.

But I pray that the past is.

I pray it can be buried and never be shared with anyone, except who it belongs to.

I will pray so hard my hands bleed, if that’s what it takes.



Chapter Thirty-One



“HOW WAS LUNCH WITH Paige?” I ask Stu as I head back into the office and see he got back before me.

“Yeah, good.” He keeps his eyes on the paperwork in front of him.

“I’ll join you next time. I haven’t seen her since we all went for dinner.” I roll my lips, the memory making me think of Harley and how stunning she had looked that night, dressed in another pink dress. One I vividly remember peeling off her afterward.

“Sounds great. She’d love that.”

“I took a longer lunch myself in the end. I met Griffin.”

Stu turns his head and watches me walk around the table to place my jacket on the back of my chair before taking a seat.

“You were at The Songbird?”

“Yeah. Perks of him being the boss, no waiting on a table even during prime time.”

I lean back in my chair and stretch my legs out in front of me, crossing them at the ankles. To anyone who didn’t know me, they’d think I looked

relaxed. But I'm far from it. The tension taking over my body is enough to render me immobile if I don't at least try to stretch it out.

"He okay?"

"He's good. He looks better than last week."

Now that Rosie is being looked after by the bird charity, Griffin is probably getting sleep again. It's ironic. Because now I'm the one who isn't. I could have taken over all the night feeds the way my eyes stay open. I just can't clear my mind enough to sleep. And after lunch with Griffin today, and what I've learned, I can't see that resolving any time soon.

Chronic insomnia, my new roommate.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I take it out, hoping it's Harley returning my call.

It's a number I don't recognize.

"Hello?"

"Reed?"

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and a muscle in my jaw ticks.

"What do you want, Bea?" I grit out.

"Can't I call and see how the future mayor is?"

I stay silent.

"Look." She sighs. "I know you and I have history. But I thought we could at least try to get along now that you're back in New York again."

"We could," I answer. "But the city is big enough that I don't see how we'll bump into each other enough for there to be a problem whether we do or not."

She laughs, but it's laced with an undercurrent of something I can't put my finger on. She was always scheming and up to something. That's one thing I remember about her from when we dated. She was always making

friends with people who could benefit her. The number of nights out Bea used to go on, and not pay for a thing as she had managed to buddy up with the next new club promoter, or bar owner.

“Oh, you always could make me laugh. It’s rare, you know, for a man to be intelligent, good looking, *and* funny.”

“Why did you call, Bea?” I keep my tone flat. Any hint of interest and she will latch on to it and try to manipulate it to her advantage somehow.

“I’m just being a friend, looking out for a friend. That’s all. Did you enjoy the basket?”

I glance at Stuart. He said Shannon’s mom was thrilled with it. A way to win favor with the future mother-in-law.

“It was appreciated.”

“Good. You know, you could have shared it with Harley if the two of you were still together.”

I grunt in annoyance. I wouldn’t discuss Harley with her when she dropped in unannounced the first time. And that’s when Harley and I were together, and everything was going great. Like hell am I going to talk to Bea about Harley now.

“I have to get back to work.”

“Wait, Reed.” Her voice softens. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought her up. But I am sorry to hear things didn’t work out between you both. Perhaps you’ll figure it out.”

I grit my teeth, inhaling through my nose as she weaves out her empty sympathies. I don’t need her well wishes, and I sure as fuck don’t want them.

“Perhaps. Now, if there wasn’t any other reason for your call?”

“Only,” Bea adds, “she looked rather upset in the photos. I think this is hard for her. It must be reassuring, knowing you have such good friends who are there to offer support.”

She’s baiting me. I can tell by the deliberate pause as she waits for me to process her words. But fuck if I’m going to give her the satisfaction.

“Yes, we’re both very fortunate. Goodbye, Bea.”

I end the call and throw my phone down on the desk in disgust, turning to my computer and typing in Harley’s name. If there are recent photographs that Bea has seen, then they must be on one of the online news pages, because Stuart keeps on top of all things being reported. And he hasn’t mentioned anything, other than more rumors about my upcoming selection announcement.

“She does not give up, that one,” Stuart says, his eyes still scanning over the printed report in his hands.

“She should learn to.”

I crack my knuckles as the first news site brings up nothing. Although, that’s a more business-focused one. I click into the address bar and bring up the online news page for the New York equivalent of drunken gossip around the photocopier at an office party. This particular news outlet is the one that was running the poll over when I would ask Harley to marry me. And also the one that snapped our first real public kiss after the question session in the park.

The page loads and I don’t even have to dig around to find what Bea was gloating over during her call.

“Stu?” I bark.

He raises his eyes to mine.

I spin the screen toward him with so much force, the keyboard clatters to the floor.

“This doesn’t look like lunch with Paige. This looks like you in Central Park *with Harley.*”

Stuart’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth, flapping it like a fish.

“So that’s lie number one today.” I seethe, the back of my neck burning as I glare at him. “Now, don’t make the next words out of your mouth be lie number two.” I jab my finger at the screen, straight into the embracing couple that’s plastered all over the front page of the news site with the caption, *Did Mrs. Walker walk into the arms of another?*

“You want to tell me why the fuck you have your arms around her?”

“It’s not what you think.” Stuart takes a breath and regains his composure, his calm mask slipping firmly back into place.

“You don’t know what the fuck I’m thinking.” I leave the screen turned toward him. I don’t want to look at Harley in another man’s arms for a second longer than necessary.

“I did take Paige for lunch,” Stuart says calmly. “And I invited Harley to join us.”

I bang my fists on the table and stand, but Stuart doesn’t flinch. He just watches me coolly from his seat.

“Tell me why you have your fucking hands on her? And I swear to God, if you lie, or I don’t like your answer, then I will remove your head from your body with a blunt instrument and make it look like an accident.”

He smiles.

“What the fuck was funny about what I just said?” I snap, my chest heaving like I’m about to explode. There’s an overwhelming throbbing in my hands that even flexing them in and out of a fist doesn’t ease.

Perhaps slamming them into Stu's face will help.

"It's not funny," he declares as his lips drop back to a firm line. "You two are made for each other. That's why I smiled. Although Harley's approach is less... caveman." He side-eyes me and then drops his pen down on to the table with a sigh.

"She was upset. I was being a friend."

"I've heard that before," I snap.

"A friend to both of you." He turns in his chair and fixes his eyes on mine. "Look. There's no easy way to tell you this. I'm just going to come out with it."

"Go on." I tilt my head side to side, my neck cracking as I try to ease the tension.

Stuart rolls his lips and nods to himself.

"Someone has been trying to blackmail her. They wanted her to persuade you to re-select George Yates for NYPD commissioner. She looked like she was about to cry, and I got the impression she didn't want to upset Paige. So I held her while she had a moment to herself. She's trying to help you. Everything she's doing, the reason she's so upset, is that she wants to help you. But she doesn't know what to do. She's scared."

I close my mouth, sealing in the threat I was about to issue before it leaves my lips. Then I sink back into my chair.

She's scared.

"Angel," I murmur, rubbing my eyes with one hand, wishing more than anything that she was here, that she'd answered my call earlier, and I could have spoken to her. I thought about going up to Griffin's office after lunch to see her. But Griffin said she wouldn't be there as he had sent her to take minutes for some meeting that started straight after her lunch break.

“Who told you?” I drop my hand, my stinging eyes wearier than ever.

Stuart’s brow shoots up. “You already know?”

“She went to Griffin for help.” I pause. “And I guess that means you already know what they’re using against her?”

Stuart nods gravely. “I do.”

“Have you seen it?” I hold his gaze, my stomach knotting as unwanted memories try to claw their way to the front of my mind. I force them away as I swallow the bile in my throat.

“The beginning. Not all of it. But enough.”

“I see.”

The two of us look at one another, not speaking. What words are there? I don’t want him to tell me he’s sorry. Not for something that happened years ago. And what can I say? It’s not like I’m going to break down and bring up a load of shit from the past that I really want to forget about. I wasn’t lying when I told Harley that I don’t think of it anymore. And any lingering trace of it that affected the way I acted, the way I behaved, left me the night that I opened up and shared it with her at her mom’s house.

She healed that final part of me.

It’s like my subconscious knew when I began calling her Angel. I’ve never called anyone else this. Only her. My very own healing angel, who’s changed me in more ways than she will ever know.

“Have *you* seen it?” Stuart asks, finally breaking the heavy silence.

“No. I don’t need to.” I squeeze my eyes shut. I don’t remember much of it at all. Why would I want to watch it? Then it would be complete in my mind. Something I have no interest in ever thinking of again.

“Don’t you think—?”

“No. I do not think. Griffin said the quality is so poor that he can’t even make out her face. If I thought she might be identifiable, then maybe it would be worth dragging it all up. But she isn’t. Griffin said she has her back to the camera most of the time. It’s just a fuzzy image from a random night years ago,” I mutter, hating that it’s intent on haunting me after all this time.

Stu leans back in his chair and blows out a long breath.

“So, how do you know about it?” I ask.

“Griffin.”

I purse my lips. “He came to you?”

“In a way.” Stu loosens his tie and runs a hand around his jaw. “I knew about the assault already.”

He pauses. Maybe he’s expecting a reaction from me. But he doesn’t get one. I sit deathly silent and still as I listen.

“I’ve known about it since before I agreed to be your campaign manager. I do a full background check on everyone I work with. It’s my job to preempt any situations where your past could be used as a weapon. I saw your medical records with the therapy sessions. I didn’t see the notes. But I saw the sessions you were recommended to attend for Rape Survivors. And that you only attended one.”

I grunt.

I didn’t need to talk about it any more than I already was. I wanted to move on as fast as I could and leave it behind me. Talking to my therapist helped. But his suggestion that announcing it in front of a room of strangers might be helpful just made me want to try to throw myself off a tall building again. And I know Griffin would kill me himself if I tried to pull anything like that again.

I crack my knuckles absentmindedly as Stuart continues.

“Griffin came to me after Harley asked him for help. He wanted details on every opponent you were up against, every vocal member of the public who wasn’t in support of you. He wanted anything I had that might lead him to who sent that video. But all he would tell me was that someone was trying to hurt you. And that they were using Harley to do it. I knew there wasn’t anything else it could be. It only took a purposefully loaded comment from me, to test Griffin’s reaction, to confirm I was correct.”

“That must have been cozy for the two of you. Playing white knights for poor damsel Reed,” I snipe.

“Don’t be an ass. We’re doing it because you and Harley are our friends. We wanted to wait a couple of days until we told you. We hoped we would have found out who sent it first. Griffin knew you would want to make them pay. I would too. For what they’re putting you through—”

“What they’re putting Harley through.” I stop cracking my knuckles and stare at him. “I couldn’t give a shit about me. I was there. I lived through it. A video is nothing in comparison.”

“They’re threatening to make it public.”

“No. They’re threatening Harley. Telling her that she’s the one who will make it go public if she doesn’t do their dirty work for them. They’re reliant on her. If they release it, they have nothing.”

“They might release it if she doesn’t do what they want. There’s no way to know if they’re bluffing or not.”

“Fuckers,” I hiss.

They have her cornered and they know it. If she tries to do what they’re asking, then she’s betraying me. If she doesn’t do it, or she tries and fails, then they say they’ll release it. Either way, she feels like she loses. No

wonder she's been so emotional. Her moving out, telling me it was the spotlight she didn't want, and that our relationship was moving too fast. It's all a load of shit. It's what she thought she had to tell me because she had no choice.

They took it from her.

Just like my choice was taken from me that night.

"We need to find them," I say to Stuart. "I know Harley. She will torture herself with this until we do. I can't let them keep hurting her. This should be my problem, not hers."

"Try telling her that. She's fighting for you, Reed. She could have walked away, not wanting to get involved, and left it at that. But she didn't. She went to Griffin, your best friend, whom she knows you trust with your life. And she begged him to help and not tell you. He obviously didn't listen to the second part, and I'm glad. But she did all of that. And then she took herself away from you to buy time while she figured out her next move. She's smart."

"I know. She's incredible." I lean my head into my hands and fist my fingers into my hair. "She's fucking incredible," I whisper.

The pink outfits, the blonde hair, the animal videos, and the talking to plants. People might assume Harley isn't bright. But they'd be wrong. She's dazzling. And to underestimate her would be a mistake. And what's more, she's strong. My girl is so fucking strong.

"I need to see her, Stu." I jump out of my chair and grab my jacket.

"Stop."

His word halts me.

"When I saw her at lunchtime, she said she was leaving work early to run errands on her way back to her friend's house she's staying at. You'll never

track her down. Just wait until she gets back.”

I swipe my cell phone up from where I threw it on the desk and dial her number. It goes straight to voicemail.

“Fuck,” I hiss, canceling the call before the voicemail kicks in.

“Look.” Stuart shoves the report he was reading into its file and stuffs it into his briefcase. “Let’s stop by and see Griffin. The three of us can really hammer out where we’re at and try to make some sense of what’s going on now that we all know what’s happened.”

“The first members’ meeting of the Reed Rape Club.” I grimace and Stuart arches a brow at me.

“I wouldn’t use that as your next campaign slogan,” he throws back with a smirk.

“No. It’s a crime. And it doesn’t even rhyme,” I mutter before catching his eye and letting my lips twitch.

That’s one thing I learned in therapy all those years ago. Look for reasons to smile, however small. My reason is a five-foot seven blonde who leaves a trail of pink glittery threads and the scent of coconut shampoo behind her. But she isn’t here. So all I have is a warped sense of humor about something serious.

I used to wonder as a kid why people made jokes about serious subjects. But now I know. It’s because they’d rather laugh than cry. And if you take control of how you view something, then you can choose how it affects you. To an extent, anyway. It’s hard as fuck to do when it’s something that’s trying to swallow you whole. I remember Griffin pulling me through some dark days. Pulling me through and out the other side to face another. Because as long as you don’t give up, then there will always be another side. Another day.

But there will never be another Harley. The knowledge that she has been going through all of this alone burns away at me.

It's time to put a stop to it.

Stuart and I lock up and head uptown, toward The Songbird. I know if there's a way to find out who is behind this, then Griffin and Stuart are the best men to help me. Between us, we know the whole of New York in some way or another.

There's nowhere to hide in this city.

Despite the adrenaline surging through my blood like an out-of-control wildfire, and it being the perfect time to get stuck into it with Griffin and Stuart, all I can think of is one person.

My person.

And being with her.



Chapter Thirty-Two



Harley

MARIA: CAN YOU TALK?

Me: Sure, what's up?

My phone rings a second later.

“Hi.”

“Harley, something's going on.” Maria's voice is hushed, and a door closes in the background as though she's moved into another room.

“What do you mean? Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. But Reed and his campaign manager came over earlier. They disappeared into Griffin's home office almost two hours ago and haven't come out. I heard Reed. He sounded mad about something.”

My stomach drops to my feet. If they're all together there, then surely that can only mean one thing.

He knows.

He knows I lied to him.

“Did you hear what he was saying?”

I pace up and down Suze's kitchen, suddenly glad I'm home alone.

“Something about how it can’t ever be allowed to happen. That he would rather die. God, Harley, it sounds serious. What’s he talking about?”

I lean back against the refrigerator and clasp my shaking hand over my mouth. *It can’t ever be allowed to happen. He would rather DIE?*

“No,” I sob, sliding down to the floor and dropping my head.

Reed knows. He knows about the video, and that they’re threatening to release it. And he would rather die than ever allow it to be released to the public. What else can he mean? This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. I didn’t want him to know about it. It’s naïve, but I thought Griffin and I could handle it. Griffin is resourceful. I thought he would find someone who could help, and then...

And then what? Arrest them? Let the police take the video for evidence. Show it to an entire jury at trial? Let the press dissect in minute detail everything that Reed went through that night.

No wonder he sounds mad. Mad and desperate for that not to happen. These people—I’m sure it’s more than one from how their message was worded—they will stop at nothing to cause him harm. He’ll never agree to their demands. That’s why they came to me. But what happens now? If he knows about the video and the blackmail, then what happens now?

I draw in a shaky breath as dizziness threatens to take over my head. I have no idea where to go from here. What the hell do I do?

“Harley, what is it? I’m worried. What’s going on?”

“Maria.” My voice is croaky, and I cough, attempting to clear my throat, but all it does is make it drier and scratchy. “There are some people who know something that could hurt Reed. They’re threatening to share what they have on him unless he acts as their lap dog while he’s mayor. They probably suspected they wouldn’t get to him directly, so they came to me. I

was the easier target.” I exhale a trembling breath as I lift my head and stare out of the kitchen window at the evening sky.

“You? Why would they... What do they have?” Maria asks, confusion evident in her voice.

“I can’t... I can’t tell you. It’s not for me to say. It’s about Reed. He hasn’t done anything wrong. It’s nothing like that. But it’s something that would hurt him if it came out. I didn’t know what to do. They were putting pressure on me to persuade him to make certain decisions, to try and influence him. But I couldn’t. I can’t do that to him. His integrity... Everything he stands for is truth and justice, and honesty...” I trail off, unsure of what I can say without betraying him.

“That’s why you moved out? So you weren’t in that position?”

“Yes.” I squeeze my eyes shut as tension spreads over my forehead. “I thought... I *hoped* we could fix it, that Reed wouldn’t get hurt. I can’t see him hurt, Maria,” I whisper as the first hot tear rolls down my cheek.

Her voice softens. “I understand, I do. But, Harley, he’s hurting *now*. Whatever these people have, is it worse than losing each other?”

I pause to allow her words to sink in.

“Yes,” I breathe. “It is worse. Because I’m scared that it will take him back to a place where he could lose himself.”

If it were me, I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I would shut down.

What if this breaks him?

“It is worse, Maria,” I say again. “It’s such a mess. I don’t see a way out of it. Whatever happens, he loses. We both do. And if this thing does come out... I’m scared what will happen. I’ve seen what can happen to people when they’re forced through difficult times. Look at my sister, Rose. She’s

barely living. She's too lost inside of herself. What if that happens to Reed?" My shoulders tremble as I sob.

"Oh, Harley."

I can tell by the waver in Maria's voice that she's crying. This is what friends do. They feel each other's emotions like their own.

"I don't know what to do. I'm so worried about him."

"Okay." Maria takes a steadying breath and exhales it slowly. "Whatever this thing is that they know about Reed, they will never know him as well as you do. They will never see him like you do. You need to talk to him about it. I've seen the way he is with you, Harley. I don't think being apart is doing either of you any good."

"The second they know we're back together, the threats will start again." I screw my eyes shut as tears course faster down my cheeks.

"Then let them start. You said there's no way out of this, right? What if you aren't meant to escape it? What if you're meant to push through it? You might not come out the same as you went in, but—"

"We'd have each other," I finish for her.

"Exactly."

"I... maybe... I just... I'm scared, Maria. I'm scared of doing the wrong thing and it hurting him more." I wipe the burning tears from my cheeks as I open my eyes.

"I know, I... Wait. They're coming out." Maria's voice drops to a whisper, and I hold my breath as though they'll hear my breathing through the phone. Which is ridiculous, because if they're going to hear anything, it's my heart banging in my chest like a prisoner trying to escape death row.

"Are they...?"

"They're leaving," Maria whispers. "Reed and Stuart are leaving, and..."

“Sweetheart?” Griffin’s voice calls in the background.

“Griffin’s looking for you. You need to go. I know he probably won’t say anything. He’s like a vault when it comes to Reed and their friendship, but if—”

“If he does, then I’ll call or text straight away.”

“Thank you.” My heart slows in my chest as I breathe deeply. “Thank you.”

We hang up and I sit on the floor of Suze’s kitchen, staring out of the window. I don’t know how long I stay there before I force myself to my feet and make myself a mug of decaf tea. It’s not like I need to worry about the caffeine. I won’t sleep. But I do it anyway, knowing I should not put any further obstacles in my path.

It’s dark by the time I finish it. I dunked a cookie in and only managed to eat half. My appetite has vanished, evaporated into thin air, just like my hopes of finding whoever sent that video. Surely Griffin would have something by now. Or Stuart? I’m asking so much of them... I... Realization hits me like a gut punch, stealing the air from my lungs.

I’m asking so much of them. But what am I doing?

I’ve run to them for help. And I’ve left Reed, thinking it will help in some way. But what am *I* actually doing?

I sit in the semi-dark of the kitchen and wrack my brains for something, anything, that might be useful. There must be something, however small. A flicker of a memory comes to me, and the silence of the house suddenly feels deafening as it bounces off the walls, growing, until it’s less of a flicker and more like a tiny flame. One that could, just maybe, ignite a fire.

I pull out my cell phone to call Stuart just as there’s a knock at the door.

“Shit.”

I tap out a text message instead, as fast as my fumbling fingers will allow, telling him my idea. Then I put my phone on the hall table and open the front door.

“Re—?”

His name doesn't even have a chance to leave my lips before Reed strides in and backs me up against the wall, crashing his lips onto mine.

I sink into him like it's the most natural thing in the world to be back in his arms again.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper against his mouth as he holds my face between his hands.

“Don't talk. We can talk later. Just give yourself to me, Harls. I need you. I need you more than ever,” he breathes against my lips, and they part for him like he's uttered a magic password. He slides his tongue in and kisses me until I'm dizzy.

“Where are Suze and the kids?”

“School thing,” I pant between kisses as I push my fingers into his hair and moan into another kiss he's giving me. “They won't be back for a while.”

“Thank you, fucking universe,” he groans as his lips travel down my neck and he pauses to suck the juncture where it meets my shoulder.

“The door's open,” I manage to say as his hands push up the sides of my t-shirt and the pads of his thumbs stroke my ribs, making me gasp and throw my head back. It's only been a matter of days since he touched me, but my body is craving him, absorbing his every touch like it's been starved for eternity.

His lips stay on my neck as he reaches back blindly and slams the front door shut with one hand. Then he drops it to the waistband of my

sweatpants and slides inside them, cupping the front of my panties roughly in his palm.

“You’re soaking,” Reed growls, shifting the wet fabric to one side and sliding his thumb over me.

I arch away from the wall at the sudden contact, which makes my legs threaten to buckle underneath me. All I can do is whimper in response as his thumb circles my already swollen clit.

“Have you been wet for me the whole time we’ve been apart, Angel?”

I hum in appreciation as he strokes me, slick arousal spilling from my body to coat his fingers.

“Yes,” I whisper, biting my lip as he adds more pressure.

He groans against my mouth.

“Tell me... have you missed me touching you?” He plunges two fingers inside me, and I cry out, but it’s caught on his lips as he kisses me again and curls his fingers, hitting my G-spot.

“Yes,” I whimper as he works me into a frenzy on his hand, rubbing my clit with his palm as he fingers me until I’m clenching around him and trying to climb up the wall backward as I writhe in his arms.

“Such a wriggler,” he murmurs, planting his free hand firmly around my neck, pinning me in place.

I gasp against his mouth as he sucks on my bottom lip, nipping it gently between his teeth.

His voice drops. “The nights without you have been hell.”

His hand flexes against my throat as his fingers delve deeper, causing my eyes to roll back in my head with pleasure. I can sense him watching me, and when I look back into his gaze, it’s fixed on mine with an intensity that makes my heart skip a beat.

“The days, too. But especially the nights. They’re so fucking long when all I can think about is being deep inside you.”

“Reed,” I moan as a familiar tightening begins gathering strength low in my stomach.

“Tell me you’ve missed me, Angel. I need to hear you say it,” he utters quietly.

“I have.”

He slides his fingers out and adds another, forcing me to accept them as he holds me still.

I swallow, relishing the resistance my neck meets against his hand. I love this. I love feeling like I belong to him. Relinquishing control to him doesn’t make me feel powerless. It’s the opposite. I feel cherished and adored when he takes command of me like this, struggling to hold himself together. I know he isn’t anywhere else right now except firmly in this moment with me. Our eyes lock together as I give my body over to him.

“I have missed you,” I whisper, staring into his darkened eyes. “I never wanted to leave. I’m so sorr—”

“Shh.” He slides his hand down my neck and over my t-shirt, grasping my breast, positioning it so he can dip his head and suck my nipple into his mouth through the fabric.

A moan catches in my throat as he bites.

“I’m going to make you come all over me, Angel. I need to feel you.”

The sound of his zipper hits my ears, and I rest my head against the wall, panting and high with anticipation for what I know is coming. He looks up at me under hooded lids as he sucks my nipple again, making me squirm against him.

I nod, my lips parted, unable to speak properly from how turned on I am. All I manage is a barely-there whisper of “Please.”

Reed tears my sweatpants and panties down my legs, dropping to his knees to pull them off my feet.

“Fuck. You’re so wet, I can see it on your legs.” He runs a tongue slowly up the inside of my thigh, sucking up my arousal with a tortured groan. “You’ve always tasted like heaven to me, Angel. *Fucking heaven.*”

I’m trembling and grabbing fistfuls of his hair as I ache to have his mouth where I want it.

“Such a pretty pussy,” he murmurs to himself, his voice low and gravelly.

He places his mouth on me, sealing it against my skin, and pleasure explodes instantly, sending shockwaves through my body as he sucks my clit. I crash spectacularly into a giant, shuddering orgasm on his face as my body almost folds in two over him.

“Reed...” I cry out, clinging on to his hair with my hands as he keeps sucking, extending my pleasure to the point where my thighs begin to shake around his face.

“More,” he growls, his tongue moving to rub fast circles over me. “Give me more, Harley!”

He sounds angry, his voice strained, but I barely have time to register it before my first orgasm rolls into another and I’m forced onto my tiptoes as he pushes his mouth against me.

“Give me fucking more!” he demands again, lifting both of my legs over his shoulders until I’m sitting on his face.

I straighten my back against the wall so I don’t fall on top of him. My heart is racing, and a trickle of sweat runs down between my breasts.

Everything is sensitive.

So sensitive.

“I—”

“Don’t you dare say it’s too much. You *left* me for days.” His voice pitches as though it’s about to break. But he coughs it away and growls again, his hot mouth never leaving my soaking skin. “I’m telling you to come for me again before I fuck you so deep my name will be etched inside your body.”

I shudder at his words and keep my hands in his hair as he parts my thighs wider and presses his tongue inside me, pulling me down onto him and rubbing his face against my skin.

He is literally face-fucking me.

Reed is face-fucking me in Suze’s hallway.

I’m powerless to do anything. He’s got me glued to the wall as his mouth turns me inside out with pleasure.

“Reed, please...”

He doesn’t answer me with words. Instead, he groans and sucks my clit, shaking his head side to side. The movement, paired with the vibration passing from his lips, is too much. I come again, my muscles spasming in deep waves as I fly back against the wall and cry out. The strength of it so great that my vision blurs and my ears ring.

I can barely comprehend what’s going on. Everything sounds like I’m underwater. My feet brush against the ground momentarily, then he lifts me, guiding my legs around his waist.

“Hold on, Angel,” he whispers.

I nod mutely as he fills me to the hilt in one determined thrust.

Our lips are parted, our breath tangling together as he forces me to take him, to stretch around him until I’m quivering in his arms.

“I understand why you left,” he says as he moves inside me, pulling almost all the way out, before driving back in, forcing me against the wall.

“I didn’t know what else to do.” My words come out like a plea. A plea to believe me. To understand.

To forgive me.

“I know,” he hisses as he watches my body accepting him with each deep thrust. “You feel so damn good. So tight.”

He lifts his eyes to mine and the golden flecks adorning the smoky quartz burn brightly. They call to me like a sign.

Another flame.

I have to do whatever it takes to make sure they always burn in his eyes. He’s too brilliant to ever be lost. To be dimmed.

“I never meant to hurt you.”

His lips claim mine again in a kiss as he thrusts so hard that the hall table begins to rock on its legs and bang against the wall.

“I know.”

“What are we going to do?” I suck in a breath as he drives deeper, making me shake around him.

“Right now, we’re going to fuck, Angel. The rest can wait.”

I’m held tightly and I give myself over to the pleasure of Reed driving into my body, fully suited and smelling incredible. The same warm, forest air scent I’ve always loved. Like adventure and home, all in one. I sink one hand into the thick silky strands at the back of his head, and hold on to his tie with the other, keeping him close as we kiss, gasp, and moan against each other’s lips.

His thumbs dig into my ass, and his cock swells inside me with that extra hardness that happens before he comes.

“Reed...”

“I’m close, Harls. Come with me.” His eyes meet mine for a brief second, the golden streaks flashing when I nod at him.

Reed’s orgasm hits first. His jaw clenches as he glances down at our bodies meeting and then looks back up and into my eyes. Feeling his cock throbbing, knowing that he’s spilling himself inside me, sets mine off, and my mouth falls open as I come around him, my body sucking him in deeper with each contraction.

“Fuck,” he hisses, kissing my lips one last time before he buries his head in the crook of my neck and rides the rest of our pleasure out for both of us in deep thrusts.

I stroke his hair, my chest heaving up and down as I try to take in air and slow my pounding heart. I relish the feel of him, buried deep, his body connected with mine. Hot, strong, and big.

Perfect.

“You put everyone else first. I’m so in awe of you, Harls.” Reed’s voice drifts over my neck slowly, a soft caress, as he tilts his head and dusts his lips over the dip beneath my ear. “You’d do anything for me, wouldn’t you?”

“For you, yes,” I whisper, pressing my nose into his hair, content to be held close. To feel his arms around me again. To have his body inside mine again.

To feel his heart thumping in his chest, against me.

“Thank you. I know it hasn’t been easy for you.”

His lips graze along my jaw, and I allow my eyes to flutter closed, lost in the softness of his kiss.

“It’s been harder for you.”

His shoulders stiffen beneath my arms and his grip on me tightens.

“It’s about to get even worse…” He pauses. “I have to let go, Harley.”

Let go?

“What do you mean, let go? What’s—”

The sound of voices coming up the path outside makes us freeze.

My eyes pop, panic gripping me. “It’s Suze and the kids,” I hiss.

I push against Reed’s chest so he will put me down, and I scabble on the floor, grabbing my sweatpants and pulling them on. My panties are twisted and in no fit state to wear. I swing my head around wildly, looking for somewhere to stuff them because my sweatpants have no pockets.

Reed calmly extracts them from my panicked hands and slides them into the pocket of his suit pants. All he’s had to do is zip up his pants and straighten his tie and he looks as good as ever. A vision in a suit that fits every hardened plane of his toned physique like a glove. Even his hair looks good, all sexily mussed up, like he’s stepped out of a high-end salon. I don’t need to look in the mirror to know that my cheeks are flushed far too pink, my hair probably resembles a bird’s nest, and my lips are likely a deep pink and swollen from all the kissing.

Suze will take one look at me and know exactly what’s been going on.

The front door flies open, and Mason and Emmerson barrel in, dumping their school backpacks on the floor as Suze bustles in behind them, muttering something to herself about schools being assholes.

“Hello,” Mason and Emmerson call before they run past us toward the kitchen.

“Hello,” Reed answers, his lips twitching as he watches them go, completely unfazed by him being in their hallway.

“They’re hungry. You’re lucky you even got a hello. A grunt would be classed as sophisticated conversation for them at this stage,” Suze says, looking from Reed to me.

Her eyes linger on my face, and I pull my tender bottom lip into my mouth, massaging it with my tongue. I know she can tell that Reed was biting and sucking on it only seconds ago. Suze could be a human lie detector. Maybe it’s a mom thing. She has this skill for knowing when people have been up to something.

My eyes dart to the wall before I can control myself. Suze doesn’t miss it and her brows incline subtly as she follows my gaze.

“Mom,” a voice screeches from the kitchen. “You said you’d make us something to eat.”

“I’m coming,” Suze calls back. “Shall I make some for you as well, or have you already eaten something?” Her eyes glint as she looks at Reed, who’s running his thumb over his lips, looking deep in thought.

I wonder if he can still taste me on him.

“Mom,” the voice shrieks again.

“I said I’m coming.” She looks between us one last time, a soft smile spreading over her face. “Nice to see you, Reed.”

I wait until she’s gone before I turn back to him.

“What were you going to say before... about letting go?”

His eyes widen a fraction, and unease passes over his face, his eyes dimming.

“I...” His brows pull together. “I came here to tell you....” His eyes meet mine, something in them making me freeze. I focus on him completely, the rest of the world grinding to a stop.

“Tell me what?” I whisper.

He shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut like it's physically painful to say whatever it is he's about to.

"Then I saw you. And I... I needed to remember how you felt. I couldn't tell you without feeling you again."

"Tell me what?" I ask again, my eyes frantically searching his before he drops his gaze away. Dread creeps into my veins like a disease, spreading sickness through my body.

He can't even look at me.

He's rolling his lips together, his jaw set firm, his eyes staring into the distance like he's lost somewhere.

"Reed?" I beg.

"It'll be okay, you'll see. It has to be this way. It's the only answer."

"What do you mean?" I reach for him, but instead of taking me into his arms, they stay fixed by his side. I grip the lapels of his jacket, desperate for him to hold me again, to feel his lips on my skin.

"It's time for a fresh start, Harls."

I stare into his eyes and see the shine in them. The emotion. The regret. He looks so deeply into mine that I'm afraid I will crumble the second he looks away.

I'm not strong enough.

I want to beg. Fall to my knees and grip him, so he can't walk away.

So he can't leave me.

"No," I choke out, my throat suddenly thick as I struggle to swallow.

He looks at me, giving me the softest, most beautiful smile as he traces a thumb down over my cheek.

"It was never going to last forever, Angel."

I step back from him, the walls spinning.

“Reed, I—”

“Auntie Lee-Lee!” Emmerson appears next to me, tugging on my arm. “Will you please come and eat with me? I want to tell you about school.”

“Emmerson, I told you to stay in here.”

Suze rushes up the hallway, giving us both an apologetic glance. When I look back at Reed, he has his phone in his hand and is frowning at the screen.

“Are you staying?” Suze asks Reed.

“Sorry, no.” He gives her the smile I instantly recognize as his professional one.

His *fake* one.

“Something’s come up at work. I need to go.” He looks at Emmerson, holding my sleeve, then leans in, kissing me next to my ear. “I’ll call you,” he whispers.

He shouts goodbye to Mason and says goodbye to Emmerson and Suze, and then he’s gone.

His scent lingers in the hallway, but it grows fainter with each breath I take as I stare at the closed door. Soon it will be gone completely.

Like he was never here.

“Come on.” Emmerson tugs on my arm, looking up at me with big eyes. I take her hand and let her lead me into the kitchen, my feet surprising me with how they manage to move themselves.

I’m dazed. Dizzy and disorientated, like I’ve been put in the washer on the fastest spin cycle. Ten minutes ago, I was in Reed’s arms. And now he’s gone. And I’m left with his and Maria’s words ringing in my ears.

It can’t ever be allowed to happen. He would rather die.

“I have to let go, Harley. It’s time for a fresh start. It was never going to last forever, Angel.”

I sit and force down one bite of grilled cheese sandwich with Suze and the kids. I listen to them tell me about their school meeting and how Mason has been chosen to join the school band.

But I can’t taste anything.

My mind keeps wandering.

Back to those words.

“It was never going to last forever, Angel.”

Nausea builds in my stomach, sloshing the grilled cheese around until all I can do to stop it from reappearing over the floor is sip my glass of water repeatedly.

He never wants that video to be released. He would rather die, just like Maria overheard him say.

A cold, creeping dread scatters up my spine.

What was never going to last forever?

Us?

What if he thinks we’re better off apart now? People can’t try and exploit my feelings for him. What if he thinks he can’t trust me because I ran and didn’t talk to him? He said he understood why I left, but does he? Does he really? Reed has always been about honesty between us. What if he can’t forgive me for going to Griffin first instead of him?

What if it’s too much? What if it’s all too much?

Angel.

His name for me has never been so far from the truth.

Angels don’t exist in hell. And that’s where I am now.

He’s gone.

He's really gone.

And what's more is that I started this. I left first. I thought I was doing what I had to.

But I've just shown him what it's like to be apart.

And that's his 'fresh start'.

Without me.

Tears burn in my eyes, so I make my excuses, thanking Suze for the food, and head to the bathroom. She catches my eye with a worried nod and I know she's waiting until the kids are in bed so we can talk. But I don't know what to tell her.

How can I explain what just happened without my soul tearing in two? There are no words to describe how numb and empty I feel.

I asked Reed to make love to me all night when I knew I was leaving.

Tonight was Reed saying *goodbye*.



Chapter Thirty-Three



“THEY’RE GETTING DESPERATE.” GRIFFIN’S lip curls in disgust as he cradles his glass of scotch.

We’re sat in the bar we always seem to end up in whenever shit gets serious. One with a deep rich interior of reds and browns, and a long bar lined with everything you need to drown your sorrows or put the world to rights. It’s not flashy. It smells of a mix of stained oak and roasted peanuts. But it’s unapologetic and doesn’t give a shit. It’s why we always end up here on nights like tonight. Nights when you need a friend to tell it to you straight. Or you need to remove yourself from all the pretentious shit that comes with being mayor, or New York’s youngest billionaire hotelier.

Nights when you just need to be fucking human.

This bar is our hidden oasis in the middle of the concrete jungle.

We’re even sitting in the same seats I remember being in when I talked some sense into Griffin’s ass after a fight with Maria all those months ago.

Now it’s my turn.

“It doesn’t mean they’ll follow through. You don’t have to do it, Reed.”

I lift my glass, staring at the honeyed liquid. I knew what I had to do the second Griffin told me about the texts and video. The second I understood what Harley has been dragged into. Knowing what this is doing to her, the power these assholes have over her... It brought memories crashing back to me. Memories I never thought I would have to face again. Not like this.

She's trapped.

They've taken away her choice. She may think she's the one who made it by leaving and trying to buy time. But she isn't. They've held all the cards. Just like me thinking if I chose to forget about that night and leave it in the past, it would be enough.

And it was. For a long time.

But it's not just about me anymore.

"I do." I hold my glass to my lips, my eyes meeting Griffin's over the rim. "I do have to do it."

I knock the scotch back, savoring the warm burn, inching its way down to my stomach. I wasn't planning on seeing Griffin again tonight. It's been less than two hours since Stu and I left his apartment.

But blackmail doesn't wear a watch.

Griffin shakes his head, rolling his lips over his teeth. "You always were a fucker when it came to principles."

"I'm the one in control of my life. No one else."

The barman refills our drinks without saying a word, then disappears to the other end of the bar.

"I know. I just wish there was another way." Griffin glances at me, then grimaces as he looks back at his drink. His jaw clenches as he sucks in a breath. "You're really okay about it?"

I cast my eyes over him. Over the tension pouring from him in waves. His shoulders are practically up by his ears from all the stiffness in them. And this is Griffin. I've known him since we were kids. He's always been uptight. I'm so used to it that I don't even notice anymore. But for me to see it in him tonight, worn so outwardly in every movement he makes.

It tells me something.

He's the best fucking friend in the world.

What I'm planning to do bothers him. *Really* fucking bothers him.

But it's because he cares. And he will support me no matter what. I have no doubt.

"I'm okay. I'm..." I run a hand around the back of my neck. "I'm better than okay. They need to know they can never intimidate me. I will never play their little bitch in Office. I didn't get into politics to aid corrupt assholes."

"I respect that, I do. I just want you to be all right, you know?"

I clap my hand on his back. "Knew you loved me."

He smirks. "Yeah, whatever. Stuck with you for life more like. Making the best of it." He side-eyes me, lifting his glass to his lips. "Only you could make a joke right now."

"Would you rather I cry? Wipe my nose on your tie?"

"Fuck off," he snorts into his glass, unconsciously running a hand down over his bird print tie.

I exhale heavily, feeling calmer than I have in days. I'm doing the right thing. I know it.

I *feel* it.

"It is what it is, Griff. I thought I knew what was important to me. But then—"

“I get it. I do. You’re a brave, crazy fucker. But I do get it. And I hope it plays out okay for you. I wish I knew for certain what will happen.”

I tilt my head, watching the barman clean up, as we’re the last two here.

“That’s life though. No one knows anything. Not for sure.”

“Guess not.”

We drink in silence for a few minutes. The calm before the storm.

“Show me the text again,” I say, draining my glass.

Griffin pulls Harley’s cell phone from his jacket pocket and hands it to me as he calls to the barman.

“Hey bud, you mind staying open a little later tonight? We have a friend joining us for a nightcap.”

The barman wanders over but before he has a chance to decline, Griffin slides a wad of bills over the polished wood. “If you can leave the bottle, too.”

The young guy’s eyebrows lift, and he pockets the cash in one fluid motion and places not one but two scotch bottles down in front of us.

“Enjoy, gentlemen.”

We watch him retreat, pulling his phone and a set of earbuds from his back jean pocket. The sound of rock music blares from them before he stuffs them in his ears and heads off into a room out the back.

“Best fucking bar on this island,” Griffin mutters as he refills his glass from one of the bottles.

I open the messages on Harley’s old phone, the pink glittery case making me smile. I’m still finding those fluffy threads from her slippers all over the damn apartment. But I look forward to it. I pretend it’s because she’s still there. That I’ll walk in after work and her eyes will light up, and she’ll

giggle as I take her in my arms and attack her neck with my mouth. Kissing over her pulse point. Feeling her life. Her energy. Drinking her in.

Making her mine again and again.

Focus, Reed.

“What did Harley say when you told her?” Griffin asks as I tap on the most recent message on the phone to open it.

“I didn’t get that far. Suze and the kids came home.”

“You were gone long enough to talk to her. What were you doing?” Griffin looks at me, then shakes his head. “Right, of course.”

“Don’t judge me, okay?” I snap. “It’s a big part of our relationship. With everything that’s happened, I needed her. I don’t expect you to understand.” Heat fires across the back of my neck. I know I was meant to be there to tell Harley what I’m planning, but I just couldn’t control the urge to have her to myself. The second I saw her blue eyes all wide and trusting, needing me as much as I needed her.

“Don’t give me that shit.” Griffin’s glass clatters on the bar as he places it down heavily and turns his face to me, his eyes piercing into mine with incredible clarity for the number of drinks he’s had. “I was there, remember? I get it. I know what Harley has done for you. You’re getting fired at from all directions. But I’m on your side. I’ve always been on your side.”

I purse my lips and lift my chin toward him.

He’s right. I’m being a jerk. Griffin has seen me at my absolute worst. But it only made him focus on our friendship even more. I honestly don’t believe I would be here today if it weren’t for him.

“Sorry.”

He nods and drops his eyes to the phone, effectively accepting my apology and moving on. We've been through much worse together. The odd, pissed reaction to one another is nothing.

"They're bluffing."

"Maybe." I scan the text again, even though I've read it half a million times since meeting up with Griffin.

Unknown: The public might be fools, but we aren't. He will listen to you. George Yates must be selected, or the video gets posted on every social media site for the world to see. Do you want to be responsible for that? You have twenty-four hours.

"They don't believe you aren't together anymore."

"We aren't though." I place the phone down and run one hand over the back of the other, cracking my knuckles.

She left.

"It's someone who knows one or both of you to make that assumption. As far as the New York press are concerned, you two are being grieved like Romeo and fucking Juliet." Griffin shakes his head with a humorless smile. "To think Harley could still influence your decision means they don't believe the story. Who's seen you together up close? Who would notice the way you are with each other? Because it's a big assumption to make that she could have that much of an effect over you when you've only been 'dating' for a matter of months."

"I don't know." I run my hand around my jaw, the days' worth of growth covering my skin scratching against my fingertips. "Someone who was paying a lot of attention?"

"Exactly. Someone who is paying a lot of attention to your personal life... a lot of attention over the way you look at Harley. Someone who can

recognize the connection you two have.”

Griffin retrieves his abandoned glass and takes a sip. “A woman,” he says as the glass leaves his lips.

I stare at the whiskey bottle as I process his words. He’s right. Who is more likely to notice the way I look at Harley? And the way she looks at me? A man might, but not to the same extent as a woman. A woman is more in tune to recognize those intimate moments between the two of us. Stolen glances when we’re separated at an event. The way Harley shivers and her cheeks flush when I whisper to her about how I can’t wait to drop to my knees and worship her when we get home. How I light up like a fucking Disney parade when she walks into a room.

A woman is more likely to recognize the signs of vulnerability created by the heart.

“I only know one woman who isn’t Harley or my family that knows about my past.” I look at Griffin, bile rising in my throat. “And that’s—”

“Call me a genius and bow to my feet,” Stuart shouts as he barges through the door to the bar looking triumphant, waving something around in his hand.

“Genius,” Griffin says dryly.

“I ain’t fucking kissing your feet.” I snort at Stuart as I grab the clean glass the barman left and pour him a large drink. “Here.” I hand it to him, and he pulls a bar stool around so he can sit and face me and Griffin.

“Thanks.” He knocks the entire thing back in one. “Ah, just what I needed.”

I pour him another as he brandishes a small bundle of papers in his hand like he’s discovered the Holy Grail.

“What’s that?” Griffin asks.

“This”—Stuart holds the folded papers up—“is something interesting I found out about our old friend, Dennis Vincent.”

We both look at him, waiting.

“I never dug into him too deeply before. I didn’t have to. I only do that with my clients and their opponents. I like to know as much about them and their pasts as possible.” He pauses to meet my eyes.

I’ve suspected George Yates and Dennis Vincent were corrupt bastards for years. Dennis vacating the mayor role suddenly before his term was up was suspicious, to say the least. Add to that the pardon Dennis served on a known criminal, as well as a multitude of other smaller crimes which never made it to trial, and you’ve got yourself one giant pie of corruption.

And it’s not one I want a slice of. Not now. Not ever.

I nod at Stuart to continue.

“But with recent events, I decided to apply my sleuth abilities to Dennis. It turns out cheating the city wasn’t the only betrayal of his. He’s been married to his wife for thirty years. But it seems Dennis also sent money to the same checking account every month for eighteen years. It stopped years before he took office as mayor, so there’s no reason for anyone to ask questions... Until now.”

“You think he was paying for a kid he’d had with another woman?” I ask, surprised.

“I don’t think. I know.” Stuart slams the papers down on the bar and we lean in, looking at the bank statements with month upon month of payments going to a woman named Kira Hutchings.

Hutchings.

“Graham?” I sit back sharply as things begin to slot into place.

“Yep.” Stuart nods before downing his second glass of scotch and smacking his lips together. “Hell, I needed that one too.”

“You think Dennis is Graham’s father?” Griffin scours the documents with a frown.

“Again, I don’t think. I know. And you’ve got friends who can find a birth certificate for us, haven’t you?” Stuart directs to Griffin, who rises from his seat in a flash, pulling his cell phone out of his jacket.

“Should we tell him it’s almost midnight?” Stuart looks after Griffin as he paces around the empty bar with his phone glued to his ear and one hand thrust into the pocket of his gray suit pants.

“No, he’s good.” I watch as Griffin nods and then says something else to the person on the other end of the line.

When Griffin Parker calls for a favor, people pick up. Midnight or not.

“So you think Dennis is behind this? And Graham? Father-son bonding they missed out on for all those years? I know, son. Let’s infiltrate the New York Office to cover up our own criminal relations.” I screw my face up, shaking my head. Despite the scotch adding a haziness, everything is beginning to turn a lot clearer.

“I know. Most people go fishing.” Stuart laughs, then looks to Griffin, who’s finished his call.

“We’ll have it within the hour.” He sits back down.

“Nice.” A smile spreads over Stuart’s face. “So now we know the who and the why. We just need to prove it. But we still don’t know the how. It obviously wasn’t personal. If you’d lost the election, they would have found something to manipulate the other person with.”

“I’m just the lucky unlucky one.” I snort.

I don't consider myself a bad person. I have no scandalous hidden records or covered up history. Apart from that night. If it weren't for that one incident, they would have struggled to find anything to use as leverage against me.

But it's not even about that night anymore.

They turned this into a war when they brought Harley into it.

They should have tried to get to me directly. But it's like Griffin said. Someone knew the best way to me was through her. Someone who has experience of reading my emotions. Who can recognize the way I look at Harley as being something special, because it is completely different from the way I ever looked at her.

A woman, like Griffin said.

Someone who knows about that night.

It can only be one person.

One person who conveniently is also dating Graham Hutchings.

Bea.



We don't leave the bar until after one in the morning. It's amazing how much you can plan with two bottles of top shelf scotch and three determined minds. By the time we roll out into the night, we've set the wheels well and truly in motion. Griffin could have gotten half of New York up if he wanted. But we decided to bide our time a few more hours to get it right. Dennis and Graham are weasels. And they'll squirm their way out of a chokehold given half a chance.

I'm not giving them a fraction.

We don't have enough evidence yet. Merely bank statements and a birth certificate, courtesy of Griffin's friend, confirming that Dennis is Graham's biological father. It's hardly ground-breaking. These things happen all the time. But the fact that there is already so much suspicion and so many unanswered questions from the public surrounding Dennis's departure from the mayor title plays to our advantage when he has a secret son who was in the running to be next to fill the role.

There will definitely be questions after the 'anonymous' tips to three of New York's largest newspapers and the story will spread quickly.

And it will give us time to put the next parts of the plan into action.

"You speak to Harley yet?" Stuart asks as I put my earpiece in so I can hear him when I'm on stage.

"No. I tried. She was probably on the subway from Suze's place with no service."

I wish I had gotten a chance to speak to her first thing this morning like I intended to. But it didn't connect, and since the city's press began reporting on Dennis and Graham the second the sun rose, it has been hectic.

Stuart's phone starts buzzing in his jacket and he pulls it out, answering on the second ring.

"Stuart Chambers, Office of Mayor Walker."

Pause.

"He will be making a press announcement shortly, combined with a written statement. Thank you."

He slides his phone back into his inside pocket.

"You're in hot demand. That's the seventeenth call I've had in the last thirty minutes. People are demanding a full investigation into Dennis Vincent's conduct while he was acting mayor. Specifically, his relationship

with George Yates, and some of the decisions they both signed off on. It seems the public have even less reason to trust him now that they know he lied about Graham being his son.”

“Busy day for them too, then.” I straighten my tie and clear my throat as one of the TV crew heads in our direction.

“Assholes,” Stuart mutters. “But it’s working in our favor. Interest in the mayor’s office is at an all-time high this morning. And everyone is waiting to see what you announce. You’re already trending online, and we haven’t gone live yet.”

I smirk at the growing grin on Stuart’s face. He loves this. Being in the thick of it. The press releases, the buzz. Perhaps not the exact circumstances surrounding why I’ve chosen first thing this morning to do a live press release in the ballroom of The Songbird hotel. But regardless, he’s in his element, thinking on his feet, and fielding press calls like a championship defender. It’s one of the reasons he’s such a great campaign manager. And as I’ve come to realize even more this last couple of days, a great friend, too.

“Right. Go do this.” He grabs his phone out of his pocket again as another call comes in.

I make my way out from behind the privacy screening to the stage which has been erected especially for this press conference. A multitude of camera clicks ring out from the gathered press members filling the room wall to wall. I catch Griffin’s eye. He’s stood at the front right side of the room, to the edge of the stage. Maria’s with him. But only Maria.

I scan the crowd of faces near them, looking for blonde hair and blue eyes. But she isn’t here, of course she isn’t. It’s purposefully early. Early

enough that a lot of the city will catch the news before they leave for work, or as they arrive to start the day.

She won't even be in the building yet.

"You ready?" The Songbird's Event Manager asks me.

"As I'll ever be." I curl my lips into a practiced smile.

"Just so you know... I voted for you." He returns a smile of his own. "It's all set whenever you want to start."

I thank him and climb onto the stage, over to where the podium is. I lift my eyes, looking into the camera directed at me, and I begin.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining me. I am Reed Walker, your Mayor Elect for this incredible city we call home. Today, I am going to share with you my plans for the following: the candidate selected for the role of deputy mayor. The officials joining me when I take office in just a few short weeks. And the commissioners I will be appointing as heads of agencies for our education, transport, and housing departments. As well as for the New York Fire Department and the New York Police Department. I know you have been waiting for this announcement and I thank you for your patience. This city deserves the very best. It deserves people who love it. Who will give their heart to it. And who will strive for justice, freedom, and peace in their endeavors. And so, I'm sure you can understand that I wanted to be certain I had made the right choices."

I cast a smile around the room.

"Right. Let's start."

Twenty minutes later, which also included question time, I'm off the stage and talking in lowered voices with Stuart when someone clears their throat behind me.

“That was a great speech, Reed.”

I turn and heat flares over the back of my neck. I draw in a deliberate breath, composing myself before I do something I regret with a room full of reporters bearing witness.

“Bea. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Stuart emits a low curse under his breath next to me and glares at her. She acts as if he isn’t even there, her eyes fixed solely on me.

“Well, it was a little quiet at home since Graham is helping the Department of Investigation with their inquiries. We had an early awakening, shall we say?” Her eyes pinch in the corners as she looks at me. They’re bloodshot. Her usually immaculate makeup is also missing, instead replaced by what looks hastily applied and smudged in places.

I look back in silence, my mouth flattened into an emotionless line. She’s not stupid. I’m sure she has suspicions about why the DOI has suddenly started sniffing around. And she would be right.

But it’s the least she should expect after what they’ve been doing.

“I just...” Her eyes sweep over my face and down my chest, softening as they return to meet mine again. “I wanted to tell you that I think you are the best mayor this city could have. You deserved to win. I can’t say that about everyone.” A cloud of tension passes over her face as she purses her lips and readjusts her purse on her shoulder.

“That’s one thing we agree on.” I glare at her. “But why come all the way here to tell me? Again,” I add, raising a brow, my jaw ticking like a watch on speed as I fight to control the fire coursing through my veins. “Couldn’t you have sent a text?” I hiss through gritted teeth.

Her eyes pop, her pupils dilating the moment she realizes that I know. She freezes, her eyes locked on mine for one second, two, three...

“People do things sometimes that... are a shock, even to themselves,” she says, plastering on a fake smile as one of the hotel staff passes and wishes us good morning.

“In the moment, perhaps.” I tip my head to the side as I study her. From the outside, she looks like any other woman, long dark hair, red lipstick, manicured nails, designer dress. But I know underneath it all is a selfish heart as cold as ice.

“But to plan something, down to the tiniest detail. To search and find something that apparently never existed twelve years ago. And then to use it as a weapon against someone who has never done a thing against you... *It’s fucking despicable.*”

Her throat constricts as she swallows slowly, looking up at me with darkened eyes. “You left me and moved to LA.”

“I wasn’t talking about me,” I spit. “And there’s nothing wrong with my memory, Bea. If I recall, you broke up with me in a note before that and were in someone else’s bed before I’d even packed.”

I blow out a breath with a humorless chuckle. “You wouldn’t know the first thing about caring about anyone other than yourself.”

Her eyes glitter up at me before she narrows them, her chest rising as she draws in a deep breath. “I can see it was a mistake coming here. Thinking that you might be reasonable, given our history. Do give my regards to Harley, won’t you? I’m sure you’ll be speaking to her.” She turns to leave.

“Don’t,” I growl.

She pauses, thrusting her chin out as she turns back to me.

“Don’t what? Don’t remind you of what it was like? How you liked to...” She glances at Stuart. “He liked it hard and dirty.” She smirks. “We fucked like—”

“No,” I hiss so quietly that only the three of us can hear. But the volume doesn’t matter. It’s the venom in my voice that makes Bea’s words wither like paper over a flame, dying in her throat. I fix my eyes on her, leaning closer. “Don’t ever say her name where I can hear you again. You don’t deserve to even *think* it.”

She bristles, her shoulders stiffening, visibly shaken by the force of my words as she slowly draws in a breath before she speaks. “I hope she knows how lucky she is. You’ve always been...” She rubs her lips together, her brows pulling inward, creating a deep line in the skin between them. “You and I could have—”

“No, Bea. We couldn’t.”

She looks at me, her eyes shining, and for a second, I see regret there, hidden behind the lies and the jealousy, and the selfishness. But it’s been layered over so many times that I’m not sure even Bea understands it herself. Visiting me at the office to congratulate me, the gift basket... Small tokens of guilt, perhaps? Maybe Graham and Dennis were the ones who decided they were going to get the new mayor onboard with their plans, whoever he or she was. Maybe it was pure luck that I won, and that Bea and I shared a history. One with an ugly blot in it that only a few people knew about, including her.

But she was still a part of it.

A huge part.

She told them about me. She betrayed any sense of decent human behavior by giving them that information when she knew they wanted to use it to manipulate me. To control me.

It’s unforgivable.

And I would bet my life on it being her who suggested they use Harley. That my feelings for her were their strongest weapon.

But they underestimated Harley.

And me.

I lean in close to her so I can whisper my next words in her ear. “I could *never* love someone like you.”

Bea’s breath catches before she inclines her cheek toward mine, dropping her voice. “But you can love her? Someone who didn’t even know you then? Who wasn’t there for the most defining time in your life?” she spits.

“She didn’t have to be,” I enunciate each word, so they’re fired like bullets one by one. “She knows who I am *now*. And that’s something someone like you can never understand. And that one night? That wasn’t the most defining part of my life. The day I met Harley was.”

Bea recoils, pulling her cheek away and glaring up at me. “You’ll always be soiled, Reed. She can’t magic it away.”

My anger turns to pity as I stare at her. She’s desperate. She’s scared and desperate, and if she hadn’t done what I know she has, then I might think she deserved sympathy.

But she doesn’t.

Bea chose her path the day she decided to share the worst night of my life with two men who wanted to use it to their advantage.

But it isn’t their life. And it isn’t their story to share.

It’s mine.

“I don’t need her to.” My voice softens as my anger turns to pity.

I allow my eyes to scan over Bea’s face one final time. I knew all those years ago she was only out for herself. I don’t know what led her to be that

person. But I can see that nothing has changed. She's not grown. She's not turned over a new leaf.

She's just fallen further. Unraveled.

She went down, and I went up.

The worst night of my life set my future careering onto an entirely new trajectory. It wasn't music anymore. It was justice and values, and belief in doing better. And people.

And now that I'm here, I intend to make every damn second mean something.

"It's part of who I am. But it's not *all* I am, and she sees all of me. Goodbye, Bea."

Her eyes turn glassy, but before any tears of self-pity appear, I gesture to Stuart, who watched the entire exchange. He nods at me before we walk away together.

Leaving her behind us.

Leaving it all behind.

Firmly in my past.



Chapter Thirty-Four



Harley

I PULL MY PHONE out of my purse as I walk up the subway steps. It immediately starts dinging with notifications.

None are from Reed.

My heart sinks and I sniff, blinking furiously.

I will not cry. I will not cry.

After he left Suze's last night and I almost threw up grilled cheese all over the kitchen tiles, I went to the bathroom and took a long, hot shower. So hot that my skin was glowing bright red when I emerged. It felt kind of symbolic. But not in a good way. It was like washing those last kisses of Reed's from my skin meant that it was final. He's gone. And he's not coming back.

"It was never going to last forever, Angel."

I manage to place one foot in front of the other and join the crush of people heading out onto the sidewalk and enroute to work. I scan through my phone messages, opening a text from Maria first.

Maria: Hey, it's crazy here. Reed's hosting a last-minute press conference in the ballroom. And Griffin didn't come home until late. I

think it's something to do with the news about Dennis Vincent. Call me when you can.

I check the time it was sent—fifty minutes ago. That's typical. Of all the days for the subway to break down between stops, it had to be today. I spent twenty minutes standing there baking hot with no air circulating the packed carriage, face to face with a guy who had clearly not brushed his teeth this morning.

Public transport sucks. Especially on days like today, where it seems I may as well have been on a different planet for the past hour, judging by the amount of city news alerts I'm getting to my phone. I set them up after moving in with Reed. I thought it would help me to understand the whole campaigning and election jargon for when I was at functions with him in case people asked me my opinion. I wanted to sound like I had an idea about it all.

I'm still mostly illiterate when it comes to it, but not today.

Today I understand perfectly.

Today's breaking headline means one thing.

Dennis Vincent has something to do with that video. And so does Graham Hutchings... and Bea.

My stomach lurches upward into my throat and I fight the urge to gag as I read the article on the screen.

Dennis Vincent has been outed as being Graham's biological father. And he's being investigated by the DOI?

Nausea threatens to cripple me, sending cramps coursing through my lower torso.

This cannot be a coincidence.

It says after an anonymous tip, they are looking into conduct while Dennis was in office. And now suspicions have been cast on to Graham and his motivations for running for mayor.

It makes sense. After what Stuart said about Dennis and the NYPD commissioner and their shady deals, the fact that Graham isn't just his friend, but his son, throws a whole new spin on things.

They wanted Graham to be mayor. And if he wasn't, they wanted the next best thing to ensure things ran how they wanted—A mayor who was on their side, by choice, or force.

I can't believe anyone would go to those lengths to try to get to Reed through me. But someone did. And the sickness in my gut tells me it's them.

I throw my phone back into my purse and speed up, weaving in and out between people as I race to get to The Songbird, my heart pounding in my chest, my breathing quickening. Reed said Bea knew about that night. She must have told them. Then they found the video footage somehow. It's the only explanation. And Reed must have found this all out.

Oh, God. *Reed.*

He's having to deal with this. He probably doesn't know what will happen next. Whose hands that video will end up in.

It can never be allowed to happen. He would rather die.

Maria heard him say it.

He must be going out of his mind. I need to get to him. I don't know what I can do. But I have to get to him. To see him. To know he's okay.

It doesn't matter that he hasn't called me and maybe doesn't want to speak to me. I just need to know that he's okay, I need to—

I round the corner, my heels slamming against the concrete as I break into a run. A black town car is up ahead, in front of The Songbird, and the doorman is holding the rear door open. I can't make out much else because there's a swarm of press, wielding cameras, spilling out from the sidewalk and into the street. I'm so close when a sudden rush of voices explodes, firing question after question.

“Mr. Walker, do you have any comments on Dennis Vincent?”

Mr. Walker, how well did you know your opponent, Graham Hutchings?

Is it true you and his girlfriend dated twelve years ago?”

That's when I see him. A flash of mahogany waves, visible above everyone else's heads. A deep navy-blue suit peeking through a small break in the crowd. A forest green tie.

Then nothing.

The car door closes.

I ignore my blouse sticking to my back, and the beads of sweat rolling down between my breasts.

All I can focus on is that car and the man inside.

“Reed!” I try to shout, but my voice comes out coarse from all the crying I did last night. I try shouting his name again, only managing to reach my own ears as the roar of the press shouting their questions through the car's blacked out windows fills the street.

My shoulders slump forward, and I suck in fast, uneven breaths as the car disappears.

I pull out my phone and dial.

“Maria?” I wail the second it connects.

“Harley. Where are you? He's just left.” She sounds out of breath, too. But I doubt she's been running up Park Avenue in heels. I stop walking to

fan myself with my free hand, hanging back from the main entrance where the crowd of journalists is still present.

“I know. I saw the car. I was stuck on the subway. What’s going on?” I shake the neck of my blouse, welcoming the cool air to my skin.

“Come in the kitchen entrance. I’ll meet you.”

I spin on my heels and dart down the side alleyway, throwing my phone back into my purse.

“Morning. Sorry.” I apologize to the kitchen staff as I nip through, holding my purse in front of me so I don’t bump into anyone carrying trays of cleared breakfast items from the restaurant.

I make it to the restaurant door and as I walk through, Maria is rushing over to me.

“Harley.”

I fling my arms around her, needing the reassurance of a friend more than ever.

She hugs me back tightly and the scent of frangipani flowers on her skin calms my stampeding heart. I take two slow breaths before I let her go.

“I saw the news about Dennis and Graham,” I sob.

Her eyes are full of concern. “I know. Griffin barely made it to bed last night before he was up again this morning. And Reed just announced the deputy mayor and all the assigned commissioners. It was filmed live. What’s going on?”

I take her offered arm and we walk through the restaurant toward the main lobby.

“I think that Dennis and Graham, and even Bea are the ones behind the messages I told you about,” I say in a low voice as we walk past two hotel guests and into an empty elevator.

“They’re the ones who have something that will hurt Reed?” She turns to me as the doors close, her eyes wide.

“Yes.” I nod, my eyes stinging as the familiar burning lump returns to my throat.

“They were working together this whole time?”

I dab underneath my eyes, tilting my head up to the roof of the elevator.

I have got to stop crying. I’m no use to anyone if all I can do is cry.

“It makes sense. Reed always suspected Dennis was corrupt. He left under such suspicious circumstances. And knowing that Graham is his son, and they were close... It raises a lot of questions about what they had planned for if Graham got elected.”

“Only he didn’t. Reed did.”

“Exactly.” I lean against the side of the elevator and allow my lungs to deflate as I sag against it. “And that ruined their plans. They had to find a way to get Reed on their side. That’s where I came in.” I place my hands over my face, welcoming the darkness.

Maria’s arm wraps around my shoulder and she holds me to her side. “You didn’t betray him, Harley. Whatever it is they have, you didn’t let them use you against him.”

“No. I left him instead. I left him to deal with it alone. I’m so stupid. I thought it would buy time. But I’ve ruined everything. They still have the power to hurt him. I did nothing, except show Reed he’s better off without me.”

“That’s not true.” She rubs her hand up and down the goosebumps which have formed on my arms.

“It is.” I sniff. “He came to Suze’s house last night. He came to say goodbye.”

Maria's arm tightens around me. "He said that?"

"He said nothing lasts forever, and it was time for a fresh start." I suck in a breath as the doors open and we walk out.

Maria's step falters and she intakes a short gasp of air. "Oh my god, Bea was here this morning, at the press conference."

"She was here?" I snap my eyes to Maria's face, but she's looking straight ahead, her brows pinched together as she steers me toward Griffin's office, for which I'm grateful as I doubt I'm capable of finding my own nose with how scrambled my head is right now.

"I saw her talking to Reed. It didn't look friendly."

Bile shoots up from my stomach and I clasp my hand to my mouth, forcing it away before it can reach any higher. "No."

I run my hand over my forehead, screwing my eyes up.

I have to speak to Reed. I have to. I need to make sure he's not drowning in all this.

We get to Griffin's office door, which is wide open, and Maria leads us inside, closing it behind us.

Griffin looks up as we enter. His phone is pressed to his ear as he paces up and down in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, which have spectacular views over Central Park.

But all I see is the stiffness in his shoulders and the tired lines at the edges of his eyes as he finishes his conversation with whoever he's talking to.

"Harley," he says as he walks to his desk and places his phone down.

He looks at me with his brilliant blue eyes, a question held in them.

How are you?

Except I know he won't allow his lips to ask it, because the answer is obvious in my frantic wringing hands and the wildness in my widened eyes.

"Where has he gone?" I whisper.

"He's got another live interview to film." Griffin holds my gaze.

"About the announcement he's made?" Maria asks.

"That, and questions about the investigation into Dennis Vincent and Graham Hutchings, I would expect." He glances at Maria, then back at me. "They will want his comment on it. The city has lost faith in the mayor's office and Reed needs to gain public trust back."

"But he didn't do anything wrong," I cry.

"I know. And he's a big boy, he'll be fine. But he will be caught up all day. You'll not reach him." Griffin raises his brows at me and my heart sinks.

"I need to see him."

"We know," Maria says, reaching out to rub my arm again. "And you will. He's going to be finished at some point, right?" She looks at Griffin, who runs his hand down over his tie and clears his throat.

"Double check with Stuart, but you're probably looking at this evening at the earliest."

"This evening?" My knees struggle to keep me balanced as pins and needles run down both of my arms.

That's hours away.

"I can't... I need to know he's okay." I whip my head between Maria and Griffin, panic clawing at my chest.

"Harley." Griffin's calm, authoritative voice stills me, and I stand mute. "He *is* okay."

"Are you—?"

“I spent half the night talking with him. And we spoke again this morning. He knows what he’s doing. He’s made some big decisions about how he wants to deal with this. And I respect them.”

“He’s made big decisions?” I scrunch my face up as I search Griffin’s eyes for an explanation. He just looks back at me, his lips pressed into a flat line.

Big decisions. Like moving on, making a fresh start.

“Oh,” I say, unable to form any other response.

“I know this isn’t easy for you, Harley.” Griffin’s expression remains grim as he speaks. “And I understand if you want to take some time today for yourself.” He looks at Maria.

“Yes. Come up to our apartment. I’m not working today. You and I can keep each other sane.”

She rubs my arm again. It’s comforting. But only to the extent of if it were soothing a small hurt. Not the pain of having my heart ripped from my chest. Every comforting hand in the world combined could never soothe the pain that causes.

Not unless that hand belonged to Reed.

He’s the only one who can make me feel anything other than complete devastation right now. Even if he’s made his mind up and our story is over, just to hear his voice and confirm to myself that he’s all right, that he’s coping, would mean everything to me.

“Um, yes... Okay... I guess.”

Griffin nods at me and then makes eye contact with Maria before we leave. He’s already on another call before the door closes.

“He’s trying to dig up dirt on Dennis Vincent. He’s been on his phone all morning. Something about CCTV and a burner cell phone number,” Maria

says as we walk back toward the elevators.

“Oh,” is all I can manage again.

Griffin’s doing everything he can to help Reed. The thought settles the creeping dread that’s sitting low in my gut, but only marginally. *What if he can’t find enough evidence? What if we can’t prove it was them? What if they release the video before we do?*

“I need to call Stuart.”

The flicker of an idea I texted him about at Suze’s could amount to nothing. But I need to find out. He only replied afterward with a short text saying, “I will ask her.” So I have no idea if it’s even useful or not. But I have to try. I can’t sit around all day and do nothing.



The next few hours are the slowest of my life as I try Stuart and Reed’s phones over and over. Reed’s is switched off, and Stuart’s is permanently engaged whenever I try, his voicemail so rammed full that I can’t leave a new message.

“This is hopeless,” I say to Maria as she places yet another latte down on the table in front of me. My mouth waters at the idea of drinking it. But at this rate, I won’t sleep for a decade.

“I switched to decaf four mugs ago.” Her lips lift into a soft smile as she sees me eyeing up the mug.

“You’re an angel,” I say without thinking, realizing my mistake the second the word leaves my lips. “Oh, God,” I groan, dropping my face into my hands. “What’s he doing, Maria? *How* is he doing?”

She picks up a remote and points it to the large flat screen TV on the wall of their living area. “There’s one way to find out. You can’t speak to him. But you can still see him.”

The screen lights up and Maria flicks through a few channels before she gets to a news segment.

“Stop,” I cry as I hold my hand up, my eyes glued to the screen. To the smoky-quartz eyes belonging to the face that the camera is focused on.

He’s beautiful. Reed Walker is undeniably beautiful.

Maria sits down next to me and we watch in silence as Reed answers the female news anchor’s questions with ease. He even smiles at one point, his eyes creasing at the corners. It looks so effortless, so genuine. But I can tell from the way his teeth are pressed ever so slightly harder together, and his eyes are super focused with very little blinking, that it’s his practiced, public face he has on.

The Reed I know smiles with his jaw looser because it often turns into a chuckle after a few seconds. A chuckle that sets an army of butterflies into full victory celebration in my stomach. And he blinks more. The golden flecks in his eyes dance like they’ve come alive, and his long dark lashes fan over them, creating an intoxicating combination of dark, then gold, dark, then gold.

The Reed I know is more relaxed. Freer.

At least he was.

I haven’t seen him look that way since the day I left him.

The day I walked out and ruined everything.

“I’m going to try calling Stuart again.” I jump up from the sofa before Maria can stop me. The concern on her face for me has grown with my tears after each unanswered call. But I can’t stop. I have to know what’s

going on. Maybe Stuart knows more about the video. Or about what's happening with the investigation into Dennis.

I pull my phone from my pocket and hit re-dial.

It rings.

"Thank God," I mutter, walking into the kitchen.

"Harley, hi."

"Stu." I fall onto one of the stools at the kitchen island in relief at hearing his voice. "What's going on? Is Reed okay? Have you heard anything about Graham and Dennis? Maria said Bea was at the press conference this morning. What did she want? Did she say anything about the video?"

"Okay, calm down." Stuart blows out a breath, then laughs softly. "He said you talk a lot when you're nervous."

"Is he doing okay?" I whisper, laying my hand over my chest where my heart is beating in a frantic rhythm.

"He's fine. He is. He's worn out. We were up half the night. But he's okay, Harley. I swear to you. In fact, it's the best I've seen him since this whole thing started."

"Really?" My spine straightens as I process Stuart's words.

"Really," Stuart confirms. "We know it was Graham who sent the video. Griffin managed to trace the burner phone, and we've got him on CCTV paying cash for it at a Walgreens in mid-town. And more is coming to light over Dennis and just how deeply involved he was with George Yates at the NYPD. There's enough shit to stick, Harley. He won't be getting away with it."

"But what about the video?"

"We're sending it to the police after his last interview."

The blood in my veins turns to ice.

“You... You can’t do that, Stu.”

“We have to. If we want them charged with blackmail, then we have to hand it in as evidence.”

My head spins and I grip the edge of the marble counter with one hand to steady myself.

“But people will watch it. They’ll see him. It could get leaked.” My voice breaks as my chest floods with worry. “Those things happen all the time, don’t they? And won’t they make him watch it? Would they play it in a courtroom, and he would have to see?”

“I...” Stuart exhales “I don’t know for definite.” His voice sounds weary suddenly, and I can tell he hates the thought as much as I do.

“Would Riley know?” My thoughts fly to Reed’s twin sister. “She prosecutes assault cases. She will know how these things are handled.”

“Good idea. I’ll call her.”

“Did you look into my other idea? The one I texted you about?” I hold my breath, nervous anticipation held on pause in my stomach as I wait for his answer.

“I did. I can’t believe I never considered it before. You might be on to something. I asked Nina, and I sent her some stills from the beginning of the video... before anyone even comes into the room,” he adds to stem my panic. “She’s working on it. She said it’ll take her a while because it was so long ago, and the quality of the recording is so poor. But she thinks she might be able to come up with something.”

“That’s...” I slouch forward over the counter, laying my head in one hand. “That’s amazing. Thank you.”

“No. Thank you, Harley. It was a brilliant idea. It could really help.”

“I hope so,” I murmur. The sound of Reed’s deep voice floats from the living room TV and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I have to go. He’s about to come off set and we have twenty minutes to get across the city for the next one.”

“When can I see him? When’s his last interview?” I don’t even attempt to hide my desperation, which is making my voice rise to a garbled squeak.

How long do I have to stop that video being seen by anyone?

That’s my actual question.

The only evidence of that night should be what Reed chooses to allow to stay in his head. And what he doesn’t should die and blow away on the wind like ashes of an old life that’s now passed.

Stuart clears his throat, and I can tell he’s considering the implications of telling me.

“Stu?” I whisper. “Please.”

There’s a long pause and my pulse thuds in my ears as I hold my breath.

“His next one. That’s his last live interview for the day.”

“How long do I have?”

He sighs as though it’s taking a lot out of him to admit it to me. But he does. And I swear if he was here, I would kiss him for it.

“One hour at most, Harley. That’s all.”

My heart goes into overdrive like it’s fighting to break free from my chest.

One hour before Reed’s life changes forever.

That’s all I have.

One chance to fix this.



Chapter Thirty-Five



Reed

THE STUDIO ASSISTANT COUNTS down silently, fingers extended in the air, then the theme music plays indicating a commercial break.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Walker,” Harriet, the news anchor, says, shaking my hand. “That was a great interview. I look forward to seeing your plans take shape in the city.”

“Thank you.” I dip my head to her as I’m invited to stand by another studio assistant and shown off set before the live feed picks up again.

I button the top button of my jacket with one hand and walk over to Stuart. He nods at me, his lips stretching into a satisfied smile. He’s happy with how the interviews have gone today. So am I. Of course, I’ve been asked about my opinion on Dennis and Graham in light of the revelations this morning, but I successfully managed to steer the conversations back to my plans for the city. Stuart has been attached to his phone all day checking social media and public comments on the news channels, and from the updates he’s given me, we’re doing okay.

The city might not trust Dennis any more than they would the authenticity of a purse from Canal Street. But feedback indicates I’m doing

something right.

Pride swells in my chest. People can see I am genuine. They can see I really care about this city. I can't let them down. They're giving their trust to me. I need to do the same.

"One more to go," Stuart says as we exit the live set and can talk again without needing to whisper.

"Yep." I run a hand around the back of my neck, stretching my shoulders out at the same time with a groan. I can count the combined hours of sleep I've had over the past three nights on one hand.

"You ready for the final stop?"

I roll my lips over my teeth and nod. "I am. It's time."

Stuart studies me, his eyes pinching at the corners as he falls serious. "You've got this, you know."

I clap a hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze. "Thanks, bud."

"Lucky for you, we don't have to race our asses across the city for this one."

I smile at him as we walk through the building toward the elevator bank. A few floors up, one final interview, and that's me done for the day. Exhaustion could so easily win if it weren't for the adrenaline surging through my bloodstream.

One more to go.

Save the best for last.

We ride the elevator up and step out into a large, modern reception area. I don't have a chance to run through what I want to say in my head, because we're already being approached.

"Reed. It's so good to see you. You're looking well. And Stuart, so nice to see you again."

Tom Coulter shakes both of our hands, then steps back, his kind eyes creasing in the corners as he smiles.

“Don’t lie.” My shoulders shake with a small chuckle, and I run a hand through my hair. I know how I look—tired. It greets me in the mirror each morning. Dullness in my skin and eyes. But it’s wrong for me to call out Tom for a polite lie when I’m being dishonest with everyone around me.

I’m not tired. I’m fucking exhausted.

But it’s not the lack of sleep that’s to blame for my lackluster appearance.

It’s her.

It’s the void I’ve been in since she left.

And it’s all my fault.

Dennis and Graham would have always had their shady as fuck plan for whoever ended up being mayor. But Bea was their key to getting to me. To using Harley. Maybe it was all just, right place, right screwed-up past, that Bea took advantage of when they were planning it all. That’s what Stuart and Griffin think.

But I know differently.

Bea didn’t have to tell them about what happened to me twelve years ago. She didn’t have to give them that. But most of all, she didn’t have to bring Harley into it.

It’s my fault. I was the one who asked her to pose as my girlfriend. I was the one who brought attention to her. Harley is hurting because of me. Because of my past.

This is crushing her.

Tom’s laugh echoes off the walls.

“It’s no lie. Wait until you’re my age, then you’ll dream about the days you could look as put together as you do now, even with no sleep.”

I curl my lips into a smile. He may be in his sixties, but he doesn't look much over fifty, and I'm sure he knows it and is being polite.

"I'm sorry to hear the news that you and the young lady we met at the dinner have parted ways," Tom says.

I fight to maintain the easy smile that was on my face seconds ago, but it's already sliding away, like ice cream off a cone on a hot day.

"Harley, wasn't it?"

"Yes." I nod once. "That's her."

Tom looks into my eyes with a knowing look only someone his age with his wisdom possesses. "Sometimes the greatest things happen the second time around. Like you, here, back in New York. And now you're going to be mayor. You've done well."

"Thank you," I reply as Stuart and I follow him down a long corridor until we reach a set of double doors.

Talking about Harley brings both a lump to my throat and a fire to my stomach. I've let her down. It's my fault her eyes were full of turmoil last night at Suze's. It's my fault that she looked so confused and anxious when I left.

I've allowed a situation that's now tearing away at her.

I've allowed it to tear us apart.

She ran thinking it would hurt me less than the alternative. She did what she thought she had to.

My Angel is a lover, not a fighter. But right now, she's fighting. She's fighting to save me when she shouldn't have to. It's the wrong battle. The fact that she can't see that already means I've let her down.

But not anymore.

Tom turns to us both over his shoulder. "I'll show you the studio, and then you can get ready."

He pushes open the doors and Stuart and I follow him onto the informal set. Two deep blue sofas are angled together around a low coffee table with a jug of water and two glasses already laid out.

"Cozy." Stuart smiles his approval.

"Just let me know when you're ready, Reed." Tom pats me on the back. "And we'll get started. No rush."

I nod in response, taking in the set up. It's a direct contrast to the news channel sets I've been filming on all day. They're all chrome, glass, giant screens, and electronic cue readers everywhere. This screams Tom. He may have started out as a political reporter, but his career has grown, and his interview style evolved into a more relaxed, informal arrangement.

The perfect battlefield for a surprise attack.

Because it's time to win the war.



Chapter Thirty-Six



Harley

MY LUNGS BURN.

My chest heaves.

I'm pushing as hard as I can, racing through a sleek black lobby I've never been in before, my heels clattering over the tile floor as I whip my head from side to side like a mad woman for a sign of where I need to go.

"The studio level I can find Tom Coulter on, please?" I pant to the receptionist I find at a long desk set to one side of the enormous elevator bank.

"Is he expecting you?" She lifts a brow as her eyes drop over my crinkled blouse.

"He's... No, but Reed Walker is. He's got an interview with him. Please, it's important I speak to him."

I glance at my watch. It's been thirty minutes since I spoke to Stuart on the phone.

I still have time. Please say I still have time.

If Reed is still with Tom, then I must have made it. Stuart said I had until Reed's last interview before they were turning the video into the police.

The receptionist makes a call, looking up at me as I stumble to the side.

What the? I curse under my breath as my heel bends to the side, snapping itself off from the base of my shoe.

“That’s just great, it’s just...” I pick it up, wrapping my fingers around it. “Stupid useless—”

“You can go up. Twenty-third floor.” The receptionist places her phone down and looks at my hand.

“Oh, thank you... twenty-three... Um, do you have a trash can?”

I’m not sure why, maybe it’s polite professionalism on her half, and crazed scramble-headedness on mine, but she holds her palm out with a soft smile and I place my broken heel into it, swallowing as she wraps it in her fingers.

“Good luck,” she whispers.

My eyes widen as her smile grows. Is it that obvious I am a woman on the edge, racing to help the man she loves from doing something he can never take back?

“Thank you,” I call as I hobble toward the elevators with one regular and one broken shoe.

This is no use. I’m going to miss my chance if I take this long. I kick off both shoes, bending down to retrieve them.

“Go,” a friendly voice next to me says. “Whatever it is, it must be important. I’ve got them. You go.”

I catch the receptionist’s sparkling eyes as she bends to retrieve my shoes.

“It is. Important, I mean. He is super important, like the most important thing you can imagine, then add some more important on top.”

She laughs, and I stand and rush into a waiting elevator.

“Thank you...?” I shout to her.

“Mary.” She smiles as the doors close.

“Thank you, Mary,” I whisper as I sag back into the wall and watch the numbers rise on the display panel.

The elevator takes so long I’m sure I’ve missed at least one Christmas and my birthday by the time the doors slide open, excruciatingly slowly, on the twenty-third floor.

I race out barefoot through a main reception area. Trust this to be the day I wear pants to work. If I had a dress, then I would have stockings on my feet.

“Reed?” I whisper shout, running down a deserted corridor. There are double doors at the end, a large red light illuminated above them saying, *Filming in progress*.

Thank God.

I stop, resting one palm against the wall as I fill my lungs. If they’re still filming, it means I made it.

“Harley?” Stuart appears from behind another door. His brows shoot up his forehead as he looks at my crinkled shirt, then down at my bare feet.

“It’s a long story.” I roll my eyes. “Well, actually it isn’t, but that can wait... I made it.” I grin at Stuart, my shoulders softening.

“Harley.” He looks at me, his face wrinkling up before a pained half smile dusts over his lips.

“I made it, Stu.” My eyes widen. “He’s still filming.” I jab my finger toward the red light, flashing like a warning beacon.

“I’m sorry.”

“But you said an hour, you said—” I bend at the waist, leaning on the wall for support as my chest tightens and spots dance across my vision. Red

flashing ones.

He's still filming. I was in time.

“We finished early at the previous news channel. It’s too late, Harley. I’m sorry.”

“So that’s it? I’m too late?” I look at Stuart, my fingers beginning to shake as my stomach knots itself.

He doesn’t answer, just gives me a grim nod.

“I need air.”

“Harley?” he calls after me, but I’m already running up the corridor, one hand trailing along the wall for support.

“I need some air, Stu,” I cry as I run down the corridor desperate to get into an elevator, ignoring the curious looks from the few members of staff I pass on the way.

I will the elevator to move fast, and thankfully it sails to the ground level without stopping on any other floors. I squeeze out through the crack in the doors, not waiting for them to open all the way. Then I run until I’m out on the sidewalk, the air of the city greeting me like an old friend as I gulp in deep breaths.

“I was too late,” I murmur as I walk along the front of the building, finding a spot of wall to rest my head back against, and allowing my body to slump in defeat.

That video is with the police now. People will be watching it. Reed will have to watch it. He might have to see it in a trial. In a courtroom full of people, their eyes glued to his face in morbid fascination as they study his reaction, drinking it in like it’s an episode of CSI and not real life.

Not his life.

The most incredible, passionate man I have ever met.

I sink to the floor, ignoring the strange looks people are giving me as they pass. Hot tears fill my eyes.

He doesn't deserve this. Any of it. Not that night years ago. Not having it all brought back and used against him.

None of it.

I sit and I cry. I cry for him. I cry for me. I cry for us. But mostly I cry for anyone who has ever been hurt in such a heinous way before, like Reed. I cry for them and the people who love them. I cry for the unfairness of it all.

I cry until my throat is dry and stinging and my face is puffy.

"Harls?"

I snap my eyes open in the direction of his voice. The second I do, he's there. Right in front of me. Smoky-quartz eyes gazing into mine, their warm, golden flecks calling out like searchlights in the dark.

Searching for me.

"Reed?"

His dark blue suit jacket brushes my knees as he crouches in front of me, his brow furrowed.

"The video," I whisper, my voice shaking.

He nods, his handsome face clouded with an expression I can't read. "I know."

"You shouldn't have had to do it. It's my fault. I should have done something when they first came to me. I should have found out who it was faster. I don't know... I... I should have done more." My eyes squeeze shut as fresh tears spill.

"It's not your fault." His voice is softer than I deserve, and my head pounds with guilt. He places his hand on my arm, but the heat from his skin is too much. A painful reminder of what I ruined.

“Stop.” I scabble to my feet, my chest heaving. My eyes are bleary, making him blur, like an oasis, a mirage to a wanderer so parched that they can sense their imminent demise should it not be real. “I can’t—”

“Talk to me, Angel.”

He inclines his body toward mine, like it’s instinctual, and dips his head so his face is close enough to mine that I can taste his scent, if such a thing is even possible.

Forest air.

Air so fresh, like first thing in the morning when everything is new and full of promise. A new day. If I were to kiss him, would he taste the same on my lips, too? Would I be filled with the promise of new hope? Or left with the bitterness of regret for what I almost had?

How does anyone survive someone like Reed Walker?

Maybe they don’t.

Maybe they turn out like Bea instead. Full of so much selfish hate that they can’t recognize the devastation their actions have on others.

“I’m so sorry.” I look up from underneath my lashes to meet his gaze. “I should have told you in the beginning. I know you can’t trust me anymore. I know that’s why you came to Suze’s to say goodbye. After everything, you should have been able to trust me. I am so sorry, Reed.”

He stares at me, leaning closer so our lips are mere inches apart. So close that the air vibrates, dancing in the space between them. I dart my tongue out to wet mine as tingles scatter through my body. I know what it’s like when he kisses me. I know what it’s like to be held by him.

That feeling is lost now, lost everywhere, except in my memory.

And in my heart.

I need his arms around me more than ever, holding me to his chest where I can rest my cheek and hear his heartbeat against my skin.

But that's not fair on either of us.

Not now.

"Harls," he utters in the gentlest voice I've ever heard him use.

"No." I hiccup, a sob catching in my throat. "Don't be nice to me. I let you down."

This is my fault. I could have been there to support him. But I ran. I panicked.

"How can you say that?" His eyes widen as his breath catches in his throat. "You've never let me down. It's the other way around."

"No. It's my fault. I thought I was giving you more time. I thought it would be okay. I thought..." I trail off as I run out of words. Nothing I say will make this any better.

I wipe underneath my eyes with my fingertips. They come away coated in salty tears and mascara.

"I'm sorry," I whisper again, my heart unbelievably heavy in my chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Harls." Reed's eyes widen further as I break into fresh tears, and he reaches for me, but I step to the side. Having him touch me again, soothe me—it's too much. It's an embrace I will never want to end. It's easier if it doesn't even begin.

"You said it was time for a fresh start, that nothing lasts forever." I clasp my hand over my mouth, nausea rolling in my stomach.

He frowns and pulls his chin back. "That's not what I—" He tries to reach for me again. "Harls, listen—"

“You’re incredible. You don’t deserve any of it. This city is so lucky to have you. You gave your heart to it and—”

“The city doesn’t have my heart, Harley,” he cuts in, his voice deep and even, snapping me back to reality and bringing me firmly into the moment with him.

“But your job, you love it. It’s what you’ve spent years working toward. Justice, honesty, truth... it’s who you are.”

He straightens his back. It’s been one day since I saw him, yet I’m struck by how tall he is. Like I’m noticing for the first time. Noticing how broad and muscular his shoulders are, carrying the weight of all this on them. Noticing how powerful his thick arms. Arms that have pinned me down beneath him and held me up above him. But mostly, noticing his darkened eyes, fixed on mine, unspoken words swirling in them with an intensity that makes the world around us come to a standstill.

He is breathtaking.

“Maybe that is who I am. And yes, I have spent years working toward it. But you’re wrong. If you think that video means more to me than you do... if you think this city has my heart...” His eyes hold mine. “Then you’re wrong. It doesn’t.”

“But—”

“It’s yours. You have my heart.”

“W-what?”

My mouth drops open. I stare at his jaw, at the thick waves of his hair, at the golden flecks in his eyes. And I stare at his lips and perfect white teeth as he speaks words I can’t even begin to comprehend.

“You’ve had my heart a long time.” His eyes soften. “You’re the *only* one who has ever had it.”

“Oh, God.” I hold my hand over my mouth, my vision blurring as I look at him. I’ve ruined everything. We could have been happy together. Then I lied. I left him alone, and I wrecked it all.

“I…” I shake my head, searching his eyes. “I didn’t want you to get hurt. You always said you’d hate to have your past used against you. And I got it. I understood.”

He nods slowly, carefully, watching me like I’m a frightened animal that might bolt at any moment. “You were backed into a corner. You didn’t know what to do. I’m not mad. Not at you.”

“You have every right to be.” I pause and force myself to take a breath. “I did the wrong thing. I should have come to you first.”

“Why didn’t you?” he asks. But there’s no accusatory tone. He sounds concerned.

I’m the one who let him down, and he’s standing here looking out for me. Worrying about *me*.

“Because I didn’t want you to relive it. To have it used against you. I wanted to make it go away. Fix it all, and then tell you afterward that there was nothing to worry about. Like you did for me when that man started saying he knew me as Julia.” I shake my arms by my sides as pins and needles run through them.

“Some things aren’t meant to be fixed, Harls.”

His eyes drink in my face, stalling on the point where my tears are dripping from my chin. I wipe them away roughly.

“We both have pasts we can’t change or fix. And we shouldn’t try. It will only keep us trapped there.”

“That’s not fair. We can’t just do nothing, Reed. We can’t let these things happen to us. These people do these…” I throw my hands up in the air.

“These despicable things to other people and get away with it. It’s not right.”

I suck in deep breaths, my shoulders trembling with the effort.

“It shouldn’t happen,” I whisper, staring off up the sidewalk. People are walking past us, but apart from the odd glance, no one is listening. They’re all too busy living their lives to notice mine crumbling around me.

“No. It shouldn’t, but it’s life. And sometimes life is fucking unfair.”

I turn back into Reed’s gaze, and it pins me to the spot, making my heart skip a beat.

“I understand.” He searches my eyes again, and I screw mine shut so he can’t see me falling apart.

I rub my hands down my face, the trembling from my shoulders and the pins and needles in my hands spreading through my body like a virus. Forest air calls to me, and I know he’s moving closer. I can sense him.

“After Brett, and my dad... seeing what it’s done to Rose. I swore I would do whatever it takes to try and stop someone I love from being hurt again. Because it’s the worst thing in the world.”

“Harls?”

“I can’t see someone I love be hurt. It’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Harls?”

“I thought I could do something. I thought that I would find a way. That a miracle would happen and—”

“Harley,” Reed shouts.

The words pouring from my lips freeze on the tip of my tongue. My hands drop to my sides, and I stare at him as my pounding heart takes over my ears.

“What?” I whisper.

“Someone you love?” His chest inflates as he draws in a slow, measured breath. “Do you love me, Angel?”

His eyes search mine with the first hint of vulnerability I’ve ever seen in them. Even when he’s talked about his assault, they’ve never looked like this before—like everything that could ever matter in life boils down to my answer.

To one word.

“Yes,” I breathe out slowly. “I’m in love with you.”

His brows rise and I can pinpoint the exact moment hope explodes in his eyes like a million golden fireworks all set off at once.

I shake my head. “But I let you down.”

“None of that matters.” He raises his voice again, finally attracting the attention of passers-by.

“How can it not?” I cry back.

“Because I’m choosing it to be that way, that’s why.”

“How is it that easy? How is—”

“It’s not easy. It’s been twelve years of trying. Thinking if I push it far enough into the past that it never happened in the first place. And that was enough. But it’s not anymore. Not now that it’s hurting you, too. I’m done pretending. I’m done trying to ignore it.”

“But...” My head spins as I struggle to process his words. “They have the video. They could still release it. Now the police have it. People will see it.”

“Don’t make me into a victim, Harley.” His voice has a dangerous edge to it. “Don’t give them that power. They manipulated you, and you fought back. Now it’s time to take back full control. They may have been under the

illusion they had it, but it was never theirs to begin with. It's always been mine."

I blink, my head pounding, setting a relentless, unforgiving rhythm. I rub at my temple. "But—"

"I was raped!" Reeds yells suddenly, drawing a gasp from a woman stepping out of a cab further down the street. His eyes are bright and clear as he throws his arms wide and tips his head back, angling it upward to the soaring Manhattan skyscrapers surrounding us.

"I was fucking raped. And it wasn't my fault." He's panting, his hair falling forward into his eyes as he looks back at me, lowering his voice. "It doesn't get to dictate my future or what I do, or who I love. It doesn't get to be used against me." He jabs his finger into his chest, dragging in a rough breath. "And it certainly doesn't get to be used against you. Not anymore."

My head spins and I stumble backward, suddenly dizzy as I lock eyes with Reed.

He may be shouting... but his eyes are full of clarity, glittering at me.

Full of renewed purpose.

"Sorry," I apologize as I bump into someone. "I... Sorry," I repeat, the woman from the cab sidestepping me as I wobble to one side.

"Argh!"

A sudden, sharp pain consumes my bare foot, shooting through my calf and forcing the air from my lungs as the overwhelming urge to vomit hits me like a punch to the face. My vision blurs.

"Harley!" Reed shouts.

It's the last sound I hear before the pain stops.



Chapter Thirty-Seven



Reed

I ALTER THE WORDS to Maroon 5's, "If happy ever after does exist", as they leave my lips.

I raise Harley's hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles one by one, singing quietly. Her brows pull together as the corners of her lips turn down.

"I know, Angel. I know the words I'm singing are different. But that's a song about people who've lost one another. My version is about them finding each other, and never letting go."

I follow the curve of her cheeks, her eyelashes fanned out over them. She murmurs, and I scan her face as she appears to be waking up.

"It's all right." I place my other hand on her forehead and stroke her hair back from her face. "You're okay."

"Huh?" Her eyes crack open, and she winces, her fingers tightening around my hand. "What happened?"

"You stood on glass and passed out."

"Oh."

"In front of a cab."

Her eyes go round as she tries to sit. "I was hit by a cab?"

I ease her back down onto the stretcher. “You would have been if I hadn’t caught you.”

She stares at me. “You caught me?”

My brow creases with confusion. “I would never let you fall, Harls.”

She gazes around the back of the ambulance, her eyes landing on the paramedic who’s jumped in and is closing the rear doors behind him.

“You could have been seriously hurt.” I press my lips into a firm line, bringing her eyes back to mine with a gentle finger under her chin.

My heart leaped into my throat when she cried out in pain. Every cell in my body tore across that sidewalk to get to her. To reach her before she hit the ground. I made it to her just in time, breaking her fall, my shoulder taking the brunt of the hood as the cab pulled away from the curb.

“Why are we going to the hospital?” She jolts up, grabbing my arm. A strangled groan leaves my lips before I can stop it.

“What is it?” She sits up on the stretcher, ignoring me as I shake my head and indicate for her to lie back down. “Reed?”

“It’s nothing,” I reassure her.

She places her hand on my shoulder, and I suck my teeth with a hiss as the muscle spasms beneath her fingers.

“You’re hurt!”

“I’m fine.”

“No. You’re not. Did you get checked out?” Her eyes dart to the medic who’s leaning forward, telling his colleague in the front we’re ready to go.

“Let me see.”

Before I can stop her, she pushes my jacket down my arm and pulls at the buttons on my shirt.

“Reed,” she gasps, her delicate fingers dusting over my bare skin as she slides the fabric away. I suck in a breath, my eyes shuttering closed as I bite my tongue to keep the expletives at bay. “Oh, my God.” Her voice wavers as she studies my skin.

My voice drops as my lips graze her ear. “Careful, Angel. You undress me and there’s no telling what I’ll do to you in here. Ambulance or not.”

“You’re turning black and blue!” She ignores me, tracing her fingers across my searing skin as I swallow the dry lump in my throat.

“It’ll heal.” I grind my teeth together as another shot of pain ripples down my arm.

“You might have broken something.”

“Harls, I’m fine.”

She ignores me again, and I groan in frustration as she turns to the medic.

“Please, can you look at his shoulder?”

Fuck. Now we’re going to have to stay at the hospital even longer. And we aren’t even there yet.

“I’m fine,” I repeat to the medic, who looks like someone’s kid brother before they were old enough to shave. “It can wait until we get there.”

He nods at me, taking his seat in the back with us as his colleague starts the engine and we drive. The only reason I’m letting them take us to the hospital at all is Harley has glass embedded in her foot that needs to be removed. Something she doesn’t seem to be aware of. I can take some painkillers and be done, but Harley could get a paper cut and I would want to shut down the city if it meant helping her.

Her hands are back on my skin, stroking it with tenderness. “You need to have it looked at when we get there.”

“I told you. I’m fine. We’re going to check you’re okay and then we’re leaving.”

I’m taking you home. With me.

“No. We’re getting you checked too.”

Stubborn...

“We’re not.”

“We are,” she fires back.

“My only concern is you. Forget about me,” I huff, casting my eyes to the medic, who’s looking the other way with a smirk on his face.

“Oh, shush. You’re like a grizzly old bear that’s been poked.” Harley’s brow creases up, and she purses her lips, her eyes continuing to study my shoulder. “You’ve really bruised—”

I grab the back of her neck with one hand, fisting her hair between my fingers as I pull her mouth to mine. She stiffens for a fraction of a second before she allows herself to fall into me, giving me full control as I kiss her so hard the pain in my shoulder melts away.

I don’t care that we aren’t alone.

I don’t care about anything at this second other than tasting her lips again.

Proving she’s still mine.

She breaks our kiss, her palms pressing against my chest as she guides me backward.

“Sorry... We...” She bites her lip as a blush creeps up her neck.

“Beats the blood and vomit we usually see.” The medic chuckles from his seat behind me.

My spine tenses, and I turn to look at him over my shoulder. “I’ll give you a hundred bucks to close your eyes for the rest of the drive.”

“Reed,” Harley gasps.

The medic tips his chin up. “Make it two. I’m pulling double shifts for the entire week. My wife’s about to have a baby.”

She’s about to...? He looks like a kid himself. Maybe it’s me getting old.

“Deal.” I pull my wallet out and thrust two green Benjamin Franklins into his outstretched palm, my eyes already back on Harley. “And cover your ears, too.”

Her breasts rise and fall as she stares back at me, her pink lips plump and inviting. “What are you doing?” she whispers.

The earlier hurt from our conversation is still evident in her eyes, but now it’s joined by the tiniest hint of a smile lifting the corners of her mouth. It’s all the fuel I need to reach forward and pull her body to mine, soaking up her scent and her softness as I wrap my good arm around her waist and slide my tongue between her lips.

Her hands go to the back of my head, threading through my hair as she sighs quietly into my mouth.

“Don’t ever think you’ve let me down, Angel,” I murmur, needing to finish our conversation from the sidewalk. I slide my lips to her jaw and kiss along it until I reach her ear and inhale the scent of her coconut shampoo. “I’m never letting you walk out on me again. I will never allow a situation where you think that’s the only option you have.”

“Reed, I—” She stops and hums in pleasure as I kiss and suck my way down her neck, moving her blouse to the side to suck the juncture where it meets her shoulder.

“Reed... What I said...” She tries again as my hand snakes around the back of her neck and my lips move lower, over her collarbone.

“Unless the next words out of your mouth are going to be ‘I’m letting you take me home with you, where I belong’, then I don’t want to hear them.”

“But—”

“But nothing, Harls. When we get to the hospital, I’m calling Suze to bring your things over. End of discussion.”

I suck and nip a path back to her lips. I’d give anything to yank her blouse down and suck one of her tight rosy nipples into my mouth, feel it roll around on my tongue. But I don’t trust kid-face behind me not to peek. And there’s no way in hell any man is ever seeing Harley like that.

Except me.

Only ever me.

I kiss her again, losing myself in her until the clunk of the doors echoes in the air and the ambulance comes to a halt.

“Another hundred and I can close them again. If that’s your kink.” The young medic winks at me as he hops out of his seat and opens the rear doors.

“Nice try,” I say, straightening my shirt and jacket as he jumps down, returning a moment later with a wheelchair.

He climbs back in and advances toward Harley. “Do you think you can manage on one foot with my help? Or you can stay on the stretcher, and I’ll take you out on that?”

“There’s no need for that. I can manage. I feel terrible for wasting your time.” She glances down at the blood-stained dressing on her foot.

“Hey, it’s never a waste. That’s what we’re here for.” The young medic grins as Harley outstretches her arms toward him. “Okay then.” He steps forward.

“I’ve got her.” I step in between them, bending over and wrapping my good arm around Harley’s waist and pulling her to her feet.

“Reed, you’re hurt, let...” Harley looks to the medic.

“Jack,” he pipes up.

“Let Jack help me.”

“No.”

Pain explodes through my other shoulder as liquid fire lances through it, making my stomach churn and sweat bead along my hairline. I clench my jaw tight as I help her out of the ambulance and into the wheelchair.

“You’re good. Michael will take care of you now.” Jack pats the male nurse on the shoulder, who has come to take us inside.

Despite my shoulder throbbing like a bitch and stealing my breath, I curl my lips as Harley calls out thank you to him as she’s wheeled off.

“First baby?” I ask him.

“Huh?” He looks at me, his grin growing brighter as he realizes what I’m talking about. “Yeah, yeah it is.” Joy lights up his face as he talks. “Only a couple more weeks to go.”

I nod at him, rolling my lips, before checking Harley hasn’t gotten too far ahead.

“Listen, thanks for patching her up back there and getting her here safely. I appreciate how hard you all work.” I shake his hand. “Take your wife out before the baby comes. Have some time together.”

His fingers curl around the extra bills as I draw my hand back. “Thank you.”

I nod at him, then turn and follow Harley. We’re shown to a waiting cubicle, and I help Harley up onto the bed.

“We’ll sort that foot in no time and have you both on your way.” Nurse Michael smiles kindly.

“Reed’s hurt his shoulder,” Harley blurts. I shake my head at her to stop, but she ignores me... again. “I think it could be broken.”

I tip my head back and exhale heavily with a groan as Michael looks my way.

“All right. We’ll check it out. Give me a minute. I’ll be right back.” He walks out and swishes the curtain closed behind him.

“You realize we’re going to be here all fucking night now?” I sigh, taking the seat next to her. “Back in a minute is probably nurse talk for three hours.”

Her lips pucker as she looks at me, defiance glittering in her eyes. “Reed, you’re hurt. I’d stay here all week if I had to.”

I reach over, entwining my fingers with hers in her lap. “Fine,” I huff.

I stroke my thumb back and forth across her skin. She shivers and her breath stalls, making her voice wobble. “Are you... okay, Reed?”

The worry has returned to her eyes. That same torment she’s held in them ever since I was elected. The night I now know as being the first time she received a text message.

And the video.

She’s suffering. But not for much longer.

I bring our hands to my lips and kiss the back of hers. “I’m with you. So yes, I’m okay. The only scenario on this earth where I wouldn’t be okay is if you leave me again. Come back with me tonight. Promise me.”

She can’t say no. I won’t let her. If she tries to argue, then I have it all planned out in my head. I’ve rehearsed every single thing I will use to convince her that she needs to come back.

“Promise me, Angel. I want to hear you say it. I need you to say it.”

She stares at me in silence and then slowly nods. “Okay.”

Tension drains away as my lungs deflate.

Thank fuck.



Chapter Thirty-Eight



Harley

REED HOLDS THE DOOR open for me, and I use my crutches to maneuver into the hallway. The doctor said I should only need to use them for a day or two, and then just a thick dressing and taking it easy should be sufficient for my foot to heal. Luckily, the glass didn't cause any permanent damage. It's just sore if I put my weight on it.

I balance, using my crutch for support as I take in the space. It's exactly the same as when I left. Except now, Bruce has a new expensive looking shiny pot and is sitting proudly on the hall table with Beryl. She even looks pleased to see him. Her leaves are unfurled, open, and bursting with excitement.

They're like two lovers, reunited after time apart. I tilt my head to one side and stare at them.

"Here." Reed closes the door and steps around me, sinking to his knees in front of me.

I look down and smile. "You hate these. You could have said they got lost when Suze moved my stuff back."

“I don’t *hate* them.” Reed’s brow furrows as he gently slides one pink fluffy slipper onto my injured foot and then takes my weight to help put the other on my good foot.

“You said they leave bits everywhere.”

“I missed having your bits everywhere.” He rises to his feet, his eyes holding mine.

I stare back at him, my stomach sinking. The hospital kept us busy. Nurse Michael was true to his word and really was only a minute. I had the glass removed from my foot and wrapped in a bandage, and they gave me clean dressings to use for the next couple of days. They wanted to check Reed’s shoulder at the same time, but he refused to leave my side. When he finally agreed, I went with him. Luckily, he didn’t do any permanent damage either. He has soft tissue bruising and was given some strong painkillers. But apart from that, he’s good.

Now it’s the two of us again. And all the reasons I had for staying away, all my guilt, the hopelessness... it’s all flooding back.

Nothing has changed.

I still let him down.

He still said he needed a fresh start.

“It was never going to last forever, Angel.”

“I know I agreed to come back here, but after everything, are you sure you want me here? I mean, what are we even doing?”

“Harls.” He reaches out and cups my face between his large hands, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. “This is where you belong. Why would you even question that?”

“Because...” My chest burns as I look into his eyes. I’m unable to look anywhere else. Not that I’d want to. When Reed looks at me like this,

nothing else exists.

“Because?” he coaxes.

“Because Maria heard you tell Griffin and Stuart that it can’t ever be allowed to happen. That you’d rather die.” I gulp in air as Reed’s pupils dilate, pushing the golden flecks in them wide. “The idea of that video getting out made you say that. You—”

“You think that’s what I was talking about?” His expression folds into one of shock and concern, his thumbs pausing their gentle path over my skin. “I said that about *you*. The idea of someone using *you*. Hurting *you*. Trying to blackmail *you*. Anyone doing anything that makes your eyes look like they do now. Like you’ve been told you just saw your last sunrise... Harley, I would rather die than allow that to happen to you again.”

“Oh.” My heart beats out a low, melodic chant in my chest. “But at Suze’s, you said you had to let go, have a fresh start. That nothing lasts forever.”

Reed’s eyes shutter closed, and he rests his forehead against mine. “I did say that. You’re right.” His voice is low and weary, exhaustion rolling off him in waves. “And I should have explained what I meant.”

I stand numb, unable to say anything else. Is this the part where we sit and have a big talk? Where we amicably part ways? But why would he insist I come back here after the hospital? Why would he kiss me in the back of the ambulance like he had finally found me after a lifetime of searching?

“They can’t blackmail you anymore. We can be together. You don’t need to worry about it anymore.” He screws his face up, his body tensing. “It’s over.”

“No.” Tears threaten my eyes as he opens his and they burn into mine. “They could still tell people. They could still leak the video. Even if it’s safe with the police, it could all still come out.”

My chest tightens, images racing through my head. Reed’s video on the internet. Him seeing it. Everyone that he loves seeing it. Him never being able to leave it behind, always wondering when he meets someone, or walks down the street, if everyone he meets has seen him at his most vulnerable. Seen a part of his life that he doesn’t remember all the details of himself.

How do you even begin to deal with something like that?

“I don’t care,” he breathes out slowly, his entire body loosening as though saying the words alone is enough to make it all better.

“You don’t—”

“I don’t care, Harls,” he says again, lifting his lips to my forehead and pressing a kiss to my skin. “Come. There’s something you need to see.”

He helps me over to the sofa, lowering me down onto it, despite the fact it must make his shoulder throb painfully. He sits next to me and flicks the TV on.

“You want to watch TV?” My mouth drops open as I turn to him. “I don’t understand, I don’t—”

“Just watch.” He rests his hand on my thigh, his eyes on the screen. “You wanted to know what I meant? It’s easier if I show you.”

I turn back to the giant wall-hung flat screen as Reed brings up a recording and the intro music for Tom Coulter’s evening news and chat show comes on.

I sit mesmerized as Tom comes into view, sitting on a deep blue sofa, his hands clasped between his knees as he leans forward. His show that airs in

the evening is made up of political and current affairs topics. There is no live studio audience. It's intimate and why I love his show. It's like watching a chat between friends.

"This is what you were filming when I came to look for you." I glance at Reed, and his lips lift into a calm smile.

"Yes. It is."

I turn back to the screen as Tom begins.

"I have a special guest with me tonight. He's an old friend of mine. Well, I'm the old part in that sentence." He chuckles, his silver hair gleaming as the camera zooms out, showing the rest of the set and the other blue sofa.

Even though I know he's going to be there, I still emit a small gasp as Reed's broad frame comes into view. His waves are perfectly swept back from his face, showing his striking eyes. And his perfect teeth are on show as he smiles at Tom and reaches over to shake his hand.

"That's your real smile," I whisper to Reed out of the side of my mouth, my eyes glued to the easy familiarity he has on screen with Tom.

Reed doesn't say anything, but his fingers flex against my thigh and squeeze gently.

"Thanks for having me, Tom," TV Reed replies.

"Now, we had this interview planned from the moment you won the New York City Mayoral vote. Congratulations, by the way." Tom laughs and Reed joins him.

"Thank you."

"But..." Tom's smile fades. "The content of what we planned to discuss today has changed somewhat, hasn't it?" He looks to Reed, who runs a hand over his jaw, his eyes looking skyward.

“Yes. I would say that’s an accurate description.” Reed chuckles softly, leaning his elbows forward over his knees and opening his palms up between them. “This was going to be about my plans for the city. And it still is. But first, I need to share with everybody why I’m so grateful that you put your faith and trust in me. I think we become the people we are based largely on our experiences and our influences. And a lot of passions are created that way. Some people are born with a talent, but not many. Most of us don’t discover our talent, our passion, and what drives us until it shows itself to us in our life. Some of us wait a long time for it. Some of us search. Some of us sit back and hope that it finds us. And sometimes it’s born out of good experiences. And sometimes it’s not.”

“That’s really interesting. I love how you said that. It’s different for everyone. And it’s not always an easy road to it. And you’re going to share with us what gave birth to your passion today, aren’t you?” Tom leans back into the other sofa, his eyes softening at the corners as he waits for Reed to continue.

“I am.” Reed nods, rolling his lips and dropping his head to his chest before looking back at Tom.

“Reed...” My eyes stay fixed on the screen, at TV Reed’s brow, and the way it’s drawn together so tightly that bile rises in my throat.

“Just watch, Angel.” He squeezes my thigh again.

I place my hand over his and he turns it so our fingers can wrap together, gripping on to each other like two people stranded in the cold. Knowing that your best chance of survival is to stay together. That your lives depend so heavily on the other’s survival.

“My passion, and the reason I wanted to be mayor, was to help people. I want to instill trust and hope in people. To lead with honesty and integrity.

And I want justice for people who are wronged by others. Truth is important to me. Whenever I've been asked a question, I've answered it honestly." He shakes his head, pausing, as Tom waits patiently.

"But I haven't been completely truthful in why those things mean a lot to me, just that they do. And recently, I've come to realize that my reasons for not being completely truthful weren't serving me anymore. In fact, they were hurting people. People I care a lot about. And I think sharing those reasons now is right. It feels right."

Reed's fingers stroke against mine, reminding me that he is here, right beside me. Keeping me warm. Sharing his body heat. Protecting me from what's coming.

"When I was twenty-one, I was sexually assaulted. I was drugged by a woman and taken to a hotel, which I have little recollection of. She did things that I don't remember. She had sex with me without my consent. I reported it. But she was never found. There was no evidence."

I can't contain the gasp that falls from my lips, hearing it laid out like that, for the world to hear.

"I see," Tom says, leaning forward and mirroring Reed's posture. "And this is something you feel led to you wanting to help others to get justice?"

"Yes," Reed answers openly. "It's why some of my main policies are based around improving personal safety and investing in the city's justice system. I've spent a lot of time looking at crime rates. I want cases to be stronger, to have the resources to investigate and go to trial. I want people to feel supported and never be reluctant about coming forward to report a crime. Crimes of all natures. But especially sexually motivated ones. For a long time, I felt like a part of me had been stolen that night. A part I never got back. And I made my peace with it. I thought that night was in the past.

And I was happy to leave it there. But recently I've come to realize that I can do something better with it. It made me want to do better. Be better. It gave me the drive to want to run for mayor so that I can make changes that will benefit people's lives. But that's no longer enough."

"You've got plans for something, using your experience to guide you?" Tom asks.

"I do. I want to invest time in community building. I want more places people can go to for help without fear of being judged. Without feeling ostracized for the things that have happened to them, for their past. I want people to be supported. To feel supported. That was a dark time in my life, and without my family and friends, I might not have found my way out. I want to spread that message. You are in control of your own life. And there is always support there when you need it. For everyone, but especially men. We don't always forge relationships so easily. We can hide our feelings until they consume us. But we need society to be promoting positive attitudes to mental well-being and health. It's something Harry Ellston, the new commissioner for education, and I have been discussing. We want to bring it into schools. We have physical education and sports, and we've come some way into the mental side of a healthy mindset. But we feel there is so much potential for more."

The camera pans back as Reed and Tom continue to talk about the plans in more detail. His admission of his assault is already fading into the background as they discuss schools and what might be trialed for different age groups.

I turn to Reed, silent tears running down my cheeks. He looks back at me, his eyes glassy and wet.

"It'll help people, Harls. That's partly why I did it."

“Partly?” My voice betrays me, cracking at the end.

“Mostly I did it for you. So you never had to worry about it again. I’m not afraid of people knowing. I’m not even afraid of them seeing that video. Do you know what I am afraid of? What scares the shit out of me?”

“What?” I whisper.

“The helplessness I feel when I see you cry.” He reaches up and swipes my tears away with his thumb. “Feeling helpless. Being helpless. This was me taking back control. I never want you to cry because of my past. It can’t hurt me anymore. As long as it doesn’t hurt you, then it can’t hurt me.”

“Reed,” I sob, falling into his arms, making sure to bury my head into his good shoulder, and not the one that’s bandaged up.

“No one in this world can hurt us again like this. As long as we stay together. You should have come to me, Angel. We can face anything together. But you have to talk to me about it.”

His arms are warm around me, encasing me in a cocoon of hope. He’s shared it with the world. He’s changed it with one decision. Transformed it so it’s no longer a dark poison to be used as a weapon, but a seed from which new beginnings can grow. If he wasn’t about to be mayor, maybe he wouldn’t have done it. Maybe he would have kept living happily like he was. Because I truly believe he was happy. He never let it define who he was. But now he has the tools and position to use it in a different way.

He’s chosen his next step.

One I never anticipated.

“I thought I was doing the right thing. You didn’t want your past held against you. But I should never have assumed I knew how you felt. I should never have tried to make that decision for you. I thought I was helping. I knew you would do anything to protect me, and I wanted to do the same.” I

sniff into his neck, inhaling his scent I've found so intoxicating right from the beginning.

Adventure and home.

"I understand. And I would have done whatever I could if it was the other way around. You didn't make a mistake, Harls. You thought you didn't have a choice." His voice falters. "I *never* want you to feel you don't have a choice."

I murmur into his neck. Telling him how strong he is, how he's exactly what the city needs, what the people need, what *I* need. I hold him close, stroking the hair at the nape of his neck as I scatter kisses all over his skin and over his throat as it vibrates with his words.

"It's the past. All I care about now is the present and the future." He places his hands on my shoulders and guides me backward, so our faces are together, nose to nose. "Nothing in this world is worse to me than seeing you cry. Remember that."

I suck in a deep breath, tears pricking at my eyes again. But I refuse to let any more fall. He's right. It's time to look forward, not back.

"I love you," I whisper against his lips.

His fingers freeze on my shoulders and the golden flecks in his eyes flash brighter than ever before as he looks at me with an intensity that stills every movement in my body until all that's left is the beating of my heart. A beating matched in his own and felt against my skin like the bass of the most beautiful song.

"I love you too, Harls. I've loved you for a long time."

We fall silent for a few minutes, just content to listen to each other's breathing and feel each other's hearts beating.

“I was worried I was going to lose you forever. You and your pink fluff and deformed cat pajamas.”

“You hate those pajamas.”

“I fucking *love* those pajamas.” A deep chuckle rumbles in his chest.

I laugh as Reed places his hands on my cheeks. “And the motivational plant talks, and your beaver mug.”

“It’s a sloth, not a beaver.”

Reed arches an eyebrow at me with a smirk.

“I would have missed your bad jokes.” I roll my eyes.

“I wouldn’t have made any without you.” He falls serious again.

I stroke the back of his head, running my fingers through his hair. “Now what?”

He sighs contentedly, an easy smile spreading over his face. “Now we go to bed, Angel. It’s been too many nights without you. I need you.”

“I need you too.”



Chapter Thirty-Nine



Reed

“GOD, I’VE MISSED YOU, Angel.” I sink my nose into the dip behind Harley’s ear and inhale. Inhale her coconut shampoo, the scent of her skin. *Just her.*

I have her out of her clothes in seconds, leaving them in a pile on the bedroom floor as I lift her with my good arm so she can step out of them.

“I love you.” She kisses me again.

She hasn’t stopped kissing me and telling me she loves me since the interview with Tom ended. Maybe she feels I need to hear it, or maybe she just wants to say it. Whatever the reason, each and every time it’s whispered from her pink lips, my chest feels like it might explode. And my dick, well, my dick...

“Reed,” Harley moans as I kiss her neck and tug her nipple between my fingers. It comes out breathy, her voice lifting as I slap her nipple gently with the pads of my fingers.

“Fuck, Harls. When you make those sounds...” I growl deep in my throat, grinding my rock-hard erection against her lower stomach through my pants. “It makes me need to be inside you.”

“Yes.” She tips her head back, granting me easier access to the front of her neck, and I swoop on it, trailing hot kisses down over her collarbone until I’m sucking one of her perfect pink nipples into my mouth.

“Reed,” she cries again, arching into me, her hands falling to rest in my hair as I lavish attention on both of her incredible tits.

“You’re so beautiful.” I swirl my tongue around her nipple one last time before standing.

She smiles at me, keeping her eyes on mine as she unbuttons my shirt and slides it down over my shoulders. Her gaze drops to the dressing the hospital applied.

“You could have been hurt worse than you are.” She chews on her bottom lip, her fingers tracing over the edge of the giant bruise which extends past the dressing.

I unfasten my pants and strip out of the rest of my clothes, pulling her to the bed with me. I sit with my back against the headboard as she straddles me.

“It would be worth it.”

She brings her eyes back to mine and one corner of her mouth lifts. “Would it?”

“Angel, I would die a thousand painful deaths for you.” I lean forward and nip her bottom lip between my teeth. “Now let me inside before I die my first one.”

“Die your first one?” She laughs and rests both hands on my chest.

“Yes. Die from waiting so long to be inside you.”

She laughs again. “I don’t think you could write that on your death cert —”

Her eyes widen as I lift her by her hips and pull her down onto me.

“Fuck.” I hiss, a mixture of pleasure racing through my dick and balls, and pain coursing through my shoulder.

“Did that hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“Reed Walker. I know all your faces. And that hurt. I can tell.” She sits still, my dick happily nestled in her wet warmth.

“I’m fine. Now ride me.” My fingers flex on her hips, but the weakness in my shoulder tells me I won’t be able to lift her up and down on me if she refuses. “Ride me before my cock explodes from impatience.” I flex inside her to accentuate my point.

She smiles; her lips finding mine as she rises and then sinks back down.

“Fuck, yeah,” I groan into her mouth, squeezing her hips as she sets a steady pace, sinking down onto my cock, over and over.

I squeeze her hips harder, my cock soaked in her juices, and it’s all too much. I want her. I need her. Closer. Harder. Deeper.

“Fuuuuccckkkk!” I wince, pain erupting like Mount Vesuvius in my shoulder as I lift Harley in the air and slam up inside her.

“Reed.” Panic spreads across her face the second my face screws up due to the pain.

“I’m fine,” I pant, cold sweat running down my chest. My injured arm shakes as I lift my hand to palm her breast.

She holds either side of my face between her hands. “We should stop.”

“Don’t you dare.” I tighten my grip on her hip with my other hand.

“But it’s hurting you.”

“Stopping would hurt me more. Now keep moving.” She shakes her head, and I grit my teeth. “Harls,” I growl.

“You need to rest your shoulder. Sitting up like this and trying to lift me is hurting you. I’m not going to let you hurt yourself, Reed.”

She tips her hips to one side as though she’s about to swing one leg up and separate us. I grip her hip harder.

“Fine,” I hiss. “I won’t move.”

“You’ll never be able to stop yourself.” She stares into my eyes, and I know she’s right. As long as I can move my arms, I will be reaching for her, holding her, lifting her, slamming her down onto me. Making sure I fuck her as hard as she fucks me.

“Tie my hands.”

“What?” She pulls her head back, searching my eyes, for a hint of reluctance maybe.

But I’m deadly serious.

“There’s no way in hell I’m not coming inside you tonight, Harls. Now tie my fucking hands before I flip you over and fuck you so deep my whole shoulder falls the fuck off!”

My chest heaves as my frustrated breath echoes off the walls.

She presses her lips together; her eyes sparkling.

“Do it,” I grunt, rolling her nipple between my fingers and kneading her hip with my other hand as the tip of my cock pulsates painfully inside her.

She reaches for my tie, which landed on the bed when we were undressing. “Hands,” she says softly.

I offer my wrists up to her and she takes care, wrapping the silk around them, weaving between, and binding them tightly together. Tied like this, they create a barrier between us when I’m sitting, so I tip my chin up at her.

“Shuffle.”

We slide down the bed together, my cock throbbing as it gets friction again.

“Okay?” Harley looks at me and leans forward.

I catch her mouth in a long, deep kiss that leaves her flushed and breathless. “Better than okay.”

She slowly sits upright. She looks incredible up there. Her legs spread around my hips, my cock filling her, her blonde hair falling over her shoulders.

Me with no control at all.

For the first time.

The first time by choice.

I swallow away the fragment of past that claws at my throat and smile up at my beautiful girl. She’s all I ever want to see.

“Fuck yourself on my cock, Angel,” I groan, practically begging.

I fight to keep my hips still, doing as I promised for fear that she really will stop if I don’t. She’ll stop and this incredible feeling of...

I clench my teeth, holding her gaze as she sinks down onto me until I’m balls deep inside her. Then she circles her hips and her eyes flutter closed.

“Fuck... Harls... Shit!” I cry as she rides me, her tits bouncing as she picks up the pace. “You’re so wet... you feel...” My eyes roll back in my head. “Rub that clit on me,” I hiss. “Use me, Harls. Use me to make that pretty cunt all swollen and aching. I’m going to come so hard inside it.”

“Yes,” she whimpers. “Fill me up. I love feeling you inside me afterward. Knowing you’ve been there.”

“Keep talking.” I suck in a breath as she rises and drops down again, circling and clenching.

“It will only ever be you. Just you.” Her gaze drops to my shoulder, and her eyes shine. She places one hand between my bound ones and connects our palms. “I love you.” She sinks down onto me again and my balls begin to tingle, pulling up closer to my body.

“Fuck, Harls,” I groan in a warning.

She whimpers, circling her hips again, her body clenching hard around me, her thighs trembling.

“Are you...”

She nods. “I’m going to come.” Her cheeks flush and her mouth drops open.

“Scream my name,” I growl.

She tenses as she reaches her peak above me. I could live a million years and never see anything more beautiful.

“R-R-Reed,” she cries, tilting her head back.

“Louder,” I command as my jaw clenches and fire races from my balls up my dick.

“Reed,” she screams.

“Harley,” I shout back as I explode, my body shaking beneath her as she milks the pleasure from me. My orgasm goes on and on with hers, both of us making so much noise I swear New Jersey can hear us a state over.

I squeeze her hand between mine as the last pulse leaves me shuddering and spent beneath her.

“I love you,” I pant.

Her eyes shine and she unfastens the tie from around my wrists, pulling both up to her lips to kiss them once they’re free.

“I love you, too. So much.”

I slide my hands around the back of her neck and guide her lips to mine as she lies down over my chest, resting on my uninjured side.

“Stay with me forever, Angel. Don’t ever leave again. *Please.*”

I slide my tongue between her lips, deepening our kiss until she sighs happily.

“I won’t,” she murmurs. “I like being Mrs. Walker too much.”

I smile against her mouth, reaching down to pull her leg higher up the bed. I find her foot and cradle it through the bandage.

“That’s good, because no one else ever could be. It’s a position with only one suitable candidate.”

“That’s what I wanted you to think. I Harley-trapped you, remember? It’s what you said once.” She grins as I shake my head with a chuckle.

“I did say that.” I grin back at her. “But I was wrong.”

I stroke her cheeks as I study her face, allowing my eyes to sweep over it indulgently. Tracing every curve, every dip, every perfect inch. I exhale, my body relaxing completely.

“You didn’t trap me, Angel. You unlocked the cage I didn’t know I was in. You freed me.”

“Reed?” Harley inhales as I hold her face.

I stroke away a strand of blonde hair that falls into her eyes, tucking it behind her ear.

“You freed me from a past I didn’t know still held so much over me. You freed me from fear, from the fear of what happens if I give up control. I *trust* you, Harls. Do you remember what else I said?”

She shakes her head, her eyes locked on mine.

“I said the next woman who got my lips, got my heart.”

Her pupils dilate, surrounded by bright, dazzling blue, like the clearest sky. “Do I have your lips?” she whispers, pressing a finger to them.

I kiss the tip of it.

“You have everything, Angel. My lips, my heart. Everything... If you want—”

“I want it,” she cuts in before I’ve finished speaking. “I want it.” A smile lights up her entire face.

I rest my forehead against hers. “Then it’s yours. Always.” I kiss her. “Now help me get some pillows to pad around my shoulder.”

“Why? Is it hurting?” Her eyes pop wide, and she moves back to look at my shoulder.

“No.”

“Then, why?”

“Because we’ve still got hours until morning, and I intend on having your legs over my shoulders and you sitting on my face.”

“Reed,” she shrieks with a laugh.

“You know I’m not joking.” I fist her hair between my hands, claiming her mouth with my tongue again.

She sinks into me, my name a breathy whimper on her lips.

“Say you agree, Angel.” I growl.

She sighs against my lips. “Reed...”

“Say it.”

She exhales, her lips lifting at the corners. “Fine. But if your shoulder does in fact fall off, then you deserve it.”

“It’ll be worth it.” I kiss away her giggle as I pull her closer. “So fucking worth it.”



“Here.” I place a steaming mug filled with coconut latte on the counter in front of Harley.

“Thank you.”

I wrap one hand around her head and kiss the top of her hair before leaning back against the counter. “I still think you should stay home. I can look after you.”

Her eyes drop to her sloth mug my coffee’s in. I raise it to my lips and take a sip, my eyes fixed firmly on hers over the rim.

She smirks and looks away. “There’s nothing stopping me from working. I’ll be sitting down mostly, anyway. And Griffin already texted last night insisting I come in late. He tried to get me to take the day off as well.”

I chuckle and raise one hand in surrender as she looks back at me with a raised brow. “Hey, I haven’t spoken to him since I called him from the hospital. If he wanted you to stay at home, then that was all his idea.”

“On second thoughts, staying at home and watching you work in your sexy glasses doesn’t sound so bad?” She smiles at me, tilting her head to one side. “Maybe I’ve been too hasty.”

I place my mug down and pull her into my arms, grasping her chin with one hand so I can tilt her face up to mine.

“Who said I would be working? You and me alone in this apartment for the day only means one thing.”

“What’s that?” Her eyes glitter.

I bend so my lips graze her ear. “You naked,” I whisper. “And lots and lots of sex.”

She shivers as I wrap my lips around her smooth, warm neck, one hand finding her breast and rubbing my thumb over her hardened nipple.

“After last night, it’s a miracle I can still walk. And that your dick’s still attached, let alone your shoulder.” She laughs, pushing me in the chest until I pause my exploration of her skin.

“Say ‘your dick’ again.” I smirk as she slaps me playfully in the chest.

“Reed. I mean it.” Her eyes are bright as she rubs my chest with her palms.

“Okay. I surrender.” She smiles at me. Considering I kept her up all night taking my cock in every position that my shoulder allowed, she looks alert and beaming.

Her shoulders relax as she exhales.

“Just one more to keep me going until tonight, then.” I wrap one palm around her neck, holding her still as my mouth claims hers and my other hand slides up her skirt and pulls her lace panties to the side. “Fuck, you feel beautiful.” I slide my fingers through her wet arousal as her breath hitches.

“Reed. What are you doing?”

“Let me fuck you with my tongue one more time, Angel. Leave me something to taste on my lips while I miss you all day.”

I drop to my knees and gaze up at her as my hands work her skirt up toward her hips.

Cheeks flushed, she braces her hands on the counter as I hook my thumbs underneath either side of her panties and slide them down her legs.

“I can keep a pair in every suit,” I say as I hold them to my nose and inhale, fixing my eyes on her confused face. “Suze’s house. When we were almost caught,” I explain.

“Oh? Oh...” Her eyes widen. “I forgot you had those.”

I shake my head with a chuckle as I pocket today’s pink lacy pair. “I definitely *did not* forget. They helped me relax that night when I finally got home.”

How can that be only two nights ago? So much has happened.

“Thief.” Harley giggles, her hands dropping to play with my hair.

I lean into her fingers, relishing their caress. “I seem to remember you thrusting them into my hands, actually. Kind of like I’m about to do with my tongue in your—”

A loud, incessant hammering comes from the front door.

“We know you’re in there,” a voice calls.

Harley gasps, her hands leaving my hair to smooth her skirt down over her thighs. “That’s Suze. What’s she doing here?”

“Cock blocking me,” I mutter as I look up into Harley’s unamused face. “Fine. Let her in and you can ask her what she’s doing here.”

I rise, running a hand through my hair to straighten it as Harley answers the door.

“About time!” Suze stomps in, closely followed by Stuart, then Griffin and Maria. She throws her purse down on the sofa and then turns, eyeing the two of us. “That’s the third time we’ve been down this morning. If you hadn’t answered, I was ready to bust the door in.”

She gives Harley a hug and then so does Maria, as Griffin’s and Stuart’s gazes fall on me.

“What’s going on?” That hair on the back of my neck stands to attention at the solemn expressions on their faces.

“The police are coming,” Stuart answers without missing a beat.

“They’ll be here within the hour,” Griffin adds, pulling out his cell phone. “I’ll call the hotel, get them to send someone around with brunch and coffee. We’re going to need it.” His brows rise as he brings his phone to his ear and doles out instructions to whoever answers.

“Why are the police coming here? Have they found something?”

Stuart nods at me. “They haven’t told us what. Said they needed to talk to you in person. But we also need to talk to you.” He glances at Griffin, who’s off the phone, and then to Harley. “We’ve found out something as well... About the video.”

“We’ve been trying to tell you all morning,” Suze chimes in from where she’s sat at the breakfast bar with Maria. “We called. Multiple times.” She arches a brow at me. “And we’ve already been down and knocked twice.”

“You couldn’t hear us.” Maria smiles sweetly at Harley.

“But we could hear you.” Suze smirks, grabbing Harley’s hand over the counter. She drops her voice to a whisper, probably thinking only Harley can hear her as she darts her eyes to me and away again. “Make-up sex is the best.”

I clear my throat to hide my smirk as Harley shushes Suze with a giggle. No matter what Griffin and Stuart have to tell me, at least Harley’s happy.

She’s back with me, and she’s happy. I’d be selfish to wish for more.

“What did you find?” Harley asks, her face falling serious as she looks between Griffin and Stuart.

“Well...” Stuart takes a deep breath.

Harley’s mouth twists into a worried line, and she looks over at me with big eyes. I hold my arm out and she hobbles over, letting me wrap her in it and pull her into my good side.

“Don’t look so worried, Angel,” I whisper in her ear. “Nothing can hurt us as long as we are together. Remember?”

Her shoulders soften a little and she presses further into me, snaking her arms around my torso and holding me.

“It’s more like, what did you find,” Stuart says.

“What? I don’t understand.” Harley’s shoulders tighten again as her entire body stiffens beneath my arm.

“The idea you had, to ask Nina?” Stuart looks at Harley, and she sucks in a breath, fisting my shirt between her fingers.

“Did she... Did she find something helpful?” Her eyes remain fixed on Stuart’s as I look around the room at everyone’s faces.

“Am I the only one who doesn’t know what the fuck’s going on?”

Stuart and Harley remain locked in some unspoken communication with their eyes on each other. Griffin looks at me soberly. Maria gives me a small smile. And Suze shrugs her shoulders at me and says, “Pretty much. We had time to discuss it while you two were—”

Maria places her hand tactfully over Suze’s, and she stops talking.

I look at them all wondering what I’m missing. When we were at the hospital, I called Griffin. He knew about the interview with Tom. He said he and Maria would be watching it. The same with Suze when I called her and confessed why Harley was at the TV studios in the first place. And how she ended up almost being hit by a cab.

They all know about the assault now. The whole world does. But something tells me there’s more to the heavy air that’s filled the room.

I look down at Harley. She’s let go of my shirt and has her hand pressed to her mouth. She glances up at me, her eyes pinching at the corners.

“What’s wrong?”

“I asked Stuart to speak to Nina about the video. Just the beginning of it, the part with no people,” she adds, quickly.

“Why would you do that?” My brow creases in confusion. *What’s it got to do with Stuart’s sister-in-law?*

“Nina’s obsessed with interiors.” Stuart rolls his eyes. “What she doesn’t know isn’t worth knowing. She can tell you where Oprah’s second guest room bed linen comes from just from catching it on screen. Everything. People’s houses, beach houses, holiday homes... hotels...”

“Wow. Great memory,” Maria says.

“Exactly. That’s why I thought... It was stupid really, just an idea, but—”

“It was genius.” Stuart stops Harley mid-sentence.

“You mean, she recognized something?”

Harley’s pulse is fluttering in her neck as she chews on her bottom lip. I bring my hand to the back of her neck and stroke it gently with my thumb. She sighs quietly, her shoulders relaxing.

“She did.” He glances at Griffin.

“Well, come on then.” I look between the two of them. What are they waiting for? The next presidential election?

“It’s not you,” Griffin says, his voice clear and concise.

“What isn’t?”

Harley’s sharp intake of breath steals my attention, and I look at her. “Angel?”

“I’m fine.” She rubs my chest with her hand, her eyes on Griffin. “Are you saying...”

“It’s not you in the video,” Griffin says again, his attention fixed firmly on me. “It’s someone else. The quality is so bad, it’s hard to make out faces properly. But it’s not you, Reed.”

I screw my eyes shut as my head starts to pound. A dull, incessant drumming that's attacking the base of my skull.

If it isn't me, then who?

"Are you sure?"

"We're certain." Stuart nods.

I look back at Griffin, whose lips are in a flattened line. He dips his head once, confirming it.

My eyes widen as heat spreads through my body.

If it isn't me, then it's someone else.

She did it to someone else. It must be the same woman. How many blonde women that age have been going around drugging men and then taking them to a hotel?

"Harley asked if Nina could look. And she did..." Stuart continues as blood pumps into my ears and his voice becomes muffled.

She did it to someone else.

"She knew the hotel straight away. Identified it by the wallpaper and furnishings. Something very distinctive about the wall-hung lights apparently..."

I tried to report it to the police back then. But it wasn't enough. She did it to someone else. I should have tried harder.

"... New York City only has seven hundred plus hotels. I swear that woman must have one of those incredible memories you read about. The photogenic ones..."

I was so intent on leaving it behind me and moving on. I should have pushed harder so she was caught. She wouldn't have been able to do it again.

"Eidetic," Griffin cuts in.

This is my fault.

“That’s it!” Stuart snaps his fingers.

I did this. I’m responsible.

“Anyway, she worked out the hotel fast. But it took her a day and whole night of research and calls to different designers and suppliers she knows to pinpoint the rest...”

My fault.

I swallow down the bile that’s risen in my throat, running a hand around the back of my neck, which is on fire.

“Reed?” Cool, delicate hands cradle my face. “You couldn’t have done anything. Stop thinking like that.”

My eyes swim back into focus, diving into clear blue seas of calm and reassurance as Harley gazes at me.

“I know you. I know what you’re thinking right now,” she whispers, before kissing me gently and stroking my cheeks. “No one is to blame. Except for that woman in the video. This is all her doing. Not yours. Not that other man. Not anyone else.”

“The man in that video?”

“It was filmed before you were... Didn’t you hear Stuart just explain that? Nina identified the hotel. But when she dug further, she found out that the hotel went through a big refurbishment three months before the night you were”—she swallows—“assaulted. That decor in the video is old.” She searches my eyes. “It wasn’t you in the video, Reed.”

My tongue is suddenly too big, and my mouth turns drier than an old bone left in the desert sun.

It wasn’t me.

There was at least one other before me.

But were there more after? Could I have done any more? Done anything to stop it happening?

“You couldn’t,” Harley says, her eyes intense as she reads my mind again. “You couldn’t have stopped any of it. Griffin, Riley, your parents... they all helped you report it. You all did everything you could. You were let down by a system that didn’t support you. And that’s what you’re fighting to change for other people now.”

She runs her fingertips over my brow and down past my eye, a soft smile settling on her lips as she traces down the side of my face and along my jaw, finally dusting them over my lips.

“I am so proud of you.” Her eyes shine.

I exhale the heavy breath I’ve been holding. “I wasn’t the only one, Harls.” My voice is strained, even to my own ears.

“I know.” She pulls me into her, stroking the back of my neck as I bury my face into her hair and inhale. I inhale coconut and calm. And I exhale the past and fear.

I wasn’t the only one.

“How could you tell what I was thinking?” I murmur into her hair.

Her arms tighten around my neck. “I know you, Reed Walker. I’ve lived with you for months and known you for years. I feel your pain like it’s my own. *It is my own.*”

“Harls.” I grip her to me, blinking away the stinging in my eyes.

She strokes my skin as her heart beats against my chest. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Angel. So much.” I draw in a deep breath, one final inhalation of her to ground myself before I move back and smile. “I knew you were incredible. But you really fucking astound me.”

Her face brightens and her mouth breaks into a radiant smile. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” I cradle her face in my hands. “You thought of asking for Nina’s help. No one else did. That was all you.”

I move forward, taking her lips in mine as I kiss her until the blood that was rushing in my ears dissipates, leaving my head calm and clear.

“Harls,” I groan against her lips, kissing her again.

Being in a room surrounded by our friends doesn’t stop me.

Even the knock at the door doesn’t stop me.

I kiss her until I have to force myself to stop so that I don’t lift her onto the counter and lose myself in her in front of everyone.

God, I love my Angel so much. Thank you for bringing her into my life. Thank you for making her everything I needed and all that I ever wanted. Thank you for creating her in a way that is so uniquely her. And so breathtakingly more than I ever deserve.

“The police are here, you two. Cut it out before they arrest you for public indecency,” Suze blurts, sounding amused.

“It’s not public. It’s our apartment,” I say as my lips finally leave Harley’s, but my eyes stay anchored on hers for a further second before the room fills with two more bodies.

“Reed Walker?”

I turn and shake hands with both men, one in a black suit, the other in full NYPD uniform.

“I’m Detective Field. This is Officer Jones. We’re here to inform you we have made three arrests in connection to the blackmail offenses you reported.”



Chapter Forty



Harley

“WE HAVE MADE THREE arrests in connection to the blackmail offenses you reported.”

I look at Maria as the detective introduces himself. Her spine is straight, and she’s perched on the edge of her seat as she watches him, her lips pressed together. Griffin moves over to her and whispers something in her ear. Whatever it is, her face relaxes, and she looks up at him as he strokes her neck and says something else before pressing a kiss to her temple.

It’s been months, but I’m sure Detective Field remembers questioning her over the thefts from The Songbird spa as much as she remembers him. That whole drama almost tore her and Griffin apart.

I bring my eyes back to Reed, taking in his handsome profile as he listens to the detective. His jaw is clenched and there’s a muscle twitching in his neck. I slip my hand into his, wrapping our fingers together. He squeezes it, his eyes staying forward.

“We’ve evidence to confirm that a Mr. Graham Hutchings purchased an unregistered cell phone. This was the cell phone that was used to send multiple text messages and one video message to Ms. Jacobs. We believe

from the evidence supplied by Mr. Chambers...” Stuart lifts his chin at the detective’s mention of his name. “That the reason behind the blackmail was to ensure your cooperation in securing George Yates’ position as commissioner of the New York City Police Department. So that he could continue to work alongside the former mayor—and as recent developments have confirmed, his biological father—Dennis Vincent in their *non-publicized activities*, shall we say.”

Reed curses under his breath at their names.

“As a member of the force, it’s my job to simply gather evidence and look at the facts.” Detective Field’s eyes shift to Maria, whom he gives a tight smile. “However, on a personal note, I must say, myself, and all the force have great respect and owe a great thanks to you, Mr. Walker.”

“We understand they were assisted by a Ms. Bea Costello, whom you had a former relationship with. A relationship that made her privy to events she felt could be used as leverage against you. She also admitted it was her idea to target Ms. Jacobs in order to influence your decisions. During her questioning, she is the only one of the three who has shown remorse.”

“Too little, too late,” Suze snorts across the room.

Detective Field’s eyes flit to her and back again.

“Ms. Jacobs...”

Reed’s thumb strokes reassuringly across the back of my knuckles as the detective turns his attention to me.

“After speaking to Mr. Chamber’s sister-in-law, following your suggestions, we have been able to identify the hotel the video you received was filmed in. And the approximate date it was taken. That being prior to the night of Mr. Walker’s assault.”

Detective Field clears his throat, looking back at Reed.

“Mr. Walker, I have personally reviewed the original report you filed twelve years ago. On behalf of the NYPD, I extend our sincere apologies that we were unable to get justice for you at that time. But please be assured, we’ve re-opened the case and are already pursuing new lines of inquiry arising since your interview with Mr. Tom Coulter aired yesterday evening.”

“New lines of inquiry?” My head spins as I look up at Reed.

“Yes.” Detective Field pauses. “Two other men have come forward. One, whom we believe to be the man in the video. And another, who has cited an incident that occurred two months prior to the date you gave in your initial report.”

I press a hand to my mouth.

“We can’t say much more at this stage. But once we have an update, we’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you, Detective,” Reed says.

“Reed?”

He lets go of my hand and wraps his arm around my shoulders, kissing the top of my head. “Fuck,” he breathes out softly so only I can hear.

I press into his side, taking comfort in the solid warmth his body transmits to mine as Detective Field continues.

“In the meantime, I would appreciate if you would all make time today to come down to the station and complete individual statements with me to assist us.” He looks at Maria. “Or with Officer Jones, should you prefer.”

“That’s perfectly fine,” Maria says. “We’ll both see you later, Detective, won’t we?” She looks at Griffin, whose eyes are intent on hers as he shakes his head, a smile playing on his lips.

I can tell what he's thinking. That she's so strong and determined. It's what I love about her. She won't consider speaking to Officer Jones for a second. She will walk straight into that interview room that holds so many bad memories for her, and she'll give her statement to Detective Field.

Because she's a brilliant friend and she's doing it to help me and Reed.

"It'll be all right." I look up at him, all tense jaw, eyes focused on a spot on the wall, breathing in and out of his nose like he's fighting to keep his emotions from exploding out. "We'll deal with it together."

The darkened cloak of worry that's marring his features lifts, and his eyes meet mine, softening. "I know." His gaze drifts to my hair and back to my eyes as he gives me a smile that's grown wearier as the morning has passed. "I know, Harls."

I grip his hand tightly in mine as we show Detective Field and Officer Jones out.

The door has barely closed behind them when two of the catering staff from The Songbird arrive with a brunch that looks fit to feed an army. They wheel in two trolleys piled high with fruit, pastries, granola, yogurts, eggs, and French toast.

The distraction is exactly what we need. It's like pressing a reset button. Breaking the somber mood and injecting some lightness and activity into the room.

The Songbird caterers begin setting up the dining table, and I gaze around the room. Stuart is saying something that's making Suze tip her head back in a deep laugh, and Maria and Griffin are talking in hushed voices, his hand resting on her hip as she sits facing him.

It's a moment of normality.

And I couldn't be more grateful for it.

“How do you feel?” I look up at Reed.

He takes my other hand and holds both in his.

“Relieved. Sick.” His brow wrinkles as he looks at me. “Knowing it wasn’t me in the video is a relief.” He sighs. “But at the same time, I wish it was. Because now I know that it happened to at least two other people. It was only a few months before, same city, same blonde female. Same setup. The woman in that video is the same woman who assaulted me. And knowing that she did it to other men, it...”

I squeeze his hands as I stare at him, my chest heavy at the anguish on his face.

“... it makes me feel sick. Really fucking sick.”

I nod, as I listen. I would give anything to erase the worry and pain in his beautiful eyes.

“I can only imagine, Reed. It makes me feel sick knowing it happened to anyone. Especially you. But you’re living your life. It’s not stopping you. And you’re doing incredible things as a result. You’re the mayor. You’re going to fight for justice and truth. You’re going to help provide support for people who need it. I really am so proud of you.”

He smiles, stealing my breath as his smoky-quartz eyes stare into mine.

“Bottling it up almost made me implode, Harls. People, especially men, need to know they can talk about these things that happen to them. If me going through it makes a difference to someone else’s life, then...” He looks to the ceiling, blinking rapidly, his eyes shining. “Ah, fuck. I’m not going to...” He sniffs, squeezing his eyes shut before he opens them and looks at me again, the smile back on his lips.

“It’s okay if you do.” I smile back at him.

“I know.” His smile widens further, and he lets go of my hands and wraps his arms around my waist. “I know.” He breathes. “If I can help someone, then maybe I wasn’t meant to be a Rock God having women throwing their panties at me on stage after all.”

His sudden change of topic makes me laugh out loud. I rise on my toes and snake my arms around his neck. “I would have loved you, whatever you chose to do.”

“Would you be throwing your panties at me?” He smirks.

I shake my head as I laugh harder. This is Reed. He’s so serious and in control when he needs to be. But at the same time, he’s so happy to lighten any situation when he feels like smiling again.

When he wants to make others smile again.

Make me smile.

“You have plenty of mine already.” I grin, wiggling against his suit pants and the pocket he put today’s pair in before the others arrived. “I won’t have any left soon.”

“Sounds like the plan of a genius.” He slips his hands lower, filling his palms with the curve of my ass. “In fact, maybe I should pass a new bill as mayor. Harley Jacobs is never to wear panties again.”

“Oh.” I arch a brow as I look at his lips. “I’ll remember that for the next hotel management meeting Griffin asks me to take notes at.”

Reed stiffens instantly.

“Harley Jacobs is never to wear panties while in the presence of Mr. Walker. How about that?” He grins, sweeping his lips side to side so they dust slowly over mine, making my entire body tingle.

“In the presence of *Mayor* Walker, you mean?” I dart my tongue out so it runs over his bottom lip, drawing a deep groan from his chest.

“No, Angel,” he growls against my lips. “In the presence of your daddy.”

I laugh more as he squeezes my ass. Trapping me in his embrace.

A trap I would so gladly throw away the key for and stay inside for eternity.

I look into his eyes.

Then his lips are on mine.

Kissing me.

Loving me.

Being everything I need.

And so much more.



Chapter Forty-One



Harley

Two months later

“RIDE DADDY’S COCK, ANGEL...”

A deep growl rumbles from behind me as a slap brands my skin.

“Fuck, your ass looks incredible like this.”

Soft fingers stroke me, massaging away the sting, and I hum happily, sinking down, savoring the fullness and stretch as I rest one hand on Reed’s thigh, and cup his balls with the other, straddling him in reverse cowgirl.

“You say that when I’m on all fours and you’re behind me,” I pant, pressing his balls against my swollen clit so I can use them to grind on.

“It looks incredible like that, too,” he groans as I rise and sink back down onto him, moaning loudly.

Thank God Gracie Mansion is big enough that even if the night security team has arrived early for their shift, they won’t be able to hear us from downstairs.

“You know I’m christening the starfish one of these days, don’t you?” Reed eases two lubed fingers inside me, making me cry out louder as a new wave of arousal soaks us both.

“Your monster cock won’t fit. I’ve told you,” I pant as my inner thighs begin to tremble.

“Why do you think I do this? I’m warming you up.” He swirls his fingers around inside my ass, causing me to come unexpectedly with a scream.

“Reed,” I cry, struggling to force out his name as I convulse around him, relishing the feeling of coming around his long, thick length while his fingers press inside me, giving my body more to grip on to as I fall over the edge into spine-tingling pleasure.

It’s like he touches pleasure points inside me I never knew existed.

“See, Angel. You come extra hard on Daddy’s cock when my fingers are in your tight little asshole. Just think how good it’ll feel when I fill it with my cum.”

I bite my lip as my orgasm rolls into another.

Reed moans underneath me. “I love feeling you suck me in tight when you come.”

He circles his fingers again, and I squeeze my eyes shut as my vision blurs. “Reed,” I whimper.

“What do you want, Harls?”

“You,” I pant, my arms beginning to shake.

Reed takes his fingers back slowly. The sensation of him removing them makes my stomach clench.

He reaches for the damp facecloth on the nightstand, running it over his fingers and then discarding it.

“Come here.” He lifts me like I weigh nothing, his shoulder fully healed, and flips me onto my back beneath him. “Now get those knees up.”

His lips dust mine as I pull my knees up to my chest and drop my thighs open. Reed slides home in one deep thrust, forcing the air from my lungs as

his eyes hold mine.

“You’re so fucking sexy.”

He pins my arms on either side of my head as he rises above me and thrusts. My mouth falls open as he fucks me deliciously hard and deep, his breath tangling with mine as we both moan and pant and cry out filthy encouragements to each other.

I force my legs apart as far as possible, inviting him deeper inside me.

“Your cunt is my happy place,” he groans, his eyes fixed on where my body is greedily sucking him in. He pushes forward and his balls thud against my ass cheeks, making me cry out louder.

“And your cock is…” My eyes roll back in my head, and I peel my spine off the bed to arch up toward him.

“My cock’s what?” he hisses through gritted teeth.

I look into his eyes, their golden flecks flashing at me.

“It’s… it’s… perfect,” I shout as I come again, a mess of whimpers and murmurs as I cry out with each pulse that’s traveling through my body.

“You’re perfect,” Reed counters, growling low in his chest as his cock thickens inside me.

“Fill me,” I whisper, my breath evading me as I shudder beneath him.

His lips spread into a panty-melting smile, setting a whole new swarm of butterflies free in my stomach as my orgasm continues around him.

“Fuck,” he growls through his smile as his shoulders tense. Then his lips are on mine and he’s groaning into my mouth as he drives into me so hard I’m forced down into the mattress. “Harley…”

His breath stalls, then he groans deeply as he comes, spilling inside me, filling me, just like I asked.

“Yes... I want to feel you tonight... I want a part of you still there... Do it deep...”

“Fuck, Harls.” His entire body tenses and shakes above me as he slams in hard again, pushing his orgasm far inside me. I know what it does to him when I talk to him like this.

He *loves* it.

His thrusts grow slower and gentler until he sinks into me one final time and then stills, dropping his face to mine and catching my lips in a searing kiss.

“I love you, Angel.” He lets go of my wrists, leaning on one arm and cupping my face with his free hand.

“I love you too,” I whisper against his lips, enjoying the sensation of his fingers trailing down the side of my neck, leaving a happily sated tingle in their wake.

We lie together for a while in companionable silence, our foreheads resting together, enjoying the sanctuary of a rare, lazy afternoon together in bed. Since Reed took up the role of mayor officially, it has been a whirlwind of work, publicity, events, and more work.

Tonight is no exception, even though it’s Saturday. But at least it should be fun.

I shuffle against the cool sheets, stretching with a contented sigh. “We need to get ready.”

“We can be late.” His eyes sparkle at me as he strokes my hair.

“No, *Mayor*. We can’t. That would be exceptionally rude.” I giggle as his teeth sink into the dip of my neck beneath my ear, and he growls, his breath tickling my skin.

“I’d rather be rude with you.”

I giggle more. “No. We’re going. The car will be here before we know it.”

“Fine. Let’s go. It’ll be one night closer to you finally letting me inside your perfect ass.” He chuckles as I slap his chest.

“So romantic. I’ve told you. You’re too big.”

He draws back to hold my eyes. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“With my life,” I whisper.

“Then you know I won’t do anything that will hurt you.”

My lips curl into a smile, and I stroke the side of his face. He’s right. He would never do anything to hurt me. Ever.

“No. You’d do something like throw yourself in front of a moving cab for me.”

“Exactly.” His smile mirrors mine as he places a kiss on my lips and slides out of my body, lying down beside me.

A disappointed sigh falls from my lips as we separate.

“When we get home tonight, then?” He raises one brow at me.

I narrow my eyes at him, giggling as he narrows his back. “It would be a special treat, right?” I trace circles over his chiseled abs.

“A *very* special one.” He grins, his eyes falling between my legs and my over-sexed pussy. It’s probably bright pink and getting ready to erect an ‘on strike’ sign, considering the amount of attention he gives it.

Not that I’m complaining.

“In that case. How about the day you give me a…” I search my mind for a suitable trade. As much as I love and trust Reed, I still don’t believe that he will fit up there. Nothing anywhere near his size has ever come out from there. So surely, he can’t go in there. It’s science. Or math. Or both. I don’t know. It’s a giant appendage and a tiny hole. That’s all I know. “A

Middlemist Red!” I say, as inspiration hits. “Yes. The day you give me a Middlemist Red, I will let you...” My eyes fall to his large cock, which is still giant even though it’s softening. “I will let you put it... *there.*”

The grin that spreads across Reed’s face is cartoon-worthy. How it stretches so wide, I will never understand.

“You’re looking far too sure of yourself there, Mayor. Do you know what a Middlemist Red is?”

“Nope.” He pops his ‘p’.

“Aren’t you a little concerned that it could be hard to source?” I raise both brows as I wait for the smile to fall from his face. There’s no way he will succeed. It’s practically impossible. The rarest flower in the world only exists in two places—the botanical gardens in London and New Zealand.

My starfish is safe.

“Nope,” he says again.

I pout to hide my smug smile, the muscles in my cheeks aching from holding it back.

He looks at me. “You know I don’t give up, Harls.” His eyes drop to between my legs again as he strokes two fingers up my inner thigh, collecting a trickle of cum that’s escaped and pushing it back up inside me.

My mouth goes slack, and I moan as he circles his fingers inside me gently.

“If there’s a Middlemist Red on this planet, then I will find a way to get you one.”

“You want my ass really bad, don’t you?” I huff playfully.

He laughs, pulling me to him and kissing me. “I just want you. All of you. Every day. Every way I can have you. Forever.”

“Fine,” I murmur against his lips. “You win. You get one, and we’ll try it.”

He kisses me again, smiling.

“Why do you look so happy?” I tap my finger against his lips as they leave mine.

“Because I already won, Harls.”

“How’d you figure that?” I grin back at his infectious joy. I wonder if he’ll be smiling when he realizes he’s just agreed to fail.

He’s so sure of himself sometimes. There’s confident and then there’s irritatingly, adorably cocky. And he is the master of both.

I lift my chin. “I’m waiting.”

His eyes sparkle as he leans in to kiss me again, his words clear and sure as they leave his lips.

“I already won because I got you.”



“Aren’t you glad we left on time now? Imagine how embarrassing it would have been if we were late, and everyone was already here,” I say to Reed as we walk toward the ballroom.

The Songbird is elegant glamour at its finest. I have to pinch myself some days that I work in the most iconic hotel in New York. Despite the number of functions I’ve attended here, the number of sparkling champagne towers I’ve seen, and live bands I’ve heard play, I always feel like a movie star walking on to set.

Tonight is no exception.

I look up at Reed in his tuxedo. I swear this man is the male body designers must base all their measurements on. It fits him like a glove, perfectly tailored to every dip and curve of his broad, toned frame.

“What’s that look for?” He smirks, keeping his eyes straight ahead. “I can hear those wheels turning in that beautifully crazy head of yours.”

I narrow my eyes. “Crazy?”

He laughs, probably thinking it’s wisest not to respond, and squeezes my hand instead.

The corners of my mouth lift. “Oh, I was just thinking about this book I read.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It was about a woman whose boyfriend called her crazy. They found him buried in the garden underneath her prize-winning plants. Apparently, all the shit he was full of was acting like the golden egg of fertilizers.”

Reed’s brows shoot up, and the corners of his lips pull down as though he’s trying to stop himself from laughing.

“Really?” He clears his throat, his free hand curling into a fist that he raises to his lips. “Maybe the boyfriend called her crazy as a compliment.”

I purse my lips. “Well, he was stupidly intelligent, with some ridiculously high IQ. So I’m not sure he could use that in his defense.”

“Maybe he’d gone crazy himself. Because of how much he loved this woman.” Reed manages to keep his face perfectly calm and composed, looking ahead as we walk across the hotel lobby. “Maybe...” He pauses. “Maybe spoken words aren’t enough, and he sings to her when she’s asleep. Sings songs that tell her how she’s the reason the sun rises in his world every morning.”

I tip my head to one side, considering his words.

“Or maybe she only wants him to *think* she’s asleep. Maybe she’s pretending, and actually, hears every single word of those songs. And they’re the reason the stars shine in *her* world every night.”

Reed nods slowly, rolling his lips as I glance at him. “And yet, she still buried him underneath her plants.”

“She really likes plants,” I whisper, biting my bottom lip.

His fingers tighten around mine and he side-eyes me with a glint. “I think the boyfriend should consider himself lucky being buried beneath her flower garden every night.”

My shoulders shake and I press my lips together to suppress my laugh. “Really?”

He smirks. “I’d die a happy man buried beneath yours, Harls. *A happy fucking man.*”

“I’ll remember that next time you call me crazy.” I catch his eye and we smile at each other, holding each other’s gaze for an extended time. Content in the present. Not in the past. Never in the past.

Just here. Now. Together.

Reed dips his head and presses his lips to mine in a gentle kiss.

“Come on. Or we’ll be late to this charity party you insisted we come to. I could have been home, fucking you with my tongue instead,” he growls into my ear before standing up straight.

“The charity fundraiser you’ve been arranging for weeks with Tom’s help, you mean?” I pop a brow at him. “You know you’re looking forward to it.” I trail my fingers up the front of his shirt and straighten his bowtie.

“Maybe.”

“I’m really proud of you, you know,” I breathe. “Tonight means a lot to people.”

“I know.” He gifts me with an achingly beautiful smile, his eyes shining.

“Come on, then.”

We walk to the ballroom entrance. My long, pink gown, designed to look like the skirt is made of soft petals, swishes along the marble floor.

The cream and gold intricately carved French renaissance style doors are wide open, welcoming us in.

Oh...

I’ve seen the ballroom of The Songbird hotel filled with people a million times.

But never like this.

“Reed!”

I curl my free hand around his bicep, wondering how we will even make it across the room. There are people everywhere. Drinking, talking, smiling. A jazz band is playing to the far side of the room, and the dancefloor is filled with couples.

“Look how many people there are. Wow.”

“It’s more than I expected.” Reed scans the room, raising a hand to Griffin and Maria, who are making their way toward us.

“I’m not surprised.”

I grin, warmth filling my chest as I look around at everyone who has come to support and raise money for the city’s new community reach program that Tom is heading up with Reed’s help. The first is going to focus on men’s mental health.

It’s going to be a lifeline for people.

“They’re all here because of you. Because of what you’re doing with Tom. You’re the new energy they needed, Reed. The city is so lucky.”

“I’m lucky.” He smiles down at me as Griffin and Maria arrive next to us.

“Great turnout.” Maria grins as she kisses first me, then Reed on both cheeks, her hair like a dark silk curtain around her shoulders, leading down to her scarlet, figure-hugging dress. I’ve told her before I think she must be a distant relative of royalty. All elegant and graceful.

Griffin and Reed fall into conversation, and Maria inclines her head subtly, directing my attention over her shoulder.

“Is that…”

“She cornered him to talk about school funding,” Maria says as Suze talks animatedly with a very enamored looking Harry Ellston over by the bar.

“Good luck, Harry.” I giggle as Suze’s hand flies into the air, and she starts ticking things off on her fingers.

“Oh, I think he’s enjoying it.” Maria turns just as Harry nods at Suze with a smile on his face, then rests his hand on her lower back and gestures toward the dancefloor.

The two of us stand staring as she pauses before allowing him to lead her away.

“Go, Harry.” I shake my head with a smile as they disappear from sight.

“You all set for tomorrow?” I turn back to Maria.

“Yes. I can’t wait.” Her eyes dart to Griffin, who’s still deep in conversation with Reed. “I think Griff is looking forward to it. Even if he doesn’t admit it.”

“Aww, it’ll be so lovely. I wonder if you’ll see Rosie?”

“Maybe. Thea, the lady who’s showing us around, said that she sees her in the park every day.”

“I hope you do. Will you take a picture for me? I bet she’s huge now.”

Happiness bubbles in my chest as I picture her, wild and free, after being nurtured by the staff at the bird charity who collected her from Maria and Griffin. She’s where she belongs now. With other birds, enjoying her life. And I know Maria’s company has been involved in fundraising for the charity recently, so all those birds will be living their best life.

Spreading their wings and flying.

A lot like Reed.

I look at his profile as he talks to Griffin. The past couple of months have been busy, to say the least. But he’s not just coped with all the changes becoming mayor has brought, he’s embraced them. He really is doing an incredible job. He was popular before, but since the interview with Tom, his public rating has soared. People like that he chose to show vulnerability. To share something so personal in the hope of helping others.

He even has the full support and backing from the president, after a personal visit to New York. Reed thinks part of it is to save face should anyone have witnessed the way he spoke to me at the retreat all those months ago. And partly because of the overwhelming public support the program he and Tom have set up. But either way, he’s backing Reed’s plans, which will make it easier as they grow. Personally, I think it's because he feels threatened. He might be a foolish, unfaithful husband. But he’s not a stupid man. He can recognize a future country leader when he sees one. One who is more than capable of having his job next. And doing it better.

I know Reed isn’t thinking that far ahead yet. He’s happy being in the present. For so long, he was scared of having his past used against him. But

it's the opposite. People come up to him and thank him. And it's not just men. It's mothers, sisters, girlfriends... I've seen it at public events I've accompanied him to. They come over and thank him. Saying he's helped their son, their brother, their partner by demonstrating that being a man doesn't mean you can't show your emotions, that you can't admit to not having it together every second of every day.

No one can.

Because we're only human.

Although, as I prefer to say, because we *are* human. There's nothing *only* about it.

Reed slides his arm around my waist, smiling down at me as he and Griffin finish their discussion.

"Maria and Griffin are seeing Rosie tomorrow." I beam at him.

"I know. Griffin told me."

Maria's eyes light up at Reed's words and she looks at Griffin. "I knew you were looking forward to it."

"Mmm," he grunts, nodding his head at both of us before giving us a rare smile. "See you both later. I left something in a meeting room down the hall and Maria is going to help me find it."

Her eyes catch Griffin's and then she takes his hand as he carves a path through everyone toward the main entrance.

"They're going to have sex," I whisper, turning to Reed. "They did it before at a charity dinner. You know, the one where your date threw her drink in your face."

"I remember that night." Reed breaks into a closed lip smile. "You wore a dress I could see your nipples through when you got cold."

"I did not—"

“You definitely did.” His smile grows and his eyes twinkle as he looks down at me. “Now, what do I have to do to get a dance around here before all the boring speeches and shit start?”

I shove him in the chest playfully. “Don’t make out like you don’t love it. You were born to be on that stage.”

He chuckles and takes my hand, leading us over to the dancefloor.

“Mrs. Walker?” He places one hand on my lower back and takes the other in his, holding it against his chest as we dance.

“Put your hand lower,” I whisper in his ear.

One corner of his mouth lifts. “Like this?”

His hand slides to the dip of my lower spine, his pinky finger grazing the top of my ass.

“Lower.” I huff. “Remember that first time we danced together? How I said we should be close enough that people around us can feel our desire flowing in waves, can see the crackle of electricity in the air between us?”

His hands slides lower, grasping my ass cheek possessively as his lips dip to my ear.

“You wanted me to look at you as if I was recalling the way you had just ridden my face before we left home, and I’d had to breathe through my ears,” he growls, making goosebumps scatter up my spine.

“Yes,” I whisper, my breath hitching as he pulls me to him with one hand so I’m pressed tightly against him.

“Angel?”

He lets go of my other hand, and I leave it resting on his chest as he curls his around my neck, stroking his thumb over my jaw and pinning me in place with an intense, smoky gaze, lit up by golden streaks.

“Yes,” I whisper again, swallowing against his hand.

“You did ride my face before we left home. You rode it while I buried my tongue inside your sweet pussy.”

My eyes widen, and I look side to side to make sure no one dancing nearby can hear him. But the music is too loud. He chuckles, flexing his fingers against my skin so my eyes return to his.

“I love how sweet and shocked you act.” He dips his lips to my ear again. “When we both know you’re my good girl, who can’t get enough of her daddy’s cock inside her.”

My heart pounds in my chest and I clench my thighs together at the deep timbre of his voice. How can he keep such a calm expression saying things like that, when I’m only hearing them, and they make me want to collapse in a horny, breathless heap at his feet?

Superpowers.

That’s what it must be.

Reed Walker is super-fucking-human. I knew those sexy glasses were a disguise. He’s like Superman’s filthier cousin or something.

I open my mouth to answer him—

“Hello, you two.”

Tom Coulter’s warm voice cuts me off from asking Reed if he fancies getting a cape to roleplay with, and I smile politely at him and Margo.

“Oh, don’t let us interrupt,” Tom says. “We’ll catch you both later for a dance partner swap.” Tom smiles as Margo winks at Reed. Then they wrap their arms around each other and move away in time to the music.

“They’re so lovely. They’ve been in love for nearly forty years, you know. Tom told me that first night I met him.” I gaze after them as they dance and laugh together.

“He’s a good man,” Reed says, pulling me close to him again and placing his second hand low on my ass cheeks so I’m pinned in his embrace just as the band start playing “This is Me” from The Greatest Showman.

Reed dips his lips to my ear and gently sings the words to me, making my body vibrate with energy like electricity is dancing over my skin with each perfectly sung note. There are no words more fitting for Reed right now. Words did try to destroy. Bea, Graham, Dennis... they’re all awaiting trial.

But he is strong and brave.

He’s exactly who he’s meant to be.

He is Reed Walker.

And I couldn’t love him any harder if I tried.

I slide my arms around his neck and sink my fingers into the hair at the top of his neck, smiling when a deep moan leaves his lips and his eyes return to mine.

I smile at him, and he smiles back.

“Do you think people still kiss lots when they’ve been together that long? I hope they do. I mean, it would be quite sad, don’t you think? If you stop. I wonder if you’d forget how to kiss and have to learn all over again like—”

Warm lips seal themselves over mine, taking my breath as their own, and sending heat powering through my veins. I whimper into his mouth as he kisses me with the confidence and certainty of a man who knows what he wants.

“I’ll never let you forget how to kiss, Harls.” His lips hover over mine, my breasts rising and falling against his shirt as I take in air. “You know why?”

“Why?” I whisper, attempting to swallow down the Reed Walker butterfly fan club that lives permanently in my core, ready to start a riot at any given second. All they need is a small sign.

One kiss. One heated look. One growl.

One anything of his.

“Because”—he kisses me softly—“I’m going to kiss you until I’m all old and wrinkly, remember?”

“You—?” Warmth blossoms in my chest as I look into his eyes, and the butterflies receive their signal as his pupils dilate. “Paige’s party?”

Reed nods, confirming it’s no coincidence that he’s repeating the exact words he said to me at Paige’s birthday party. After he got headbutted by Freddy the goat.

He lifts both hands to cup my face.

“I love you so much,” I whisper, looking up at him.

“I love you too, Harley. And I will love you for as long as my soul exists.”

“Souls exist forever, Reed.” I stare into his eyes.

His eyes sweep over my entire face before coming back to rest on mine as he smiles.

“Then forever it is.”



Chapter Forty-Two



Harley

Epilogue – One month later

“AT THIS RATE, I will be one hundred and eight by the time we get there! Not twenty-eight,” I call after Reed, who’s gone back upstairs again.

“One second,” he shouts back down.

I flop into the chair in the hallway and look over at Bruce and Beryl.

“You two were made for mansion life. Look at you both, loving your little sunny spot.” I smile and get up, grabbing the mist bottle from the drawer, and begin misting them generously.

“You both look wonderful. So healthy. I’m glad you like it here. So do I. Although...” I lower my voice. “Has Reed seemed distracted to you?” I glance up the stairs to make sure he isn’t coming. “Because he has to me. Ever since...”

My shoulders sag as I continue spraying. Detective Field paid us a visit two days ago to tell Reed that they had been able to identify the woman in the video. The woman they believe is also responsible for drugging and assaulting Reed. They didn’t know a lot about her, apart from she had no family they were aware of. And had a clean record.

No one knows why she did what she did. And now she can never be asked. She was found dead in her home the week after she assaulted Reed all those years ago. An accidental painkiller overdose.

All those years Reed could have perhaps had some kind of closure, knowing she was gone and wasn't hurting anyone else.

My enthusiasm for spraying wanes and I put the bottle away with a sigh.

Reed has been more pre-occupied ever since Detective Field's visit. He's been on his phone even more. And I swear I heard a woman's voice on the other end when he went into his office to take a call before breakfast yesterday.

"Ready, Angel?" Warm lips press into my neck, making me jump. "Hey, it's just me." He spins me in his arms, smiling at me as I face him. "You ready to go see everyone before we come back and I give you your birthday present?"

I smile back at him. My birthday is tomorrow, so we are going to see Mom, Brett, and Rose, and stay in the guesthouse tonight. It'll be the last time we do. I've been using the money from letting out my apartment to help Mom pay for the final renovations. What we were short by, Reed has added. Brett will have his own space again soon. Not that he ever complains. But he's a grown man living with his mom and sister. It might only be down the driveway, but it's still his.

He needs this.

And hopefully, Rose will find what she needs soon too. Something that will bring her back to us. Bring back the sister I love and miss.

"Are you okay?" I look up at Reed, and I know emotion must be swimming in my eyes because the corners of his eyes pinch and his smile drops as he looks back at me.

“Harls? What’s wrong? I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know.” I sniff, feeling hot suddenly, and wiping at my cheeks. “Since Detective Field visited, you’ve been acting odd. And you went out of the room to take a phone call yesterday. You never do that.”

“Angel.” His eyes flutter closed, and he rests his forehead against mine. “I’m so sorry if I’ve worried you.” He takes a deep breath and opens his eyes. They burn into mine. “Honestly, what Detective Field told me was a shock at first. But afterward, it was a relief. I know she stopped hurting people. Did you think that was bothering me?”

“Maybe,” I whisper.

His lips curl into a small smile. “Do you want to know what the phone call was about?” I look at him as he pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and brings up a photograph. “She was meant to be a surprise for tomorrow.”

I stare at the picture of a small, copper curled bundle of fluff with two round, shiny black eyes.

“She’s—”

“A Cavapoo puppy. And she’s ours.” Reed tips the screen and smiles at the photograph. “We pick her up tomorrow. Natalia helped me find her.”

“You did all this as a surprise?” I take the phone from his hand and stare at her. She’s tiny with paws that look far too big for her, and a bright pink tongue that’s poking out.

She’s adorable.

“I did.”

A grin plasters over my face. We’re going to be a little family. I can even get her those cute doggy sweaters to wear when it’s cold. And she’ll be able to cuddle up with us on the couch at night, and we can take her for walks, and take photos of her and fill the house with them, and...

“What are we going to call her?” I look up at Reed, beaming.

“She’s already got a name.” He runs a hand around the back of his neck and bites his lip.

“Oh?”

Okay, so he’s chosen one. Or maybe the breeder did. But I don’t care. She could be called anything, and I will love her. I can see us together now, little besties, outnumbering Reed and filling the house with feminine energy. I hope she likes pink because I saw a really cute collar in a window when I went for lunch with Suze and Maria the other day. It’s like the universe was already giving me a sign.

“Yeah. She’s called Red,” Reed says.

“Aww, because of her red fur?” I look back at the photo.

“No.” Reed clears his throat. “As in Middlemist Red.”

My eyes go round as I snap them back to him. “You named her after—”

“After a plant that there’s only two of in the world.” He laughs. “You weren’t making it easy for me, were you?”

“Reed Walker! Did you buy us a puppy, just so you could try and have your smutty way with me?” I laugh in shock, my mouth dropping open.

“No... I bought us a puppy because I know you love animals and I want you to be happy. I *named* her myself so that I could have my smutty way with you.” He grins.

“She’s not a plant.”

“No. She’s better. There are two of them in the world. There’s only one of her.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I can’t. He’s got me. There *is* only one of her in the world. Just like there is only one of him.

Only one Reed Walker.

Only one love of my life.

A person who I would do anything for.

I chew my cheek as I look back at the photo before handing Reed his phone back. “Okay.”

His brows lift. “Okay?”

“We can do it. I want to. I actually think it might be quite nice. Suze said when she last did it, she squirt—”

“I do not need to hear the rest of that.” Reed pulls me into his arms, kissing away the words on my lips.

I sink into him, reaching up to stroke his hair. “Thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever been given anything better.”

“The promise of anal sex?”

He chuckles as I pull his hair in warning.

“I know, I know. A puppy. She is super cute. Wait until you see her.”

“Yes, she is.” I look between his eyes. “But I didn’t mean her.”

I press my lips to his and kiss him, savoring the way he always kisses me back, no questions asked. I can walk into a room and not say a word. Just go over to him and kiss him. And he welcomes me with open arms. It doesn’t matter what he’s in the middle of doing. He always stops. And it’s not just kissing. I could just be feeling hormonal and want a cuddle. Or want to show him a new animal video I’ve found online. He will always give me his undivided attention.

I am always his priority.

Me. Us. Our relationship.

He does everything he can to nurture it, and to love.

He loves me every day. And every night. And every speck of time that exists in the cracks between.

And I love him right back.

Hopelessly.

“I mean *you*, Reed.” I smile. “The man I barely tolerated when he visited my boss at work. Who is now the man I can’t imagine living without. I love you more than ever.”

His smile lights up his entire face. He really is ridiculously handsome. Some days, I stare at him and wonder if the universe knew what it was doing when it created him. When it placed him on this earth, not only looking devastatingly beautiful on the outside, but having a heart and soul that match on the inside.

He’s so much more than I ever imagined.

“Harls.”

He catches my lips in another knee-weakening kiss, and I pull him to me, never wanting to let go. He moans as I kiss him back deeply, sliding my tongue into his mouth and losing myself in him. He feels so good in my arms. So tall, broad, and strong.

He thinks I was the one who freed him from the trap of his past. But he freed me too. He freed me from the fear of vulnerability, from believing in someone and placing your trust in them. All the lies and cheating I was surrounded by. The ugliness in people that I saw every night I worked for the honey trap agency. The ugliness that led to Brett’s injury. Reed freed me from that. He showed me how to open myself up to vulnerability and hurt.

Because that’s when you can truly love with nothing holding you back.

He did all that.

It may have been fake in the beginning. But that never was. That was always true. And if I’m honest with myself, I think the rest of it was. My heart knew it was real, even if my head took some catching up.

“I love you, Reed Walker,” I say again as he draws back to look at me.

“I love you too, Mrs. Walker.”

“Unofficial Mrs. Walker.” I bite my lip as I look at him. He’s called me Mrs. Walker from time to time ever since I moved into his apartment.

And it’s felt... right.

“Not for long, Angel,” he says softly, stroking his hands through my hair as he gazes at me. “I’m getting a ring on that finger before you have a chance to change your mind. You’re mine, and I want you trapped with me forever.”

“It doesn’t sound much like a trap.”

“Really?” He arches a perfect brown brow at me.

“Uh-huh.” I place my hands over his chest so I can feel his heart beating beneath my palms. “It sounds more like paradise to me.”

He smiles at me, and I smile back at him, inhaling the scent that is so uniquely him.

Adventure and home.

Adventure for our future together, and everything we will do.

And home because, well, because my heart is telling me so.

Reed is my home. Wherever he is, it’s where I want to be.

He will *always* have my vote.

A pair of faint, stylized wings with a light purple and blue color palette, positioned behind the chapter title.

Chapter Forty-Three



Harley

Extra Epilogue – Two weeks later

“JESUS, HARLS. YOU’RE SO fucking wet.”

I moan, arching my ass up into the air and pushing backward as Reed’s fingers slip inside me again.

“I missed you,” I moan again as he circles them, pressing against my G-spot.

“I’ll have to go away more often,” he groans as I shudder and clench down onto him.

I pant, ridiculously turned on by what he’s doing to me. He’s been away for one night for some big political meeting that was held in Washington. I would have gone with him, but I had promised Brett I would go home for the evening after work yesterday and stay over to help him move his things into the guesthouse now that it’s finished. Rose even helped. She’s still as withdrawn as ever. But Brett and I did manage to get a laugh out of her when the box I was carrying bottomed out and the contents went rolling down the driveway. So there’s hope yet. My beautiful baby sister is still in there.

“No... you can't... I...” My breath takes over in one long moan as Reed replaces his fingers with his cock, sliding into me in one slow, deep thrust.

“Fuck... I will never get enough of you taking my cock like this, Angel. You take it so fucking well.” He pulls back and slides home again, setting my thighs trembling.

“I want to take it there,” I pant as he fucks me slowly, the rim of his cock massaging my G-spot with each drive forward.

The fingers kneading my ass cheeks pause and his breath stalls.

“Now?”

“Yes,” I moan again as his cock twitches inside me, threatening to tip me over the edge. “I’m going to come if you keep doing this. And I want the first time to be when you’re *there*.”

I clench around him again, fighting to hold my release in.

Reed always makes me come multiple times. But it’s the first one that hits the hardest. That’s the most exciting. The others are still powerful. They roll into one another like one long assault of pleasure on my body. But the first one has the element of complete unbridled release, where I feel like I no longer inhabit my body. That’s the one that makes me see stars. The one that sets me up for the next, and the next. The one where I want to scream the loudest and merge my body with Reed’s for all eternity.

It's the one that takes me to the edge of insanity.

Then pushes me over.

Reed pulls all the way out, replacing his cock with his fingers again, and swirling them deep inside me.

“I said, don’t make me come yet,” I whimper as the pads of them brush my G-spot again.

He hisses as he sinks his cock back inside me. “I’m just making my fingers wetter. You’re dripping. Feel.”

With that, he eases two fingers between my ass cheeks and pushes them inside me. The extra fullness has sweat pricking at my hairline as I fight not to come.

“Stop moving.” I dig my fingers into the sheets, scrunching them up. “I swear, I’m going to come if your cock so much as quivers inside me,” I plead, my voice shaking.

“Okay. Okay. Breathe.”

Reed’s calm voice and a couple of deep breaths have me in more control.

“Okay. Okay. You can move.” I suck in a breath as he pulls out and removes his fingers, leaving me aching for him.

The bed dips.

“Stay right there.”

The sound of water running in the bathroom reaches my ears as I stay on all fours on the bed, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Okay, Angel,” Reed whispers in my ear, leaning over me from behind. “I’ll be gentle. I promise.”

“Okay,” I murmur, leaning my head to one side as his warm lips kiss my neck.

“You’re so beautiful.”

His voice gets further away as he moves into position behind me, before the sound of a lube cap being flicked open makes me shiver in anticipation.

“I love you so much, Angel,” he says as the broad, smooth head of him presses against me.

He clasps my hip with one hand as he pushes forward, meeting resistance. He pushes harder and my body opens to him, the tip of him

sliding inside me, covered with a mix of lube and my own arousal.

“Oh, that’s kind of... Fuck!” I cry as he pushes further and I stretch around him.

I swallow, my stomach clenching as he pauses, then begins to push again.

It’s not hurting exactly. I think I’ve gotten used to having his fingers there. He’s been getting me ready for this. But still, his cock is so much bigger.

“Relax, Angel. I’ve got you.”

Reed slides his other hand around me and sinks his fingers inside my pussy at the same time as he pushes forward again. My body clamps down on to them greedily, a rush of arousal coating them.

He groans and swirls them. And suddenly, I can feel him everywhere. Filling me. Owning me. Claiming me as his. In every way he can, just as he once said he would.

“Reed,” I moan, rotating my hips to take him further until I feel his balls against my skin.

“Jesus,” he hisses, flexing the fingers gripping my hip.

“Fuck me,” I whimper, scrunching the bedding again as his fingers inside me curl against my G-spot.

He groans and begins to move, slowly at first, just moving a little way back and then pushing back in, building up a steady pace as he fills me with his fingers at the same time.

“More.” I drop to my elbows, opening my legs wider.

Reed slides his hand from my hip and digs his fingers into my ass cheek, opening it up.

“Fuck, Angel, you look... The way my cock is... Fuck...”

His speed increases and he pulls back further before driving back in. He presses his palm against my clit and rubs in circles as his fingers continue to curl inside me. My arousal is running out of me, the sound of it mixing in the air along with Reed's skin hitting mine.

"Reed!" I screw my eyes up as pressure builds low in my core.

"That's it, Angel. Scream my name when you come. Scream it and let everyone hear whose cock is filling your gorgeous ass right now."

I moan, my arms trembling as I struggle to focus on just one area of pleasure. It's like my entire body belongs to him.

I'm stretched and swollen, and wet and sensitive, and...

"Reed!" I cry again as my lungs start sucking in air, storing it in preparation. "Reed!"

"Do it, Angel," he grunts.

I hold my breath as I shake, my entire body tensing. Then my breath leaves my lungs in the first gasped pant as my body releases and my orgasm erupts, popping my eyes open as I cry out his name again.

I shudder and shake, spasming around him, coming harder than I ever have before.

"Fuck, you're such a good girl, Angel. Coming with Daddy's cock in your ass like that. You're such a fucking good girl." His voice is strained, as though he's gritting his teeth and trying his hardest not to lose control.

"Daddy?" I cry, loving how we revert back to it when we're really turned on and we're going at it hard and dirty.

"Angel," Reed replies with a groan as I continue coming in waves around his fingers.

"Fill me... Please."

“Fuck.” The growl that comes from Reed’s chest is the lowest I’ve ever heard as he digs his fingers into my ass cheek and pushes his other fingers deeper inside me. His whole body pauses behind me, and then he breathes out, filling the air with the vibration from his chest as he drives forward again and spills himself inside me.

“God, Harls. I love you. I fucking love you,” he groans as he pumps me from behind, filling me. “You’re incredible... You’re...” He sucks in a breath. “You’re *incredible*.”

Then he falls forward, wrapping both of his arms around me, and pulls us down onto the mattress to lie on our sides, him still inside me and spooning me from behind.

“Are you okay?” he pants.

Sweat runs between my breasts as I nod and catch my breath. “I am.”

He rises onto an elbow and hooks two fingers underneath my chin, turning my head and bringing my eyes to meet his.

It reminds me of the first night we spent together in the hotel at the retreat. The first night he kissed me. The first night he buried his body inside mine like this while he held me by the throat and fucked me.

It seems kind of fitting that we should lie like this now, after all we’ve been through together since that first night.

“I love you.” He catches the corner of my mouth in a kiss as I sigh against his lips.

“I love you too.”

His hot chest presses against my back as we hold each other.

Yip.

I freeze.

“Reed? I thought you said you gave her the chewy bone toy?”

“I did.” He sinks his nose into my hair and inhales.

“But that usually keeps her occupied for ages.”

Yip, Yip.

“She’ll go back to it. Just leave her.” He kisses the dip of my neck beneath my ear. “I’ve still got plans for us this afternoon. And they include not leaving this bed.”

Yip. Yip.

“Maybe she needs a pee.” I chew my bottom lip.

“I took her before we came upstairs.”

“Maybe she needs another.” I turn my face to where Reed is kissing my shoulder, his hands cupping my breasts as he plays with my nipples.

“You’re going to make me leave paradise to go check, aren’t you?”

When I don’t answer, he groans and presses another kiss to my skin.

“Okay. I’ll go check on her.”



Reed

“Go on, then. Take a piss.”

I stand out in the middle of the lawn, dressed in hastily thrown on sweatpants and a t-shirt as Red stares up at me with puppy eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that. Do you know what you interrupted?”

She tips her head to one side as she sits on the grass and stares at me.

“No.” I reach down and lift her up onto all fours again. “It’s piss time. Do it so I can go back inside and get back into bed with Mommy.”

Her furry bottom drops back down to the grass and she stares at me.

“All that fucking yipping inside, you’d think your bladder was about to explode. Now stop jerking about and take a damn piss.” I huff, crossing my arms.

Red gets up and starts sniffing the grass.

About fucking time.

Then she starts circling.

“Oh no! No, no, no. Pisses only.” I point at her, but she just stares at me as she arches her back and deposits a steaming shit onto the manicured back lawn of Gracie Mansion.

“Fucking hell.”

I look around, wondering if I can leave it for the groundskeeper to pick up. But Harley will kill me. Plus, I’m not an ass. Picking up your own dog’s shit is bad enough. Picking up after someone else’s is just gross.

“Fine. You wait here while I get a bag.” I turn to head to the back door, but Red whips around the front of me in a flash of orange curls and blocks my path.

“What?” I stare down at her, sitting at my feet. “I need to get a bag for your shit. Can’t you learn to bury it or something?”

She stares back at me and then stands on her back legs, placing both paws on my shins.

“You want me to carry you now? Is that it? Pick up your shit *and* carry you?”

She wags her tail, and I curse under my breath as I lean down and scoop her up.

“You’re such a fucking princess.”

She licks me in response, her butt wiggling in my arms.

“Yeah, all right. I love you too,” I grumble as I stroke her soft ears and press a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re lucky I do. Otherwise, you’d be in a kennel outside when I want Mommy to myself. None of this interrupting me by yipping like an idiot.”

I place her inside the back door and she runs over to her bed, picking up the bone toy I gave her earlier and lying down happily as she starts chewing it.

“That’s exactly what you were supposed to be doing.” She stares at me as I shake my head and grab a bag.

I deal with her little gift and then give her some fuss before closing her in the kitchen and running up the stairs two at a time. I hope Harley is still naked. Either in bed or in the shower. I don’t care. I just know I want her again. She said she missed me last night. But I haven’t told her that I barely slept a wink without her. I watched the clock all night instead. Just wanting to be with her in our bed.

The shower is running when I get back to the bedroom, and I strip my clothes off, throwing them across the room as I sprint into the bathroom.

It’s empty.

Harley isn’t here.

“Harls?”

“Get in the shower. I’ll meet you in the bedroom after,” she calls from behind the closed door of the walk-in closet.

“Okay.” I frown, stepping under the hot spray. She must have been in here already because her towel is missing.

I squirt a blob of her coconut shampoo in my palm and foam it up, washing all over and soaping up my dick and balls as the scent reaches my nostrils.

I can't believe she actually let me fuck her ass.

And judging by how loud she screamed and how tight she clamped down on my fingers, I would say she enjoyed it more than she was expecting to.

I enjoyed it more than I was expecting to as well. I thought she was going to be thrown across the room with the force I came inside her.

Fucking incredible.

I finish washing and towel off as fast as possible, striding into the bedroom buck naked with all the swagger of a guy who has just been gifted with the most perfect sexual release from his girlfriend.

I stop dead.

“Harls?”

She's kneeling in front of the armchair by the bedroom window.

She turns and looks at me over her shoulder, then tips her head, gesturing to the chair.

I walk over, my eyes dropping over her deformed cat pajamas she's put on.

“Angel, you just gave me something amazing. What's all this?”

“This?” She bites her lip, her eyes sparkling. “This is all for me.”

She smiles and looks at me from beneath her lashes as she ties her hair up into a ponytail.

“Now take a seat, Mr. Walker.”

The End

Not ready to say goodbye yet?

**Click the link for an extra extended epilogue of Harley and Reed's
wedding day**

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/pvgulpuvfa>

And then...

**Do you want to find out what happened to Harley's sister, Rose,
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Elle's Books

Trapped with Mr. Walker is book 6 in 'The Men Series', a collection of interconnected standalone stories.

They can be read in any order, however, for full enjoyment of the overlapping characters, the suggested reading order is:

Meeting Mr. Anderson – Holly and Jay

Discovering Mr. X – Rachel and Tanner

Drawn to Mr. King – Megan and Jaxon

Captured by Mr. Wild – Daisy and Blake

Pleasing Mr. Parker – Maria and Griffin

Trapped with Mr. Walker – Harley and Reed

Time with Mr. Silver – Rose and Dax

(Also available by Elle, Forget-me-nots and Fireworks, Shona and Trent's story, a novella length prequel to The Men Series)

Get all of Elle's books here: <http://author.to/ellenicoll>

About Elle

Elle Nicoll is an ex long-haul flight attendant and mum of two from the UK.

After fourteen years of having her head in the clouds whilst working at 38,000ft, she is now usually found with her head between the pages of a book reading or furiously typing and making notes on another new idea for a book boyfriend who is sweet-talking her.

Elle finds it funny that she's frequently told she looks too sweet and innocent to write a steamy book, but she never wants to stop. Writing stories about people, passion, and love, what better thing is there?

Because,

Love Always Wins

xxx

To keep up to date with the latest news and releases, find Elle in the following places, and sign up for her newsletter below;

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Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank. People who have been there for me and helped to make this book everything that it is. I just love Reed and Harley so much. Their story was an important one to be told, and I hope you love them as much as I do.

But I will start as I always do, with the lady who gave me the courage to write that first ever word...

TL Swan.

You are an inspiration and a queen.

To all the Cygnets; I am so blessed to be a part of such an awesome group who are always there to support one another.

Layla, Vicki and Sadie, we talk almost every day and you're still not sick of me! You are all amazing.

My beta readers; Hannah, Rita, Taye, Kelly, and Layla. You see that first draft and you still come back for more! For that, I am forever grateful! Your comments help so much.

To Sarah and Zee for making the words shine, and for cleaning up all the smirks and intense eyes I like to scatter about everywhere!

Thank you to Abi and Sherri for both of the amazing covers. I adore them. I had to get pink in.

To the wonderful Zulfa, and the beautiful Sara, for keeping me organized and making such beautiful edits and videos.

Thank you to my amazing ARC readers and street team, to Jo and the team at Give Me Books, and to the bloggers, bookstagrammers, booktokkers, and everyone who has shared my books.

Finally, a huge thanks to you, the reader. None of this would happen without you. If you enjoyed *Trapped with Mr. Walker* then please leave a review on Amazon and tell your friends about it. It helps so much.

Thank you, and until the next book...

Elle x