

SIN TOO

BOOK TWO OF THE SIN SERIES



S.J. TILLY

SIN TOO

By S.J. Tilly

Sin Too

Sin Series Book Two

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Cover: James Adkinson

Editor: M. Penna

This book is dedicated to Oscar.

You had to leave before this book was over, and it broke my goddamn heart.

But you'll always be my guardian. My ride or fucking die.

Writing creates new realities. And in every one of my worlds, you're there with me.

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CHAPTER ONE

BETH

The throbbing in my head drags me from unconsciousness. The world I wake to is wrong. It hurts. Pain prickles down my limbs like little needles and there's a pressure on my chest, like I'm being crushed. I reach out to touch my forehead, but something isn't right. My arm is already raised, my hand is dangling above my head.

I concentrate on my eyes. After a few tries I'm able to slowly blink them open. The dim light surrounding me is cut through by a moving beam. I have to squint every time the bright light passes in front of me.

Upside down. I'm upside down. What in the hell...

As the acrid smell of burnt rubber and gasoline assault me, it all comes back. The screech of tires. The headlights streaking towards Patrick's window. The ear splitting crunch of car meeting car. Then... nothing. We must have flipped.

Blackness tries to take me again. I can't let it. This is bad. We need to get out of here.

"Patrick." His name comes out as a croak, the attempt to speak causes a round of coughs to break from my chest. Each one hurting more than the last, and I work to control my breath.

My muscles aren't cooperating. It's hard to turn my head and I don't know if it's because I'm injured or if it's because I've been suspended upside down by my seatbelt for who knows how long.

I swallow and try again. "Patrick."

A groan from the driver's seat the only reply.

I heave out a breath. He's alive.

The beam of light cuts across my vision again and I try to focus on it. It seems a lot closer than the last time I remember seeing it. Is that a flashlight? Is someone already coming to help us?

"Lizzy?" Patrick's voice sounds strained.

"I'm here. I'm here." I get my head to turn and look at Patrick. My brain takes a moment to register all the blood. Too much blood. "Patrick. You're

hurt.”

“Lizzy.” He says my name again, but he’s looking out the window. The beam of light nearing.

His voice is shaking now, but not from pain. He sounds scared. “Look away.”

“What do you mean?” Panic is finally starting to claw its way through me.

He turns his neck to look at me. “Don’t watch this part. I don’t want you to watch this part.”

Past him, the approaching silhouettes sharpen. Since the car is upside down, I can’t see their heads, but I can see their hands. And the guns they’re holding.

I wake on a gasp. Clawing at my chest, trying to catch my breath.

My stupid sleep shirt is twisted around my body, strangling me. I wrestle it into place, fighting against the sweat that has it sticking to my chest.

Blinking at the ceiling, listening to the rumble of canine snores, I admit defeat.

“Fuck.”

Throwing back my quilt, I climb out of bed. I know I won’t get back to sleep now.

I pick my way around unpacked boxes and push all thoughts of *that night* out of my mind. I can’t go down that spiral. Not today.

Flipping on my bathroom light, I mentally pat myself on the back. The rest of the house might still be a disaster, but at least I had the foresight to get my en suite organized. En suite. I snort at the thought. This bathroom is half the size of my last one, complete with the brassy look of the 80’s. But it’s mine. I’ve adjusted to a lot over the past few months, but sharing a shower with a 16-year-old boy is not going to be on that list.

Once steam is billowing from the small stall, I step into the spray.

Waking up early wasn’t on the plan for today, but the added time means I’m showered, dressed, and have half the kitchen unpacked before Noah trudges out of his room and across the hall, into the bathroom. His bathroom.

Used to his routine by now, I time it so the waffles are popping out of the toaster a moment after he enters the kitchen. The dogs follow him in, noses leading them to their usual spot of begging at Noah’s feet. A 90-pound brindle Boxer, Bam, and Pebbles, a 120-pound white Great Dane, are both basically senior citizens, and motivated by little else than food.

“Good morning!” I force some extra cheer into my tone.

His reply is a grumble that might have been *morning*. I don’t press him. Instead, I slide the plate of food across the island towards him.

“Eat up. We’re leaving in 10 minutes.” I tell him.

We eat in silence. Noah with his eyes half shut and me with my mind racing. My new job starts tomorrow, and I hope to have most of the house unpacked by then. Maybe once it’s all put away, we’ll eat at the dining table like a normal family. Maybe.

Exactly ten minutes later, Noah is standing next to the door, backpack in hand.

“Ready?” I ask, even though I can see that he is.

“Yeah.” Noah shrugs.

“Alrighty, let’s go.” I grab my purse and follow him out the door.

I probably should’ve pushed for him to bring a jacket. I’m sure his hoodie is plenty warm, but neither of us is used to November in Minnesota. I should have checked the forecast. That’s one more thing I’ll need to add to my daily routine.

Starting up the car, I hand my phone to Noah. He finds the podcast we’re currently listening to, a docu-series about serial killers, and we settle in for the drive. I’m not sure how we settled on this topic. It’s morbid, and unhealthy on so many levels, but it’s interesting. And since we both like it, it hardly seems worth fighting over.

It’s about a 20-minute drive to Noah’s new high school, which is in the next suburb over. There are closer schools to our new house, but open enrollment allowed me to get Noah into a school with a great hockey program. As far as I’m concerned, the trek is worth it if it makes Noah happy. He’s had so much turmoil, I’ll do whatever I can to put a smile back on his face.

Following the signs, I pull up to the front entrance of the school.

“Okay.” My voice cracks and I clear my throat. “Here we are.”

Noah’s lips pull back and I can’t tell if it’s a cringe or an attempt at a smile. “Here we are.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” My palms are sweating at the mere memory of starting at a new school.

He shakes his head, causing his shaggy, sandy colored hair to fall over his eyes.

I smile. “Are you sure you don’t want me to give you a haircut real

quick?”

He rolls his emerald eyes. The act should make him look younger, but it gives him just the right amount of teenage rebellion. I feel like this damn kid is growing up right in front of me. Lord help the teenaged girls inside that school. His boyish good looks are only increasing with his recent voice change and growth spurt. His broody attitude will only make him that much more alluring to the poor teenaged hearts he encounters. He's 16 going on 30, and I'm way too young for this shit.

“That's a hard *no*,” he replies, shaking his hair back out of his face.

“Alright.” I wring my hands in my lap, wanting to reach out and pull him into a hug, but not sure if it'd be welcome. “And don't forget, according to the schedule your new coach sent over, you have dry land practice in the gym from 2:30 to 3:45. I'll be waiting here when you're done.”

Noah and I watch as the first students start to pull into the parking lot. We're early on purpose since he still needs to find his locker. I had thought moving over Thanksgiving weekend was clever, but I didn't realize it would keep us locked out of the school.

I lean over and elbow him. “If I find all the right pans today, I'll make that potato thing you like for dinner.”

“Thanks, Li-... *Beth*.” Noah pales a little at the slip.

I plaster on a huge smile, ignoring the mistake. “Don't thank me yet. With my luck, I'll get stuck under a pile of discarded boxes, helpless until you hitchhike home and rescue me. Now go on, before I do something to embarrass you.”

Noah nods, then climbs out.

Watching him walk away, I see the shift take over his body. Spine straightening. Shoulders pulled back. Mask of calm and confidence firmly in place.

I'm wiping away a tear before I even realize what I'm doing. That poor boy. I can't imagine starting at a new high school as a Sophomore. A new school in a new state is bad enough, but it's not just that. It's the middle of the school year. Or almost the middle, since there's a month left in the semester. Doctored transcripts or not, the transition won't be easy. Not to mention the fact that their hockey season started a week ago. Noah's one true love. We couldn't have the coach call his previous team, for obvious reasons, so he has to start at the bottom. Although young, Noah should be Varsity. But without references, he's stuck taking an open position on JV with no

promised ice time. I've no doubt he'll blow the coach away with his speed and talent. But like everything else in recent history, he's starting on the back foot, fighting for a chance, and all with a new last name.

I drop my forehead to the steering wheel. *I can do this. I have to do this.*

CHAPTER TWO

BETH

“Okay, okay.” I grumble, kicking boxes out of my way. “If you pigs didn’t chug your water you wouldn’t need to go out all the freaking time.”

I put a hand up, forcing the beasts to wait for me. Pulling open the back door, I make sure to step out of the way before giving them the *go-ahead* signal. Pebbles nearly knocked me down once already, and I’m nothing if not a quick learner.

Following the dogs out, I stand on the back porch and look at my new yard. It’s hard to judge the true potential with all the plants on the verge of wintery death. But there are a few large trees shading the lot, hanging on to the last of their colorful leaves.

I take a deep breath of the crisp fall air and let my mind flash through old memories.

I was 7 the last time I was here, in Minnesota. Considering that was 22 years ago, I didn’t expect this place to feel like home. I didn’t expect the nostalgia. And yet... And yet there’s something comforting with the familiarity. I was a kid, sure, but being here is bringing it all back. I remember the cold nights. The fall colors. The calm quiet of a snowfall.

I wasn’t addicted to caffeine back then, so it was hot chocolate all the way. My mom would put the drink packets above the fridge, telling me that I needed to watch my calories. *Bitch*. But Aaron, in his random acts of big-brother-kindness, would steal them for me. Putting the empty box back up high, mom none the wiser.

And just like that, my light memories are soiled with feelings of regret and guilt. And anger. Oh Aaron, it didn’t have to be like this.

Bam startles me with a string of barks. Back in the present, I watch as he chases a squirrel down the fence line. He gives it his all, but he doesn’t even come close to catching the intruder. Pebbles just watches, judging, from her spot sprawled in a patch of dirt.

“You tell him, Bam!” I call out to the panting boy.

I’m glad the house came with a fenced yard. These two still get spurts of

energy and I have yet to perfect the two dogs versus one person walks. God knows I've lost my temper with them a few times over the past three months, but Aaron did a decent job training them.

Watching the dogs do their dog thing, I can confess that I'm glad they're here. I never thought I was a dog person, but they bring a great level of comfort that I wasn't expecting. And they're something familiar for Noah.

A breeze cuts through my sweater, sending chills skittering up my arms. I may enjoy this weather, but I'm not dressed for it. I step back inside just in time to hear my phone ringing.

"Coming! Coming!" I shout like an idiot, as I hustle down the short hallway to where I left my phone in the kitchen.

Instantly I worry that it's Noah. Could something have happened to him on his first day? Does he need me to come get him?

I grab the phone and relax as I read *U.E.* on the screen.

"Hey, Uncle Enzo. How are you?" I say, proud that I don't sound as out of breath as I feel.

"Darling." Enzo's cigar scratched voice rumbles through the phone. "I'm supposed to be the one asking you that."

I smile at his obvious concern. "I'm good. We're good."

"Really?"

"Really. The house is perfect." I look around at the mostly organized kitchen. "I don't know how to thank you for this. For all of it."

"Oh hush. We've been over this." I can imagine him waving my worry away as he grumbles.

I sigh. "I know. But that won't stop me from thanking you. I don't know how you managed it all so quickly."

He stops me. "The house is okay though? I know it's a little small. And dated. We'll finish off the basement and give you a movie room or something. Make it a place for Noah and his friends to hide away and make noise without bothering you."

I think of the cement floor and stud walls below me. "Maybe, eventually. But only once I've bought the house from you."

"Darling." He always calls me that. I love it. "The house is already yours."

I let out an annoyed sound. I'm not poor. I have plenty of school debt, but I've been a practicing Physical Therapist for the past 8 years making decent money. I'm fairly sure I could still afford to buy this house. Except of course, Beth Smith doesn't have a credit history. Or any other sort of history. And

Beth Smith has to pay for a teenager now. Starting with buying a second car, so Noah can get himself home after practice.

I drop onto the couch. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll let Noah help me decide what to remodel first. But seriously, the house is perfect just how it is. We don’t need more than this.”

I can picture Enzo’s bushy white eyebrows, and mane of silver hair, as his voice softens. “Once we figure all this out, you’ll be able to do whatever you want. You won’t have to stay here.”

“If we figure all this out. And even then,” I look around, “I like it here. Plus, it’s not like we have anything to go back to.”

“You know I’d love it if you two stayed.” Enzo clears his throat. “So, how was Noah this morning? First days are always tough.”

“Good thing Noah is tough.”

Enzo hums his agreement. “He’s got a lot of your dad in him.”

“He really does, doesn’t he?” I smile. “When I dropped him off this morning, he was stoic, as expected. Me, I was crying before I even got out of the parking lot.”

“Typical mom behavior.” Enzo chuckles.

Mom behavior.

I lean back against the couch cushion and breathe. Just breathe.

“Yeah.” I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow. Twice. “He has his first practice with the hockey team today. It’s just weight training and running. Tomorrow they’ll be on the ice.”

Enzo hears the anxiety in my voice. “Don’t you worry about him. Noah will kick ass. I’ve seen tapes of his games. Kid has nothing to worry about. I just wish I could come watch him play.”

“Yeah. I know.” Uncle Enzo has been a godsend for Noah and me. We talk all the time, and he’s helped us more than I can even comprehend. But he has to stay away from us. If someone is watching him, he’d lead them right to us. So, for the foreseeable future, its phone calls only. “I can facetime you when he has a game.”

“Ha!” Enzo barks out a laugh. “Your Aunt Tami has been trying to teach me that shit. I always end up looking like I have four chins.”

I chuckle. “Same, Uncle Enzo. Same.”

Enzo’s wife Tami is the same age as him but looks 20 years younger. Wealth, sunscreen, and not smoking has paid dividends.

Uncle Enzo sighs. “I have to go, but give that kid a hug for me.”

“Will do. Our best to Aunt Tami.”

Hanging up the phone, I shut my eyes and contemplate taking a nap until I have to pick up Noah. Then a dog barks and I remember I left them trapped outside.

CHAPTER THREE

BETH

The drive to school this morning has been relatively quiet. Just the backdrop of our crime podcast getting us ready for the day.

Last night when I asked Noah how his first day went, he replied with *I don't know yet*.

I didn't push him. I get it. It's a lot to take in, and Noah likes to take his time processing things. I'll ask him again tonight.

"You can drop me off here," Noah says.

I look around. We haven't even pulled into the parking lot yet.

"Oh, okay." I slow the car and pull over to the curb.

He's a teenager, I remind myself. He doesn't want to get seen getting dropped off by... me.

Noah fiddles with his backpack strap. "It's just that we aren't super early like yesterday. I don't want you to get stuck in the parking lot traffic. You know high schoolers, they can't drive."

There he goes, trying to spare my feelings. This kid.

"Good thinking." I add extra cheer into my tone. "Speaking of, I was thinking we could go car shopping this weekend."

His head whips around so fast to look at me, I swear I hear the air move. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." I grin. "I don't have any patients today, so I can drive you over to the rink after school and pick you up after. But once my work starts picking up, I won't be able to."

Noah's head is nodding. "Yeah, okay. We're on the ice again Thursday and Friday. If you need me to, I can talk to the guys about catching rides. Some of them were alright yesterday."

Relief washes over me. Not at the fact that I won't have to drive him, but the fact that he's sharing a little bit with me. In teenaged boy speak, being *alright* means they'll probably be best friends in no time.

I play down my reaction with a shrug. "Plus, you're gonna want a car for when you start going on dates."

That earns me an eyeroll. “Bye, Beth.” He pulls open the car door but pauses. “Good luck on your first day of work.” Then he’s gone. Melding into the flow of students.

I cling to Noah’s words on my drive to my new office. We don’t have a terrible relationship. Not at all. It’s just new. And built on trauma. So that means I cling to every positive interaction we have.

The light in front of me is red, so I use the brief stop to find some Lizzo. Cranking the volume up, I let the beat loosen up my tense muscles. I can’t start today depressed about the past. Today is about new beginnings.

Spotting a coffee shop with a drive through on the next block, I alter my plans. Today is about new beginnings, and lattes.

-

Twenty minutes later, I’m parked in front of Atom’s Gym, fully caffeinated and ready to walk inside like a confident bitch.

I’m a physical therapist, not a captain of industry, so my *power suit* is a pair of black contouring yoga pants, a grey lightweight sweater over a red sports bra, with the straps peeking out at my neckline, and my bright yellow running shoes that haven’t been on an actual run in months.

Since I don’t have any appointments today, I left my hair down. I spent forever this morning making it look like it naturally falls into lovely waves. Which is probably false advertising, since from here on it’ll be pulled back into a ponytail or messy bun.

I look at myself in the rearview mirror. “You earned this. You deserve this. They are lucky to have you.”

I give myself a nod before I climb out of my car and head for the front door.

Atom’s Gym is a free-standing building in an affluent suburb of Minneapolis, not too far from the city I now call home. According to my over-the-phone interview with the owner, Trevor, the clientele here ranges from off-season professional athletes to bored rich housewives, and everything in-between. I don’t think I’ll be meeting him today. Trevor made it sound like he’s never here, saying he hires adults, so he doesn’t have to spend his time “overseeing nonsense”.

I’ve never even been inside a place like this before, but I’m looking forward to working here. I’m guessing it will have a lot more drama than the

settings I'm used to, but it should be entertaining. Plus, it pays well.

I'm not sure how Uncle Enzo was able to line this gig up for me, and honestly - I'd rather not know. But since I'm more than qualified, I refuse to feel guilty about the handout.

With one last deep breath of fresh air, I walk through the first set of doors. I got this.

I don't *got* this. I instantly have an embarrassing attempt at opening the second set of doors. They're locked. Feeling like a total tool, I wave to get the attention of the woman sitting behind the front desk. It doesn't work. She doesn't see me.

I contemplate banging on the glass, but I can hear the music that's jamming through the building's audio system from here, so I doubt she'll hear me knocking. I'm a moment from calling the main number for the gym when she looks up and spots me. When she does, she literally leaps to her feet. The tiny sprite of a woman, who looks like a Sporty Spice and Tinkerbell love child, practically runs to the door to let me in.

"Oh my god, please tell me you're Beth!" the girl says while, *I swear to god*, she claps her hands and bounces on her toes.

I don't remember the last time I had this warm of a welcome.

I grin and nod. "I'm Beth."

She lets out a squeak of joy and then throws her arms around me in a hug. "I'm so excited to meet you!"

I'm all of five foot six, but I feel like a giant with her tiny frame pressed against mine. I'd be surprised if she broke five feet with her neon pink tennis shoes on.

"You don't say." I chuckle.

The girl steps back. "Oh geez, I'm sorry! I totally just accosted you!" She gives a self-deprecating eye roll. "I'm Sissy. I'm the front desk girl, in-house DJ, consumer of gossip, and *technically* the assistant manager," she ticks off the points on her fingers. "Trevor told me all about you. He's down in Arizona visiting his mom, so who knows when he'll be back around, but we don't need him."

I can't help it. I'm beaming. This chick is like bottled sunshine. "It's really great to meet you."

"Well, *come on*. I'll walk you through the place, then you can unload your bag in your office." Sissy hooks her arm in mine and starts to pull me past the desk.

I don't fight it. And I don't try to chime in. I just go with it.

Just past the front desk is a small hallway that abruptly opens into a huge gym. The ceilings are two stories high. There are tons of windows, but they're all tinted, allowing natural light in but taking away that awkward fishbowl feeling. The main floor is broken up into sections. There are leg machines, arm machines, free weights, barbells, and dynamic weights like kettlebells and those weird sandbags. There's a space with big punching bags, and smaller speed bags. The front wall is lined with treadmills and ellipticals, and the back wall has those big heavy ropes lined up in stations.

It's entirely impressive.

"The yoga and barre studios are up there," Sissy points up behind my head.

Turning around I look up. Somewhere behind the front desk must be a set of stairs leading to the second floor. I can see three classrooms. From this angle it's hard to tell, but I assume they have wood floors and lots of mirrors. Nothing says *Zen* like Warrior Pose while looking over a crowd of sweating jocks.

Arm still in mine, Sissy leads me along the wall below the yoga studios.

We pass a women's locker room and a men's locker room before coming up to a short hallway. It's less a hallway, and more of an indent that has one door on the right and one on the left.

"*Chiropractor and Acupuncturist.*" Sissy points to one door then the other. "And down here..." She trails off until we walk another 30 feet to the next mini hallway. "*Masseuse.*" She points to the room on the right, before going all Vana White on the final door. "And *Physical Therapist!*"

When Sissy opens the door, I literally gasp. The room has to be twenty feet by twenty feet, at least. There's an exam table. A corner desk with a sleek desktop computer and a comfortable looking chair. A built-in bookshelf. A bench for stretching. A large stability ball. And a small closet that Sissy opens to reveal cleaning supplies and a freaking mini fridge.

"Holy shit." I murmur.

Sissy looks at me with hopeful eyes. "You like it?"

"Umm, yeah. This place is nuts." I shake my head in disbelief.

She grins. "Oh good! I was hoping you'd like it. I know you're way down here on the end, but it really is the best place. When you shut the door." she demonstrates by shutting the door, "it gets pretty quiet. I know the music out there is loud, but we've added extra sound proofing in these rooms so you

can have conversations with your patients without having to yell.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” I say, shocked at how quiet the room is.

Sissy nods. “And if there’s anything else you need, let me know. I think Trevor emailed you your schedule already. Josh was the previous PT, so you’ll be taking over his usual appointments. But you can move things around however you want. And as of this morning, your calendar is up on our website so the members can log in to their portals and sign up for your openings. But go ahead and take some time to get settled, then come get me and I’ll walk you through the system.”

“Thank you, Sissy.”

My face must show more emotion than I intended because she hugs me again.

“Oh stop! I’m just excited to have a cool girl to work with.” Sissy says with a squeeze.

I shake my head as she lets go. “How do you know I’m cool? I could be a total bitch.”

Sissy throws her head back, letting out a tinkling laugh. “Beth, I know a bitch when I see one. Trust me.”

Then, in a swirl of pixie dust, she’s gone.

Looking around my new office, I feel - for the first time in months - *hope*.

CHAPTER FOUR

BETH

An hour and a half later, I admit that I can't putter around in here any longer. Had I known how large my office would be, I would've brought more stuff with me. I knew this was a high-end gym, but I'd figured my office would be more of a glorified closet. As of now, the space just looks bare; half moved-in, and a little sad. Tomorrow I'll bring my box of PT books and anatomically correct joint and muscle models. Maybe even some framed pictures for my desk.

Opening the door, my ears are assaulted with some classic Eminem. I almost laugh out loud. Sissy referred to herself as the gym DJ, and this is not the sort of music I'd expect her to choose.

On my tour with Sissy, we'd stuck to the outer edge of the gym, so I decide to take the long way and stroll through the floor. There's a little walkway outlined between each section, so I follow it. Winding my way back towards the front.

This time I focus on taking in the details. Most of my work with patients will be done in my room, but it'll be good to know what I have at my disposal. The equipment all looks heavy duty, and top of the line. Everything has that well-used appearance, but is clearly taken care of. There are stations with sanitizing wipes all over the place and there's an oddly satisfying scent of sweat and lemons. With walls in shades of grey, the whole gym has an industrial vibe. I like it.

I know Trevor mentioned that there were quite a few "rich housewives" that worked out here, but they must stick to the yoga studios because all the people I can see look like serious gym rats. It's not busy, but the ones that are here are working hard.

Weaving my way around a large machine, my eyes land on a set of legs. Giant freaking legs, bent at the knee, suspended in the air. I stumble to a stop. The legs move up, and my eyes rise with the motion. But as my gaze goes up, my jaw goes down. Holy fucking pull-ups. Who is this monster?

Thighs the size of watermelons connect to an ass that is testing the physics of his workout shorts. The profile view I have doesn't show how wide his

shoulders are, but the man's chest is as deep as I am wide. His shirt is desperately clinging to every impressive inch. And those *biceps*, they're as big as my thighs. Only without the jiggle.

What in god's name does he eat? Smaller men? Full sized cows? The man is ginormous. His size bordering between sexy-as-fuck and run-the-other-way terrifying. But he's not a bodybuilder, with the deeply defined muscles and creepy veins, he's just built like a damn ogre. Thick and hard and *oh my god* now I'm wondering about the hidden parts of him.

As he lifts and lowers himself, flashes of his face appear behind his enormous arms. He's Greek, or Italian, or some other breed of descendants of the Gods. His hair isn't as deep-black as mine, but it's a dark, chocolatey brown. And sweaty. And just long enough for the damn ends to curl around the tops of his ears. Those little curls would be cute, if it weren't for the beast of a man that they're attached to.

Another pull-up lets me admire the shadow on his jaw. It looks thick and deliberate. It's probably more of a beard than a shadow. And unlike my bright white paleness, his skin has a glowing amber tint. *Sweet protein pancakes*. This motherfucker is *all* kinds of hot, and it's just not fair.

The man straightens his legs and his hands let go of the bar they're gripping, dropping him to his feet. That's when I notice the thick chain around his waist, that's connected to a heavy weight. Holy Cheetos, how strong is this guy?

An involuntary sound of surprise leaves my lips.

I slap a hand over my mouth, but it's too late. The man's head turns. I thought nothing else about him could shock me at this point, but I was wrong. The bright blue eyes that meet mine are so unexpected that I don't even react. I just stare. And he stares right back.

I've been caught ogling him, and I feel like the biggest creeper in the world. Do I say *hi*? Wave? Give him a head nod and a slap on the ass? At this point, is there even a way to introduce myself without seeming like I'm hitting on him? For all I know, he'll be one of my patients. Gah.

I lower my hand, readying myself to say hello, when his eyes leave mine.

My body freezes as I watch him give me the slowest once-over in the history of douchery once-overs. As his gaze travels back up my body, his blank stare has turned into a deep scowl.

My cheeks flare at the feeling of his disapproval, and I look away before we make eye contact again.

Berating myself for being a chicken, I step off the path and cut between a row of dumbbells.

“Don’t be an idiot.” I whisper to myself. “You have bigger fucking problems than some asshole’s inflated ego.”

But my chastising doesn’t help. Suddenly I feel self-conscious of my curve-hugging leggings. My snug sweater. I tug at the hem of my shirt. My prominent hourglass figure feels so out of place amongst these no-body-fat specimens. I might not look like it, but I’m fit. I work out. I jog. Occasionally. I just have some extra padding on my ass. So what?

Battling back the feelings of insecurity, I remind myself who I am. I’m a strong, smart woman. I’m a trained professional. I may be soft in places, but I’m hard where it matters. And I can do this.

“You Beth?” A snotty female voice cuts into my thoughts, halting me.

I look up to see a beautiful woman. Thin. Delicate. With a total bitch face.

“Yes.” I force a smile and hold out my hand.

She steps closer but doesn’t take my hand. “Look, I don’t know whose cock you sucked to get this job, but it doesn’t belong to you.”

A completely unwanted image of Uncle Enzo getting a blow job pops into my mind. I feel myself gag against the bile that tries to lurch up at the thought.

Before I can even think of an appropriate response to this assclown, a small arm links through mine.

I recognize Sissy’s voice immediately. “Hi, Trisha. It’s a shame you couldn’t hide your total cunt personality for even one day.”

A laugh bursts out of me as Trisha’s face crumples in anger. Sissy nailed it. This woman is a total C-word.

Trisha opens her mouth, but Sissy raises her hand to cut her off. “Save it. It’s not Beth’s fault that she’s more qualified than your sister.” Sissy looks up at me and fake shudders. “Can you imagine if I had to work with another one just like her?”

I smile. “I really can’t.”

Still arm-in-arm, we turn towards the front desk.

I flick my eyes over to the giant man and see that he’s watching me. I quickly look away.

I want to ask Sissy about him, but instead I ask, “So, who is Trisha? I take it she works here?”

Sissy shivers next to me. “She’s the acupuncturist. Nothing against the

profession, but no way is that bitch getting anywhere near me with her needles.”

CHAPTER FIVE

BETH

Flipping my lamp off, I lay back and pull the covers up to my chin. Dog snores fill the room, like animal white noise. Half the time they sleep with me, and half the time they sleep with Noah. I don't know how they always know who needs them most, but I'm thankful for the company tonight.

The rest of my time at the gym today went well. Sissy showed me everything I needed to know about the computer system, and I feel ready for my first appointment tomorrow. And when I picked Noah up from school to drive him to the hockey rink, he was in a good mood. He was clearly excited to get on the ice again. I was tempted to come in and wait on the bleachers, but I didn't want to be that one weird adult watching practice.

When Noah came out afterwards, sweaty and stinky, he was smiling. *Actually* smiling. All while talking with a teammate on his walk through the parking lot. I had to blink away my tears before he got in the car.

We celebrated the good day with pizza.

But there's still something... unsettling, clinging to me like a shadow. A sticky emotion that I can't label, and I can't shake off. Lying here, staring at my ceiling, overthinking it, I wonder if my subconscious knows that this good day signifies the true beginning of my new life. My new normal. A trajectory that I never planned for. A life that I wasn't prepared for.

Unbidden, my memories push through, reminding me how fresh the wounds still are. The pain is still real, both emotionally and physically. As if to prove it to myself, I take a deep breath. It's faint, but I can still feel the pull where my broken ribs have healed.

And just like that, I'm back. Lying in that hospital bed. Police officers standing in the doorway, asking the doctor if I can talk.

I wish the doctor had told them no. I wish I had been able to push them off another day. Another hour.

Stuck there, stitches in my forehead, three broken ribs, lacerations on my face and arms, I had to lie there, holding still to dull the pain, while the cops told me that my boyfriend was dead. Passed away. *Gone*.

They said he died from blood loss before the ambulance came. Said there was an unfortunate piece of glass that cut into his neck, severing his carotid artery. They said it was probably immediate. They said he didn't suffer.

But they were wrong. His worried voice was still rattling around in my brain. *Lizzy, look away. Don't watch this part.*

I shook my aching head. I argued with the cops. I tried to tell them about the men. About the flashlights. About the guns. But they just kept repeating that Patrick didn't die from a gunshot. To them, my story was nothing more than the ramblings of a grieving woman. They were convinced that Patrick's death wasn't nefarious; it was just shitty luck. A hit-and-run accident. A freak thing. Just like the glass slicing his throat. A freak thing.

I tried to make them understand. I wanted to yell and scream. But I couldn't even do that. My ribs hurt too much; every deep breath was a knife in my side. And my head was throbbing from the concussion. My temple already swollen from where it hit the side window.

It had to be a bad dream. I was convinced it was just a bad dream. I told myself I'd be able to explain what really happened if I could just sleep for a bit.

But then the cops came back.

I thought they'd come back because they believed me. That they believed Patrick was murdered. That they were there to tell me they'd be opening an investigation.

But it was a different pair of cops. And they weren't there about *my* accident. They were there to tell me that my brother was dead.

That's when I started sobbing. Needles of pain with every inhale. Soul-tearing grief filling every inch of my body. My tears flowing from guilt and heartache and physical pain.

Aaron.

I croaked out his name, over and over. My brother. My big brother.

I thought it couldn't get worse. I thought there was nothing else they could say to hurt me. My brother, who hadn't talked to me in years, was gone. I'd never get to see him again. To hug him again. To tell him I forgave him. Tell him that I loved him.

But then the cop placed her hand on my shoulder and shattered my world again.

"He left Noah in your custody."

I forced myself to swallow down a cry so I could ask her, "Who's Noah?"

Her face contorted, as though she was the one in agonizing pain. “Noah is Aaron’s son... Your nephew.”

CHAPTER SIX

BETH

“What about this one?” Noah asks, gesturing to a small pickup truck. I shrug. “Sit in it. As long as we stay on budget, and it’s safe for winter driving, it’s up to you.”

Noah watches me for a moment before shaking his hair out of his eyes and opening the driver’s door. Poor kid keeps hesitating like I’m suddenly going to shout *just kidding* and drag him out of the lot. It’s times like this that it hits home just how much he doesn’t trust me yet.

It makes my heart ache thinking about the time we missed. The bonding we could have had when he was growing up. I hate that I missed that. And I hate how much better our relationship would be now if we had had that.

Seeing him sit behind the wheel, checking his mirror, he looks just like my brother. Just like his dad.

I remember when Aaron first got his license. He was ten years older than me, and I looked up to him so much. I remember how *adult* he looked sitting there in my mom’s car. I couldn’t wait to get that big. And I couldn’t wait to have Aaron be the one to teach me how to drive.

But fate’s a bitch and that never happened.

Aaron’s senior year, our mom met a man, and she moved us from Minnesota to Pennsylvania to follow him. Aaron was never the same after that.

I was just a baby when our dad died, but Aaron had a decade of memories with dad. He never liked the idea of Mom moving on. When we found out we were moving, Aaron was angry. I wasn’t thrilled about leaving the place that had always been my home, but I thought getting a new dad could be nice. But Mom’s boyfriend didn’t become my dad. He didn’t become my anything. And Aaron just got angrier.

The second Aaron turned 18, he moved out. He moved out and got too busy with his new friends to visit. And by the time I graduated high school, I hardly saw him anymore.

When I was 20, working on my undergrad, my mom met a new guy. This one she eventually married, but not before she followed him to Florida. She

left, and I stayed in Philly. My pathetic little family kept getting smaller.

Aaron surprised me one night by coming to my apartment and taking me to dinner. He had changed so much, I hardly even recognized him. His eyes were different. He was harder. A little bit scary. And on the way home I found a gun and a couple bags of white powder in his car. He told me it was nothing. He told me it was work. He told me to keep my fucking mouth shut.

I slapped him. And then I didn't hear from him again for years.

Noah would have been a couple years old by then, but I didn't know anything about him. From what I've been able to piece together, Noah's mother was a junkie who didn't track my brother down until Noah was older. I still don't know all of the details, but - when Noah was about 12 - my brother got full custody. And in the years that followed, Noah's mom disappeared. Presumed dead.

The fucking kicker... My mom knew about Noah. She knew she had a grandson, and she never told me. Aaron apparently talked to her. Just not to me. Never to me.

I would have gotten over his *profession*. I would have been there for Noah. I would have been there for my family. But I was kept in the dark. And even though he wouldn't talk to me, my brother decided that if anything happened to him, I'd be the one to take in his son. A son I met for the first time three months ago, in the worst way possible.

Noah climbs out of the truck. "Do you think we can test drive this one?"

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "Absolutely. You like it?"

He nods. "Yeah. The bed will be nice to throw my hockey bag in. And since there's not much of a backseat, I won't get stuck driving a bunch of people around."

"Good thinking." I reach up and tap his temple. "Glad one of us is smart."

He rolls his eyes, and it helps to push away my lingering dark emotions. Our relationship still has a long way to go, but we've made progress. He's still quieter than I'd like, but I can feel us getting more and more comfortable with each other as the weeks go by.

As much as I want to flash forward, I know there's no rushing this process. Time and bonding is the only way to get where we're going. The small moments will add up until we have a history that we can lean on.

As we walk up to the office to tell them we found one to drive, Noah rattles off every detail of the truck by memory. After telling him we'd be coming here this weekend, he'd spent the rest of the week researching cars.

And I couldn't be prouder.

Watching Noah interact with the salesman. Watching him test drive his first car. These experiences are a privilege to witness. Our history might be totally fucked up, but I'm glad to have Noah in my life.

I groan, prying myself out of the truck. "You weren't kidding about the back seat being tiny."

Noah laughs but offers me a hand. "You didn't have to cram in back there. The sales guy said you could've sat upfront."

I lower my voice. "You are talking about the same guy I am, right?"

He laughs again. "True enough."

The salesman who rode with us on the test drive is as wide as he is tall. No way is that guy *cramming* into anywhere.

I elbow Noah. "Have the ambulance ready on speed dial. I'm afraid we might give him a heart attack when we tell him we're going to pay for this outright."

Noah grins. And he doesn't stop grinning as we sign all the boring paperwork.

I have a small list of *happiest moments* in my life. Handing Noah the keys to his new vehicle quickly slides to the top of the list.

Pulling into the driveway, I watch Noah steer into the spot next to mine. I do like this house, but as soon as we get our first big snowfall, I'm going to desperately wish we had a garage.

Getting out of our cars at the same time, I ask Noah, "You want food or dog duty?"

He tips his head in thought. "Food, I guess."

I gesture for him to open my passenger door. On the way home we picked up some tacos to-go. I know I shouldn't have insisted that he follow me to get the food, but I'm not quite ready for him to be out there alone. Considering he'll be driving himself to school tomorrow, I don't have long to get over it.

Hurrying ahead, I get the door unlocked and leave it open for Noah. Rushing around, I throw some dog food into the dishes while the beasts sniff around in the backyard.

By the time the dogs are back in, chowing down, Noah has our dinner set out on the counter.

My mouth waters at the sight, and we don't waste time digging in.

"I'll pay you back for the truck," Noah blurts out as I have a taco hanging half out of my mouth.

I make a sound while I quickly chew, holding up my free hand to stop him from saying more.

After I swallow, I shake my head. “No.”

“Yes.” He sets his shoulders, turning him into a man much older than his 16 years.

I rotate on my stool so I’m facing him. “Noah, that truck is a gift. Under no circumstances am I going to allow you to pay me back for it. If I didn’t want to buy it, I wouldn’t have.”

He flicks his eyes in my direction. “That’s a lot of money.”

I shrug. “It’s just money. And it’s mine. I get to choose how to spend it.”

“But why would you spend it on me?” Noah asks, still sitting rigid.

I don’t need to think about my answer. “Because you’re mine, too.”

Noah takes a deep breath, and his shoulders slowly lower as he exhales.

“Thank you.” His voice is almost a whisper.

“You’re welcome.” Mine is just as quiet. “Now eat your tacos.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

BETH

I wake up on a gasp, heart beating wildly.
“Shit.” I pant. “Fuck.”
I kick my legs free from the blanket tangled around

them.

My pulse is still racing, and I thank the Sandman that I don't remember the dream I was having. I'm sure it was nothing good.

I glance at the clock and groan. Three AM. I flop an arm over my eyes. It's too fucking early to get up, but I need to calm down if I'm going to get back to sleep. I slowly lower my arm and look over to my closed bedroom door.

I shouldn't. I probably really shouldn't. But my legs are already walking me to my door and clicking the lock in place.

Climbing back into my bed, I grab my phone.

I won't feel guilty about this. It's totally normal. Everyone does it. And - goddamnit - I need it, too, if there's going to be any chance of me falling back asleep.

Getting comfortable, I open the private browser on my phone and type in my favorite porn site. Paranoid, I turn my volume all the way down. Scrolling through the popular videos, my mind wanders to one man in particular. A man that looks like he might actually break me. A man who was rude. A man who looked at me like he might hate me. A man who I wouldn't mind hate-fucking me.

I shouldn't. I probably really shouldn't. But I'm already opening the search bar and typing *muscles*.

I am not disappointed with the selection that comes up. Choosing one at random, I feel my temperature rise.

The man in the video isn't as big as my mystery man. My man is the size of a mountain. This guy is more like a boulder. But - holy wow - he's hung. As the girl in the video goes to town giving him an over-the-top sloppy blowjob, I wonder how endowed my guy is.

My guy. I'd roll my eyes at myself, but fucking hell - I can't look away

from my phone screen. The pair in this video have advanced quickly. He's all-out fucking her now. She's more flexible than I am, but I'm pretty sure I'd be okay with the position they're in.

I watch in amazement as one of his hands spans her entire stomach. I spread my hand out on my stomach and wonder how it would feel if it was *his* hand. How large would his hand be on me.

The hand in the video slides south. And so does mine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANGELO

Her hips sway as she approaches me. Those fucking pants clinging to every sinful inch of her. Her glossy black ponytail bouncing from side to side with each step. Her peaked nipples pressing against her thin shirt.

I stand still. If I make any sudden movements, she might disappear.

“Angelo.” She purrs my name, coming to a stop directly in front of me.

“Beth.” Her name feels foreign, but right, on my lips.

I reach out for her, but before I make contact she drops to her knees. Her small hands tug down the front of my shorts and my dick springs free.

Fuck yes.

Her fingers grip my length, sliding slowly up and down.

I don’t want to rush her, but I silently beg her to put her mouth on me.

When she finally does, I let out a groan that I feel all the way to my toes.

But it’s not enough. I want to see her bright green eyes looking up while she’s got me buried in her throat.

“Open your eyes.” I demand.

My eyes open.

“Fuck.” I groan, for a whole different reason.

Staring at my ceiling, I will myself back to sleep. To finish my dream. But I’m not getting back to sleep. Not like this.

Fuck it. I tug my sleep pants down enough to let my aching cock free. Waking up with an erection is nothing new. But waking up *this* painfully hard is all *her* fucking fault.

Beth.

Her name sounds angry even in my mind. But it’s still her lips that I picture as I close my eyes. I’m so ready to come, I don’t even care that it’s her that I’m thinking about.

Stroking myself, I think about what it’d be like to get my hands into that thick, thick hair. To hold her face steady as I feed her my cock. To watch her try to get her little hands around me. To wipe that fucking smile off her face. To replace it with a look of ecstasy. To bury myself all the way inside that

perfect, curvy body.

Another stroke, and I moan my release.

Laying there, covered in my own fucking mess like some goddamn teenager, I feel like a fool.

“Get it together, man.” I tell myself.

I glance at the clock and see that it’s just after five.

Padding my way into my bathroom, I flick on the lights and turn on the shower.

This woman is going to be the damn death of me. Every day since she’s started at Atom’s, I’ve had to watch her saunter back and forth across the gym, teasing me with every step. I’ve always thought of myself as an equal opportunity kind of guy. A guy that liked all sorts of women the same. I never thought I had a type. Until I saw her. She’s beautiful, in a classic girl-next-door kind of way. Pink, soft looking lips. Big emerald eyes. Dark hair that shines under the gym lights. Aside from the first day, her hair is always up in a high ponytail. The type that just begs you to grip it and take control. She’s more than a foot shorter than I am, so I should be worried about breaking her, but I’m not. Her glorious hourglass curves can take me. I’m fucking sure of it. That round ass. That shirt-straining chest. She was made for a man like me.

I’m forty-fucking-two, and I’m getting hard again just *thinking* about some chick. And she’s not even just some chick. She’s *the* chick. The girl that Uncle Enzo told me to keep an eye on.

I have a job for you. There’s this girl.

He told me that she was going to start working at my gym, and that I was to keep an eye on her while she was at work. That’s it. Not who she is. Not why she needs to be watched. Not if she’s in trouble or if she *is* trouble.

Fucking Uncle Enzo. He’s always so goddamn secretive. He’s old school and will only tell you what he thinks you need to know. And the more you ask, the less likely he is to share.

So here I am, dick in hand, over a girl that for all I know could be his fucking mistress. She better not be. Aunt Tami is one of my favorite people. If Enzo is messing around on Tami, I’ll bury him myself.

Stepping out of my shower, I vow to find out more information today. I held back on her this last week and I dwelled on it this weekend. But I’m not sitting idly by any longer.

Ready or not, *Beth*, here I come.

CHAPTER NINE

BETH

After eating a late lunch in my windowless office, I have an hour to kill, so I figure I'll go harass Sissy for a bit. Maybe I'll step outside and fill my lungs with some fresh, chilly air. Just as I think it, a text pops up on my phone. A photo of Bam and Pebbles, sniffing around in my backyard. I reply with a quick "thanks" and smiley face.

I really lucked out with the sweet, retired widow across the street who was thrilled to be our dog sitter. She'll stop by on weekdays and let the furballs out in the afternoon. As I walk towards the front of Atom's, with the hopes of stepping outside, the correlation between my day and my dogs' day is not lost on me.

I don't know what hours Sissy works, but when I got in at 8:30 this morning she was sitting behind the front desk, bouncing along to *Space Jam* as it blasted through the speakers. It's easy to forget that she's the assistant manager. She reminds me more of a bubbly teenager than a woman who I swear is in her thirties.

I've been able to avoid Trisha, the Ice Queen of Needles, since our first run-in. And even though I feel like a pussy, I pick up the pace as I walk past the alcove where her office is. She's not really a threat to me. I'd just sit on her to stop an attack, but I'm not real big on confrontation. Fleeing like a 'fraidy cat suits me fine.

The other professionals that office here seem pleasant enough, but not super social. Which I'm totally okay with. I'm juggling enough as it is.

Rounding the corner, I spot Sissy laying on the floor behind the front desk, phone above her face.

"Hey, Sissy."

Like a jack-in-the-box, Sissy pops up into a sitting position. "Hey!"

"What ya doing down there?" I ask.

She crosses her legs and shrugs. "Just shaking it up. I was going to plank for a bit, but somehow ended up watching cake decorating videos for..." she glances back at her phone, "the past 20 minutes."

I laugh. *“Been there.* Well, if you aren’t too busy, would you want to go outside and eat a brownie with me?” I make a big display of showing her the small container in my hand.

“Oh, hell yeah!” She hops up and grabs the sweater off the back of her chair. “Not sure why we have to freeze our asses off for it, but I’d do just about anything for chocolate.”

I zip up the sweatshirt that I pulled on over my long sleeves. The shirt is one of my favorites - a soft purple color, and stretchy fabric that makes my boobs look great, but it isn’t very warm. “I probably won’t last long, but I just need a little bit of air and sunshine before going back into my cave.”

Sissy nods as she holds the door open for me. “I get that. I can have Trevor buy you one of those vitamin D lights for your office if you want.”

“That’s a sweet idea, but I’m okay. It’s good for me to have a reason to get up and wander around. And this way, I can hang out with you.”

We step to the side of the front door and lean against the building. I open the container and hand a brownie to Sissy. Our first bites are synchronized, as are our moans of chocolatey bliss.

“Holy fuck balls.” Sissy mumbles, mouth full of brownie.

I grin. “You can thank Pinterest for this recipe.”

We eat a few more bites in silence, huddled against the frosty wind. The sunshine tricks you into thinking that it’d be warm out, but the temperature is below freezing for sure.

A black SUV with tinted windows pulls into the parking lot and Sissy makes an amused sound.

“What?” I ask.

“He’s not going to be very happy about our newest member. Or maybe he will.” She tips her head side to side. “No, I’m thinking this case is a stage-5 clinger situation. But I can’t exactly use that as a reason to deny someone membership to our gym.”

I’m trying to decipher Sissy’s words, when the driver’s door opens and a man unfolds himself from the vehicle. My mystery mountain of a man.

“Hey, Angelo!” Sissy calls out as he approaches.

Angelo. I let the name roll around in my mind. It’s a good name. A strong name. A little mysterious. A little sexy. *Oh my god what’s wrong with me?* I stuff another bite of brownie into my mouth, like that will stop my inner dialogue.

Angelo nods to Sissy before giving me a measured look. “Ladies.”

And holy fuck, I think I just ovulated.

I clench my thighs against the warmth spreading through my body. His voice is absolutely perfect. Deep. A little scratchy. A true masculine rumble.

I try to avert my eyes but end up staring at his perfect ass as he makes his way inside.

“Would you like a moment alone?” Sissy giggles.

“What?... I... *No.*” Even with the cold wind on my face, I can feel my cheeks getting red.

She giggles some more before nudging me with her elbow. “It’s okay. He’s one hot piece of man meat. Six foot eight. 350 pounds. Don’t ask how I know that.” She shakes her head. “The man is a motherfucking tank. And if dick were my thing, I’d be doing all sorts of shameful things to myself while thinking of him.”

“Yeah.” I feel myself literally gulp, since I was doing just that this morning. “He’s big.”

I must sound as dazed as I feel, because Sissy starts laughing so hard she has to brace herself against the wall.

I roll my eyes and reach for the door.

“Wait! Wait!” She fans her face as she catches her breath. “Girl, if anyone has a chance with him.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Watching you every time you walk by.” She raises her eyebrows in a *haven’t you noticed* way.

My face scrunches up in confusion. “You’re crazy. He looks at me like he hates me. And how would you even know? You sit up front.”

This time she rolls her eyes. “Cameras. Duh.”

“Wow. You really are a perv.”

She shrugs. “Gotta entertain myself somehow.”

We start to walk back inside, the feeling in my fingers nearly gone. “Wait, what were you talking about when Angelo pulled up. Something about a clinger.” It’s strange to be saying his name out loud.

“Oh! Right!” We push through the second set of doors and Sissy looks around to see if we’re alone. “Well, this woman, Rachel, just came in over lunch to sign up for her trial month of membership. I don’t know if Trevor explained it to you, but anyone who wants to become a member has a trial month. It’s still full price, but it’s a way for the client to see if we’re the right gym for them. And for us to see if they’re a good fit for Atom’s. It’s not

unheard of for us to decline a member, for one reason or another. This place isn't cheap, so we need to make sure that everyone plays well together." She scoffs. "Trisha excluded. Whatever. Anyways, Rachel has been in here before, as a guest. She has a few friends that come here, but she's never been a member."

"Who's Rachel?" I whisper.

"I'll point her out." She waves me off. "So, Rachel has been here before a few times. And she's left a few times with - *drumroll please* - Angelo."

Sissy looks at me, but I'm not following.

She reaches up and smacks me on the forehead. "They'd *leave together*. Angelo and Rachel were dating. Or hooking up. Definitely something. But I haven't seen her in here over the last couple weeks. And she never arrived here *with* Angelo, so I don't think they were serious. But then she shows up today and wants a month trial. You ask me, I think she's trying to reestablish her flag on Mount Angelo."

An unpleasant emotion sits down on my chest. Am I really jealous about some stranger and her relationship with some other stranger? Hot or not, what do I care?

Sissy continues. "I don't know Angelo well. He's always been nice to me, not super chatty but friendly enough. He's come in just about every day for the past year since he started coming here, so you get a feel for someone, ya know. He'll show up at different times, but he's the type that comes here to work, not to socialize. And I don't think he's going to be thrilled about Rachel posting up in his gym."

I push away my pesky emotional reaction and raise an eyebrow at Sissy. "How much of this is fact and how much is speculation?"

She grins. "Probably 50/50. But I think I'm right."

I have to laugh. "Okay, point out this Rachel chick to me. I'm curious now."

I'm more than curious.

Sissy's grin grows. "She left. I signed her up. She walked through. Then she left saying she'd be back later. One guess as to what, or who, she was looking for."

"In this theory of yours, did he try to ghost her? Or is she just an overachiever?" I ask.

"My version, he told her their arrangement was done and her little pea brain won't accept it. She's hot, so she has a chance at getting back in his

bed. But he doesn't strike me as the type to settle down with a chick like Rachel."

"Hmm. Well, this has been truly fascinating, but I should get back to my office. I have an appointment later this afternoon that I want to read up on."

"Alright. Have fun back there. And thanks for the brownie!"

I smile. "Thanks for joining me. This was far better than eating two brownies alone in my office."

Sissy's tinkling laughter follows me as I walk back to my room.

This job really is quite different than the positions I've had before. In the past I've always worked with *regular* people who suffered an injury or went through surgery. I see that here too, only all of my patients are members of the gym. Some of them might not actually need treatment, they just want to be over-safe. Others are looking for me to help them prevent injury for an upcoming event or game. And some just want the help stretching.

I've met a few that seem a bit on the spoiled side, but mostly they're all just athletic people who are super cautious with their bodies, and I can respect that.

I try not to notice that Angelo isn't out on the gym floor. He must be in the locker room. Undressing.

"Wow, classy." I mutter to myself as I round the corner into the little hallway with my door. Then I scream.

CHAPTER TEN

BETH

My hand flies to my chest, attempting to push my heart back in place behind my ribs.

“Oh my god.” I gasp out the words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scream at you.”

“You really know how to make a guy feel welcome, doc.” Angelo says without humor. His voice still so damn yummy.

I take a slow breath. “I’m sorry. You startled me.”

He doesn’t even look phased by my outburst. But his oversized, hulking form was the last thing I expected to find blocking my office door.

“Is there something I can do for you?” I leave his name off the question. It’d be weird for me to use it before we’ve officially met.

“I believe my appointment started about a minute ago.” He says, with those eerily-blue eyes locked on me.

Needing to break eye contact, I glance to the closed door of the massage room that’s across from my office.

He uses a knuckle to tap twice on my door. “My appointment with you.”

Dumbstruck. I’m dumbstruck.

“With me?” I ask.

Angelo slowly nods his head, like he’s talking to someone particularly daft.

I blink twice then snap myself back to reality. This is a patient. Apparently, *my* patient.

“Of course.” I step forward, hoping that Angelo will back up to make room for me to reach my door. He doesn’t. I’m forced to blade my body so I can reach out and swipe my card against the sensor to open the door.

I clear my throat as I step into my office, holding the door open for Angelo. “I apologize for my tardiness. I must have had my times mixed up when I read my calendar this morning.”

In two steps, Angelo is in the center of my room, taking up far too much space. “Not your fault, doc. I just booked it a few minutes ago.”

“Please, call me Beth.”

“Alright, *Beth*.” The pause he puts before my name feels almost pornographic.

Ahh! Okay, I cannot let my mind go there.

“If you’ll just give me a moment...” I choke out the words.

Hurrying over to my desk, I ditch my empty brownie container and hang my sweatshirt on the back of my chair. Taking a seat at my computer, I have to type the password in twice to get it unlocked. In the reflection of the screen, I can see that I’m biting my lip. I immediately release it. It’s a stupid nervous habit that I thought I broke ages ago.

Getting my schedule up, I see Angelo’s appointment. Angelo Rossi. 42 years old. Member of the gym for six years. Had numerous visits with the previous Physical Therapists, for a variety of reasons. Most recent major item was a knee replacement two years ago.

“Okay.” I exhale a deep breath before spinning around in my chair to face Angelo. He’s sitting on the bench across from me, towering over me even in our seated positions. “What brings you here today, Angelo?”

“My knee.” He gestures, with a hand the size of a bear paw, towards his right knee.

“That’s the one you’ve had replaced, yes?” I affect my best professional tone.

“Yeah. It tweaks a couple times a year.”

Angelo’s answers seem short. I don’t know if that’s just how he is, or if he has something against me. Either way, it doesn’t matter. I’m here to do a job.

“Alright.” I rise. “Can you get up for me? I’m going to have you do a couple of movements so I can see your range.”

When he stands it takes all my willpower to stay put. Half of me, the animal part, wants to flee. The other half, the female part, wants to faceplant into his colossal body.

His eyes dip to my mouth, and I realize that I’m biting my lower lip again. Crap.

“I know you just got here, so you probably aren’t really warmed up. Can you do a couple of slow high knees, a couple squats to get your muscles moving?”

Angelo doesn’t reply, he just does as I ask. I can’t really complain that he’s being a bad patient, because he’s not. He’s just being intense, and that makes him all-the-more freaking intimidating.

I tell him to keep going as I walk around him. Partially to watch his

movements, partially to get out of his sightline and get a grip on my sanity.

After a minute, I stop back in front of him.

“Hold a squat for me with your knees as close to 90 degrees as you can get.”

With my eyes on his lower half, averted from his face, it’s slightly easier to concentrate. And I force myself to not pay any attention to the bulge that’s obvious in his loose shorts. I bet if I climbed into his lap, he could hold that squat just fine for the two of us. *Professional*. I am a mother-flipping professional.

“Now lunge, please. Start with the right leg in front.”

We go through both sides. I watch his movements. He stays silent. And the more he doesn’t say, the more I wonder if this is some sort of a test. Sure, his knee is probably tight, but is that really why he’s here? Being that I’m a professional, I won’t short him on treatment. But my tactics today may be a little different than what he’s used to.

“Okay, so there’s a stretch I’d like to do with you.” I turn to my little closet and pull out a yoga mat. With a flick, I get it unrolled on the floor between us. “Sorry, but we’re going to have to do this on the floor. You’re a little too big for my exam table. And even if you could balance on it, I wouldn’t be able to get the leverage I need.”

I swear I see the corner of his mouth twitch, like he’s fighting a smile. But, like everything else so far, he obeys without a word.

When he’s sitting on the mat, I smile. “On your back.”

This time the clench of his jaw is unmistakable. From humor or annoyance though, I’m not sure.

“Just relax for me. Hands at your sides. Right leg bent, foot on the ground.”

I step up next to his right side, and when he bends his leg, I kneel down next to him.

“I’m going to help you slide the heel of your foot towards your butt.”

When I grab a hold of his ankle, his leg jerks and his head snaps up.

I let go so fast, I start to tip sideways. My arms fly out to the side to balance myself, but I can already feel that I’m going to fall over. Embarrassment hits before I do.

But I don’t hit the ground. One of Angelo’s large hands clamps down around my arm, keeping me upright. His chest is half raised off the ground, and he’s supporting my weight like it’s nothing.

My heart is beating wildly. “Thanks.”

Angelo slowly releases me, seeing that I’m steady again. “Sorry for startling you. Your hands were cold.”

“Oh god.” I push up one of my sleeves and press my fingers against my inner forearm. I flinch at how cold my own hands feel. “Wow. I’m so sorry.” I frantically rub my hands together trying to heat them up. “I guess I still haven’t warmed up from my little break outside.”

Angelo lies back down, keeping his eyes on me. “I’ve known people who go outside for a smoke. Can’t say I’ve met anyone who goes outside for dessert.”

I lose the battle against my smile, letting it spread over my face. “Yeah. That was kind of dumb, huh? I guess I’ve forgotten how cold it can get here.” As soon as the words are out, I regret them, and the smile falls off my face. I shouldn’t have said that.

Thankfully, Angelo doesn’t notice my change in mood, or he just doesn’t care.

I move to stand. “I’ll go run my hands under warm water for a moment.”

Angelo’s hand reaches out again, this time landing on my thigh. “It’s fine. Really. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

I hesitate.

“Beth, it’s fine.”

Taking him at his word, I grab his ankle. No one flinches. No one falls over.

Guiding him through the stretch, we complete the process a few times.

“Okay, one more I’d like to do. You can do both of these at home with a resistance band, or with a partner, just remember to keep good form.”

Staying at his side, I rotate around so I’m looking at his face. I keep my right knee on the ground, next to his and bring my left foot out in front of me. If Angelo were standing, it’d look like I’m about to propose to him.

I tap his thigh. “Bring this leg up. Good. Now I want you to rest the back of your knee on my shoulder.”

Angelo’s eyes slide to mine, but he complies.

There’s a lot of body contact. The shorts he’s wearing are bunching around his upper thighs, so when I place my hands on his leg just above the knee, it’s all skin-on-skin contact. But thankfully this time my hands are a little warmer.

“Now relax. I’m going to lean into you. You’ll feel this along your

hamstring. Your IT band. Your glute.” I press my weight into him, bringing his knee towards his chest.

This is what we call a deep stretch. It does great things, but it can be a bit uncomfortable. And I think Angelo is perfectly aware of how uncomfortable he’s been making me feel, so I lean in a little more.

A mix between a groan and grunt rumbles through Angelo’s body.

I ease off and move his leg side to side to keep things loose. Then I lean in again.

This stretch is perfectly professional. But it’s also very personal. The back of Angelo’s leg is flush against the front of my body. I’m glad the sports bra I’m wearing today has extra padding, otherwise he’d probably be able to feel my over eager nipples pressing into his hamstring.

Treating him like I would any other patient, I reach across my body with my left hand and press my fingers into his hip. Applying pressure where the IT band connects with the glute.

“Fuuuck.” The curse rolls out of Angelo.

“Did we find a winner?” I ask, moving my fingers along the line.

“Yeah.” His eyes are closed.

“Relax, big guy.”

The endearment is out of my mouth before I realize what I’m saying. I want to apologize. I shouldn’t have said that. But then something amazing happens, Angelo’s mouth pulls up into a smile. I’m glad his eyes are closed because mine are popping out of my head. He was handsome before, but that smile... *Shit*.

I slowly release him and scoot back. “Try to do these stretches a couple times a week, and I recommend using a foam roller to get that IT band loosened up. You don’t want to overdo it. And it won’t feel good while you’re rolling it out. But it’ll help.”

I hurry to stand and offer a hand to help him up.

Angelo looks at my outstretched hand and smirks. “Pretty sure I’d pull you to the floor.”

My mind blanks for a moment with the visual of me sprawled across his body.

I swallow. “Right.”

Rising back to his full height, the smirk is off his face and he’s back to giving me that distant assessing look. With a nod, he turns and leaves.

I drop into my chair feeling like I just completed a job interview. Or a first

date.

What in the fuck was that?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BETH

I zip up my jacket as I walk towards the front door in a daze. This is what one session with Angelo did to me. One short, albeit hands-on, interaction, got me flustered to no end. I ended up just laying on my own exam table waiting for my final appointment of the day. Pathetic.

“Beth! Hold up a second!” Sissy calls out to me.

Her quick footfalls alert me to the fact that she’s running up behind me. She must’ve been in the locker room.

“What’s up?” I ask when she reaches me.

“I forgot to tell you earlier, a bunch of us are going out Saturday night. You have to come!”

I look around the gym for this bunch of people.

Sissy slaps my arm. “Not people from here!” She laughs. “My friends. It’s my girlfriend’s birthday, and she finally decided this morning that she wants a classic night of partying to celebrate. You know - drinking, dancing, dirty fun times.”

“Oh, well...” I trail off, not sure how to turn her down nicely.

“No! You can’t say no. You’re new in town. There’s no way you know anyone cooler than me.”

I laugh at her self-praise. “That’s true.”

“I know. And I’m sure you don’t have plans.”

I haven’t told her about Noah yet. I’m not trying to keep him secret; it’s just not an easy conversation to have. *My teenage nephew lives with me. We just met a few months ago, when his dad died, so it’s still a tenuous relationship. Lord knows he’s spent plenty of nights alone, so I don’t think I can ditch him for a party yet.* Yeah, that’s a little much for a quick brownie break chat.

“I’ll think about it.” Is the best answer I can give her.

She jumps up and down. “Yay! Okay, I’ll text you the details. Who knows, maybe you’ll even meet a nice, tasty man.” She winks.

“Bye, Sissy.” I roll my eyes and push through the doors, into the cold. I

hate that when she mentions meeting a man the first person that flashes into my mind is Angelo Rossi. He wasn't really friendly. He wasn't particularly nice or talkative. And yet, the feel of his muscles under my hands will keep me company for the rest of the week. My poor cold hands.

I shiver, and not just from the memory. *Goddamn*, it's cold. "Dumb!" I scold myself. Why do I always forget about that stupid button on my key fob that will start my car? I could've had it all warm before I stepped outside.

Digging in my bag for my keys, I don't realize who else is out here until I hear that deep rumbling voice. Angelo. My eyes snap up and it takes me a second to spot him, even though he's directly in front of me. He's a few cars down from my position, and a few spots down from him is my trusty Honda CR-V.

He's standing in front of his giant SUV. I'll have to veer off my current trajectory to avoid colliding with him. With them.

Angelo isn't alone. He's talking to a tall, slender, stunningly beautiful woman. She looks like one of those picture-perfect Instagram models, with her color-coordinated workout gear, sleek winter jacket, and fuzzy earmuffs.

His voice is too deep to be quiet, but - try as I might - I can't make out what they're saying. She's talking animatedly, her pearly whites flashing in the late afternoon sun, and Angelo looks just as bored talking to her as he did talking to me. Not sure what to make of that.

As I approach, I angle away from the cars to give them a wide berth. The woman, who I'm going to assume is Rachel, spares me a two second once over. She does not look impressed and dismisses me without a word of greeting. What a peach.

Refusing to risk seeing the same look in Angelo's eyes, I go back to searching in my bag for my keys. I'll reach my car before I ever find them, but it gives me something to focus on.

The couple, ex-couple, fuck buddies, whatever they are, are still there when I pull out of my parking spot. Circling the building to avoid them would be ridiculous, so I suck it up and drive past them.

As I do, I glance over. And catch Angelo staring right at me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BETH

I check the oven timer, then call over my shoulder. “Two minutes until I start plating.”

“Yeah, okay.” Noah mumbles in response.

It pleases me to no end that he’s doing his homework at the kitchen table, rather than locked away in his bedroom. When I was his age, you’d have to pry me out of my room with a crowbar. But my mother was a royal pain in the ass to be around, so that played a major role in my choice of scenery. All the more reason to be happy that Noah doesn’t mind being in the same room as me when he doesn’t have to.

Over the past two weeks, this has become our routine. Him doing assignments, me cooking, while we listen to one of my cherished albums from the nineties. Today is Barenaked Ladies. Yesterday was Sublime. Half the songs cause Noah to look at me like I’m insane, the other half I catch him bobbing his head along to. We have so much time to make up for, sharing music from my past feels like a good place to start.

The timer beeps and I pull on my oven mitts.

Setting the steaming tray of cornbread muffins onto a cooling rack, I inhale the aroma and smile. My mom and I might not have a good relationship, but she was always a damn good baker.

“Smells good!” Noah says, grabbing bowls and plates from the cupboard.

“Yeah. This is Grandma’s recipe. And you can’t very well have chili without corn bread.”

“God forbid.” is his sarcastic reply.

“Smart ass.” I smack his chest with my oven mitt. “Alright, I’ll grab the cheese and sour cream. You grab the butter and honey.”

“Honey?”

“Yeah. For the cornbread.”

“For the cornbread?”

I look around the room dramatically. “Is there an echo in here?”

Noah throws up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll grab the honey for our chili dinner.”

“Just trust me, kid.”

Five minutes later, I watch with a knowing smirk as Noah inhales a muffin slathered in butter and honey.

When he just stares at me, I prompt him. “*And?*”

“You were right. This is amazing. I’ll never doubt you ever again,” he says with an overly dry tone.

“*Good.*” I reply, smiling. “Now. How was your day? Do you have more homework to finish?”

“I have a test in Sociology tomorrow.”

“Oo, the study of people. I loved that class.” I brush off my hands. “Do you have a study guide? I can quiz you.”

I expect him to turn me down, but he doesn’t. Noah digs through the pile of folders next to him, handing me three completed quizzes. Seeing that they all have A’s on the top, I grin.

I flip through the pages, deciding to start with definitions. “What is the term for: the feeling of workers in a bureaucracy that they are being treated as objects rather than people.”

Noah shoves a spoonful of chili into his mouth before responding. “Alienation.”

As we study through dinner, I watch as Noah eats a second serving, and the pile of muffins dwindle down to crumbs. I swear, every meal I’m still amazed at how much this kid can eat.

“Well,” I say, setting down the last quiz. “Considering you just nailed every single question, I think it’s safe to say you’re gonna do fine tomorrow.”

Noah shrugs. “It’s not hard.”

“I know that this was a shitty time to start at a new school, with the end of the semester just a couple weeks away. But maybe for next year you should consider AP classes. Or maybe doing that...” I wave my hands around, “whatever it’s called. The program that allows you to take a couple college courses instead of normal high school classes. I think that you can start it your Junior year. Get a jump on a degree.”

“I never thought about it.” Noah furrows his brow.

I smile, standing from the table, grabbing our bowls. “We missed the boat this year, but it’s something to think about.”

Noah follows me to the sink. “Yeah, maybe.”

He’s quiet while he rinses dishes and puts them into the dishwasher. I try not to watch him too closely while I put away the measly leftovers, but his

mood seems to have just changed.

“Noah, you don’t have to. It was just an idea. If you want to stick with the normal classes, that’s totally fine. And if you don’t want to go to college, that’s okay too. It’s not for everyone. There are all sorts of great trade jobs you’d be great at.”

Noah turns to me, forehead scrunched. “Huh? Oh, no. It’s not that.”

“What then?” I ask. Preparing for bad news.

“Marcus asked if I wanted to go with him to his family’s cabin this weekend. I think Willy’s going too.”

“Oh.” I recognize those names from his new hockey team. When Noah’s talked about Marcus and Willy it’s always been good things. They are definitely becoming friends. And it’s nice that they’re including him, but a part of me isn’t comfortable with this idea. Like, not at all. Is this what it feels like to be a parent?

“Marcus’s parents will be there the whole time. It’s not going to be a party, or anything like that.”

I catch myself biting my lip again. This week is killing me.

Starting with the simplest question, I ask, “Do you want to go?”

Noah raises his shoulders. “Yeah. It could be fun.”

I exhale and lean against the counter. “Alright. But I want to talk to Marcus’ mom. Or dad.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Yeah? You’ll let me go?”

My chest clenches at his obvious excitement about going, and at the fact that he’s asking my permission. I know I’m his guardian. I’m the closest thing he has left to a parental figure. But I guess part of me was afraid that he’d never accept my role in his life. That he’d just go off and do whatever the hell he wanted. The fact that he’s asking me has my damn heart swelling.

I push through the happiness that’s threatening to come out as tears. The last thing I want to do is have a mental breakdown in front of Noah over something as simple as this.

I make my voice sound as normal as possible. “Of course. It’s great they invited you. Just get me a phone number.”

“Okay.” Noah’s face is already buried in his phone as, I assume, he texts Marcus for his mom’s number. “There you go.”

My phone chimes. Looking down, I see I have the contact information for *Linda Anders*.

Noah is still standing there, just staring at me.

I look back down at the name. “I guess I’m calling this stranger now.”
I feel the color leave my face, and Noah starts to smile.

“Are you nervous?” He asks.

“No.” I obviously lie.

I deal with strangers all the time for work. But something about calling some other kid’s mom has my freaking palms sweating. Wow, I’m being such a pansy. *Like a band-aid*, I think, *just gotta do it*.

I click on the number and start to pace the kitchen as the phone rings.

“Did Marcus tell her I’ll be...” I start to ask Noah but get cut off when a woman answers the call.

“Hello?”

“Um, hi. Is this Mrs. Anders?” *Mrs. Anders?* I slap a hand to my forehead. There’s a chuckle. “Oh please, call me Linda.”

“Alright. Uh. Hi, Linda. This is Beth Smith, I’m Noah’s, *um, uh*, Noah’s aunt.” I stumble over my own introduction. I don’t know what Noah’s told his friends. Maybe they don’t know I’m his aunt.

“Yes, yes, I was expecting your call. Nice to talk to you, Beth.” She ignores my awkwardness.

I look up and see Noah’s thrown a hand over his mouth, attempting to hold back a laugh.

“Oh, shut it!” I whisper-hiss at him.

“I’m sorry, what?” Linda asks.

My eyes widen. “Sorry, no, not you.” Noah really loses it, laughing freely now. I know it’s at my expense, but the sound has the tension leaving my body. “I’m sorry, please pretend that I’m not entirely socially inept. I just wanted to talk to you about this weekend.”

Linda chuckles. “Absolutely. I was so excited when Marcus told me that he’d asked Noah to come with. He’s had nothing but nice things to say about your boy.”

“Thank you, that’s nice to hear. And same to you for Marcus.”

Linda scoffs. “That boy can be a real terror, don’t let them all fool you.”

I smile, liking her already. “I’m sure I was a pain at that age too.”

“Too true.”

“Well, I don’t want to be a bother, but I figured I should call and make sure you were okay with Noah coming. And double check that you plan to be there. Not that I don’t trust Noah...” I trail off. I don’t know how to ask all the right questions without sounding rude.

“Oh of course. I’d be calling you if roles were reversed. Our cabin is only about an hour away. I’ll send you our address so you have it. The plan is to go up tomorrow after they get done with practice and come home Sunday afternoon. There’s plenty of space so the boys can have their own rooms, or double up, whatever they prefer. The lakes aren’t frozen enough for ice fishing, and there isn’t quite enough snow for snowmobiling, but they can tool around on the trails with the 4-wheelers. My husband will be there to help with that stuff. Honestly though, if it’s like the other times, they’ll spend the whole weekend playing video games and eating too much frozen pizza.”

“Wow, sounds fun! Can I come?” I joke, then cringe. “I’m kidding. I mean, it does sound fun though.”

Noah is laughing again. I flip him off.

Linda continues to be unfazed by my weirdness. “Oh, we do a parents weekend in the spring. You’ll definitely be invited.” Her inflection tells me that it’s a good time. “But don’t worry, there’s no alcohol when the kids are around. My oldest son, who’s 18, will go up on his own sometimes, so we never keep booze in the cabin.” She huffs. “Now don’t get me wrong, I’m sure that twerp has gotten drunk a few times, but not on my dime. Greasy food and too many baked goods. That’s the worst they’ll see this weekend.”

“I’m all about that.” I sigh. “Well, sounds like it’s settled. If you’re okay with Noah joining, then he’s all yours. The number I called you on is my cell, call me anytime.”

“Got it. And I’ll send you a text once we all get there Friday night. I know how forgetful these boys can be about checking in.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. I’m thrilled to meet you at their first game, if not sooner.”

I smile. “Same. It’ll be nice to know someone.”

I hear a shout in the background before Linda groans. “Sometimes I wonder where their brains go. It was great talking to you.”

I laugh. “Likewise, and good luck this weekend.”

Noah’s watching me expectantly, as though he didn’t just listen to the whole conversation. I hold up a finger, making him wait.

I head into my bedroom, then into the closet. Finding my hidden shoebox, I lift the lid and dig around until I find the envelope. Pulling it out, I remove \$300 dollars, then put the rest back.

Uncle Enzo insisted on giving me some cash when we first moved in. I tried to refuse, but he left the envelope in the house for me before we even

moved in. He told me to spend it however I wanted. I don't know if this is what he intended, but I want to make sure Noah has some money on him. And unless I go to an ATM right now, this is the only option.

Noah's at the table, packing up his schoolwork when I re-enter the kitchen. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. Holding out the cash for him to take.

"This is for this weekend. I want you to be able to buy your own food if you go out to eat. Don't be pushy about it if they insist on paying, but at least you'll have the option to pay for yourself. Or if you go to a movie, or buy snacks, whatever. Plus, you need gas money for your truck. I know it might be more fun to ride up with Marcus, but I think you should drive yourself. Then you can set your own schedule and come home when you want to."

I don't think this is a hazing thing, but if he wants to come home, I don't want him to feel like he's stuck there.

Noah slowly takes the money from me. "Wow, thanks Beth."

It's my turn to shrug. "It's the least I can do. I hope you have fun."

Noah stands, looking uncomfortable for a second, before he steps up to me and pulls me into a tentative hug.

It takes my brain a half moment to realize what he's doing. When I do, I throw my arms around his waist and squeeze him to me. This is the first time he's initiated a hug. We've embraced a few times. When we first met. At the funeral. But it wasn't like this. Those were out of pain and grief. This is something else. I hug him tighter.

Noah lets out a croak. "Are you trying to crush me?"

"Shut up." I reply, not letting go.

Noah lets out a snort of laughter, then seems to relax a little.

"Have you gotten even taller?" I ask, realizing that he's definitely got several inches on me now.

"I think it was all that honey with dinner."

I let him go and reach out to flick his arm. "Go to bed, you turd."

Noah grins, dodging the flick. "Goodnight, Beth."

"Night, Noah."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BETH

The bag crinkles in protest as my fingers scrape bottom. I peer inside, sad to see that I've finished the entire bag of BBQ potato chips without realizing it.

Looking down at myself, I see crumbs all over my lap and sweatshirt.

"Really fucking classy." I say out loud to myself.

The sound of another episode of *The Office* starting is the only evidence I have that it's getting later. With trepidation, I tap my phone to see the time.

"Seriously? How is it only 5:00?" I drop my head back against the couch cushion.

Bam and Pebbles raise their heads to look at me. They'd set up shop laying at my feet hoping for some chips of their own, but I'd selfishly devoured them all by myself.

I sigh and close my eyes.

Ever since his surprise appointment with me earlier this week, I've felt off kilter. And every day since I've done my best to avoid him. It's stupid. I need to shake this weird feeling he gives me. He's no one special. And he has a girlfriend. Or fuck buddy. Or whatever *Rachel* is. So what if he's the sexiest man I've ever encountered? So what if he looks at me like I'm some dirty little bug on his windshield? His opinion shouldn't matter to me. This whole thing with him is dumb. I'm dumb. I'm acting like a damn teenager crushing on the forbidden bad boy.

So I'm here having a Sulky Saturday, while my actual teenager is out having a social life. I'm happy for him. I really am. But I'm also lonely. Pathetic and lonely. Such an attractive combo.

Last night, I spent the evening baking four types of cookies. Not because I needed them, but because I didn't want to sit still in my suddenly empty-feeling house. Sure, I have the dogs to keep me company, but those lazy furballs are asleep by 8:00 every night.

And today, well today I've cleaned every room in the house, minus Noah's. I'm fairly sure there's an unwritten rule about cleaning someone else's bedroom. So now, every surface has been scrubbed and sanitized.

Every window wiped down. Every garbage emptied. And that didn't even take half the day.

I don't know why I'm being so dramatic. An annoying man. An empty house. These are things that I should be used to. Until Noah came into my life, I'd been living alone since I was 18. I thought I might actually enjoy this weekend, but I miss him.

And I know you aren't supposed to speak ill of the dead, but my ex-boyfriend was also an annoying man. For entirely different reasons. Thinking of Patrick, I ponder if that's the right term. Am I supposed to refer to him as my *ex-boyfriend*? Is he an ex simply because he's dead and not my boyfriend anymore? Does it count for anything that I had been planning to break up with him?

I groan. This is not the sort of thing I should spend my night dwelling on.

I look at my phone again. Debate with myself. See the BBQ-colored flecks on my sweatpants and come to a decision.

I text Sissy. *Where are you guys going tonight? And what time?*

I figure it might take her awhile to reply, but it doesn't. 30 seconds later my screen is filled with a variety of party emojis, a string of peaches, and - finally - a time and address.

Dress code? I ask.

Something you can dance in that shows off that bangin' ass.

Three hours later, I'm standing in my kitchen, waiting for my ride. I don't plan on getting drunk tonight, but it's better to be prepared ... and I'd rather not have to ask Noah for a lift to pick up my car tomorrow.

I look at my reflection in the front window and question if this is the right outfit. And question if this is a good idea. And question every decision I've made over the past ten years. But a chime lets me know my ride's here. So, like my life choices, I'm stuck with the clothes I have on.

I slip on my black ankle boots before hurrying out the door. The freezing air whips my hair around my face. I have a hair binder on my wrist, but I had time to waste so I dried and curled my dark locks into big waves. Then I stood in my closet for-freaking-ever trying on every piece of clothing I own. I ended up pairing my black faux leather leggings with a strappy silver top. The run to the car has me shivering in my sleeveless shirt, but I don't feel like trying to keep track of a jacket inside a club. I'll just need to warm up with alcohol.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BETH

“Bottoms up, girl!” Sissy shouts in my ear.

I look over to see she has a new round of drinks in her hand. With a shrug, I down the rest of my margarita and take the offered glass from Sissy. I’ve been nursing this single drink for the past hour, so I feel okay about having a second.

I wasn’t sure how I would feel once I was actually here, but honestly - I’m having a great time. Sissy was so happy to see me; it instantly put me at ease. And her girlfriend, Daniella, was just as friendly. Not to mention stunning. Together they make the most beautiful couple I’ve ever met in person.

Clinking my glass with Sissy, a true smile forms on my lips. “Thanks!”

“Don’t mention it.” Sissy says, giving me a side hug. “I’m so glad you came!”

“So you’ve said.” I laugh.

They invited quite a few people, but in the busy club it’s hard to tell who all is here for Daniella’s birthday. I’ve recognized a couple people from the gym, patrons that Sissy must be friends with, but the rest are new faces.

Drink in-hand, I make my way to the dance floor. The crowd in here is pretty crazy, so there’s a lot of bumping and jostling. But - thankfully - it’s an eclectic crowd, ranging all over in age, so I don’t feel like a cougar.

Letting myself loosen up, I feel the music fill my mind.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but I turn around when I feel a tug at my arm. Sissy motions for me to follow her back over to the tables that our group has commandeered. Her movements... uncoordinated. She’s totally drunk.

By the time I make it over, Sissy and Daniella are going through a round of hugs. When they turn to me, I set my drink down and allow myself to be sandwiched between them.

“Happy birthday! Thanks so much for inviting me out tonight.” I say into a face full of hair.

“It was great to meet you!” Daniella slurs. “Sissy won’t shut up about how awesome you are. I’m glad I got to finally put a face to the name!”

“And ass!” Sissy cracks up as she slaps the side of my hip. Her aim not quite right.

“Oh my god! I’m taking you home, you predator.” Daniella says to a grinning Sissy.

Sissy grabs my hand. “Are you gonna be okay? Do you want to split a ride home?”

I shake my head. “Thanks, but I’m going to stay and finish my drink.”

With a final round of hugs, I watch the girls walk away.

Remembering my drink, I spin back around and pick mine up off the table. With the glass against my lips, a blast from the past has everyone left in the birthday group freeze-framing. No freaking way, they’re playing *Barbie Girl*. I haven’t heard this song in 20 years. In nearly a synchronized fashion we all slam the rest of our drinks and make our way to the dance floor.

The crowd is lost in rhythm. I lose sight of my new friends, but I let *Aqua* take me away. With a smile on my face, my body bounces to the beat.

Song after song, I shake my hips. I wave my arms around like I know what I’m doing.

I don’t remember the last time I let go and danced like this. Why don’t I do this more often? This is so much fun!

I feel my limbs getting looser.

I feel the bodies around me getting closer.

I feel myself getting hotter.

My balance sways and my feet trip. I have to grab a hold of the person next to me to keep from falling. He doesn’t seem to mind, but I don’t recognize him.

I need a break.

I push myself away from the stranger and struggle to get through the mass of bodies.

I aim for our table. Or, wait, that’s not our table.

I turn around. Is that it? Everything looks the same.

I just need to sit for a moment. I’m too hot is all.

A body bumps into me and suddenly I’m facing a new direction.

Shit. Which way was I going?

I spot a table a few feet away. It’s a normal height one. Not the tall one I’d been at before. But it has an empty chair. Keeping my eyes locked on my destination, I stagger my way closer.

Am I really this drunk?

I get a hand on the table and carefully rotate myself into the chair. Why is this so hard? My legs give out, my ass dropping onto the hard chair.

I must be more out of shape than I realized. I must have danced too much.

A figure approaching stands out from the crowd. He's heading directly for me.

I blink, trying to focus my fuzzy vision. It's a man. I don't recognize him, but he's smiling at me. A feeling of unease takes root. His smile isn't friendly.

He stops when he's just a foot in front of me. I watch him, unsure of what he's going to do. He places a hand on the table next to me, and slowly lowers himself into a crouch.

"Hey, beautiful." There's something wrong with his voice. It's off. Not right.

I feel the little hairs on my arms rise.

I open my mouth to tell him to leave, but there's a blur of motion, and then he's gone.

My brain feels like it's working in slow motion. I can't make sense of what just happened.

It takes all my concentration to raise my eyes. The creepy man is standing now. His hands are clutching at an arm. I tell my eyes to follow that arm. Tracing the forearm, I find a large hand clamped around the creepy guy's throat.

An angry voice rumbles through me despite the noise of the club. "I'll remember your fucking face. You better fucking pray you have nothing to do with this."

The hand releases and the creepy man staggers back, disappearing into the crowd.

That voice. That deep, sexy, straight to my core, voice. I'd recognize it even in my sleep.

Angelo.

I know it's him, before my eyes follow from the hands all the way up his oversized frame.

Sitting here, in front of his standing form, I feel like a toy. Like a little girl in front of Godzilla.

We lock eyes and his expression is one I haven't seen before. It's not the usual derision. But I can't figure out what it means. Something unpleasant, I'm sure.

Wait, Angelo? Why is he here?

In one swift movement, he drops down to kneel in front of me. “Are you okay?”

His quick actions startle me, and his question doesn’t register. “Angelo?”

To my own personal horror, I watch my hand as it reaches out and touches his chest. What? *No! No. Bad hand!*

My fingers touch hard muscles. I know I shouldn’t be doing this, but I want to. I can’t stop myself.

He acts like he doesn’t even notice it. “Beth, what’s wrong?” When I don’t answer, he leans closer. “Are you alright?”

“What are you doing here?” I know Angelo’s here for something, but I don’t remember how he got in front of me. Has he been here all night?

His hand reaches towards my face. On instinct I pull back and he halts. I can’t let him touch me. He’s been mean to me.

“Beth, how much did you drink?”

I feel my brows come together. “I only had two. I’m not drunk, you jerk.”

Oh crud. My mouth drops. I can’t believe I just called him that.

He doesn’t react to my name calling. He just looks at me. Examining my face while his is far too close.

“Fuck.” He finally says. “Beth, I’m going to take you home.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No.” I repeat.

“Beth, you can’t stay here. And you’re in no shape to get yourself home.”

I scowl at him. “I’m not leaving with you. I watch the news.”

“Beth...”

I shake my head to stop him. Everything starts to spin and I stop. Fuck.
Note to self: don’t do that again.

Angelo sighs, and reaches into his pocket.

When he brings his phone to his ear, I see that my hand is still pressed to his chest. I yank it back. Why was my hand on him? Why did he let me touch him? Why did he feel so good under my palm? So warm? I reach my hand back out, placing it fully against his pectoral. My fingers flex into his t-shirt. Hmm, the fabric is so soft. The dark material is stretched tight over his large body. He’s wearing an unzipped hoodie, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Letting my eyes fall, I see he’s wearing jeans. Goddamn this buttface. Why is he so flipping handsome? He should look out of place here, dressed like this, but he doesn’t. How can someone look so good in casual clothes?

“Mmm.” I hear the sound as I drag my hand across his chest. Holy

fuckballs, *did I just moan at him?!*

Angelo's voice distracts me from my worry.

"Yeah, she's here. She's messed up. I think someone gave her a roofie." Who is he talking about? And aren't roofies drugs? That can't be right. "I told her I'd take her home, but she said no. I can't very well drag her out of here." Me? Is he talking about me? Crap, what did he say before? "If you think that will help."

There's a pause and I look up to find him watching me.

"Beth, take the phone."

I pull away from the staring contest and see that Angelo's holding his phone out for me.

Shit, I'm tired.

"Who is it?" My words slur a little as I force my arm to reach out.

"A friend."

A friend?

It takes me a beat to let that register. Angelo doesn't know me, and none of my friends know him. Fear starts to climb up my spine and I curl my fingers into Angelo's shirt. I don't know why I'm trying to hold him to me, since he might be the danger.

Angelo's hand closes over mine. I expect him to push me away, but instead he holds my hand in place against his chest. "Beth, it's okay. Please talk to him."

I work my teeth over my lower lip.

Lifting the phone to my ear, I keep my eyes on Angelo. He's still an unknown. An apex predator, and I feel like I shouldn't look away.

"Hello?" I ask slowly.

"Hey, darling." The unmistakable voice greets me.

My eyes widen. "Uncle Enzo?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANGELO

Even sweaty and under the influence, Beth is still the most enticing woman I've ever laid eyes on. Her small hand under mine, clutching my shirt, is the most intimate thing I've felt in a long time. She's alluring. Perfect. And someone fucking drugged her.

"Uncle Enzo?" Hearing the recognition in her voice lets me breathe a small sigh of relief. She's far enough gone that I was worried she wouldn't know him by voice.

Then it hits me. *Uncle Enzo*. She called him *Uncle*. She's not some mistress. She's not involved with him. Fuck. She can't be related to me. Beth... *Beth*... Why do I feel like I should know this name?

Like a brick to the face, it's suddenly there. This is *Lizzy*. Elizabeth. Uncle Enzo used to talk about her all the time. He'd been friends with her dad. I remember some story about the guy dying and Enzo vowing to keep an eye on his kids.

I tighten my grip on her hand, thanking the gods that she's not some distant cousin.

I'm still not sure what Beth is doing here. Why she's not going by *Lizzy*. And, now that I think about it, I'd bet money her last name isn't really *Smith*. It's such an obvious last name, so common, that I didn't even think to question it.

I turned up the volume on my phone before I handed it to her. I wanted to be able to hear both sides of this conversation.

I lean closer to Beth.

"You gotta trust me on this one, darling." Uncle Enzo says. "Angelo will help you."

Her fingers work nervously, absently, against my chest. Her gaze on her lap.

"But he hates me."

What?

"What?" Enzo asks. "Angelo doesn't hate you."

Fucking right, I don't hate her.

"I *know* him, Uncle Enzo." Her emphasis on *know* makes it sound biblical. Enzo hears it too. "What do you mean by that?"

Beth sighs, sounding more sad than defeated. "I don't *know him*, know him. He's always at the gym. I see him there, and I see how he looks at me. He doesn't think I should be there."

"Why would you say that?" Enzo asks.

I watch her bite her lip. Her words are already making me feel like shit, and I'm positive her next answer is going to make me feel worse.

I watch her swallow before she replies. Her voice gets quieter. "He doesn't think I'm good enough. I'm not like the rest of the women there. I'm different. I'm... well, you know... I'm not skinny like them."

A growl rolls through my body and I snatch the phone away from her. Not wanting to let go of her other hand, I end the call and slam the phone onto the table then grab her chin. "You listen to me, baby girl. I don't think any of the things you just said. Not a single fucking one. You need to get that shit out of your head. Alright?"

Her eyes are glittering with unshed tears and it fucking kills me. I know she wouldn't be saying any of things if it weren't for whatever drug is in her system, but I hate that she's carried around these toxic feelings for the past two weeks. And I hate that I'm the cause of them.

"You know what I see when I look at you?" It's more a demand than a question.

"What do you see?" She asks in a whisper.

I loosen my grip on her chin. Sliding my hand down I gently hold her neck. "I see fucking perfection. I see the face and body of a goddamn goddess. I see a woman that was built to tempt me." I stroke my thumb up and down the front of her throat. "Do you hear me?"

Beth nods.

"Good. Now are you going to cooperate and let me bring you home?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BETH

I nod again. I'm having a hard time following, but the seriousness in his tone, the way he's touching me, makes me want to trust him.

"Good girl." Angelo releases my hand and stands.

I forgot that he's been holding it this whole time.

It's so loud in here. Why is it so loud?

Angelo gestures to someone. I watch as a large guy in black comes over. He looks serious. Is he a security guard? Angelo points to himself. Then to me. The new guy looks at me. I wave. It's a weird wave. *Why did my fingers move so slow?* I flex them. Opening and closing my fingers to make a fist.

A large hand lands on my shoulder. *Good lord, was I just watching my hand? What's wrong with me? Didn't Angelo say something about drugs? But that's not right. I didn't take anything. And I don't do drugs. I mean other than regular drugs. And I smoked weed in college a few times. But that can't be what he's talking about, is it? No. That doesn't make sense.*

The security guy hands a phone to Angelo. Angelo pockets the phone and gives the guy some keys. Was that Angelo's phone? Is everyone talking to Uncle Enzo? Does he own this club or something? He owns a lot, so maybe.

Wait, how does Angelo know Uncle Enzo?

Angelo turns back to me, crouching down. "Can you walk?"

"Umm..." I think about the question. I think about it for probably too long.

Angelo shakes his head. "Never mind. I'll carry you. But you'll need to help. You might be tiny, but carrying dead weight is harder than it looks."

I choke on a laugh. "Tiny? Have you seen me?"

Angelo cocks an eyebrow. "Have you seen *me*?"

Even my slow brain has to concede that point. He's freaking mammoth.

"Okay." I reply, meekly. "Where are we going?"

"I'm bringing you home. I don't see a purse. Did you have one with you?"

I think about it, but then shake my head. "No. I wore my pocket pants."

I pat my hip and feel my phone. Then check my waist for my credit card

and ID.

His eyes trail over my bare arms. "Jacket?"

I shake my head again.

"Beth, you'll freeze to death outside in what you're wearing," he scolds.

I shake my head again. "Just gotta run to the car. Not gonna die." Is what I try to say. I think my words got jumbled on the way out.

Angelo sighs, and pulls off his hoodie.

My eyes stay stuck to his muscled form, as I obediently let him thread my arms through the sleeves.

"It's a little big." He says, with a small smile.

I wrap my arms around myself, relishing in the warmth. I don't remember being cold before, but this is nice. Tipping my head forward, I inhale the scent of Angelo. It's... man. It smells like man. I'm going to live in this sweatshirt. It's like a blanket. It's a blanket-shirt.

"Time to go." Angelo says. He grabs my hands and puts them on his shoulders. "Bridal style is not the easiest way to carry a person through a crowded room. A piggyback ride would be best, but I can't really keep you from falling off."

I nod, as though I understand what the hell he's talking about.

"So, you're going up front. Wrap your arms around my neck. When I stand, wrap your legs around my waist. Alright?"

I swallow. "Alright."

Angelo grips my hips and pulls me to the edge of my chair. My body instantly reacts with a flood of highly inappropriate hormones. Something about being manhandled just does it for me. Then his hands slide until they're under my ass. My ass is not small. But his huge hands engulf my cheeks.

Woah.

Wait, what am I supposed to do?

"Hang on to me, baby girl." His lips brush against my temple.

Baby girl. Hearing his deep voice call me that short circuits my already frazzled thoughts.

Then I'm rising and my arms tighten themselves around his neck. When Angelo reaches his full height, he boosts me higher and my legs instinctually wrap around his waist. Or as far as they can get. Even his waist is big.

One of Angelo's hands stays in place holding my ass, while the other bands across my back. The embrace is like nothing I've ever experienced before. I like it. And I feel myself melt into him.

The view from way up here is too much, so I close my eyes and bury my face into Angelo's neck. He smells nice. Like his sweatshirt. I hug him a little tighter, rubbing my nose against the warm skin at the collar of his shirt. I can feel the rumble from his chest to mine. I think he said something, but I couldn't hear it.

"You smell really nice." Each word has my lips scraping against his neck. "Thank you for the ride," I say and I feel another rumble from Angelo.

I drop my head onto his shoulder. "I don't know why you're helping me. You don't like me."

His hold on me tightens. "I like you, Beth. I'll tell you again tomorrow, so you don't forget."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ANGELO

I adjust my grip and hoist her a little higher. Her warm, soft body pressing into mine is some sort of cruel and unusual punishment. Her lips on my skin - literal torture. And by the time I get her out the front door to where I had security pull my car around, I'm rock hard. It makes me feel like a goddamn pervert, getting turned on by a drugged girl, but I can't help my body's physical reaction to Beth.

The security guard opens the rear door for me, then hurries back inside. It's all of ten degrees out here and - like me - the guy's probably freezing in a t-shirt.

"Beth." She doesn't react. "Babe, you with me?" I lean my head back, trying to get a look at her. "Well, shit." She's passed out.

Doing my best not to jostle her too much, I lay her across the backseat. I debate for all of a few seconds on how to get a seatbelt on her before I give up and shut the door. I'm fucking cold and there's no safe way to secure her while she's laying down.

Rushing, I get myself into the front seat. Letting the warm air blow around me, I look back at Beth.

"Goddamnit." I mutter.

If something happens to her while I'm driving, Uncle Enzo will literally skin me.

I get back out and open the rear door. Gently, I pull her up to a sitting position and strap her in. The backrest of the bench is adjustable, so I angle it back just enough to keep her from tipping forward.

Finally back in the front seat, I rub my hands together in front of the heater. I think I might have another sweatshirt in the way back of my Suburban, but I'm not getting out again to look for it. Instead, I grab my phone and enter Beth's address in GPS. Good, it'll take me 20 minutes to get there. That should be enough time to get my dick under control and to come up with a plan.

It's not.

I drive past her house, then circle the block. I still don't know what sort of trouble she's in, but Uncle Enzo asked me to look out for her, so that's exactly what I'm going to do. But what I'm supposed to do once we're inside... I have no idea. Do I stay and watch over her? Do I leave and just lock the door behind me? What's the protocol for this situation? I decide to stick with what I know, personal security, and go from there.

Nothing struck me as suspicious when I drove past, but I've never been here before so I wouldn't know if anything was out of place. It's nearly midnight in a residential neighborhood, so I would expect it to be this quiet.

Pulling into the driveway I find it odd that she has a little shitty pickup as well as the Honda I've seen her driving at the gym. But knowing Enzo he might have supplied her with a whole fleet of random vehicles.

There's a large window on the front of the house. Through the curtains I can see there's a light on inside, but it's dim. Probably a lamp. Most people leave a light on when they know they'll come home late.

I look at my text from Uncle Enzo and memorize her door code, thankful I won't have to dig through her skintight pants to find a house key.

Bracing myself for the cold, I get out and collect Beth. She's still pretty out of it, but I get her awake enough to hold on.

"Hang on tight."

She hums her agreement and nuzzles into my shoulder as I lift her from the car. She promptly falls back asleep. Kicking the door shut, I force myself to ignore the way her lips feel, parted against my neck.

Professional. I'm a motherfucking professional.

Quickly striding to the front door, I free a hand and type in the code. A beep sounds and I turn the lock and open the door.

The smell of chocolate wafts over me as I step through the threshold. I relock the door behind me, then firm my grip on Beth.

Looking around in the soft light, I see that I'm standing on the edge of a dine-in kitchen with a living room over to my left. On the far side of the kitchen is a hallway, which I imagine leads to her bedroom. I take one step forward before a sound halts me. I know that sound. It's the sound of claws on hardwood floors.

I brace myself to see a dog, but I'm not prepared.

"Jesus Fuck!" My voice is louder than I intended, and I retreat until my back hits the door.

A large, dark and angry Boxer is the first to charge out of the hallway. I

open my mouth to try and placate the animal, but my words are cut off by the white horse-of-a-dog that follows. Of-fucking-course she'd have a Great Dane.

"Beth." I nudge her head with my own.

I'm guessing these dogs won't attack me while their owner is in my arms, but I don't really feel like putting money on that bet right now.

"It's okay. Good dogs." I use my calm voice. It doesn't work.

The pair slowly prowls across the kitchen, lips pulled back, teeth on menacing display.

Great. This is really great. Would it have killed Enzo to tell me about the pair of Hell hounds?

"Who the fuck are you?"

I'm not caught off guard very often, but it's clear that tonight is not my night.

From the sound of the voice, a goddamn kid just got the jump on me. Reluctantly, I pull my gaze away from the canine threat, and find a teenage boy standing just inside the kitchen. Hair askew. Pajamas rumpled. Hockey stick raised in the air like a baseball bat.

This just keeps getting better and better.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ANGELO

Moving Beth's weight to one hand, I raise the other, palm out, trying to show I'm not a threat. I don't know who the hell this kid is, but he's acting like he lives here.

"Look kid..."

He cuts me off, stepping closer. "I said, *who the fuck are you?*"

He's brave, I'll give him that. But I can see that he's shaking. *Well done, Angelo. You've lusted after a woman who's incapacitated by a date rape drug, and now you've frightened some poor kid in his own home.*

"My name is Angelo. Beth is my friend."

His face hardens. "Bullshit. She doesn't know anyone here."

I want to convince him that I'm not a threat, but the advancing dogs keep pulling my attention away.

"Can you call your dogs off?" I ask.

"No. Put her down." He takes another step closer.

I gotta hand it to him, I'm an intimidating guy and he isn't backing down.

I shake my head. "Not gonna happen until I'm sure those dogs aren't gonna try and rip me apart."

"Beth!" The kid shouts her name, his voice sounding a little frantic. She doesn't stir.

I take a breath. "My name is Angelo Rossi. I'm a member at Atom's Gym. I know Beth from there. We were at the same place tonight celebrating a birthday. Enzo Costa gave me this address so I could bring her home. You might know him as Uncle Enzo."

The kid's face registers shock before he narrows his eyes at me. "You know Enzo?"

I nod. "He's my *actual* uncle."

I watch as some of the tension leaves his face, but he doesn't lower the hockey stick. "What's wrong with her?"

"The dogs?" I gesture with my chin.

The kid looks at the dogs, hesitating, before deciding. "Bam. Pebbles."

Chill.”

The word is clearly a command, since both dogs instantly relax. They turn their heads back to the kid, tongues lolling out.

“Thanks.” I say. “Smart dogs.”

“My dad trained them.”

“Who’s your dad?” I ask.

I know it’s not the time for questions but I’m curious who this kid is. Is he Beth’s son? He looks too old to be hers, and he’s calling her by her first name, but anything is possible.

The kid’s glare turns even frostier. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She... drank too much.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Look, she can talk to you more in the morning. But for now, she’s fine. She’ll *be* fine. I promise.” As I reassure him, I give Beth a small shake. Turning my head, I talk right into her ear. “Beth, you gotta wake up for me. We’re home.”

She groans a little.

“Beth?” The kid comes closer, looking back and forth between me and the woman in my arms. “Beth, are you okay?”

His voice breaks and my chest tightens. This kid is really worried about her. Scared for her. And his nervousness is seeping under my skin.

“Wake up, babe.” With the kid’s eyes on her face, I give her ass a little pinch. It does the trick.

“I’m up. I’m up.” She mumbles.

“Beth!” All the bravado leaves the kid as he rushes to close the distance between us. Thankfully lowering the hockey stick.

She lifts her head a little. “Noah?” I hear the smile in her voice.

“Are you okay? Do you really know this guy?”

She blinks then looks up at me. “I’m good.” She takes a deep breath. “This is Angelo. He’s... He smells nice.”

The kid, Noah, looks disgusted with her answer. I smirk. I do smell nice.

She reaches out to touch Noah’s hair. “I’m happy you’re home. It was lonely here without you.”

I look away, trying to give them privacy, even though Beth is still draped across my body. And getting heavy.

“You’re okay, though?” Noah asks again.

I feel her nod. “I’m good. Someone... Angelo’s helping. Uncle Enzo said

so.” Beth’s words are slurred, but the message is there.

“I hate to interrupt,” I interrupt, “But I’m gonna drop her if I don’t set her down soon. Where’s Beth’s room?”

Noah sighs. “Follow me. But you’re not staying in there with her.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BETH

S hiiiiit. I let out a whimper. Holy crap, my head hurts. I roll over onto my back, and the light coming in through my closed eyelids makes me wince. Setting off a chain reaction of body aches.

How much did I drink? I don't remember getting drunk last night. But I feel really, *really* hungover.

I lift my arm to shield my eyes from the light as I crack them open, looking for the clock. Then my eyes open wider. It's almost 11:00! That can't be right. I haven't slept in this late since I was a teenager.

Teenager... Why does that word feel significant?

Wait, did I see Noah last night? Was he home? No. He isn't supposed to come home until tonight.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to remember what happened last night.

I cleaned. I got ready and met Sissy at the club. I met her girlfriend and their friends. We had margaritas. On the rocks, extra salt, my favorite. We danced. I remember having fun. I remember thinking I should dance more often. I remember sitting in a chair and talking to Angelo.

Angelo.

Like a wave, the truth of last night crashes against me. The dizziness. The struggle to focus. The appearance of Angelo. I think I talked to Uncle Enzo, but I don't remember what we talked about. Or how Angelo knows him.

I remember Angelo... hugging me? No, carrying me. I don't know how I got home. I remember Angelo saying something about drugs.

Holy shit! I was drugged. It had to have been in one of my drinks.

Oh god, the creepy guy. I remember his eyes. I remember his voice. I remember feeling afraid. Was it him? Was he planning to take me? Was he going to rape me?

My mouth fills with saliva and I force my body to roll out of bed. Rushing across my bedroom, I make it to the bathroom just in time to dry heave into the toilet. My stomach doesn't actually feel bad, it's the thought of what could have happened that has me retching. I wince through another heave of

my chest.

My next inhale is quickly followed by a sob.

Someone could've hurt me. Someone could have raped me.

I clamp both hands over my mouth to try and hold down another strangled cry. If Noah really is home, I can't let him hear me.

Still on my knees, I use the counter to pull myself up.

Catching a glimpse in the mirror, my breath catches. My hair's a mess. Mascara is smeared around my puffy, red rimmed eyes. I'm wearing my sparkly shirt from last night. A thong. And a gigantic sweatshirt.

His name rolls through my thoughts yet again. Angelo. He saved me last night. He found me. He stopped that man. He brought me home. He gave me his sweatshirt. He called me *baby girl*.

Tears start to drip down my cheeks.

What has my life become?

More tears spill from my eyes as my breakdown gains speed. I reach into the shower and turn the water to hot. While it runs, I strip off my clothes.

How could I be so stupid? How could I let this happen? There are people out there who are looking for me. People that want to hurt me. People that could hurt Noah. Noah, who's lost so much already. Who's counting on me to take care of him.

Between one breath and the next, I'm bawling. Blindly, I step into the stream of water, letting the sound drown me out. I reach for the shampoo, but my fingers ball into a fist before they touch the bottle. The sobs are wracking my body. One after another. It's not just last night. It's that night three months ago when everything changed. It's the crushing weight of being responsible for another human being. It's the crippling fear that I'll do something wrong and get us both killed. It's the loss of any chance I might've had at fixing my relationship with my brother. It's a man who acts like he hates me, but who actually doesn't. It's all of it. It's too much.

Moving slowly, a headache pounding behind my eyes, I lower myself until I'm sitting on the shower floor. With my head on my knees, I let it all come out. I let the tears flow until there's nothing left.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BETH

Thirty minutes later I feel exhausted, but also remarkably better. Sometimes a good hard cry can be really therapeutic. Hair wrapped in a towel, I pick up Angelo's sweatshirt and slip it on like a robe. I could use my actual robe, sure, but I don't want to. I want the comfort that this ridiculously huge piece of clothing brings me. Folding the sides over each other, wrapping myself tightly in the Angelo scented material, I open the bathroom door.

The cool air from my bedroom hits my legs and face. It's refreshing after my prolonged steam session so I take a second to breathe it in.

"That looks better on you."

Angelo's deep voice startles me so badly I jump backwards, dislodging the towel that had been piled on top of my head.

The damp towel flops into my face but I manage to keep my arms hugged around my body, keeping the sweatshirt closed. Frozen in place, I hear Angelo chuckle.

He clears his throat. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

I hold up a finger, then carefully back myself back into the bathroom.

5 minutes later, I step out of my bathroom with my hair combed, my teeth brushed, and my real robe cinched tight.

Now that I'm paying attention, I easily spot Angelo sitting on the foot of my bed.

Without being leery, Angelo looks me over. A small smirk pulling on his lips, I'm sure due to the fact that I'm no longer wearing his sweatshirt.

I swallow my pride and hold his eye contact. "Thank you. For last night." I use my hands to gesture around me. "For everything."

His face sobers. "How are you feeling?"

I shrug. "My head is fucking killing me and I'm tired, but mostly I just feel disgusted about letting that happen."

Angelo stands. "Beth, you didn't *let* anything happen. Don't for a second feel responsible about this."

"Yeah, but someone must have put *whatever it was* into my drink. I

shouldn't have set it down. It was a stupid mistake. I know better than that."

He shakes his head. "These guys are pros. They could do it even when your drink is in your hand. Especially in a place as crowded as that. It's fucked up, but it happens all the time."

I cross my arms over my chest. "You seem to know an awful lot about this stuff?"

"I work in security, and I've worked in places just like that before." He tells me.

"Is that how you know Uncle Enzo?" I ask, not wanting to wait to have this conversation.

"I know him because he's family. He's *my* Uncle Enzo." Angelo says, raising a brow in challenge.

"Really?" I think this over. "But how did you know that I know him?" I almost roll my eyes at myself; that sounded ridiculous.

Angelo is quiet for a moment before answering. "He told me that you knew each other when you started at Atom's."

I wasn't expecting that answer. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing really. Just that he knew the woman named Beth. But last night when you were on the phone with him, I put a little more together."

I raise my eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate.

"When you called him *Uncle*, it reminded me of this girl he used to talk about. A girl named Lizzy. Short for Elizabeth." He puts emphasis on the *Beth* part. "It's been a long time since I've heard him talk about you, but I'm guessing you're that girl." He tips his head a little, keeping his eyes on me. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in knowing more of your story. Knowing why you're here."

"Is that why you're still here? To know more of my story?" I'm trying to give off an angry vibe, but he's back to smirking.

"That'd be a perk. I'm still here because Uncle Enzo told me to keep an eye on you. And because your damn dogs wouldn't let me leave. Now get dressed. I have some painkillers for your headache, but you need food first."

And with that, he walks out of my room, shutting the door behind him.

I take my time pulling on a pair of leggings, a sports bra, and a baggy sweater. Then I throw on a pair of fuzzy wool socks to complete my armor.

Walking down the short hallway to the kitchen, I smell coffee and bacon and hear voices. My brain is still such a jumbled mess that I forgot, again, about Noah being home.

Stepping into the kitchen I find Noah at the counter, with a plate of waffles, scrambled eggs and bacon, and Angelo at the stove. The sight halts me. This is... surreal. And a fantasy come to life that I didn't even know I had.

"Beth!" Noah spots me and spins on his stool. His gaze is scrutinizing.

"Good morning." I smile, truly happy to see him.

"Here." Angelo holds out a mug of steaming coffee for me.

"Thanks," I say, feeling awkward.

He nods towards the island. "There's some Tylenol for you."

"Thanks." I mumble again.

Noah is watching our interaction with an unreadable emotion on his face. It's not quite suspicion but it's not serenity either. It dawns on me how this might look to him, and I feel my cheeks instantly heat.

"We didn't... It's not..." I look back and forth between Noah and Angelo. "He's not interested..." I trail off when Noah rolls his eyes and I hear Angelo huff out a breath.

"Just sit down, Beth." Angelo says turning back to the stove.

I look to Noah. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with... um, having relations. But that's not what this is."

"Oh my god, please stop!" Noah holds both his hands up. "I know, okay. Angelo was sleeping on the couch when I got up. He even had Pebbles sleeping with him."

Angelo scoffs. "More like that damn pony was trying to smother me."

I bite down on a smile, wishing I had seen that. "She might be a big girl, but I think it'd take more than a dog to smother you. A buffalo might do the trick."

Noah laughs but it quickly dies off. "Are you really okay? Angelo said you drank too much, but that's not true, is it? I've seen people that've had too much, and you didn't look like that."

I open my mouth to answer but find that my throat is tight. My damn tears are back, threatening to spill over. I close the distance between us and sit on the stool next to Noah.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. But I'm okay." I whisper.

I was hoping to comfort him, but he suddenly looks like he's going to be sick. I grab his hand, not sure how much to tell him.

Angelo sets a plate in front of me. "She's right. Beth will be fine. But you're right, too. Someone slipped something into Beth's drink. My guess is

Rohypnol.”

Noah’s eyes go wide. “She was Roofied?!”

The boys are talking to each other now, not including me, and I’m actually okay with it.

Angelo straightens to his full height. As a way to convey authority. Not intimidation.

“Yes. But she’s fine. She was with friends when it happened, and I was there to help. There are some sick fucks out there and unfortunately this sort of thing happens. As far as we can tell, this was a random attack. But the important part is that she’s fine. No one hurt her and no one *will* hurt her. You hear me, Fighter?” Noah nods, but Angelo wants more. “Tell me.”

“I hear you,” Noah says.

“Good. Now eat. Both of you.” Angelo sets a plate of food in front of me, then grabs his own to eat standing up.

Wanting to change the subject, I ask, “Fighter?”

Angelo grins as he shoves a heaping forkful of eggs into his mouth. “This kid came storming out, hockey stick raised over his head, demanding *who the fuck are you*. Using those Hell Hounds as soldiers. Even when he lowered his weapon, he wouldn’t leave me alone in your room.” He tips his head to Noah. “It was smart. In this case unnecessary, but still smart.”

“Oh, well...” Jesus, what do I say to that? Tell my 16-year-old nephew thank you for keeping some strange man from potentially molesting me? Apologize for bringing a strange man home in the middle of the night? Apologize for getting drugged?

Angelo cuts off my thoughts. “I gotta say, it would’ve been nice if you, or Uncle Enzo, had mentioned the fact that you had two watch dogs and a teenaged bodyguard at home.”

“Sorry about that. I’m sure it was a bit much,” I apologize. “But I would’ve loved to see the look on your face when my defenses came out, one after another.”

Angelo smirks. “I bet.”

A phone chirps and Angelo pulls his out of his pocket. “Damn. I have to run. Make sure to stay hydrated and the headache should go away by tomorrow.” He looks to Noah. “Keep an eye on her. Make sure she takes it easy today.”

“Will do,” Noah replies.

I look down at Angelo’s still overflowing plate. “Want to take that with

you?”

He eyes it for a moment, like he’s wondering how quickly he could eat his mountain of food. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

Thankful for the task, I quickly find a container and slide his breakfast inside. “How do you eat this much?”

“I’m a growing boy.” I hear the smile in Angelo’s voice. “And I’m taking the fork,” he says, grabbing the food from me and heading towards the door.

I follow him over, then notice that he’s still just in a t-shirt. “Oh, let me go get your sweatshirt.”

I start to turn, but his hand darts out and grasps my elbow. “Nah. You keep it for a bit longer.”

His hand slowly slides down to my wrist, his fingers trailing over my skin. Then he’s gone.

I bite my lip while I let my newly racing pulse settle.

I turn back to see Noah watching me. My shoulders drop. “I’m sorry. About all of this. The whole messy night. And this morning. I’m just... I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Noah’s voice is quiet. Then he looks back at the door. “He’s pretty big, huh?”

A laugh bubbles out of me. “Yeah, just a little. I can’t believe you came out ready to attack him.”

Noah shrugs. “I didn’t know he was a freaking giant when I heard him talking to the dogs.”

I smile. “Fair enough. Do you want to tell me why you’re home early?”

He shakes his head.

“Do you want to spend the day bingeing Indiana Jones movies?” Those movies were my brother’s favorite.

A smile pulls at Noah’s lips and he nods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BETH

“Oh, what’s this?” Sissy asks, bouncing out of her chair.
I smile and hand her the two baggies.

“It’s pink! What sort of cookies are pink?”

“Cherry chip.” My mouth waters, even though I’ve eaten nearly a dozen already since baking them this weekend. “The other one is a coffee cake cookie.”

“Shut the fuck door!” Sissy pulls open the bags, sniffing. “I was going to go pick up a late lunch from somewhere, but I might just eat these.”

“It’s tempting. I had a hard time choking down my salad knowing I had cookies nearby.”

“Preach.” Sissy replies. “So, did you get home okay Saturday night? I felt so bad ditching you there, but I was super drunk. And horny.”

The laugh I let out is awkward. I don’t really want to tell her what happened. I’m not ready yet. Thankfully, when I arrived this morning she was on the phone, so I was able to wave hello then hide in my office all morning. I probably would’ve stayed hidden all day, but I did bring these cookies for her. And I felt like too much of a chicken hiding while I waited for my next appointment.

The front door clicks open and we both look to see who’s entering. I’ll never admit that my heart rate ticked up thinking it might be Angelo. Instead, it’s Trisha, the Bitchiest Acupuncturist on Earth. As the door shuts behind her, I expect her to ignore us and walk past, but she doesn’t. She approaches us instead.

“Girls.” Trisha says in greeting, tone full of condescension.

“Wraith.” Sissy replies, with a tip of her head.

I smother a laugh, not wanting to get involved in Trisha’s toxicity, but the noise is enough to draw her full attention.

“Laugh it up. When Trevor gets back in town, he and I will be having a little chat.”

I raise an eyebrow, not sure why she thinks she has so much pull here. I still don’t know how Uncle Enzo knows the general manager, Trevor, but I’m

confident I won't be going anywhere.

Sissy gestures with her cookie. "Run along, Trish. You're spewing frigid air all over my entryway."

I suppress another laugh.

Trisha narrows her eyes on Sissy's hand. "Cookies?" Her eyes trail over to me, slowly looking over my much curvier frame. "This is a place of fitness. Not gluttony."

My fists clench. I didn't think I'd have to deal with bullies as an adult. It's pathetic. And it's pathetic that I'm letting her words hit their mark.

Sissy pushes up to standing, fury filling her eyes. But before she can speak, or more likely yell, a deep voice cuts into our tension filled trio.

"Beth." We all turn our gazes at the same time to find Angelo standing a few feet away. "How was your weekend?"

Angelo's voice is calm, but his face is stormy. He looks mad. Pissed.

I give him a small smile, pushing Trisha's remarks away. "It was good. Watched some Harrison Ford yesterday. You?"

"Not bad." Moving his eyes over to Sissy, he makes a point to not look at Trisha. "Thanks for inviting me out for Daniella's birthday."

Sissy grins. "Glad you could make it. Even if you were late." She takes a big bite of cookie.

Angelo moves his eyes back to me. "You bring more of those?"

"I did. Would you like some?" I bite my lip.

"Yeah." He holds out an arm, gesturing for me to lead the way.

Why do my cheeks feel warm? Is this flirting? How do I not know if this is flirting?

I hear Trisha huff, as I step past her. I'm not sure if he gave her the brush off because of what she said, or if he just doesn't like her. But I decide I don't care. It was perfect.

We walk part way to my office before I break the silence. "Do you really want some cookies or was that just a way to break up a potential cat fight?"

"Oh, I want some, babe." Angelo replies. "And as much as I'd love to see you wipe the floor with that witch, I can't have you getting fired."

"I appreciate the faith you have in me." I reply, trying desperately not to grin like a fool.

I'm acting like I've never had attention from a man before. Well, I guess I haven't. Not from a man like Angelo.

Reaching my little alcove, I step forward and unlock the door. "Come in."

I hear Angelo enter behind me, as I walk over to my closet and pull out another set of sandwich bags filled with cookies. I'm surprised to see him sitting on the bench when I turn around. I figured he'd grab them and run.

"Here you go." I step closer and reach my hand out.

His large fingers brush mine as he takes the bags. "Quite the coincidence that you had these packed up and ready to go."

"Indeed." I don't want to admit that I actually brought these in for him.

Angelo sets them on the bench next to him, then leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

His eyes trace over my face for a long moment before he speaks. "How are you feeling?"

"Good." I answer quickly.

He cocks his head to the side, giving me a bland look.

I huff and pull my chair over so I can sit in front of him. "I'm good. My body is a little achy and my head still hurts this morning, but I feel pretty good. I probably ate too much yesterday, hoping to soak up whatever was still in my system. I even sent Noah to the store between movies to buy a bunch of Gatorade. I'm sure it was overkill, but I did like you said and stayed hydrated."

"Good girl."

The compliment buzzes through my body. Heating my blood and causing my thighs to clench. Good lord, my body reacts to this man like nothing I've ever experienced before.

I shove the filthy thoughts from my mind and try to focus. "Thank you again. For everything you did. I'm sorry you had to deal with... all that. And see me like that. And carry me." I feel my face heat. "I know it's the fault of the guy who drugged me, but I should've known better. I know it's a dangerous world out there. And I know that I need to be careful, especially with..."

I trail off, realizing what I was about to say. My blush recedes as I feel myself pale. I can't talk about this.

"Beth." His stern tone has me meeting his eyes. I didn't even realize I'd looked away. "You don't need to tell me everything right now, but I need you to know that you can trust me. Whatever it is that you're hiding from, you don't need to hide it from me."

I swallow. I want to deny his assumption. I want to tell him I'm not hiding. But I don't want to lie to him. And he already knows that *something*

is going on, so it's best to just not answer. I need to call Uncle Enzo tonight and talk to him about Angelo. I should have done it last night, but I wanted to relax and pretend the whole ordeal never happened.

Angelo nods like he can sense my understanding. "How's Fighter?"

I sigh. "He's okay. I think. He's hard to read sometimes. I still don't know why he came home early from his friend's cabin. Part of me wishes he hadn't, so he wouldn't have had to see me like that. The other part is glad he was home. With him there, I didn't have to choose whether or not to tell him what happened. It's a lot for a teenager to deal with, but it's better if we don't have secrets."

"I get that," Angelo pauses. "He has your eyes. But he's not your son, is he?"

I feel my resolve shifting. I want to talk to Angelo.

"He has my brother's eyes. We got them from our dad. Our dad who was friends with your Uncle Enzo." I scrub my hands over my cheeks. "Noah is my nephew. His dad... he passed away recently."

"I'm sorry." Angelo's voice sounds deeper than usual.

"Yeah, well, my brother and I had a complicated relationship."

"Family can be like that."

I cough out a laugh that sounds as depressing as it feels. "When the cops told me that Aaron was killed, they told me that I would be taking custody of Noah. I hadn't been expecting that." Understatement of the century.

Angelo is quiet and I keep my gaze on the floor.

"That poor kid lost his dad and got stuck with me."

"How long ago was that?" Angelo asks.

"A little over three months."

"Beth..." He trails off.

I hold up a hand. "No, it's okay. Sorry for dumping that on you. I'm not looking for..."

His hand closes around my wrist. His other hand grabs my armrest, and he pulls me and my chair forward. The wheels easily move under his strength. He pulls until our knees bump into each other.

"Listen to me. I know you aren't looking for pity. And I'm not going to give you any. I'll tell you that I'm sorry for your loss. It's a stupid worthless saying, but it's the best we have when someone close to us dies. And - fucked up relationship or not, he was your brother. I know that I don't know you very well, but one night at your place and I can tell you that your house is a

home. That kid has had a rough go at it; I can see it in his eyes. But he's got it good now. You care about him, and he cares about you. It's plain as fucking day to me."

My throat tightens.

The hand on my chair comes up and cups my chin. His thumb brushing across my lower lip, before applying pressure. The movement has me releasing my lip, which I hadn't realized I was biting again.

"You keep this cute chin up, baby girl."

I don't know if it's him touching my lip. His kind words. Him calling me *baby girl* again. Or a combination of all three. But the next thing I know, my hands are on his shoulders, pulling our bodies closer. I have half a second to pull in a breath, inhaling the masculine scent of him, before my lips press against his.

I initiated the kiss. I wasn't expecting to. I don't think he was expecting it either, but Angelo doesn't waste any time. His legs spread and with his grip on my wrist he rolls my chair even closer.

My head tilts and Angelo deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping against the seam of my lips. I open for him, letting him in. He tastes like strength. And safety. And fire.

When my knees hit the bench between Angelo's spread legs, he releases his grip on my arm, and slides his hand around to hold my side. His handspan is so large I can feel his fingers pressing into my hip and brushing the underside of my breasts at the same time. Our mouths never breaking contact.

I grip his shirt, my hands feeling so small against his large body, trying to bring myself even closer. His fingers on my side hold me in place. *God he's so big.*

A moan slips from my lips and I can feel arousal gathering between my legs. I don't know if I've ever felt this turned on from a kiss before. In response to my noises, Angelo lets out his own groan and I feel his body shift.

Angelo pulls my lip into his mouth and gently sucks the exact spot I had been biting. The man pays attention.

No one has paid attention to me in so long. No one has kissed me since Patrick.

Patrick...

Like a flip has been switched, just thinking that name has my blood chilling and my body stilling.

Angelo feels the shift in mood and breaks the kiss. My eyes pop open and my breathing is heavy, but I can't tell if it's from making out, or from the fact that I suddenly feel like I'm about to cry.

I peel my fingers away from his body. "I'm sorry. I..."

I what? I don't know how long I need to wait after my boyfriend dies to kiss someone else. I don't know how to tell you that I had a boyfriend who died the same night as my brother. A boyfriend that was murdered while I was passed out in the car next to him. I don't know if I should let you into my life since it might mean that you'll be killed next. I don't even know you, but I already have feelings for you.

I clear my throat. "I have an appointment soon."

Angelo's jaw flexes, but he doesn't say anything as I slide my chair back a few feet and stand. He rises a moment later, eyes still on my face.

I'm sure he sees too much. More than I want him to.

"I'm sorry," I repeat in a whisper. Willing him to leave.

"This." He gestures between us. "This ain't over."

My mouth opens but no response comes out. I just stare as Angelo turns towards the door. And I try, I really try, to pretend that I didn't notice the obvious bulge in the front of his pants.

As the door closes behind him, I sink back into my chair. My emotions are all over the damn place. Guilt. Sadness. Self-disgust. Lust.

I drop my head back and squeeze my eyes shut. I need therapy. And I need to find a way to get laid without having a mental breakdown.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ANGELO

Adjusting my dick, I close Beth's door behind me. What in the ever-loving hell just happened? We just made out like teenagers, that's what happened. And I have the tented pants to prove it. But unlike my teenage exploits, I managed to make this girl cry just by kissing her.

But that's not right. Not entirely. I felt the way she reacted to me. I saw the desire in her eyes. I've seen the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not looking. Beth isn't getting choked up because she doesn't want me. And I sure as fuck didn't force myself on her. Damn it though, after the things she just told me in there I shouldn't have even been able to get an erection.

I drag a hand over my face. I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be getting even more involved with her.

I could call Enzo. I could make him tell me everything he knows about Beth. But I won't. I won't, because asking will show my hand. I doubt he'd be happy to hear that I want to fuck his precious *Beth*. Not to mention - if Enzo wanted me to know more, he'd have told me more. That old asshole has a reason for everything he does.

No, what I should do is - go into the locker room, get changed into workout clothes, and let my stress out on the heavy bag. Instead, I head back towards the front door. My office is equipped with the best toys for digging. If I go now, I'll be able to learn everything there is to know about *Beth Smith* before midnight.

I should make better decisions. I should walk away from her. But I'm a greedy son of a bitch. And one taste just isn't enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BETH

“Thanks again, dear. I’ll see you next week.” Mary pats my arm before opening my office door.

“Just remember, twice a day, Ms. Wilder.” I remind her.

She waves me off as she leaves. “Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. My damn kid will be on my case if I don’t.”

I smile. This was her second appointment and even though she insists I call her Mary, it’s just too much fun to rile her up. She’s not actually a member of this gym, but her son is a star player on the local professional hockey team. I’m not sure if her son goes here, but these appointments are at his insistence so Mary can have a speedy recovery from shoulder surgery. No matter the circumstance, she’s a ton of fun and I’m glad to have her on my schedule.

After a final wave goodbye, I stand at my open office door, debating. I like it open. I like listening to Sissy’s crazy music selection. I’ve been able to avoid Angelo since our kiss on Monday. I’m being a baby. I know I am. But I’ve made it this far. I don’t know if he’d even try to come talk to me, but an open door might be too good of an opportunity for him to pass up.

The choice is made for me, when I hear my phone vibrate from its place on my desk. Swinging the door closed, I hurry over and see a number I don’t recognize. I usually wouldn’t answer, but it’s local.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Mrs. Smith?” A stern sounding female voice asks.

“Who is calling?” I return her unfriendly tone. *Smith* isn’t the name I’m running from, but you can never be too careful. Plus, I’m not a Mrs. anything.

“This is Sandra Wellman from Western High School.”

My suspicion flashes into panic. That’s Noah’s school.

I’m already reaching for my keys. “Is he okay? What happened to Noah?” My voice betrays how scared I feel.

She cuts me off. “Noah is fine. But there was an incident.”

That gets my hackles up. “What sort of incident?”

“He was involved in an altercation.”

“A fight?” I ask, disbelieving.

“Yes. I need you to come in to discuss the consequences.”

“I’ll be there in 20 minutes.”

“We’ll be waiting.” Sandra freaking Wellman snaps before hanging up.

“Can’t wait to meet you.” I say sarcastically to my phone.

Pulling my coat on, I snag my purse and flick off the lights. Yanking the door open, I step through without looking and collide with a wall. A big, muscled, wall.

Hands grip my shoulders to steady me. “Woah, easy there.”

I allow myself one second to soak in the feeling of Angelo’s hands on me, of his voice rumbling around me before stepping back.

“Hey, Angelo. Sorry I have to go.” I force myself to make eye contact.

His brow lowers. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. No. It’s just... The school called and I need to go get Noah.”

Angelo steps back, pulling up to his full height. “Is he okay? Need me to come with you?”

It’s his second question that has my mouth popping open. *Come with? Why would he even offer that? And why do I want to say yes?*

I shake my head. “He’s fine, supposedly. He was involved in a fight. I really need to go.”

“Alright.” He steps aside, giving me just enough room to move past him. “But call me if you need anything.”

His statement catches me so off guard I respond dumbly with, “I don’t have your number.”

Feeling flustered, and late, I hurry away.

As I rush past the front desk, I remember I have another appointment coming in today.

“Sissy!” I call out, and she appears from behind the desk. Probably laying on the floor again. “I have to run. Nothing bad, but can you please call my final patient and cancel for me?”

“No problem. You okay?” Her face twists in concern.

“Yep, it’s fine. I’ll fill you in later.” I say over my shoulder as I shove through the doors. This will give me the opening to finally tell her about Noah.

Walking through the front doors of Western High School, I realize I have no flipping idea where to go. I look around but don't see anything that resembles an office.

"Shit." I look at the phone in my hand and wonder if it would be humiliating to call that woman back and ask where to go.

As I stare at my screen, a text buzzes in.

Now you have my number.

Umm, what? I blink a few times, wondering.

Angelo? I text back.

Who else, baby girl?

This man is going to be the death of me. But I can't think about him right now. And I definitely can't think about that panty melting kiss we shared a few days ago.

I shake it off, saving his number, and focus on the task at hand. How to find this bitch's office.

Fuck it. I text Noah.

Half a dozen messages later, I find myself outside of Mrs. Wellman's office. The door is open, so I walk in and find Noah sitting in front of a large desk behind which is a hellish looking woman in her 60's. Noah's head is down, his hands tucked between his knees, looking completely defeated. Anger fills my veins. *No one makes him look like that.*

"Mrs. Smith," she says in a cold greeting, before making a point of looking at her watch.

This cunt. She gave me no directions on how to find her. And when I do, she has my boy sitting here like he's lined up for the firing squad. Her fucking attitude is the last straw on my patience.

"Hi, Sandra." I use her first name just to annoy her, and it looks like it works.

She bristles. "Please have a seat."

I take the chair next to Noah, knocking his knee with mine. He hadn't looked up yet, but that does the trick. His eyes are a mixture of frustration and worry. I raise my eyebrows and give him a small smile before turning back to Sandra.

"Alright, I'm here. Care to tell me what this is all about?" I don't bother to play nice. Noah looks miserable and I want to get him home as quickly as possible.

"Noah was caught fighting with another student. This school has a zero-

tolerance policy regarding physical altercations.” She pauses, probably assuming I’ll turn to Noah, but I don’t. Eventually, she continues. “Noah will face a one-day suspension, starting immediately and lasting through tomorrow. He can return on Monday.”

“And the other boy?” I ask.

She sniffs. “Same punishment.”

“Does the reason for their fight make any difference in the outcome of the suspension?” I know Noah wouldn’t be involved in a fight without a good reason. But if it won’t matter to his penalty, then we’ll talk about it at home.

“Like I said, we have a zero-tolerance...”

I cut her off. “Is there a way for Noah to get the schoolwork he’ll miss tomorrow?”

I watch Sandra get ruffled by my rude behavior. “Yes. The teachers will be notified of his absence and he’ll have his assignments emailed to him by tomorrow morning.”

“Good.” I stand.

Sandra and Noah stand at the same time, both staring at me.

“Mrs. Smith, fighting is something that we take seriously around here.”

“Yes. I see how seriously you take it. You provide equal punishments to both parties, though I’m positive that one is more guilty than the other. Your zero-tolerance bullshit allows no room for reason or compassion. I understand that violence should be frowned upon, and Noah and I will be having a conversation when we get home. But the goal of that conversation will be for me to understand exactly what happened and why. And since you clearly have no use for facts in your decision-making process, you’ll have no part in that discussion.” I look to Noah. “Do you need to stop at your locker for anything?”

He shakes his head, eyes wide, fighting a smile.

“Good.” I look back to Sandra. “Thank you for calling me.” Then I spin on my heel and walk away.

Noah’s long strides have him catching up to me quickly. Under his breath he says, “That was amazing.”

I stop holding back my own smile. “It felt pretty amazing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BETH

“Now.” I say, setting down plates of grilled cheese and tomato soup, my favorite comfort food. “Time to talk.”

Noah picks up his spoon and draws patterns in his bowl of soup.

I sit down next to him and nudge his elbow. “I trust you. I’m sure there’s a reason for what happened, I just want to hear it from you. So, who did you get in a fight with?”

He sighs. “This stupid asshole, Mick.”

“Mick?” I repeat.

Noah rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I think his real name is Michael or something. He’s a total asshole. Everyone knows it.” He sighs. “I was running late to Chemistry because I stopped at the bathroom, so the hallways were mostly empty. And when I turned the corner, I saw Mick and his girlfriend standing against the lockers. I was going to go around them. Ya know, give them a wide berth. But then I heard her say Ow.”

I don’t like where this is going. By the end of this story, I’m sure I’ll want to hit this fucker Mick myself.

Noah dips his head. “I’d like to say that I didn’t hesitate, but I did.”

“Noah, you can’t torture yourself with that. It’s easy to second guess your actions after the fact. Trust me, life is full of those moments, but you have to find a way to put it out of your mind.”

He nods but keeps fidgeting with his spoon. “I called out to him, but he ignored me. And when I got closer, I saw that he was holding onto her arm. Like really tight. So, I got up in his face and told him to let her go. The guy is such a piece of shit. He told me to mind my own fucking business. I told him that being a prick made him my business.”

I bite down on a smile, knowing it’d be completely inappropriate.

“So, I shoved him. He had to let her go to get his balance. The idiot didn’t even wait to get his footing before he took a swing at me. Dad taught me some basics about self-defense, so it was easy to dodge.”

“I’m proud that you...” I start.

He cuts me off. “That’s when I punched him.”

“Oh.” Huh. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? “Did he hit you back?”

Noah shrugs. “He tried. But I think he was a little dazed.” He looks at me for the first time since he started talking. “I didn’t hit him again. I just shoved him back into the lockers. But that’s when the teacher showed up. I don’t know where Mick’s girlfriend ran off to, but all the teacher saw was Mick swinging at me and me pushing him. But since Mick’s nose was bleeding all over the place, the teacher figured I already hit him. I mean, technically I did start it.”

I blow out a big breath. “Perhaps, but you did the right thing.”

Noah stares at me like he’s waiting for the *but*.

This time I shrug. “The whole thing sucks. It sucks that this fucker Mick is abusive to his girlfriend. It sucks that you had to witness it. But I’m glad you did. And I’m proud of you. Sure, violence isn’t the answer. Sure, you escalated the situation. But you know what, that’s fucking life. There are certain people out there that will never listen to reason. People that will always see the world in their own warped view. And sometimes those people need a dose of reality in the form of a fist to the face.” I pause.

“Unfortunately, people like that tend to have a long learning curve. So, when you go back to school on Monday, you’ll need to watch your back.”

Noah nods a little. “Yeah, I figured that. I’m gonna let Marcus know what happened so he can fill in the team. Those guys will be on my side.”

“Good thinking. You’ll need to call your coach, too. I’m sure he’ll get wind as to why you weren’t at practice today, but he should hear the whole story. I have a feeling he won’t bench you if you tell him the truth.”

“I can call him tonight.”

“Good.” I look at the hand still holding the spoon. “How’s your hand?”

He releases the spoon and flexes his fingers. “Fine.”

He flexes them a few more times. He looks like he has more to say, so I stay quiet.

“I came home early last weekend because I felt bad about leaving you home alone. I know we’re just... I know this is all new, but you’re pretty much the only family I have now. And when I was up at the cabin, it was good, ya know. But then Marcus’s mom asked about you, I couldn’t stop thinking about how you were still here. By yourself. So, I made an excuse and came home. But then I got here...” He takes a deep breath. “I got here, and you were gone.”

“I’m sorry.” I say, feeling my throat tighten.

“No. It’s okay. I eventually figured that you must have gone out with someone.” His shoulders slump. “But then I started worrying that you were out on a date. And my stupid head just wouldn’t let it go. Because what happens if you find someone? What happens to me if you get a boyfriend? Mom’s gone. Dad said he was gonna get us a better life. He made all these dumb promises. And I believed him. But then he fucked it up by stealing all that money and getting himself murdered.” Noah’s breath catches. “That’s bad enough, but he didn’t just hurt himself - he got your boyfriend killed. And he dragged you into all of this. He didn’t even tell us about each other! I mean, what the *fuck*! And now you’re all I have... and I wouldn’t even blame you if you wanted out... but I don’t want you to go. I don’t want you to go...” Noah whispers the last sentence.

I shove out of my chair and pull him into a hard hug. “I’m not going anywhere. You hear me? I’m not going anywhere.”

Noah grips me back. “When I saw Angelo holding you... I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

We’re both crying, clinging to each other.

I stroke a hand over his hair. “You’re never getting rid of me. Not now. Not when you’re 18. Not when you’re 35 and married.” I hug him tighter. “I love you, Noah. I wish I had met you sooner, but that doesn’t matter. You’re mine. And no matter who else comes and goes in our lives, we have each other. You hear me? We’ll always have each other.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BETH

I slap my hand on my nightstand until my fingers finally grip my bleating phone. Squinting an eye to see the screen, I hit snooze then drop my phone onto my chest and will sleep to claim me again.

It doesn't.

Groaning, I pick my phone back up and turn off my alarm. I slept like shit last night. After Noah and I cried all over each other, we brought our dinner to the couch and ate quietly while watching Seinfeld. A show about nothing was precisely what our minds needed.

After that, my exhausted mind should've gladly slipped into sleep. And it did. But then dreams of being stuck upside down, strapped into Patrick's wrecked car, plagued me all night. Leaving me unrested and feeling like crap.

I need to settle down. It's finally Friday and I want to start it relaxed.

I look at my phone, then at my closed door, then back to my phone. *I probably shouldn't...*

Unlocking my phone, I switch my browser into private mode. Not sure why I bother, but it makes me feel a little more anonymous as I open my favorite porn site. Scrolling through the video selections, my mind starts to wander. And it wanders straight to an oversized, over-muscled beefcake that I just can't seem to get out of my thoughts.

Angelo, even his name is sexy. But I still can't get a solid read on him. He was quiet and rude when I first met him. Then he swoops in and saves me, going so far as to literally carry me home. And he stayed. He stayed and spent the night in my house to make sure I'd be okay. And then he goes and bonds with Noah. That shouldn't make me swoon so hard, but it does. It really fucking does. And the kiss. Good lord, that kiss. I've kissed guys. I've had sex with guys. Not many, but I'm not inexperienced. Yet somehow that brief, all-our-clothes-are-on kiss, was perhaps the most sexually charged moment I've ever had. His hands, so large, so capable of damage, were gentle. Until they weren't.

I rub my legs together remembering how his palm felt against my side.

The way his fingertips felt digging into my flesh.

Refusing to dwell on my reasons, I open the site's search bar and type in *muscled men*.

Drooling over the thumbnails, I select a video at random. I make sure my volume is on low and I hit play. It's easy to imagine the man on screen as my Angelo. *My Angelo?* I blink away the thought; this is not time for deep thinking. This is the time for shallow thinking.

I feel a heat work its way through my body as I watch the man on screen pull the woman's thong aside and bend down, face first. With one hand holding my phone, my other hand drops to my chest.

My phone vibrates with a text.

Mom: Are you up?

I cringe. Removing my hand from my boob, I swipe her message away.

The man on screen has now completely undressed the woman. And he's unzipping his pants. I suck in a breath. I know this isn't Angelo, but a girl can imagine. The man reaches his hand into his pants...

Mom: I haven't heard from you in weeks.

Angrily, I swipe the message away again.

The man's palming his erection, his huge fucking erection, rubbing it against the woman's...

Mom: You need to call me.

The woman throws her head back in ecstasy as the man thrusts into her.

Mom: I'm going to start calling the morgues if you don't call me back.

"Oh, come on!" I say to the ceiling as I press my phone against my forehead. I'm sure as fuck not relaxed now, but I'm awake.

Giving up, I exit out of my muscle man fantasy and text my mom back.

I'll call you in a bit.

Grouchier than ever, I throw my phone onto the bed and stomp into my bathroom. Nightmares and a cold shower. What a day this is turning out to be.

-

I wait until I'm halfway to work before I call my mom. This means I'll only have a few minutes to talk and a perfect excuse to get off the phone quickly.

"Elizabeth, it's nice to finally hear from you." is my mom's way of

greeting.

I squeeze the steering wheel. “Hi, mom.”

My mom and I never had a great relationship. She’s always been harsh and judgmental, which only got worse as I grew older. According to my mother, I got most of my genes from my dad’s side. I got his thick bones and wide shoulders. His dark hair and bushy eyebrows. His stubborn personality and sarcasm. All great things to hear growing up.

When my mom moved to Florida during my first year at college, she just couldn’t understand why I’d choose to stay in Philly rather than move with her. That decision was the beginning of the end for us. And though it’s made our relationship even more strained, not once have I regretted that decision.

“And where’s my grandson? I want to talk to him.” Her whiny tone grates on my skull, giving me the start of a headache.

“I’m on my way to work, so he’s not here.”

She huffs. “Well, I’d like to talk to him. You’ve had time to get settled by now.”

Noah and I both changed phone numbers when we moved. I told my mom that Noah needed time to adjust as the excuse for not giving her his number. She’s toxic on the best of days and Noah doesn’t need that right now. If ever.

I sigh. “I’ll make sure to call you again this weekend and you can talk to both of us.”

“Fine...” she drags out the word. “How’re things going with his new school?”

“Really well.” I skip over the fact that he’s currently sitting out a suspension. “He has his first hockey game next week. And he’s made some friends on the team.”

“Friends already?” I can’t tell if it’s surprise or disapproval in her voice.

“Yeah. He went with one of his friends to their cabin last weekend.” As soon as the words are out, I wish I could take them back.

“Oh.” Mom says, disapproval winning over.

I instantly get defensive. “Something wrong with that?”

“Of course not. I’m sure you were thorough and spoke with this *friend’s* parents before agreeing to anything.”

I grit my teeth. “I did.”

“I just don’t think you should give him too much freedom. Kids like that need a firm parental figure.”

“Kids like *what?*” I ask.

“You don’t have to get all snippy with me. I don’t mean any offense. It’s just that Noah has a lot of his dad in him.”

Taking a deep breath, I try to push away my anger. “Mom, Noah is a great kid. He might look like Aaron, and have his wit and humor, but he’s a good kid. He doesn’t need me to be his warden. He needs me to be his family. I’m doing the best I can, and - so far - it’s working for us.”

“I’m sure you are. I’m just saying that teenage boys can be a handful.”

“Well it would have been helpful if I’d have known about Noah, oh - I don’t know - *anytime* in the last 16 years.”

Mom lets out an annoyed sigh. “We’ve been over this, Elizabeth. Aaron didn’t have much to do with Noah until these last few years. And by then, you weren’t even talking to him.”

“And that’s all my fault?” I ask, furious that she’s still putting this on me.

“It’s in the past now,” is mom’s non-answer.

“Sure.” I’ve been so caught up in the conversation, I surprise myself when I turn into Atom’s parking lot. “I have to go.”

“Already?” Mom asks sadly, as if we’ve been having a friendly conversation.

“Yeah. I just got to work.” I reply, pulling into a parking spot.

“Okay. But don’t forget to call this weekend so I can talk to Noah.”

I sigh. “I won’t forget.”

The only good thing about our shitty relationship is the fact that my mom always pretends that things are fine. When I call her back this weekend, she’ll act as though this unpleasant talk never happened. It’s unhealthy, but it’s easier than dealing with the drama.

Turning the car off, I reach over to grab my bag off the passenger seat. Empty. I groan. Yeah, that’s about right for this day. I can picture my bag, sitting next to the front door. Right where I dropped it while I pulled on my jacket. It’s not a big deal. I have my phone and keys in my coat pocket. My work computer has everything I need for my appointments. But my bag had my wallet. And my breakfast bar. And my lunch. Guess I’ll be fasting today.

I hustle through the brisk air, pulling my hands out of my pockets at the last minute to pull the front doors open.

“Beth!” Sissy’s voice welcomes me the second I step inside.

“Hey, Sissy.”

“Happy Friday!” She sings loudly.

I laugh a little. “Is it?”

Sissy pouts. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Just having one of those mornings, ya know?”

She widens her eyes. “Oh girl, I freaking know. And don’t worry, we’ll turn your day around.”

“Thanks.” I smile.

“How about yesterday? Everything okay from that? I called your last appointment and said you had a family emergency. He was fine with it and rescheduled for the opening you had today.”

“Thanks. I owe you.” This is the best opening I could ask for.

“Everything’s okay, but you were right about it being a family thing.” I watch her, watching me. “My, uh, nephew got into a fight at his school. I had to go in and rescue him from his bitch counselor.”

Sissy’s eyebrows go up. “Oh dang! I didn’t know you had a nephew.”

I nod.

She tilts her head. “He lives around here, I take it.”

“He lives with me.” I bite my lip. I don’t know her, not really, but I want to tell her the truth. Or at least as much truth as is safe. “His name’s Noah. He’s 16. His dad, my, uh, brother, was killed in a car accident recently. I got custody of him and we moved here to get a new start.” I shrug. “I lived in Minnesota for a little while when I was a kid. It felt like the right thing to do.”

Sissy’s staring at me. Just staring. Her mouth slightly open.

Guilt nips at me. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. It’s still a new thing for us. Like really new. And it’s not the easiest thing to bring up in conversation.”

Sissy’s hands shoot up. “Ohmygod, stop talking.” Then she’s running around the desk and throwing herself at me. Her tiny arms wrap around my neck and she pulls me into a hug. “I’m so sorry, honey. I lost a cousin to a drunk driver a few years ago. I can’t even imagine losing my brother, or my dad that way. Life is such a fucking twat.” She hugs me tighter. “Noah’s lucky to have you. And I’m happy you choose our cold-ass state to move to.”

I’m too stunned by her reaction to get emotional. I’m sure that will come later.

“Now.” She pulls back and keeps me at arm’s length. “Tell me about this bitch counselor.”

My office phone rings. Weird. I don't think anyone's ever actually called it. All of my scheduling is done through the website, so I can't imagine who'd be calling it now.

I pick it up, then hesitate. Is there a certain way I'm supposed to answer?

"Hey mouth breather, you gonna say *hello*?" Sissy's voice comes through the line.

I burst out laughing. "Oh god, I'm so glad it's you. I just had a total brain freeze there."

"No shit." She giggles.

"You're the first person to call this line and I panicked. Am I supposed to answer with a script or something?"

Sissy scoffs. "What? No. Quit smoking crack. Now get your ass up here. You have a visitor." She hangs up the phone.

Visitor? I look at my calendar. My last morning patient just left, and I have an hour before my afternoon starts.

A little voice tells me that maybe it's Angelo. But I slap that voice, it's a stupid thought. If Angelo were here, and if he wanted to see me, he wouldn't need to be announced by Sissy as a visitor.

Realizing how dumb I'm being, I get up.

Rounding the final corner, it only takes me a second to register the person standing by the desk talking to Sissy.

"Noah?"

Hearing his name, he turns to face me. "Hey."

"Hey yourself." I grin. "What're you doing here?"

Noah holds up a paper bag. "I come bearing gifts."

"Shut up!" I step forward. "Did you bring me lunch?"

He nods, smiling. "Yeah, burritos. I was thinking about coming to visit anyways, to check the gym out. Then I noticed your bag by the front door. It was a few hours after you left, so I wasn't sure if that food would be bad or not." He jerks his head towards the door. "I did bring your bag though. It's still in the car."

"Wow, thanks! You're the freaking best!" My cheeks are starting to hurt from how much I'm smiling.

"Aww." Sissy drapes herself across the desk. "You guys are adorable."

I roll my eyes then look back at Noah. "Did you grab food for yourself too?"

“Duh.”

“We can eat in my office. It’s not glamorous, but my desk will work as a table.” I start to wave him forward, then stop. “Oh, right.” I slap my forehead. “Noah, this is Sissy. She’s my favorite person around here. And Sissy, this is Noah, my super sweet, burrito-bearing nephew.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Sissy deadpans. “You think I didn’t put it together and introduce myself the second he looked at me with those pretty Smith-green eyes.”

Noah smirks at me. “She even introduced herself as your favorite person.”

Sissy cocks her eyebrow at him. “Was I wrong?”

“No, ma’am,” Noah answers.

The grin on Sissy’s face rivals my own as she mouths *ma’am*.

“Okay, okay. We’re going to go eat now.” I say, motioning for Noah to follow me.

In my office, we leave the door open so we can hear the music and Noah tells me about the homework he got from his teachers this morning.

“Do you have one of those portal things where I can see the status of your classes?” I ask.

“Yeah. I might have it written down somewhere, but I can ask on Monday.”

“I’d appreciate that.” I open my mouth to say more, but a large form fills the doorway in my peripheral vision.

I’m turning my head as the figure double-knocks against my open door.

“Angelo.” And just like that, I remember that I started my day with a failed attempt to masturbate to his memory. My cheeks flare.

“Doc.” He narrows his eyes, no doubt seeing the embarrassment that is flooding my system.

“Hi, Angelo.” Noah says, while sitting up straighter in the extra chair I snagged.

Mercifully, Angelo turns his attention away from my blushing face.

“Fighter.” He nods at Noah.

Forcing myself to act normal, I gesture towards the bench in my room. “You can come in. We’re almost done with lunch.” I look at Noah’s balled up tin foil. “Well, I am. Not all of us eat like human garbage disposals.”

Noah shrugs.

“Hey, gotta get it while it’s hot.” Angelo says, stepping into my room.

From my seated position, it looks like he’s taller, and wider, than the door

frame. My mouth salivates, and not from my burrito.

“You two can eat like uncultured heathens, but I’ll savor my treats.”

“You do that.” Angelo’s voice rolls over me as a small smile pulls at the edge of his mouth. And I swear to god, I think I orgasm.

“I was actually stopping by to ask how it went at the school yesterday.” He turns his attention back to Noah. “I heard you got into a fight.”

“It was hardly a fight,” is Noah’s response. The little shit.

“Will you tell me about it?” Angelo asks.

Noah looks at me. For approval? I give him a little nod and that’s all the encouragement he needs. Noah tells Angelo everything. From when he first saw Mick. To feeling bad about waiting. To punching the little shithead right in the nose. To me being a bitch to Mrs. Sandra Wellman.

I spend the whole story looking back and forth between the two of them. Noah seems comfortable. He’s telling the story to Angelo just like he told it to me. And Angelo is uncharacteristically showing emotional reaction to each detail. Anger. Shock. Pride. Amusement.

By the time Noah’s done, Angelo’s sitting on the bench leaning forward. “Gotta say, I wasn’t expecting you to live up to your nickname quite so quickly. You did good, Fighter.” His eyes dart to me. “But your aunt is right. This kid probably won’t just tuck tail, so you’ll need to watch your six. If it’s okay with Beth, I can show you a few things.”

I bite my lip. “What sort of things?”

Angelo sits up. “The sort of things that I can demonstrate on the heavy bag.”

“The *punching* bag?” I ask.

Noah turns towards me. Eyes wide with hope. “Please?”

I narrow my eyes and wag my finger between the two of them. “Don’t think you two can start ganging up on me with those puppy dog eyes and get whatever you want.”

Angelo bursts out laughing. A sound so loud and deep it causes me to jump.

He’s grinning at me when he finally stops laughing. “Puppy dog eyes? I don’t think I’ve ever been accused of that.”

“So?” Noah asks.

“Yeah, yeah. You two can go practice punching things. But stop back in here before you leave.”

They both stand and Noah walks out first. Leaving me alone with Angelo.

I push the sincerity I'm feeling into my voice. "It's nice of you to do this. Really, you've been nothing but nice to him since he first tried to bash you with a hockey stick. I don't know how to thank you."

Angelo holds my gaze as his mouth tips up into a small smile.

Then, he turns and walks out the door, while I bite my lip. And squeeze my thighs together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BETH

“Are you sure you have everything?” I ask.

“Yes.” Noah replies, exasperated.

“You have your second water bottle?”

He rolls his eyes and nods.

“I have another protein bar in my purse if you need it.”

“Beth, chill. I have everything I need.”

“You’re sure.” I ask for the twentieth time.

He just stares at me.

“Okay. Okay. Sorry. I’ve never done this before!” I wring my hands in my lap.

Noah seems to share none of my nervousness.

“I’ve done this hundreds of times.” He grins.

I use the back of my hand to smack his shoulder. “Awfully cocky for your first game of the season.”

Noah shrugs. “You’ll see my amazingness soon enough.”

I open my mouth to tell him that he sounds just like his dad, but I stop myself. I don’t know if saying something like that would be welcome, or if it would throw him off. I’ll tell him later.

“You coming in now, or are you gonna wait?” Noah asks me.

“I’ll walk in with you.” The game doesn’t start for another 45 minutes, so I bet a lot of the parents won’t arrive until later. But I’d rather just find a seat and wait inside.

I hold up a finger, “One sec.”

I reach back and pull something out of the seat pocket behind Noah. Giving it a quick shake to fluff it out, I pull the knitted pompom hat down over my head. The blue and gold are a bit obnoxious, but it’s the colors for Noah’s team, The Hawks. And across the front, in big white letters, it reads *Hawks* under a pair of crossed hockey sticks.

I stare at Noah, waiting for a reaction. He just stares back. Until he bursts out laughing.

“What?” I smile, even though I’m positive he’s laughing *at* me. “I thought

it was cute.”

I look at myself in the rearview mirror. I still think it’s cute.

Noah brushes an actual tear away from the corner of his eye.

I hold my hands up. “Oh, come on! It’s not that bad.”

Noah shakes his head, still grinning. “You’re insane.” Then he reaches out and flicks my pompom.

Swatting his hand away, I huff. “Get out of my car, funny man.”

My smile lasts until we’re halfway to the doors of the ice arena. Like I thought, most of the players are walking in alone, but the parents that we have seen don’t look all that friendly. I’m so freaking nervous that my palms start to sweat. Which makes me even more stressed out. I’m a freaking adult, I won’t let a bunch of suburbanites intimidate me.

“You’ll have to point out Marcus’s mom for me,” I tell Noah when we reach the doors.

“I think she’s out of town.”

“What?” My voice hops up an octave and I almost trip over my own feet.

Noah holds the door open for me. “She had a work trip or something. But his dad should be here.”

I walk past him, mentally preparing myself to sit alone. I was secretly hoping to have someone I could follow around like a lost puppy.

Noah surprises me when he drops his long arm across my shoulders.

He chuckles. “Don’t look so scared. If you can handle Angelo ‘The Giant’ Rossi, you can handle a couple of yuppie parents.”

I blow out a big breath, letting it expand my cheeks. “I’d take a herd of Angelos over judgmental hockey moms any day.”

Noah laughs. “You’ll be *fine*.” Someone I can’t see calls out to him. “I gotta go.”

“Alright. Kick some butt out there.” I tell him, pushing my insecurities down.

“Always.” He drops his arm from my shoulder, but quickly reaches out and pulls my hat down over my eyes.

“Brat!” I yell at him, pushing my hat up in time to see the disapproving Botox scowl of a passing woman.

I try to smile, but I’m pretty sure it comes out as a creepy grimace. She turns away and continues on towards the bleachers.

“Eesh.” I mutter to myself.

Running my hands down the front of my jacket, I’m happy for the added

layer of protection from both bitchy looks and the cold. I don't know why I didn't think about it being cold *inside* the arena. The *ice* arena. I'm happy to have this realization internally. If I'd said that out loud to Noah, I'm sure he'd roll his eyes at me again.

Deciding to be an anti-social coward, I select a spot that's not near anybody.

Over the next half hour, I watch the teams warm up while the bleachers fill with parents and what I have to assume are other students. Even if Noah hadn't told me his number, I'd recognize him from the sandy blonde hair peeking out from his helmet.

By the time the first period is over, I completely understand Noah's confidence. The kid is a freaking super star. He didn't start the game, but I bet that'll change since he's clearly one of the best players. His skill might be why I've gotten dirty looks from a few of the moms. Looks I ignore. It's not my fault their kids aren't as good as Noah.

By the end of the second period, Noah scored a goal. I'm not even embarrassed that I jumped to my feet screaming. I wasn't the only one. And if the group of cute girls down the row from me are any indication, I think Noah has been downplaying his popularity at school. No surprises there, he's pretty great.

Waiting for the third period to start, I feel my purse vibrate against my leg.

Pulling out my phone, I see a text from Angelo.

Angelo: How's the game going?

My brows furrow until I realize that Noah must have told him about the game when they were punching stuff in the gym last week.

Other than the first time he messaged me to give me his number, Angelo has never reached out. But he has made it a point to say hello to me every day at the gym. And I hate to admit it, but it's become the highlight of my day.

I don't know what he does outside of the gym. I'm assuming he has a real job, but he doesn't have a set schedule. Sometimes he'll be arriving as I'm leaving for the day. Once we walked out to our cars at the same time. Other times I'll see him around lunch. It's never the same, and it keeps me on the edge of my seat.

We don't have long, in-depth conversations. And we certainly haven't kissed again. But it's nice. Pleasant. Friendly.

Me: They're ahead going into the third and Noah is kicking ass! He scored a goal!

Angelo: Not surprised, that kid's a winner.

Me: Trust me, he knows it.

Angelo: It's not cocky if it's true.

Me: Spoken like a cocky man.

Angelo: Like I said...

Me: (imagine me rolling my eyes)

Angelo: Did you go all out? Face paint? Banner?

Me: No, but that's a great idea. I just have a hat.

Angelo: A hat? I'm not impressed.

I bite my lip. I know I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. But I've never been good at listening to myself. Selecting the camera icon, I flip to selfie mode and hold my phone up. Without overthinking it, I adjust my hair, so it's spread over my shoulders evenly. I don't know how to pull off the pouty duck face, so I give the lens a big goofy grin, snap the picture, notice it's out of focus, but hit *send* anyways.

As soon as the photo goes through, I regret it. I regret it so hard.

When Angelo doesn't respond right away, I regret it even more. I debate changing my number, and my name again. But before I can flee, he replies.

Angelo: Only you could make a hat like that look adorable.

Adorable? Did Angelo just call me adorable? Do I want him to call me adorable? That's something you'd call a little kitten. Not exactly something you'd say to a woman you want to see naked.

I deflate a little inside.

Me: Thanks?

Angelo: You're welcome.

A whistle blows, catching my attention.

Me: The final period is starting. Gotta pay attention now.

Angelo: Cheer extra for me.

I spend the rest of the game with my attention torn between watching Noah on the ice and thinking about Angelo. When the final buzzer sounds, Noah's team wins 4-2 and I've never felt prouder.

Standing in the lobby, I watch as the crowd slowly disperses out the doors. I probably should've talked to Noah about our plans for meeting after the game. I think they have to come back out this way, but I'm not positive. Either way, if he goes out to my car and sees I'm not there he'll come back in and find me.

"Beth?" I turn to find a smiling man, in his 40's, approaching me. "You're

Noah's aunt, right?"

I'm a little wary, but I smile back. "Yep, that's me."

He reaches his hand out. "I'm Daniel Anders, Marcus's dad."

"Oh, hi!" I shake his hand. "It's great to meet you. I was looking forward to meeting Linda tonight, but Noah said she's out of town."

Daniel nods and glances at his watch. "She should be landing in just a few minutes. She had a work conference all week."

I make a face. "Conferences are the worst."

Daniel laughs. "You got that right."

He seems like a classic *dad*. His short brown hair is greying. He's maybe six feet, with a bit of a belly. His clothes are business casual, like he came straight from work, but his workplace isn't too stuffy. I can definitely picture him tooling around on a boat or snowmobile.

"I wanted to say thank you again for inviting Noah to join your family the other weekend. That was really nice." I tell him.

He waves me off. "No need to thank us. Noah was the perfect guest. Our place is usually filled with as many non-family members as relatives. So it's nothing new for us."

"Well, I'm still grateful to know he's making friends."

Daniel's face turns serious. "Absolutely. It's important for these boys to have good friendships. That's one of the reasons we're always bringing them up to the cabin. It keeps them out of trouble. Idle hands and all that." I nod, understanding all too well from my own childhood. "Speaking of, we're heading back up this weekend. Same as last time, we'll leave when the boys are done with practice tomorrow. If Marcus hasn't already invited Noah, I know he plans to."

"What am I planning to do?" A boy walks up and asks. His eyes widen when he sees me, then he smiles. "Well, hello. I'm Marcus."

He starts to hold his hand out, but Noah is next to him and cuffs him in the back of the head. "*Dude.*"

I'm not sure why he just scolded his friend for trying to shake my hand. And I'm pretty sure Marcus's dad looked to the ceiling, as if searching for patience.

I give Marcus an awkward little wave. "Hi. I'm Beth, Noah's aunt."

Marcus just grins wider.

Daniel puts a hand on Marcus's arm. "I was just telling Beth that you were planning to invite Noah to come up North this weekend."

“Oh right!” Marcus’s eyes bounce back and forth between me and Noah before stopping on his friend. “Unless you’d rather stay home. I could come spend the weekend with you.”

Noah fakes a lunge at his friend and Marcus stumbles back laughing.

“Alright, alright.” Daniel says, guiding Marcus away. “It was nice to meet you, Beth.”

“Same to you.” I call out as he walks away with his son. Once they’re out of earshot I turn to Noah. “That was strange.” Noah just stares at me like I’m an idiot. “You can go with them. I’ll be totally okay at home. And I won’t go out dancing, I promise. Unless you wanted to have Marcus over. I’m fine with either.”

“Uh, yeah, no. Marcus isn’t coming over. I’ll go up with them.” He replies shaking his head.

I step forward and pull him into a hug, whisper shouting into his ear. “You did so great out there!”

And what does the little jackass say?

“Told ya.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ANGELO

I shouldn't be here.

I keep telling myself that. I told myself that the whole way over, and yet, here I am. Walking up to the front door, I can't help but notice that Noah's truck isn't in the driveway. Beth is home alone.

I really shouldn't be here.

Ignoring all my good sense, I clench my hand into a fist and knock. In response, I hear a startled yelp. Followed by a round of barking. *Oh good, I scared her.* I lift my eyes to the heavens. Off to a great start, Ang.

"Beth, it's just me," I say into the door. "Angelo."

No shit, it's me. There better not be any other men knocking on her door at 10:00 on a Saturday night. Not that I'm going to overthink the jealousy that swirls in my gut at that thought.

"Oh, um, coming!" She calls out.

My hand stays fisted. What I wouldn't give to hear her call those words under different circumstances.

I hear her mumble something to the dogs as the locks click open and I take a step back, so I won't be looming over her. I'm used to being the biggest person in the room. With a career in security, it's always been an advantage. And with the way I've seen Beth look at me, I think it's an advantage with her too. But I still don't ever want her to feel intimidated by me.

"Angelo?" Beth says my name like a question as the door swings open.

"Hey..."

Whatever words were going to come out of my mouth next, die in my throat. I'm literally rendered speechless by the siren in front of me. I've seen women in ballgowns who haven't caught my attention like she does right now.

Beth's standing in front of me. Barefoot. Shorter than ever. Hair loose around her shoulders, skimming the tops of her breasts. Breasts that are barely held in place by a thin strappy tank top. With no bra. No fucking bra. A pair of matching dark blue sleep shorts leave her legs bare. She'd be

freezing in her tiny-ass outfit if it weren't for the large hoodie she's wearing, unzipped, revealing her entire enticing form to me. A triple-XL hoodie to be exact. *My hoodie.*

"This is a surprise," Beth says, with a smile on her face. Her beautiful, rosy-cheeked face.

Taking an extra second to really look at her, I see the signs. She's been drinking.

I really fucking shouldn't be here.

"Would you like to come in?" She asks, oblivious to my stunned silence.

I need to go.

"Yes."

I'm a jackass.

Stepping through the front door, I take my eyes off Beth and allow myself a moment to chill the fuck out. Her monster dogs take a quick sniff of me, as I toe off my shoes, before wandering away. There's a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table next to a mostly empty bottle of wine and a short juice glass that she's using in lieu of a real wine glass. The TV is on pause.

"Sorry to just stop by unannounced. I was in the neighborhood," I lie. "Figured I would drop off your container." Not a lie. I hold up the Tupperware she let me use to take my breakfast in, the only other time I've been inside this house.

"Oh, thanks. You didn't have to do that." She says taking it from my hands.

I shrug. "I was free." I look back to the living room. "Am I interrupting? I can leave."

I should leave.

Beth gives me a self-deprecating smile. "I'm not busy. You can come sit if you want."

I watch her turn away from me and walk to the couch. From the back, it looks like she's naked under my sweatshirt. I follow her, but I don't sit down. She only has the one couch and if I'm sitting that close to her, I'm going to do something that I should probably regret.

"Popcorn?" She offers me as she sits cross-legged on the couch. Showing me way too much of her tempting legs.

"No thanks."

She bites her lip. A habit I've noticed she only does when she's uncomfortable. Shit. I'm making this weird. I stop pacing and sit on the

couch opposite of her.

“What’re you watching?”

“EverAfter.” She looks down. “It’s a Cinderella story. And kind of my guilty pleasure.”

“What do you mean?”

Beth shrugs. “I watch it when I either want to feel good... Or cry.”

Want to cry? This is why I’ll never understand women.

Knowing I shouldn’t ask, I do anyways. “Which was it tonight?”

Her gaze darts to me then away again. “The latter.”

“Why?” I can’t help myself.

Beth lets out a deep breath. “Don’t you ever just need to let it out? Like when you bottle up all these stupid, gross, ugly emotions and they just pile on top of each other. And you need to get them out. But every time they try to come out it’s just not the right time? Like if you get drugged but don’t have time to deal with it because your nephew is in the house and you can’t lose it in front of him. Or if you kiss...”

She trails off, and I know exactly where she was going. *If you kiss someone and start to cry, but you’re at work, so you can’t.*

Clearly there is more going on here than I realize. There’s more to Beth than even my background check was able to pull. And I’m probably the last man who should be trying to comfort a woman, but I need to know what made her so upset about that kiss. That kiss, that moment in her office, it was... *fuck*, it was intense. It was hot-as-hell. But it was not something that should leave a person in tears.

My body leans towards her as I ask, “Why did our kiss make you cry?”

She pinches her eyes shut.

I know I should say something else. I should tell her that she doesn’t have to tell me. I should give her an out. But I don’t.

With her eyes still closed, she answers. “It was the first kiss I’ve had since my boyfriend died.”

Uh... What?

Fucking Enzo. Motherfucking Enzo. Why the fuck wouldn’t he have told me this?

Beth opens her eyes to reach for her glass of wine. She takes a long sip before she looks at me.

“I just... I think I need to get this out. I need to say it out loud to someone. And I don’t have anyone to talk to, ya know? I mean, I have Noah, but this

is... And Uncle Enzo is the only other person that knows everything. But he's ..."

When she trails off, I place a hand on her knee. "You can talk to me, Beth."

She swallows, then nods. Then nods again.

"I told you that Noah's dad, my brother, died recently. It was a ..." she pauses, seeming to think something over. "He died in a car accident. Just over three months ago. I was actually in my own car accident that night. My boyfriend was driving, and someone ran into us, hitting his side. It pushed us over an embankment." She looks away. "The cops told me he died during the accident."

My chest feels tight. "Were you hurt?" I whisper.

She takes another sip of wine and shrugs. "Some broken ribs. A concussion. Some other cuts. I was in the hospital when they came to tell me about my brother."

"Fuck."

She gives me an odd look. "You want to hear something to say *fuck* about. My brother never even told me he had a son."

My eyebrows go up. "Noah?"

She huffs out a sad laugh. "Yeah. After the cop told me that Aaron was dead, she told me I'd be getting custody of Noah. And my reaction was *who's Noah*. How about that, for fucked up?"

I've never been at such a loss for words. I have a sickening suspicion that those accidents weren't accidents at all. It would explain a lot. Why she's here. Why she's going by a different name. Why Uncle Enzo is involved . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BETH

I'm just drunk enough that I can't get myself to shut up. Angelo showed up at just the right, or wrong, time. I've been sitting here debating my next steps. And maybe this will push me enough to act. I just need to move on.

I shake my head. "I'm getting off topic, sorry. We were talking about the kiss."

Angelo opens his mouth, then closes it. Honestly, I'm surprised he's still here. Most guys would have bolted for the door already. But - I swear to god, if he tells me he regrets our kiss I am going to lose it. So, I don't give him the chance.

"The problem with death is that it robs you of closure. I know, I know . . . that sounds like it doesn't make sense. But it does. Because Patrick's dead, I can't break up with him. I can't tell him that I don't want to be with him anymore. Because that was my plan. I was ready for us to be over; I just hadn't gotten around to it. We weren't that close. We dated for a year, but we weren't in love. We didn't even see each other that often. We just *were*. And now I can't seem to move on without feeling this stupid, nauseating guilt."

I lean forward and grab the bottle of wine, pouring the rest of the contents into my glass, searching for the bravery to finally say out loud what has been bothering me for months.

"And now that he's dead, I can't question him about how we met." I take a large gulp of liquid courage. "He knew my brother, but I didn't know that. I sure as hell didn't know that they were friends. That they *worked* together. I found all that out after they both died. And I just can't shake this feeling that none of it was real. And I can't ask them if it was all fake. Was he just with me because my brother put him up to it? To keep an eye on me or something? Was it a set-up when I first met him at that coffee shop? The one I went to almost every day. Was our whole relationship completely fucking fake? And - if so, was he faithful to me? Did he even really like me?"

"And if I didn't love him? And if I was planning to break up with him? And if he was just with me to - I don't know - *watch* me, does it even count

as a relationship. And if all of that is true, do I need to feel this ugly guilt about moving on? *How long do I have to wait?*”

I heave out a breath. I feel a little better just having said that out loud. I left plenty out, but I still feel better.

“Beth ...” Angelo sounds tortured.

I wave him off. “It’s okay. I know, there’s nothing to really say to all of that. I just needed to let it out. And hopefully explain my reaction to our kiss. That really was an *it’s not you, it’s me* scenario.”

“Yeah.” He drags a hand over the back of his head. “I can’t even pretend to understand how that would make you feel. I’m sorry that kissing me caused you this heartache.”

I shake my head. “No. That’s not it. I needed that. And more. I just need to rip the band-aid off, so-to-speak.”

Angelo’s brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

I meet his eyes before answering. “Sex. I need to have sex.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ANGELO

“Um, what?” There is no way that I heard her right.

But she nods and continues as though I didn’t just swallow my tongue.

“The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. I need to do it. Go all the way. Round all the bases. If I do this slowly, then at each and every step I’m going to have these awful little mental breakdowns. And I can’t deal with that.”

“You want to have sex.” I repeat, slowly.

“Yes. I’ll fuck the guilt out of my system.” She bends and picks up her phone from the coffee table. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while and it’s time. I downloaded just about every dating app I could find tonight. I was psyching myself up to create profiles when you knocked.”

She unlocks her phone and hits an icon I recognize as a sleazy hookup app. A completely unwarranted jealous rage rolls through me.

“No.” I snap, and grab the phone from her hands.

“Hey!”

She reaches to get her phone back, so I stand up and step away. “You’re not sleeping with some random asshole.”

Her phone is still open, so I start deleting all her new apps.

She turns in her seat to watch me walk into the kitchen.

“Angelo, this isn’t your choice.”

“The fuck it isn’t!” I growl, slamming cupboards as I open and close them.

“I’m an adult -”

I cut her off. “Oh, I know you are, baby. And if you want to get laid, you can fucking get laid. Right here. With me.”

That shut her up.

I open the cupboard above the fridge and find what I’m looking for. Pulling out a bottle of Jack, I snag a random coffee mug from another shelf and pour a shot’s worth.

Throwing it back, I swallow and level my gaze across the room at Beth. “You’re not going out there so some perverted stranger can get a taste of your

pussy. *No.*” I pour another shot and tip it back. “You can ride my dick, get it out of your system.”

I clench my teeth, pouring another round.

I’m pissed. Really fucking *pissed* that she thinks she could get away with this shit. I will rip the limbs off any man that tries to touch my fucking woman.

Beth’s angry tone matches my own. “If you have to be drunk to fuck me, then you can leave right now!”

Her eyes are narrowed, her cheeks red, and she’s pointing at the door.

I throw my head back and laugh.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BETH

This motherfucker is laughing at me.

I let out my own growl. “I won’t be your drunk pity fuck. Take your tiny dick and leave!”

Angelo has an infuriating smirk on his face as he slowly pours himself another shot. “This isn’t gonna be a pity fuck. And I don’t need to be drunk, doc. But you’ve been drinking and I’m stone cold sober and I’ll feel like an asshole if we aren’t both at least a little drunk.” He sets down the bottle. “Finish your wine.”

I look at the glass still in my hand. “Why?”

“Because it sounds like you haven’t fucked in a long time. I’m a big guy. You’re a little woman. I don’t want to hurt you, baby girl, and a little alcohol will help to loosen you up.”

My mouth drops open.

If he’s not serious about having a big dick, I’m gonna kill him, because his words have me halfway to a climax.

I hold up my glass. “Cheers, big guy.”

His eyes heat as he tips his mug back for a final time. I’m not one for slamming wine, so I take a slow sip as I watch Angelo stalk across the room towards me. I turn, keeping him in my sights. He stops in front of the couch, using a foot to shove my coffee table aside before he takes the glass from my hand and sets it down.

I start to stand, thinking we’ll go to my bedroom, but Angelo places a hand against my chest and shoves me back down to sitting. At this height, I’m staring straight at the bulge in the front of his pants. An exceptionally *large* bulge. My fingers itch to touch him, but - before I can - he drops to his knees. His large hand grips the back of my neck, pulling me forward until my lips touch his. The hand on my neck shifts up, fisting into the hair at the base of my neck, tugging hard enough to make me moan.

When my mouth opens, he sweeps his tongue in, tasting like whiskey and man. My hands reach out for his chest. Running up and down the planes of muscles.

When his mouth leaves mine to trail kisses along my jaw, I tip my head back and arch my body towards his. The hand not in my hair, encircles my throat, then slides straight down my chest. His fingers grip the top edge of my tank top, and he pulls down until both my breasts spill out.

The groan that Angelo releases, as he closes his lips around one of my nipples, has me begging.

“Angelo. Please.”

His mouth doesn't stop, but his hands drop to my hips. Using his shoulders as leverage, I lift my ass up and he pulls my shorts down.

I tug on his hair. “*Shirt*. Take off your shirt.”

Angelo lightly bites my nipple before his mouth releases, and he sits back. His eyes lock on my exposed sex. I'd close my legs to hide myself, but I can't. His hips are wedged between my knees.

With one swift movement, Angelo's shirt is off.

Mesmerized, my hands reach out to finally get skin-on-skin contact. His muscles and coarse hair feel divine under my fingertips. At my touch, his shoulders bunch and his biceps flex. The size of them even more astounding up close. I'm too distracted, so I don't see his hands reach out for me. I don't feel his hands on my hips. I don't notice his grip on me until he pulls me forward. Only stopping when I'm sitting on the edge of the cushion.

He puts a hand on the center of my chest and presses again. I tip back, reclined, splayed out . . . for Angelo.

I expect him to undo his pants next. I expect him to move on to the fucking me part. I stare down the length of my body, waiting to finally see what he's hiding behind those jeans. But he doesn't move his hands to his fly. He brings them between my thighs.

“Eyes right here, baby.” Angelo rumbles, pointing to his face.

I remind myself to breathe and lock my eyes on his. Then he starts to lower himself.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. *He's going to* . . . I gasp when he flattens his tongue and licks the length of my pussy. “Oh my god.”

My brain is shorting out. It's been so long since a man has done this to me. So long that I've forgotten how it feels. My eyes go back and forth between watching his mouth work between my legs and holding his gaze. Because he hasn't stopped watching me watch him.

I'm dripping wet. I'm about to come. And he just started.

“Angelo. I'm so close.” I pant.

Angelo leans back, apparently not wanting me to finish yet. From his place on his knees, he strokes a finger up and down my slit. Teasing me with just the tiniest amount of pressure. It's heaven. It's torture.

I wiggle, hoping to get penetration. I need something. I want his cock, but I'll take a finger at this point.

"You want more?" He growls.

I nod. "*Please.*"

He slides just the tip of his finger inside me. Then pulls it back out. "Usually I'd let you come two, maybe three times. But not tonight."

A whimper leaves me, and I think I might cry.

"I need to keep you focused. And the first thing you're gonna feel inside this pussy is my dick."

I open my mouth to yell at him for being an asshole, but then he drops his mouth to my clit. And words are no longer possible.

He alternates between sucking on my nub and teasing me with light touches. My eyes are squeezed shut, my fingers clawing the couch, my head turned to the side as though I'm trying to escape him. That's why I don't see him undo his jeans. I don't see his Angelo-sized cock as he strokes it. I don't even hear him open the condom and roll it on. I don't even realize that he's stopped licking me until I feel the fat head of his dick pressing against my opening.

My eyes fly open. He's pushing inside me.

I look down and see a... Good-fucking-*fuck*, is that his cock?!

As he inches inside me, my mouth opens in a silent scream.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ANGELO

“*Relax.*” Fucking hell, she needs to relax. “Relax, baby girl.” If she doesn’t stop squeezing my dick like that, I’m going to come before I’m even all the way in.

Carefully, without going any deeper, I lean forward and press my mouth to hers. I know she can taste herself on me. And from the sound she makes, I think she likes it.

“Kiss me. Touch me.” I whisper against her lips. I need her distracted, so she’ll finally fucking loosen up.

I open her mouth with my tongue and feel the moment that her muscles let go. And I slam forward. Catching the sounds that spill from her mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BETH

The pleasure is so intense. The pain - a dull throb behind the heat of lust. Angelo's body moves inside me. Over me. Around me.

It's too much. Too much Angelo. Too much dick. Too much emotion. *Too much.*

I feel a tear slip from the corner of my eye. And I hate it. I knew the first time would be hard, but I didn't think it would feel so good. *So fucking good.*

"Don't stop," I plead against Angelo's lips. If he stops... If he leaves me now, I'll never recover. "Please don't stop..." I beg.

"Not a chance." His mouth leaves mine, and I feel him lick up my cheek. My body shudders. I think he just licked the tear off my skin. That shouldn't comfort me. That shouldn't pulse through me like wildfire, but it does.

"You're mine tonight." He bites my earlobe. "No one else's."

His thrusts never stop. Never slow. His huge body looming over me. Hands roaming. The only sign of time passing is the sweat coating our bodies.

"Touch yourself." Angelo demands, then leans back so he can watch the spot where he moves in and out of me.

God, he's handsome.

With one hand still on my hip, he grabs my wrist and brings it down to where we're joined.

"Touch yourself. I won't ask again. I want to feel you come."

I've never done this before. Sure, I've given myself a hand during sex, but not like this. Not with the guy blatantly staring. But Angelo is looking at me like I'm the best thing he's ever seen. The heat in his eyes making me bold, I rub small circles around my clit while I watch him watching me. The tendons in his neck flare. His wide chest is tight with effort, or restraint. His eyes are hooded, but laser focused.

The pressure builds, and our movements become frantic.

"That's it." He drops forward again until his lips are a breath away from mine. His hips still working, always moving. "Come for me, baby girl."

That's all I need. My body tenses, and an orgasm more powerful than I thought possible rips through my body. I'm making sounds, but I can't hear them over my roaring pulse. I can't hear Angelo, either, but I can feel his chest rumbling against my own.

More. I can't stop. There's still more. Hooking my feet on the back of his thighs I pull him in as deep as he can go.

"Fuck!" Angelo shouts. Then he shudders above me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ANGELO

Gently removing myself, I don't miss Beth's wince when I pull out. Shit. I probably should've been more careful with her. It was a tight fucking fit and I know it's been at least several months since she's had sex with anyone. I push that thought away. The idea of some other guy putting his dick anywhere near her fills me with a possessive rage. Even if it's directed at a literal dead man.

Good idea or not, I don't regret a single second of what happened between us. Based on her panting breaths and flushed cheeks, I bet she feels the same.

Climbing to my feet, I walk across the room to throw the condom away. I remember being a teenager. If I'd ever found evidence of my parents fucking, I would've dry heaved for a week. So I find a paper towel to wrap the condom in before tossing it into the kitchen trash.

Turning back to Beth, I contemplate what to do next. I'm not done with her. That's for damn sure. But I think we'll both need more than a few minutes before going again.

"Oh my god." I hear her groan, as she sits up from her spot on the couch. "Thank you."

Thank you? *Thank you?*

She's reaching for her sleep shorts when her words sink in. She's thanking me for helping her *get it out of her system*.

I grit my teeth as I grab my shirt and pull it on. "Glad I could be of service."

Her lips try to smile, but she won't make eye contact. I can't tell if she's trying to brush me off, or if she's uncomfortable. Typical. Even when she gets exactly what she wants, she still doesn't know what to do with it.

"I hope I didn't keep you from any other plans tonight." Beth's voice is fake-pleasant, increasing my suspicion.

I keep my eyes on her as I pull my shirt back on. Her hands start to fidget, and I watch as she zips up *my* hoodie. The one that she never took off. Dragging the catch all the way up to her chin, she literally closes herself off from me. I want to grab her and shake her. I want her to look me in the eyes

and tell me that she enjoyed that for more than the sake of *getting it over with*. But I'm not going to ask her that. Not now. Not when her answer could make me look like even more of a fool.

"I should get going." I say in a bland voice.

She glances at me. "Are you okay to drive?"

I nod. "I'm a big guy, remember. It's going to take more than that to affect me." She can take that however she wants.

Not wanting to drag out this awkwardness any longer, I head for the door. I can hear her soft footfalls behind me, but she doesn't make any attempt to stop me.

"Lock the door behind me." I demand, then step out into the cold night air.

The few seconds it takes me to reach my car only stirs my irritation. Is she fucking serious with this shit? Climbing in, I slam my car door harder than necessary. Was that really all she wanted? A good hard fuck. Does she think that's all she needs?

"Fuck!" I bark out, gripping the steering wheel tight.

Fine. That's totally fucking fine. I won't be pining after her if she's done with me.

I turn the car on and rotate in my seat, preparing to back out of her driveway. But movement at her window catches my eye. The curtain is swaying. She was watching me.

I let that fact soak through my battered ego.

I take in a slow deep breath. And one more, letting my anger settle.

Fine. I'll give her time to let this sink in. I'll let her get used to the idea of *us*. Because we aren't done yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BETH

Rinsing the soap off my body, I can't help but to squirm. Nearly 24 hours later and I can still feel the evidence of my encounter with Angelo. I nearly laugh at myself.

Encounter. More like the fuck of a lifetime. He wasn't lying about needing the alcohol to loosen up. Not that it helped all that much.

Turning the water off, and grabbing a towel, I check the time. Noah should be home soon. Throwing on some comfy clothes, I debate hiding the presents that I wrapped and put under the tree this afternoon. It might be a bit much all at once.

Rounding the corner into the living room, I find Noah sitting on the couch, staring at the elaborately decorated Christmas tree. No turning back now.

He must've heard me enter, but he doesn't turn his attention away from the tree. And the mound of presents beneath. And the fake holly and lights around the large picture window. And the stockings hanging from the TV stand.

I shove Pebbles off the couch so I can take a seat next to Noah. And I thoroughly pretend that I didn't have sex in this exact spot last night.

I clear my throat. "You made it back early."

His wide eyes keep sweeping over the room. "When'd you do all this?"

"Today." I shrug. "I woke up early and realized how close Christmas was."

Truth is, I woke up with a sore vagina and spinning thoughts of Angelo. I desperately needed something to distract me. So... *Christmas.*

I tried to play it cool last night. I told Angelo what I wanted, and he complied. More than that, he offered. He offered sex, the chance to get over my ex, the chance to move on. Nothing more. I know better than to be upset over how easily he left. I'd be a hypocrite if I complained. Him sticking around to cuddle wasn't part of the deal.

"Who are all those presents for?" Noah asks.

I had forgotten to buy gift tags during my shopping spree at Target, but since he's the only other person in the house, it shouldn't be hard to hand

them out. It's nothing that great, mostly clothes and few video games.

I nudge him with my elbow. "Uh, you, dummy. Who else would they be for?"

His eyes widen even further. "You didn't have to get me anything."

I refuse to let his words make me sad. Instead, I pinch him. "Shut your face. I'll buy you gifts if I want to."

He bites his lip and I nearly smile. It's the same stupid habit that I have.

"Did you have fun this weekend?" I ask.

He nods. "Yeah."

Suddenly I wonder if I did it wrong by decorating alone. "Sorry, I should have waited for you to put all this up."

For the first time since I sat down, he turns to look at me. And he's smiling. "It's a nice surprise."

I beam. "I bought a crap ton of stuff to make cookies with. Reindeer shaped cutters. Sprinkles. Food dye. Hershey Kisses for those round peanut butter ones. You wanna help me bake sometime this week?"

"I don't really know how," Noah admits.

"Even better." I smile. "It'll be a messy good time."

Noah's gaze slides back to the overly lit fake tree filling up the corner of the living room. "I'd like that."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BETH

Standing with my hand on the door handle, I chide myself for being a giant pansy. I've hid in my office the entire day, dreading the thought of running into Angelo.

Why didn't we talk about how we were going to handle this before he left my house this weekend? Oh, that's right, we didn't discuss it because I panicked and let him leave before my heart even settled down.

"Ugh." I groan out loud, thumping my forehead against the door.

When I was going to bed last night, after watching Christmas movies with Noah, I saw Angelo's sweatshirt draped over the foot of my bed. And I wanted to slap myself. He stopped by, to drop off my container, and found me in skimpy pajamas wrapped up in his sweatshirt like some lovesick schoolgirl. God, he must think I'm pathetic. Why didn't he say anything! Why didn't he ask for it back? Oh right, he was too busy getting away from me as fast as possible. What did Sissy call that girl he'd been dating, or banging, or whatever? A "stage five clinger"? Yeah, that's probably what he thinks I am. Sacrifice the sweatshirt for his freedom. Great.

I allow myself one more thump of my forehead against the hard surface, then I square my shoulders and pull the door open. My last patient of the day left 20 minutes ago, and - if I stall any longer - I'll just feel like an even bigger idiot.

Stepping out of my little hallway, I tell myself not to look. There's no need. I should just keep my eyes forward and get out of the building as quickly as possible. But I'm stupid and I allow my eyes to scan the gym floor.

It doesn't take long to find the man who's been plaguing my thoughts. There are some machines between where he is and where I am, so the view isn't perfect. But I can see him sitting on some sort of bench. I slow my walk, as I take in his large, muscled frame. The memory of his bare skin under my fingers causes a shiver to roll down my spine. My eyes trace up to his thick neck. His chin that I know to be scratchy. His mouth, that's moving. He's saying something. He's too far away; I know he's not talking to me. But his

eyes are locked with mine.

My feet stop walking. I wish they wouldn't've, but they did. And now I'm standing here, a dozen yards away, staring at Angelo as he talks to... boobs. A giant pair of perky boobs suddenly block my view of Angelo's face.

I can feel the color drain from my cheeks as I realize who he's talking to. It's Rachel. His *hard to classify* admirer. Guess what they say is true: *think of the Devil and she shall appear*. Clad head-to-toe in Lululemon, she looks just as perfect as she did the first time I saw her. And I guess it's also true when they say *men are assholes*.

It's been less than 48 hours since he's had his dick inside me, and yet here he is - at my place of work - openly flirting with a woman he has a sexual history with. And just like that, when I thought I couldn't feel any grosser, I have a disgusting thought. *What if I'm the other woman?* What if they've been together this whole time? I just took Sissy's word for it, but I never actually asked him if he was single.

I've half a mind to stomp over there and confront him. But the idea just sends my stomach into knots. Instead, I put my eyes forward and hurry towards the front doors.

"Beth!" Sissy calls out to me as I try to breeze through the entrance.

I want to ignore her, simply so I can flee, but she doesn't deserve that.

Slowing and turning her way, I open my mouth to say hello, but stop. There's a man standing in front of her desk. Well, he's actually leaning against it, looking completely at home. The man is about six feet tall. Trim. 30 something. And handsome in an I-grew-up-with-money sort of way. And he's beaming at me.

"This must be *the* Beth Smith that I've heard so much about." He straightens and closes the distance between us. "Sissy has told me so much about you. As in, I literally can't get her to shut up about how great you are."

I take his extended hand and shake it. "Uh, thanks?" It comes out like a question as I dart a look over at Sissy.

She rolls her eyes. "Beth, this is Trevor. The general manager."

My eyebrows fly up. "Oh, hi! It's nice to meet you, Trevor. Sorry I didn't recognize your voice."

Trevor is still grinning. "That's my bad. I skipped right past introductions." He finally lets go of my hand. "Lucky for me, Sissy here keeps me in line."

I nod. "The place would burn to the ground without her."

“It’ll probably burn to the ground because of her, too.” He gives me a conspiratorial wink.

“Hey!” Sissy protests. “I can *hear* you.”

Trevor laughs and turns back to me. “So, how’re things going? You settle in okay?”

“Everything is great. Seriously. My office is wonderful. The scheduling system is super-slick. The equipment that you have here is above-and-beyond,” I tell him honestly.

“Good. Good! And today? How’s your Monday going?” He’s still grinning, but I feel my smile slip.

Sissy rolls her chair closer to the desk. “Are you okay, doll? You look a little pale.”

The distraction of Trevor nearly made me forget about Angelo and his life-sized Barbie. But now that I’m reminded of it, that sinking feeling is back.

I wave her off. “Just low blood sugar.”

Trevor steps closer and places his hand on my shoulder. “If it’s food you need, I’d love to take you to dinner. We can get to know each other a little.”

The look on his face makes me think the offer is innocent enough, but I really don’t want to take him up on it. But I also know that when your boss invites you out, you should go.

I open my mouth, unsure on how I’m going to answer, when a large body looms into view.

“Trevor.” Angelo’s deep rumble rolls through the room a second before he claps Trevor on the back hard enough to dislodge his hand on me.

The men exchange greetings and I do my best to keep my gaze averted from Angelo.

“Beth,” Trevor says my name. “I assume you’ve met Mr. Angelo Rossi already.”

I nod and plaster on a pleasant smile. “I have.” I reluctantly turn my eyes to Angelo. “Nice to see you again.”

I can’t help but to do a quick scan behind him to see if Rachel is about to appear, but there’s no one else in sight.

“Doc.” Angelo tips his chin down to me in greeting, then turns back to Trevor. “You got a few minutes?”

I see Trevor look back towards me, perhaps remembering his offer of dinner. I take the opportunity that Angelo has, probably unwittingly, given

me.

“You all have a good night. I gotta head home. It was nice to meet you, Trevor.” I offer my hand for another shake.

“Yes, of course.” This time he grabs my hand in both of his. “It was a treat to finally meet you, Beth. I’ll be in and out of here a lot, but hopefully we’ll see each other again soon.”

I swear Angelo is scowling at our joined hands.

“I’d like that,” I say quietly, more to myself than to Trevor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BETH

Planning to use my hermit strategy again today, I'm startled when my office door flies open.

I spin in my chair to see Sissy bounding though. "Hey! Your 11:30 just called to cancel."

I glance at the clock and see they gave a whole ten-minutes' notice. Classy. "Alright. Thanks for letting me know."

Sissy snags for my jacket hanging in the closet and tosses it at me. "That means you have two hours to blow before your next appointment. And I put a block on your schedule to make sure you won't get any last minute adds."

"Okay." I drag the word out as I'm reminded of Angelo's one and only appointment with me, which he made at the last moment.

Sissy keeps talking. "I talked to Trevor, and he said that I could use the company card to take you out to lunch. You know, since you couldn't do dinner last night." When I just continue to stare at her, she picks up my purse and drops it in my lap. "Chop chop, sweet cheeks. Let's go."

For a moment, I almost argue, but then I realize that this fits in perfectly with my *avoid Angelo* agenda.

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The ride to The Salty Lime in Sissy's bright orange Jeep Wrangler is quick and filled with her retelling of her dad's recent birthday party.

I swear that I've known her longer than a few weeks. She feels like a close friend more than someone I just met. And because of that, I shouldn't have been caught off guard when her face turns serious the second the server walks away with our menus.

"Alright girl, you got some splainin' to do."

My voice goes up in surprise. "What?"

"Don't you *what* me. You know exactly what." I blink at her, and she rolls her eyes. "Angelo. What's going on between you and Angelo?"

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

Sissy holds up a hand. “Don’t even think about lying to me. I see the way you look at him.”

I cross my arms. “And how do I look at him?”

“Like he’s a jungle gym and you’re a kid hopped up on sugar and caffeine.” She doesn’t even crack a smile giving that description. “And I see how he looks at you. Not to mention that little *interruption* yesterday... Angelo has never, not once in his life, initiated a conversation with Trevor. It almost looked like he was trying to get Trevor’s hands off you and prevent you from going to dinner.” She raises her brow in a *tell me I’m wrong* gesture.

A huff of laughter leaves me. “Yeah, well, I have a hard time believing all that, considering just moments before he had Rachel drooling all over him.”

Sissy waves me off. “That bitch can fawn over him all she wants, but Angelo wasn’t looking at her. In fact, he’s *never* watched her the way he watches you.”

Sissy and I stare at each other for a long moment before I let my shoulders sag. “It started at Daniella’s birthday party.”

“Oh shit, I’m right!” Sissy sits up straighter. “But I didn’t even see you guys talking to each other.”

“Yeah, well, it all went down after you left.”

“Went down?” She asks.

I bite my lip, here we go. “Someone put something in my drink.”

Sissy gasps. “Someone tried to drug you?!”

I nod. “They more than *tried*. I didn’t know they’d done it and I drank the whole thing.” Sissy’s eyes instantly start to fill with tears. “No, don’t get sad. Seriously, I’m okay. I wasn’t hurt. Nothing happened to me.”

“But...” Her voice breaks and I reach across the table to take her hands because I get it. I totally fucking get it.

The corner of my mouth tips up into a smile. “Angelo saved me.”

And so I tell her. I tell her about stumbling to the chair. About the creepy guy. About Angelo stepping in. About him carrying me out of the club and driving me home. I tell her about the dogs scaring him. About Noah defending me. But I don’t tell her about Uncle Enzo and the role he played in convincing me to go with Angelo. Sissy doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that I’d just let him take me home. And even though I find that I trust Sissy completely, it’s not safe for her to know about my connection to Enzo. Or any of the other stuff.

“I’m so sorry.” Sissy wipes away a tear.

I feel terrible for telling her this. And for not telling her sooner. I just feel terrible.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m okay. Really.”

She sniffs. “So is that why he was acting all protective of you yesterday?”

Needing to see her smile, I decide to jump ahead in my story. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s because I fucked him last weekend.”

After Sissy quits choking on a mouthful of air, I tell her the rest of the story.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BETH

“Uhhn...” The man below me groans.

I ease up on the stretch and apologize. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to push you too far.”

The man shakes his head. “No problem.”

It’s his first appointment, and I’ve been spacing out the entire time, I’m sure he thinks I’m the worst physical therapist ever.

Usually Fridays are a thing to be celebrated, but today has been a pile of shit. I had a bitchy patient this morning. I had a nasty run in with Trisha the Needle Queen during my lunch hour with Sissy. And I nearly walked into Angelo just an hour ago as he was coming out of the locker room. He looked handsome as ever in his loose shorts and t-shirt stretched across his oversized frame. I tried not to notice how good he smelled. I swear I even held my breath. But his stupid scent followed me all the way to my office.

The man groans again, and this time I pretend it’s on purpose.

“We’ll hold for another 3, 2, and there you go.” I release his arm and step away from the table.

The man sits up and smiles at me, as though I didn’t just absently torture him for the past 40 minutes.

Handing him a printout of the moves we worked on, I tell him to continue at home.

To top off my subpar performance, I can’t for the life of me remember his name. So, as he climbs off the table, I quick glance at his records on my computer screen. James.

As an apology, I grab out a baggie of cookies from my drawer. They aren’t very pretty, but Noah and I did our trial run of Christmas cookies last night, and if I don’t give some away we’ll be eating them until March.

“It was great to meet you, James.” I smile and hold out the bag. “I know it’s not quite the holidays, but please take these home and share them with your wife.”

He wouldn’t shut up about his pregnant wife, so I’m positive they won’t go to waste.

His face lights up as he takes the bag. “Wow, that’s so thoughtful!”

Opening the door, I guide James out of the office.

We take a few more steps until we’re out on the main floor. “Trust me, you’re doing me a favor by taking these.”

I see the mountain behind James, moving our way, but I purposefully ignore it.

“My wife will kill me if I don’t give you a thank you hug,” James says as he holds his arms out.

Normally, I’d say this is creepy behavior, but this guy is just weird enough, and obsessed with his wife enough, that I think he’s being honest.

The approaching form is getting larger, and unmistakable.

I smile and hold my arms out to accept the hug. “Can’t have you getting killed on my behalf,” I joke.

When James bends to hug me, I see that Angelo is now just a few feet away. His eyes are narrowed, and his fists are clenched.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ANGELO

Our family has cleaned up our ways. It's been a while since I've done anything super illegal. But right now, I'm itching to beat this man to death and dump his body in the Mississippi. Who the fuck does he think he is? And what the fuck does she think she's doing, hugging this creep?

I get it. She's been avoiding me all fucking week since she basically kicked me out of her house. I haven't approached her either, true, but she's the one who needs to figure shit out. She's the one who *thanked me* for my services while my dick was practically still wet.

I planned to give her a few days to think it over. A few days to start to crave me. I was hoping for shy looks. Heated cheeks. But what I've gotten was a complete icing out. Sure, Rachel showing up Monday wasn't part of my plan, it was just an unfortunate coincidence. When Beth saw her with me, I was a moment away from telling Rachel to fuck off. But when I noticed Beth was watching, I decided to let it play out. I wanted her jealousy to spike. I wanted the sight of me near another woman to spur her into action. But then the law of unintended consequences stepped in. And - watching the color drain from Beth's face - I realized that my split-second decision may have been too convincing. And that Sissy must've told Beth the over-exaggerated rumors about my history with Rachel. Because ever since that moment, she's closed herself off even more. She's holed up in her office. She's kept her head down. She's not made even a second of eye contact with me.

Until now.

And this prick is still hugging her.

I step closer, closer than societal norms allow, and clear my throat.

Beth's eyes narrow, probably in annoyance, but the sound works to split them up.

The man turns and I recognize him as a loudmouth that I've seen around the gym. I don't know his name. And I don't care.

I step closer. "Beth, a word?"

I'm nearly touching her and have now inserted myself between the two of

them.

She rolls her eyes before she bends to look around me. “Have a great weekend, James.”

He might reply, but my focus is solely on Beth. She continues to ignore me, turning and striding back into her office. I’m just a step behind her when I close the door, locking the handle the same moment it clicks shut.

“Are you done?” I ask, leaning back against the door and crossing my arms over my chest.

My harsh tone has the desired effect.

Beth spins to face me. “Me?! Are you done being a psycho? What the hell was that out there?”

“You were getting too fucking close to that guy. He’s an asshole.” It’s a guess, but I’m sure it’s true.

Beth’s small fists curl against her hips. “Oh, *he*’s an asshole? That’s rich.”

“What are you trying to say?” I challenge her.

She glares even harder as she takes a step closer to me. “You’re the one with a revolving door of women. A new one each week.”

I allow my mouth to pull up into a smirk. “You jealous, baby girl?”

“Ha! Not likely.” She snaps. “You’re free to swing your tiny dick at whoever you want.”

I growl. Not at the obviously wrong assessment of my dick, but that she’s pretending to be okay with me fooling around with other women.

I take a step away from the door. “I’m not touching anyone else. Neither is my dick. And neither are you.”

She’s trying not to react to my words, but I watch her chest rising with rapid breaths. “Look, you fool.” She jabs a finger into my chest. “I touch people for a living. You need to chill the fuck out.”

My hand jerks up to encase hers. “Watch it, baby. You can do your job, but I don’t want to hear you talking about *touching* other men.”

“Oh, I can do my job? How gracious of you.” She steps closer, trapping our joined hands between our bodies. “You don’t own me. Just because I fucked you once...”

My patience snaps and my lust takes over. I cut off her tirade by slamming my mouth down onto hers.

I’m expecting a fight. I’m expecting her to bite me. Slap me. Knee me in the balls. Instead, she opens her mouth to deepen the kiss.

A groan tears through my body. I don’t know when enough will be

enough, but I need more of her. Right fucking now.

Turning our bodies, I press her back against the door. Then I grip her shoulders and spin her around.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BETH

Angelo crowds against my back, pressing me into the hard surface of the door. And I love it. I should push him off. I should demand answers. But I'm too turned on to think about anything other than having him inside me again.

A hand grips my ponytail and tilts my head back. "These rooms are sound proofed. And the music out there is loud. So don't try to keep your noises from me."

To punctuate his statement, Angelo grinds his erection against my ass. And I moan.

His chest rumbles against my back, then he steps away. I don't have time to react before I feel his hands at the top of my leggings, pulling them down. Tugging until the material bunches mid-thigh. Trapping my legs together. The cool air on my heated skin lets me know that he pulled my thong down at the same time.

Angelo drags his hands up the outside of my legs. "You can lie and tell yourself what we did was a one-time thing."

One of his hands slides over my bare butt cheek. His palm leaves me then connects with a smack a second later. I open my mouth to - I don't know what, but I'm cut off when his other hand moves between my legs, stroking against my exposed pussy.

"You can say whatever you want, but I can feel how soaked you are *for me*. How ready you are *for me*." His finger glides back and forth through my slickness. "Your mouth might tell me off, but your pussy is begging for more."

"You are so..." I start, but Angelo pinches my clit, and my words turn nonsensical.

His chuckle reverberates through my bones.

But I can't even get mad because now his dick is pressing against my entrance, my wetness allowing him to push in. My body clenches, and he growls darkly against my ear before he shoves all the way in.

A sound leaves me, half moan, half shout, and I hope these rooms really

are soundproofed.

My fingers desperately grasp at the door in front of me, needing to hold onto something.

Angelo doesn't go easy. He doesn't give me any time to adjust to his intrusion. He pulls back, so he's almost all the way out, then thrusts back in. It's not fast, but it's deliberate. The sensation is never ending. I feel like I've never been fuller. My legs want to spread, but they can't, and the added friction feels so goddamn good.

His hands are on my hips, holding me steady. "You're gripping my cock so hard." He runs his nose up the side of my neck. "Admit it. You love it when I fuck you."

Not wanting him to win this easily, I turn my head until I can see his face. Then I smile. "You call this fucking?"

He doesn't stop, but he slows, as his lips tip up into a dangerous smirk. "You on birth control, baby girl?"

The question catches me off guard before I realize that he's bare. I should be furious that he's inside me without a condom. I should've noticed. I should definitely put a stop to this madness right now. But all I do is nod.

He makes a sound low in his throat. "Good. Put your forearms on the door."

With my palms flat on the surface, I face forward and brace my weight on my forearms.

Angelo's hands slide around to the front of my hips. Fingers splaying along the crease where my legs meet my body. Then he lifts.

My toes are barely scraping the floor. My back is arched. My ass is raised. And he's deeper than he's ever been before. I swear my vision doubles. Then he picks up the pace.

"Holy fuck." I groan out the same time I hear Angelo moan, "Shit."

He's alternating between shallow and deep thrusts, and I'm about to scream. His fingertips are digging into my soft flesh, and I can feel where bruises are sure to form, but I love it.

I press back into him.

"What happened to me coming two or three times?" I pant.

His hips shift and he hits an even deeper point causing me to cry out.

"With your attitude, you're lucky I'm letting you come at all."

It's hard to focus on words right now, but I swallow to clear my throat. "God, you're such an ass-"

In a flash, he's shifted so one hand is centered on my belly, holding me up. His other hand closing down over my mouth.

"Baby, you talk too damn much."

The fingers on the hand holding me up spread, causing what has to be his pinky finger to press against my swollen clit.

"More." I say, but his hand muffles the sound.

I'm so close. If I don't come, *like right fucking now*, I'm going to actually die.

Needing to spur him on, I open my mouth and suck one of his fingers into my mouth.

"Fuck." Angelo holds his hips tight against mine, buried inside me, then moves his hand so he can rub more forcefully over my clit. The hand over my face moves, and a second finger is shoved into my mouth. "Suck."

He continues to work me over with his fingers, a matching pace both on my clit and between my lips. His hips press harder against my ass as he grinds in a circular motion.

"Let go, baby girl. Pull me under with you."

His words undo me. And I do exactly what he asks. My whole body shuddering.

I think he moves. I think I bite his fingers. I think my feet leave the floor entirely.

CHAPTER FORTY

ANGELO

“Hey, boss. Didn’t think I’d see you back here tonight.”
“Raul.” I greet him with a nod.

Raul’s on Mazzanti Enterprise’s security team. My team. I make all my guys rotate through the lobby position. It’s a good place for them to keep their everyday skills sharp. It’s also just a good practice to not have the same guys, working the same shifts, with trackable habits, as your front line of defense. Plus, if I’m going to run an elite crew, why wouldn’t I use them in our own building.

He takes note of the tension in my stance.

“Problem?” Raul asks.

I shake my head as I scan my badge and pass through the checkpoint.
“Nah. Just have a few things I need to wrap up.”

I ditch out of the office almost every day to hit the gym, but it’s not uncommon for me to come back and work into the evening hours. I just don’t usually do it on a Friday.

Swiping my badge again inside the elevator, I select the top floor.. As the doors slide shut, I lean against the rear wall and shut my eyes. *I’m a fucking fool.* I’m letting some random chick get under my skin. I never lose control like I just did. I never let my emotions get the best of me. But half a second of watching that dickhead holding a bag of her cookies, smiling at her, and I was seeing red. Then he holds his arms out for a fucking hug. Like we were at some touchy-feely salon and not in a fucking gym. And I was done. Just *done.*

From there, my caveman ancestry took over. Of course she fought my attitude. Of course she pushed back. And - of course - that just turned me on even more. That little spitfire was made for me. And I’m not sure what to do with that.

What I probably shouldn’t have done was run.

I thump my head back against the elevator wall a few times.

Yep, I ran like a little bitch. We’d had a fairytale level of synchronized orgasms, then I pulled out, saw my cum trailing down her legs, because like a

complete idiot I fucked her bareback, and then I ran.

The elevator doors open on the top floor and I shake that hot-as-hell visual out of my mind.

Everything I did was dumb. Every. Single. Thing.

But I can't bring myself to regret any of it. Except, maybe, not staying for round two.

Stepping onto the executive floor, I shake my head at myself. I'm not really sure why I came back, but here I am. And my legs are taking me towards Vincent's office.

It's getting close to the end of the day, but since I can see Vincent's executive assistant, Brent, sitting at his post outside of Vincent's office, I know he's still here.

Brent perks up when he sees me approaching. "Hi, Mr. Rossi. What can I do for you?"

I tip my head towards Vincent's partially open door. "He's expecting me."

"No, I'm not!" Vincent's voice yells back from within his office.

Brent takes his job seriously, but I also think he might have a little crush on me, so to throw him off his watchdog game I give him a wink, before continuing on into Vincent's office.

"Hey, asshole. Come on in..." Vincent says sarcastically from behind his desk.

I kick the door shut behind me as I roll my eyes. "Fuck off, Vinny."

Going to the back corner, I pull out a bottle of bourbon from the hidden bar cabinet.

"By all means, make your fat ass at home." Vincent spreads his arms when I drop into his visitor chair with the bottle and a pair of glasses.

"Appreciate the hospitality, little man."

Vincent is anything but little, just like I'm anything but fat. But compared to me, even his 6-foot-4-inch frame looks average. And teasing each other is as natural as breathing.

He might technically be my boss, but he's family. My closest cousin. And just because he's the *first born*, doesn't mean he's not still that sneaky little shit I grew up with. A kid I played with. Chased skirts with. Worked around the country with. Walked through hell with. Vincent may look like the Devil, dark hair, darker eyes, sin personified, but he's a good guy. And he may run the Mazzanti family, the reformed Mazzanti family, but he'll always be my friend, first and foremost.

I hold up one of the empty glasses. “Drink?”

He shrugs. “Why the fuck not.” He accepts the two-finger pour I hand him. “What are we drinking to?”

I pour my own, tip it towards him, then swallow it down. Never giving him an answer.

Vincent takes a sip from his glass. “Okay.” He drags the word out. “Do I need to call Sasha and tell her I’ll be out late tonight, getting drunk with her favorite ogre?”

I add a bit more to my glass. “I’d rather not have your wife sniffing around my problems, thank you very much.” I grumble.

I’m being a whiny bitch and I know it.

Vincent has his drink halfway to his lips when he pauses. “Hold up.” He sits forward, eyes wide. “This is about a woman.”

This time I only drink half of what I’ve poured, wanting to pretend I have a shred of control left.

“Holy shit!” Vincent laughs. “I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Oh shut the fuck up. Quit being a cunt.” I shoot back, which only makes him laugh harder.

He holds his glass out. “Top me off. This really is cause for celebration.”

“I don’t know why I even talk to you,” I say shaking my head.

“Because you love me.” Vincent’s smug smile is endlessly infuriating.

“You know what, I think I’d rather talk to Sasha than you. Lord knows she’s the smarter one.”

“You got me there.” He shrugs. “But I bet you don’t want to tell her that you just fucked some woman and ran out.”

“How the...”

Vincent reaches over, snagging the bottle. “I recognize the symptoms. And I don’t mind telling you, it’s a dumbass move.”

“It’s cold out.” I reply. When he cocks his head, I gesture with my glass. “Sorry, I thought we were stating facts.”

“I see you’ve passed step one: *Acceptance*. So, what do you need me for?”

I slump into the too-small seat and give him the rundown. It’s succinct, holding only the basic details. And by the time I’m done, Vincent is grinning.

“Dude, do you have to look happy right now?” I ask incredulously.

“I’m just soaking it in,” Vincent says. “You’ve given me so much shit about marrying Sasha, and look at you now.”

I hold my hands up. “Jesus Christ, Vin! Don’t even joke about marriage.

What's wrong with you?"

Vincent laughs it off. "Alright, ya big baby. So you haven't been real smooth with her. So, what? She's hooking up with her bodyguard. Sasha would call this a classic rom-com scenario."

"I'm not her bodyguard."

He cocks an eyebrow at me. "No?"

"Uncle Enzo just told me to keep an eye on her at the gym." I shrug. "He hooked her up with a house in a safe area. I've been there a few times, but I've been careful. No one's going to find her through me."

"She does know that you've been tasked with watching her, right?"

When I sit silently, Vincent drops his head back.

"Are you really this dumb?" he asks, eyes on the ceiling.

I let out a deep breath. "I mentioned that Enzo wanted me to keep an eye on her." I don't mention that I told her this the morning after the club incident. And that I may have let her believe that Uncle Enzo told me to watch over her *that* night. But I don't need to mention it, since Vincent can clearly read enough between the lines.

"You see how this is going to blow up in your big ugly face, yeah? Does she even know what you do? That you're *almost* as loaded as I am?"

That takes me off guard. "What does money have to do with anything?"

He looks at me like I really am the dumbest man alive. "People can get weird when there's such a big fiscal gap between them."

"She's not poor. She's a Physical Therapist for fuck's sake." I defend Beth.

"I'm just saying, you better start being truthful with this girl, or else..." Vincent puts his hands together then makes an explosion sound as he pulls his hands apart, miming a bomb.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

ANGELO

I spot Beth before she spots me. I've been thinking about her all weekend. Trying to decide how to handle this thing between us in a way that won't blow up in my face. And the best conclusion I've come up with is to woo her. Charm her into falling for me. Where to go from there, I have no idea. I don't know if I want something serious. I don't know what I want, *period*. But it's my plan. Part of a plan. The beginning of a plan.

And, when I quietly push through the doors and approach the desk where Beth has her back to me, I happen to overhear the perfect opening.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BETH

“Wow, are you serious?” I ask Sissy, taking the envelope she hands me.

“Yep. Mary Wilder said her son got you five tickets to the next Sleet game. I peeked at the date; it’s this Wednesday.”

I close my eyes and think. “I’m pretty sure Noah doesn’t have a game until Friday.”

Sissy claps. “Perfect! He’s going to be so excited! You can bring him and some of his hockey friends.”

I nod. “Noah’s going to be so excited. There are two boys that he’s gotten close with, so I know he’ll want to invite them. That gives me an extra ticket.” I wiggle my eyebrows at Sissy.

“I wish.” She sighs. “But we have dinner with Daniella’s parents that night.”

“I’ll take you.” Angelo’s deep voice sounds from right behind me and I nearly scream.

With my hands clutched against my chest, I slowly turn to face the man who has the audacity to even offer such a thing.

Sissy beats me to a response. “Oh, yes! Angelo is the perfect person to go with.”

I narrow my eyes at Angelo while directing my question at Sissy. “How so?”

I can hear her freaking grin. “Because he helped set up security down at the arena. And he can keep you and the boys safe. Plus, if you ever get separated, you’ll be able to find him. You know, because he’s big-as-hell.”

As Sissy rambles on, Angelo’s smirk grows. “What she said.”

Going for unaffected, I prop one fist on my hip. “And what if something *comes up* and you’re forced to run away...” I say, alluding to the way he ran out of my office last week just seconds after - against my better judgement - we had sex. Again.

His smirk doesn’t even slip. “I’ll clear my schedule.”

I open my mouth, and frustratingly find myself at a lack for words.

“Good. It’s settled,” he says, pulling the envelope from my hand and peeking at the tickets inside. “Starts at 7:00. I’ll pick you up at 6:00. Have all the boys at your place.” Then he slides the envelope into his pocket, patting it twice. “I’ll keep these safe.”

I stand slack-jawed as he casually strolls away. *The nerve of this guy! Who does he think he is?*

The sound of Sissy’s giggles has me spinning to face her.

“What the hell just happened?” I ask.

She grins. “I think you just got roped into a date with Angelo.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

BETH

“Boys!” I yell from my spot near the front window.
“Coming!” A trio of teenaged voices call back.

Angelo just pulled up in front of the house, idling in his dark SUV, since the driveway is filled with mine, Noah’s, Marcus’s, and Willy’s cars. I hold up a finger against the glass, letting him know we’ll be out in a moment.

A loud whoop of noise precedes the boys as they pile out of the hallway.

Willy and Marcus are a good influence on Noah. They’re both loud and funny, and it’s fun to watch Noah come out of his shell when he’s around them.

I overheard Marcus using the term MILF earlier, followed by a thud, then a laughing cry of pain. It took me a moment to put it together, but the awkward introduction we had at the ice arena is starting to make sense. Honestly, I think Marcus is just trying to rile up Noah. I’m a little curious to see how Angelo handles it.

“Ready?” I look them over. They’re all wearing their own hockey jerseys over sweatshirts. I’m wearing one of Noah’s new hockey hoodies since I don’t have any Minnesota Sleet stuff to wear. Hopefully, these layers will be enough to keep us warm. I didn’t want to deal with lugging around a bunch of winter jackets.

The boys all nod and head to the door. I turn the TV on, so the house doesn’t look empty, and so the dogs have something to listen to, then follow them outside.

“Noah, you want shotgun? I’ll sit next to Beth in the back.” Marcus says with a grin.

“I think not.” Angelo’s deep voice rumbles through the air, causing us all to stop and look to where he’s rounding the front of the car.

“Ah!” Marcus stumbles over his own feet as he takes a step back.

I bite my lip to stop from smiling. Even from ten feet away, Angelo is an imposing figure. Dressed all in black, looming through the growing dusk.

“Hey, Angelo.” Noah greets him.

“Fighter.” Angelo nods at him but keeps walking towards me. He doesn’t stop until he’s next to me, his chest brushing against my shoulder, as he faces the boys. He puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his large body. I’m not sure what to do with this greeting. I haven’t seen him since he stole the tickets from me on Monday. I don’t know if he’s been busy, or if he was just avoiding me so I wouldn’t have a chance to steal my tickets back.

“Hey, doc.” He whispers before dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

And I melt. I. Fucking. Melt. *What is it about kisses like that?* Ugh.

“Boys.” His arm is still around me, but he’s addressing Noah’s friends.

Noah takes the cue, pointing to one then the other. “This is Willy, and that’s Marcus.”

Both boys are staring wide-eyed, but Marcus looks a little pale.

It’s too quiet for the others to hear, but I can feel Angelo’s chest vibrate in a chuckle. The sadist is enjoying making these kids squirm.

“Let’s go,” Angelo says, keeping his arm in place as he walks us towards the car. “We’ll hit some traffic, but we won’t have to deal with the parking ramps. I have a spot.”

“Of course you do.” I mumble.

Angelo ignores my comment and steps away so he can open the passenger door for me. I see him look over my head. “Kids in the back.”

He waits until I’m buckled in before closing my door and circling around to the driver’s side.

“*Shit* Noah, when you said he was big I thought you meant fat. Not big like a freaking monster who could crush me with one hand...” Marcus whispers none-too-quietly in the back seat.

Noah laughs. “That’s what you get for assuming.”

Marcus lets out a fake shiver. “Ms. Beth, I’m sorry for everything I’ve ever said to you. Please don’t let your boyfriend eat me.”

Before I have a chance to correct him, Angelo’s door opens.

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“No. Angelo, you don’t need to do that.”

He uses his massive size to block me from the cashier and hands his card over. I’d pound my fists against his broad back, but I doubt he’d even feel it. Plus, I don’t want to make a scene.

“Thanks, Angelo.” Noah says, picking up his plate of nachos and bottle of

water.

I can feel Angelo's response more than I can hear it. The other boys also thank him for the absurdly expensive concession food. I've never been to a professional hockey game before, but I should have expected these prices.

"Babe, come grab yours." Angelo glances at me over his shoulder.

Like the shining beacon of health that I am, I grab my dinner of French fries and mumble a thank you.

I don't know what to do with his pet names. He's been so all over the place with me, I don't even know what to think about tonight. Is this a date? Can you really call it a date with three teenage boys in tow?

Angelo picks up his food last, a ridiculous pile of calories. I think he had them combine two hamburger meals into one paper boat. I'm stunned by how much food Noah can eat; I can't even imagine what a 16-year-old Angelo was like.

Food in-hand, I follow along behind the boys. As we get closer and closer to the ice, I realize that I shouldn't be surprised at how good these seats are. I got these tickets from my patient, who got them from her son, who's *on* the team. And if the jerseys we see everywhere are any indication, Jackson Wilder is kind of a big deal.

One of the boys lets out a whistle when we finally reach our seats. We're near center ice, three rows up. And - thankfully - we have five seats on the end of the section, so we don't have to climb over anyone.

"You next." Angelo says from behind me, jolting me back to the task at hand.

I'd spaced out watching the players warm up. They're so close.

I shuffle in and settle in next to Noah, leaving the seat on the end for Angelo.

Instantly the boys start nonstop chatter about which players are their favorites, pointing to the ice, all while stuffing their faces.

With them distracted, I feel like I can finally talk to Angelo. But I'm not sure what to say.

Popping a fry into my mouth, I look at Angelo out of the corner of my eye. I swear he just ate half a burger in a single bite.

"You really didn't need to do that." I say, turning towards him. "I didn't invite you so you'd pay for all of us."

Angelo's mouth tilts up as he looks down at me. "If I recall correctly, you didn't *invite* me at all."

I purse my lips. “True. You did kinda bully yourself into this.”

He shrugs, his shoulder brushing mine in the process, and takes another bite of his food. It’s a good thing I’m not claustrophobic, because he’s taking up half of my seat along with his own.

Placing my hand on his thigh, I hope he understands I’m being serious. “Seriously, I’ll pay you back.”

Angelo sighs and shifts so he can look at me. “Beth, it’s fine. That was nothing.”

I give him my own sigh. “That was like \$100 back there. Which is ridiculous, and not nothing.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I don’t live in my mom’s basement spending all my money on a gym membership. Alright? I have a job.” I open my mouth to argue further, but he holds up a hand to stop me. “I told you before that I’ve worked in security.”

I nod, remembering that, assuming he’s a bouncer at some club or something.

Angelo keeps his eyes on mine. “I’m Head of Security for Mazzanti Enterprises. It’s less field work than what I used to do, but I like it. I’m good at it. I get paid well for it. And my cousin, Vincent, runs the whole damn company. So if I need a raise to pay for some nachos and overpriced French fries, I’m sure I can talk him into it.”

I mentally check that my mouth isn’t hanging open. That... That is not what I expected. I’ve heard the name Mazzanti Enterprises enough times to know they’re a huge company. Like *super huge*. And I remember hearing about the Minneapolis location in the news last year. Something about a kidnapper getting kicked out of a top floor window. I hope that *less field work* means Angelo wasn’t anywhere near that.

Taking in his high quality clothes, thinking about the luxury SUV he drives, I guess it makes sense.

And then it really dawns on me. Uncle Enzo. This must be how Uncle Enzo is so connected. I’ve always known that he *knows people*, but I never knew who those people were. Just that they had influence. Influence that’s evident with how easily he was able to help Noah and I. Clearly I don’t understand the extent of it, but I know Uncle Enzo has money. Like lots of money. So if Angelo is from similar circles, then dropping a hundred bucks really is nothing.

I keep my voice as even as possible, I say, “In that case, I want some

M&M's too."

A slow smile pulls across his face. "I'll get you whatever you want, doc."

I don't know if it's the look in his eyes, or the cold air that seems to be swirling around, but a chill skitters down my arms.

"Can you hold this for a second?" I hold my food out to Angelo.

He takes it without question. I wipe my salty fingers on a napkin then dig into the big pocket on the front of my sweatshirt, coming out with my blue and gold pom pom hat.

I don't think much of it, until I get it pulled on and look back over to Angelo. The look on his face has me feeling all sorts of self-conscious and I feel my cheeks turn pink.

Without a word, he hands me back my fries, then holds out his food for me to take. Returning the favor, I wonder if he's about to pull his own hat out of some hidden spot. Instead, he tugs his phone out and holds it up.

"Smile, baby."

"Wha-" My question is cut off by the sound of him taking a photo.

"I told you to smile, babe." When I just blink at him, he raises an eyebrow. "The picture you sent me was all blurry. I need a new one."

His comment pulls an unintended smile onto my lips.

He snaps another picture and tucks the phone back in his pocket. Leaning in close, Angelo puts his mouth against my ear. "You look cute enough to devour."

Now my cheeks are flushing for a whole new reason. "Oh."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

BETH

I can scarcely hear myself think above the excitement vibrating through the vehicle. The boys haven't stopped talking over each other since we all climbed in to head home.

The game itself was good. Or so I'm told. I couldn't exactly pay attention. Angelo had his arm around the back of my chair for the entire game, so obviously I overthought it the whole time. Was it an act of romance? A way for him to be closer to me? Or did he do it simply because he's too big and can't be contained by a single seat? When his large palm curled over my shoulder, I was certain he was doing it on purpose. But then he got bumped by someone behind us, so maybe he was just trying to keep himself out of the way?

"Right, Beth?" Noah asks.

"Uh, yes." I mumble, before Angelo's chuckle has me looking back at Noah. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said we should do this again." He has a grin on his face that warms my soul, and I'd agree to just about anything to keep it there.

"I can't promise tickets that good, but we can definitely go to another game." I smile.

"Awesome." He turns his gaze to the back of Angelo's head. "You'll have to come, too."

Although he's driving, Angelo must know Noah is talking to him.

He replies in his deep voice. "Anytime, Fighter."

I should probably put up a fuss about Noah inviting him, but I think Noah wants Angelo with because of his connections. I never doubted that Angelo was telling me the truth about his job, but tonight proved that he travels in elite circles. When the game ended, he surprised us by bringing us down to the Sleet locker room. Angelo introduced the boys to some of the players, the head coach, and his stunning daughter - Izzy. I think Marcus was more excited about meeting Izzy than he was the players. Even though she's probably a decade older than him.

It's dark out now, but - with the streetlights - I can see the smirk on Angelo's face.

I nudge his elbow. "Looking that smug, I expect to see Canary feathers falling from your lips."

Without looking, Angelo's hand reaches out and captures mine, resting our joined hands on the center console.

"I live to impress high school kids." His words are low, and only for me.

"Is that so?" I ask.

In a move I never could have predicted, Angelo pulls my hand up and lightly kisses my knuckles.

"If I happen to also impress a pretty lady, so be it," he murmurs.

I'm biting my lip, trying to keep my smile at bay. I don't know what to do with this version of Angelo.

Needing to gather my wits, I keep my eyes down. And it's because of that, that I see the text that flashes across his screen.

Angelo's phone is in the cupholder between us. I'm not prying. I wasn't even trying to read it. I just happened to be staring right at the phone when the screen lit up. And my eyes took in the words before my brain could tell them to look away. If it weren't for all of that, I wouldn't have this rock building in my throat.

Rachel Huntington: Where are you, Tiger?

Tiger? I don't know if I should laugh or throw up... Throw up. Definitely.

I pull my hand free from Angelo's grip and clasp my hands together in my lap. What the hell is his problem? Why would he take us all out tonight? Why would he make this feel like a date? What's the point?

Within a heartbeat, I force my hurt to morph into anger. This prick. This total freaking prick. He hasn't just tricked me. He's tricked Noah. Noah who's lost so much. Noah who's trusted Angelo as easily as I have. Noah doesn't need this. I don't need this.

"Beth." Angelo's voice is still quiet, but I can feel the weight of my name as he says it.

I wasn't exactly stealthy with my hand withdrawal. I turn my head to look out the side window. We'll be home soon, and then I can be done with this man's bullshit once and for all. God, I'm such a fool.

"Beth." He says again.

I glance at him just long enough for him to see the look on my face.

"Don't." I keep my voice low, like he did. The boys in back don't need to

be a part of this.

Angelo turns down my street and I let out an exhale. Almost there.

Thankfully, the boys have continued to babble this whole time, not noticing the tension in the front seat.

Angelo slows to a stop in front of the house. Finally. But as I reach to unbuckle my seatbelt, a large hand closes over mine.

“Noah, can you go unlock the house. I need to keep Beth for a minute.” His tone neutral.

Noah agrees, and the boys thank Angelo as they climb out of the car.

When the last door closes, his eyes find mine. “What just happened?”

I pull my hand away from his, again, and cross my arms. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Baby, don’t play dumb. You can’t pull it off.”

I feel like that was a compliment, and it only serves to make me madder. “What is this?!” - the question bursts out of me.

“What is what?” His face scrunches, making him look infuriatingly cute.

“This.” I gesture between us. “What are we doing? Was this a date? Or is this just a *thing*? You know what, never mind. I don’t care. I’m not looking to compete with anyone. Have fun with Rachel.”

Turning away from him, I reach for the door handle. The second my hand comes into contact with the cool metal, the door locks engage.

I try to reach for the lock button on my door, but Angelo’s long arm reaches across grabbing my far hand this time. With one tug, I’m facing him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” He looks more confused than mad.

I sigh and roll my eyes. “Angelo, I saw the text she just sent you. I didn’t see it on purpose, but I’m glad I did. I’m not interested in messy.” He glances at his phone, then back to me. I fill him in. “She wanted to know where her *Tiger* was. I’m assuming you’re heading there next.” I’m done fighting. My anger dissolves, and I feel deflated. “It’s fine, Angelo.”

“The fuck it is!” His voice comes out at a shout. He sees me startle and let’s go of my arm, running his free hand down his face. “Rachel is... nothing.”

I cross my arms again. I may not like her, but I don’t think he should treat his *partners* so coolly.

Angelo shakes his head. “It’s not like that. It’s *never* been like that. Rachel is a clingy desperate wench who is only interested in my status and money. We aren’t dating. We aren’t a thing.”

“But I saw you two. More than once. And Sissy told me...” I trail off. Sissy told me a few theories, but she did admit it was all hearsay.

“Yeah, you saw her accost me in the parking lot. And you saw her approach me at the gym, but you didn’t see me telling her to fuck off.” He’s calmer now. And something in his eyes has me wanting to believe him.

“So you aren’t dating her anymore?” Maybe it’s stupid to ask. He could just lie to me.

“We were never dating.” When I raise my eyebrow, he holds up a palm. “We weren’t fucking around either. Or whatever other rumors you’ve heard. Damn Sissy.” He grumbles her name before continuing. “I took Rachel out to dinner *once*. Against my better judgement. And she was so goddamn boring that after dinner I dropped her off at her house. I didn’t even get out of the car to walk her to the door.”

I catch myself biting my lip. “You two haven’t...”

Angelo shakes his head. “Nope.”

Then he reaches for his phone. Before I know what he’s doing, the phone is ringing through the car speakers and her name is showing on the screen.

“Angelo!” I whisper-shout.

“I saved her number so I would know to ignore it. I should have just blocked it.”

The call picks up.

“Angelo?” A feminine voice purrs.

“Rachel, we talked about this. Don’t text me. Don’t call me. And don’t ever fucking call me Tiger.” With that, he hangs up.

My mouth drops open. I have no idea how to respond to that.

“Close your mouth, baby girl. You’re giving me ideas.”

My mouth snaps shut.

“Come on, let me walk you up.” Angelo says, calm as can be, like I didn’t just listen to him telling a woman off.

I haven’t even moved by the time Angelo circles the car and pulls my door open.

“So, you’re not sleeping with anyone else?” My words come out slow.

Angelo leans in close. “No. And if you ask me anymore stupid questions, I’ll bend you over my knee. Then I’d have to kill Marcus on the off chance he witnessed it, and I’m not prepared to murder a horny kid right now. So shut the fuck up and kiss me.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

BETH

Angelo's lips descend on mine. I expect them to meet in a clash, but instead he slows until our lips are barely brushing. The scared part of me wants to hesitate. To question him further. But I saw the truth in his eyes. I heard the phone call. He might hurt me in the long run, but I don't want to hold back anymore.

My hands reach up and curl over his shoulders. His muscles firm under my touch.

My lower half is still facing forward in the seat, but one of Angelo's hands reaches across my lap. Grabbing my knee, he pulls until I've spun to face him. My legs automatically part, allowing him to step in-between my knees. When he does, he palms the back of my head and deepens the kiss.

I let out a sound that's filled with my need.

"Fuck, baby." Angelo whispers against my lips.

His breath tickles and I tip forward pressing a firm kiss on his mouth to chase the feeling away.

"How long until those kids leave?"

I chuckle. "They aren't. All the parents agreed we didn't want the boys driving home this late, so they're sleeping over."

Angelo groans and drops his head to my shoulder. "Well, shit."

My arms come up to encircle his neck and let him lean into me. "I'd offer you a drink, but I don't want to set a bad example for them. Drinking on a school night, and all that."

"I wouldn't want to set a bad example by waking them up with a creaky bed frame."

"Angelo." I admonish him, tugging gently on his soft hair.

He huffs out another breath then slowly extracts himself. I keep a hand on the top of his head, making sure he doesn't hit it on the door frame. I'm not sure how he even wedged his body in here in the first place.

Once he's back to standing tall, I let him help me out of his car.

Walking to the front door, fingers entwined, I decide that this was indeed a date. I wasn't sure in the beginning. By the middle I was hoping it was.

About ten minutes ago, I wanted to punch him. But now I don't want it to be over.

"I had a really nice time." I tell Angelo, sounding shy. "Thanks for driving and buying everyone dinner. I really appreciate it. I hope you know that."

"I know it." Angelo squeezes my fingers. "I expected you to hit me when I took those tickets from you. I'm glad you didn't."

I don't hold back my smile. I should probably be mad at him for bullying his way into this evening. I should definitely be mad at him for the way he ran out after claim-fucking me in my office. Maybe I'm being *that girl*, but I want to let all that go. I let out a silent sigh. I'm going to trust my gut on this, and my gut tells me to give this a shot.

Angelo pauses when we reach the front door. "This is where I leave you."

I surprise us both when I wrap my arms around him in a hug. Angelo doesn't waste time returning the gesture and I find myself sinking into the comfort that he offers.

"This is nice." I soak in the heat of him.

"Yes, it is." Angelo murmurs above my head.

Angelo pulls back so he can look down at me. "I have a bunch of meetings tomorrow, so I don't think I'll make it to Atom's. But I'll see you there Friday?" He says it as a question.

"I'll be there."

"Good. Now get in the house and lock the door."

I roll my eyes. "Yes, sir."

Before I can step away, he grabs my hips and pulls me tight against his body. "Mmmm. I could get used to that."

"You like formality? I can be proper." I bat my lashes up at him. "Sir, would you like me to suck your cock?"

I swear his eyes bulge before he grinds what is most definitely not a flashlight against my belly.

"Get the fuck inside." He growls.

Slipping from his hold, I laugh as I dart through the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

ANGELO

“I have Eric heading the new-” I’m interrupted by my cell ringing. I don’t bother apologizing. I’m in a meeting with Vincent and a few of my top security guys discussing an organizational shift. If anyone understands interruptions, it’s this group.

Answering, I see it’s the number for the security desk downstairs in the lobby. “What is it?”

“Uh, boss, there’s a kid here asking to talk to you.” Raul tells me, sounding uncomfortable.

“A kid?” I’m confused. The only *kids* I know are family, and Raul would know them by sight.

“Yeah, well, maybe not a kid exactly.”

“Spit it out, Raul.”

“Says his name is Noah Smith.”

I’m standing before Raul can even finish. “Send him to me.”

Not bothering with an explanation, I stride out of the conference room. I’m certain Raul will fast track the elevator. I’m only waiting by the doors for a moment before they slide open, revealing Noah.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, reading the tension in the way he’s standing.

He steps out, visibly swallowing before he replies. “I can’t find Beth.”

“Explain.” I demand, slipping into my professional mode.

Noah glances around nervously and I’m reminded who I’m talking to.

I place a hand on his back and guide him down the hall. “There are no threats here, but we can talk in my office.”

“Sorry... I just... I heard you tell Beth that you work here. I didn’t want to just show up but I don’t have your number.” Noah’s rambling nervously.

“I’m glad you came.” I say, using my card to unlock my door.

Noah steps in and starts pacing. I need him to talk, but I need him to calm down. He’s not one of the trained professionals I’m used to working with.

Pushing down my impatience, I force myself to walk around my desk and sit in the chair. “Sit down.” I command.

He drops into the seat, hands wringing in his lap.

Noah's eyes are pleading when he says, "I don't know where she is."

I grab a water bottle from the shelf behind my desk and toss it to him. "Take a breath, then start from the beginning."

"Okay. Alright." He takes a drink of the water. "I forgot my skates at home this morning. But I had a free period, so I ran home to get them before practice. But..." Noah trails off and his eyes dart around the room.

"Noah. Noah, look at me. You can trust me. I know you don't know me well, but you can trust me. Beth does. Uncle Enzo does. Okay?"

He nods. "Yeah. Okay."

"Did something happen when you went home?" I prompt.

"There were two guys." His face pales. "Normally I'm on autopilot driving home, ya know. But one of the neighbors was backing out of his driveway, so I had slow way down. And that's when I noticed the guys at our front door."

"What did they look like?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. They didn't look right. I mean, they looked like normal guys, but not like city workers or whatever. They were wearing dark jackets and hats hid their faces. When the guy backing up got out of my way, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want them to see me. In case they were bad guys. So, I drove past, and watched them in my rearview mirror. When I saw them trying to look in the windows I got freaked out."

"Did they notice you?" I ask.

Noah takes another drink of water. "I don't think so."

"Good. Did you try calling Beth?"

"Yeah but she didn't answer. I figured she was with a patient or something, so I went to the gym. But her car wasn't there. And that Sissy woman wasn't sitting at the front desk, so I had no way to get inside. She should be there. She never said anything about going somewhere. And she's not answering her phone." Noah's voice is rising. "She wouldn't just leave. I know she wouldn't just leave."

"It's alright. I know she wouldn't." I tell him, fully believing it.

Noah continues, like he didn't hear me. "I would have called Uncle Enzo, but I don't have his number. I don't have anyone's number. I didn't know what to do!"

I raise my voice to get his attention. "Noah." His mouth snaps shut. "You did the right thing. I'll get you the phone numbers you need, but right now you need to let me help."

He stares at me for a moment before replying. “Okay.”

I turn and unlock my computer monitors. While screens flash on, I pull up Beth’s number on my phone. Calling it, I listen to it ring several times. She’s not answering, but the phone isn’t off. By the time the voicemail picks up, the program I need is ready to go. Hanging up the call, I type in Beth’s number. Having friends in the Defense Department is great for multiple reasons. Today it’s great because through some not-so-legal means, I’m able to track Beth’s phone.

When the marker indicating Beth’s location flashes to life, my chest tightens.

“Open the door.” I bark at Noah.

He jumps from his seat and reaching the door, pulls it wide open.

“Vincent!” I boom out.

Knowing he’ll be here in two seconds; I send an immediate response code to the three best guys I have on site.

“What is it?” Vincent asks, appearing in my doorway.

“I need you to take Noah to your place.” I gesture to the boy in question.

“I gotta go get Beth.”

Noah looks back and forth between me and the man who’s a stranger to him.

His stance is ramrod-straight when he squares off to me. “Where is she?”

I debate lying to him, or telling him nothing at all, but I go with the truth.

“She’s at the hospital.”

He steps towards me. “I’m coming too.”

I shake my head. “No. With the right calls I can get through security, but I can’t get you through. It’ll only slow us down.”

It’s a harsh truth, but he accepts it with a maturity I wasn’t expecting.

“Alright.” He nods once.

I gesture to Vincent. “This is my cousin. He’s good.” I move around my desk and place a hand on Noah’s shoulder. “I’ll bring her back to you.”

Behind Vincent, I see my guys approaching at a run.

Dialing one more number before we go, it only rings once before it’s picked up. “Enzo, I need you to make a call.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

BETH

“Alright, this might be a little cold, but just relax.” The feminine voice says, a moment before I feel the cool metal press against my flesh.

Relax. I chew on my lip as I stare at the ceiling. They always say that, though it’s hardly a relaxing experience. Today it’s made even less so with the presence of the young medical student shadowing my doctor. So - lucky me - instead of just one set of eyes, I have two people standing at the foot of the bed staring at my spread open vagina.

“You said you’ve only been with one person recently?” The doctor asks.

“Mmhmm.” I confirm. She’s asked this, along with a few other strange questions already.

“Do you live with your partner?”

“Oh, um, no.” I reply.

“Do you feel safe at home?”

“Yes?” I say it like a question, which was the wrong thing to do.

“We have resources for you, if you feel like you’re in trouble.”

What on earth? Oh. My. God. *Ohmygod!* Realization hits me and I feel a blush burn across my body at record speed. I don’t know if it’s possible to blush *down there* but if it is, I’m doing it.

My bruises. Those damn fingerprint sized bruises all over my upper thighs from the rough, unexpected, epically hot, jealousy-driven, pressed-against-my-office-door, sex with Angelo. It’s been almost a week, but the bruises are still plenty visible.

“Well, um, if you’re talking about my...” I bring a hand up to cover my eyes, hoping it will hide my embarrassment. It doesn’t. “That was consensual.”

“As long as you’re sure.” The doctor hums, face still hovering between my legs.

“Yeah. I... liked it.” My second hand comes up to cover my mouth. OH MY GOD! I did not just say that. I want to suffocate myself with the paper bed sheet to put myself out of my misery. I’m sure the medical student is dying to laugh right now.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about.” The doctor says, patting my thigh. “Okay, I’m going to remove the speculum.”

Keeping my eyes shut, I do my best to pretend I’m dead.

“Okay, I’m going to insert a finger into your vagina and then press on your abdomen.” Her voice is so friendly that it somehow makes the experience even worse. I know they have to tell you all of this, but I’d really rather not know. Let me be surprised.

Just when I think I couldn’t be any more mortified, raised voices in the hallway snag my attention. I slowly lower my hands from my face, eyes wide open in horror, the doctor’s finger still shoved up my hoo-ha, as I listen to the unmistakable sound of Angelo’s angry rumble.

“All done.” The sound of rubber gloves being pulled off accompanies the doctor’s statement.

Removing my feet from the stirrups, I do my best to sit up calmly.

The two medical professionals look at each other, as the voices continue. Getting closer. And louder.

“Why don’t you step out and see what that’s about.” My doctor says to the student.

“No!” I blurt the word louder than I intended and they both jerk their gazes to me. “Sorry. It’s just that... Uh, I know who’s out there.”

The doctor narrows her eyes at me.

I hold both my hands up. “No. No, it’s nothing like that.” I sigh. “I’m sorry for the disturbance. I don’t know why he’s here, but he must’ve figured out I was at the hospital and panicked. Overreacting is kind of his thing.” I glance at my purse sitting on the floor. The lunatic must have tracked my phone.

Both women are staring at me, doubt written all over their features.

“I promise. That’s Angelo Rossi out there. He’s a big-time security guy at Mazzanti Enterprises. I’m beginning to think he takes his role as protector a little too seriously.” I tell them, trying to look as sincere as possible.

Angelo’s voice is now dangerously close to my exam room door and we can hear him clearly. “The call you just got should give you all the permission you need. Now where the fuck is she?”

I change my mind about hiding. “Can you just stick your head out there and tell him I’m fine?” I ask, worried he’s about to escalate.

“This can be a good learning moment.” The doctor says. “Unruly patients and guests are part of the job.”

Keeping my butt planted on the table I hold the medical gown tight over my lap while I watch the doctor go to the door. She places a foot just behind the door, so it can only open a few inches. When she opens the door, the student standing behind her cranes her neck to see who's causing the commotion.

The doctor clears her throat. "Are you Angelo?"

"Yes." I can hear his heavy footsteps. "Is Beth in there?"

"She is. And she's fine. But I need you to wait out here. Quietly." Without waiting for a reply, she shuts the door.

I can picture Angelo on the other side, grinding his teeth in annoyance.

"He's huge." The student whispers, before her own cheeks turn pink. She's probably thinking back to the bruises on my legs. Which means she's probably picturing us having sex. That's what I'd be doing if I were her.

The doctor smiles at me. "Huge and worried. We'll step out so you can get dressed. The office will call if there's anything we need to talk to you about, but everything looks good. Your prescription will be sent to your pharmacy. Finish out the week of pills you have left then start the new prescription. As long as you don't skip any days, you'll be fine."

They slip out the door, and I take a moment to just breathe. If it weren't for Angelo I wouldn't even be here. After our round of unplanned and unprotected sex, I realized I was getting low on my birth control. When I tried to call in a refill, it got flagged saying I was overdue for an appointment. If I wasn't having sex with anyone, I probably would've let it lapse. But since I have an oversized, overbearing man in my life, banging me at inopportune times, I figured I should stay on top of it. I knew it'd be taking a chance coming here, since I needed to use my real name for my medical records, but it needed to be done.

Doing my best to clean up and dress quickly, I steel myself and pull open the door.

The doctor and her student are standing in front of my door, assumingly as guards. I'm glad they stayed since I'm sure Angelo would have just walked in otherwise.

At the sound of the door opening, the doctor nods to Angelo. "Thank you for waiting." She looks over her shoulder at me. "Have a nice day, dear." Then with a nudge to her student, they both walk away.

Before I can step out of the room, Angelo steps forward. His body as imposing as always in dark jeans and a skintight black thermal shirt. "Are

you okay? Are you hurt? What's wrong?" His normally stoic composure beyond cracked.

"I'm fine." I prop my hands on my hips. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He ignores me. "Are you sick? Why are you at the hospital?" His eyes quickly trace all over my body, looking for an injury.

Knowing he won't shut up until I give him an answer, I lower my voice. "I was getting my damn *physical*. Are you happy?"

He looks past me into the room, then back, before dropping his gaze lower on my body. "*That* sort of physical?"

I throw my hands up. "Yes, *that* sort of physical."

His face hardens and he steps closer. "Did you come here to get tested? I'm not fucking dirty."

He looks so affronted, I almost laugh. Almost. "You're an idiot."

We stand there, looking at each other, before I sigh and give in. "I'm getting my pills refilled."

He blinks. "Oh."

"Yeah, *Oh*. Now why are you here?"

His mood sobers. "We were looking for you."

His use of the word *we* has me noticing the three large goons that're standing behind him.

"Did something happen?" I ask, finally understanding that something must have prompted his search for me. My adrenaline spikes. "Noah?!"

Angelo places his large hands on either side of my neck. "Beth, Noah's fine. He came to me, looking for you."

"Why?"

"We'll talk once we're out of here." He says, turning and guiding me through the hallways, until we make it out of the hospital.

When we get to the parking lot, Angelo asks for my car keys.

"Why?" I stop walking.

"Because you're riding with me. Eric will bring your car to your house." I open my mouth to ask *why* again, but Angelo cuts off my protest. "I'll fill you in on the drive."

Rather than argue, I dig my keys out of my purse and drop them in Angelo's open palm. With hardly a glance he tosses the keys behind me and I hear someone, probably some man named Eric, catch them.

Once we're both inside Angelo's vehicle, my patience snaps. "Tell me

what's going on."

He does. As we drive away from the hospital, Angelo quickly runs me through the story Noah told him. When I start to ask a million questions, Angelo assures me yet again that Noah is fine. I repeat that over and over in my mind. I'm sure Noah was terrified, but he kept a cool head and did the right thing.

I'm a little surprised when Angelo admits to tracking my phone, but I'm not surprised that he's not the least bit sorry for the breach of my privacy.

"Where's Noah? Still at your office?" I ask.

Pulling to a stop at a red light he glances my way. "No, Vincent took him to his place."

"What?" I explode. "You can't just send my son off with some strangers!"

My son.

My voice catches in my throat when the words hit me. It just came out.

My son. I don't know when it happened. How it became reality. But he is. He's my son now. *Mine.*

Guilt. Grief. Love. Each emotion feels stronger than the last. That poor boy has had so much go wrong in his life. He deserves better and I'm going to give it to him. Because he's mine now. My son. I'll never let anything hurt him again.

Angelo set his hand on my thigh, rubbing it up and down. "They're good people. Vincent's my cousin, remember? We've been best friends our whole life. And his wife, Sasha, will be there. And my niece, Annie. She's younger than Noah, but she's great." He squeezes just above my knee. "Come on, baby girl. Please don't cry."

I blink at his words, noticing that my eyes are filled with tears. Angelo is mistaking my extreme emotional reaction as worry over Noah's current whereabouts. I should try to correct him, but I can't. Not yet. If I do, I'll lose it. I can break down later. When I'm alone.

Angelo keeps talking, his voice soft and reassuring. "I told Eric to call Vincent after I found you, so they know we're coming back together. Noah's fine. He knows you're fine. I'm sure Annie's already got him battling her in some video game."

I'm frantically wiping tears off my face, sniffing.

"How old is Annie?" My voice sounds awful.

"Uh, 13? Going on freaking 30. She's not Sasha's biological daughter, but I bet she'll officially adopt her soon. They're a good family." His hand is still

stroking my leg. “Marie should be there, too.”

I sniff again, getting a grip on my emotions. “Who’s Marie?”

“Vin’s mom. See? Noah’s in good hands. He’s hanging out with three generations of Mazzantis in one of the most secured penthouses in the city.”

Angelo’s voice urges me to believe him.

Needing the contact, I set my hand on top of his on my lap. Angelo flips his hand over so we’re palm to palm.

It’s quiet in the car for a few minutes before Angelo speaks again. “I have a crew that’s going to install a new security system at your place, but I need to know what to do about the dogs. Do you have a command or something, so they won’t attack my guys?”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that.”

Angelo squeezes my hand. “Babe, it’s happening with or without your help. So tell me what to do about the dogs.”

Sighing, I accept that there’s no use arguing with him. “We have a neighbor lady who dog sits for us. I bet she could take them for a bit.”

“Can you call her? Then send me her number.”

Relieved to have a task, I spend the rest of the drive texting with the neighbor.

By the time we pull into an underground parking lot, I’ve gotten the dogs squared away and Angelo has given the go-ahead to overhaul my house with high tech security stuff.

Feeling drained, I climb out of the car and let Angelo take my hand. We take an elevator up to a lobby. A really expensive looking lobby. Then get out and move into a different elevator. Angelo swipes a card over the sensor, then selects the top floor.

“Quite the building,” I say, mostly to myself.

Angelo shrugs. “It’s pretentious as fuck, but it’s got top notch security.”

I eye him. “Let me guess, your company?”

He looks down at me with a grin. “Yep.”

I bump him with my shoulder, suddenly feeling lighter. “Your modesty is humbling.”

The doors slide open on the top floor and Angelo pulls me out. “Marie is going to want us to stay for dinner. I hope that’s not a problem.”

“Pretty sure Noah’s missed practice by now.” I shrug. “Dinner would be nice.”

The hallway we’re walking down is wide, with pristine carpet and honest-

to-god chandeliers, with only a few doors visible. I can already tell this is going to be the nicest home I've ever been in.

Angelo pulls me to a stop in front of a door. Standing this close to the apartment, I can smell garlic and deliciousness seeping from under the door.

Angelo knocks, and we hear the sound of deadbolts unlocking. A second later the door is pulled open and we're greeted by a little gold-haired angel. This must be Annie.

"Hi!" She waves at me before smirking at Angelo. "You're in trouble."

Angelo's chin tips down. "Why? What'd I do?"

"You've been," Annie lifts her fingers for air quotes, "keeping secrets."

That phrase must mean something to Angelo because his massive shoulders sag. "Fuck."

"Language!" A loud voice admonishes from inside the apartment.

Looking past Annie, I see a small, adorable grey-haired woman approaching. Her mouth spread in a wide smile.

"Tesoro, my sweets!" She's beelining straight for Angelo.

Angelo squeezes my hand before greeting the woman. "Hi, Mama."

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

BETH

Holy flipping Christ. Just when I thought today couldn't get any more mortifying, I stumble into a surprise meet-the-mom moment with a man who isn't even technically my boyfriend. For all I know, he might just want to be fuck buddies. My palms instantly start to sweat.

The small woman tugs Angelo into an embrace. She's got to be no more than five feet tall, adorably curvy, with a head of bright white hair. I don't even want to think about a woman that small giving birth to the beast beside me.

With Angelo bending to return her hug, she lets out a string of incomprehensible words that I think might be Italian. Wait, does Angelo speak Italian? If I weren't in shock, I'd fan myself. Please, pretty please, let him speak Italian.

When she pulls his face down to kiss both of his cheeks, I have a brief moment to wonder if maybe he planned this. But when Angelo's terrified eyes meet mine, I know he had no hand in this. Somehow his discomfort helps me to relax. This is going to be just as painful for him.

"Oh, bel viso!" The woman's attention turns to me. "My goodness, look at you." She grabs me by the shoulders. "You're stunning." Her shockingly strong arms pull *me* into a hug.

Not expecting it, my arms end up worthlessly pinned at my sides.

I feel her turn her face towards Angelo. "She's stunning."

I pretend that I'm dressed up. In my mind I'm wearing a pretty but tasteful little black dress, instead of black leggings and a baggy pink sweater. I dressed thinking I'd have a half day of work followed by a visit to the crotch doctor. Not for dinner in a millionaire's penthouse with *my man's* family.

Angelo sighs. "I know, Ma. But would you let her go?"

She scoffs but releases me from her embrace.

"Beth, this is my mother, Giana. Mama, this is Beth." Angelo says, running a hand over the back of his neck.

She waves him off. "Yes, yes. Call me whatever you want, dear. I've been

looking forward to meeting you.”

“Ma!” Angelo snaps at her but she just waves him off again.

“Ignore him.” She tells me before throwing a glare Angelo’s way. “This *cafone* hasn’t told me a single peep about you. Mind you, he’s a sweet man. A real catch. Just not that clever about women.” I bite down on a laugh and Angelo lets out the type of groan that only a mother can elicit. “But your Noah, he’s quite the charmer. If you’re responsible for raising that boy then I know you’re good people.”

I open my mouth but I’m not sure how to respond to that.

Sensing my discomfort, Angelo places a hand on my back. “Come on, I know you want to see Noah.”

Tilting my head up, I give him a small smile. “Yes, please.”

When Giana turns to walk back into the apartment, Angelo looks down at me and mouths *sorry*.

Angelo starts to guide me forward when the girl pops back into the hallway, walking backwards ahead of us. The appearance of Angelo’s mother made me forget all about her.

“Noah’s racing my dad.” The young blonde says, looking at me. “I’m Annie.”

“Hi Annie. It’s nice to meet you. Thanks for letting us crash your dinner tonight.” Annie really is stunning. A girl on the verge of growing up. Bright blonde hair. Stunningly dark eyes. The kind of daughter that’s sure to give her daddy ulcers.

She smiles. “No worries. Noah’s pretty cool.” Her gaze darts to Angelo and her mouth tips up into a smirk. “I’ve never met one of Uncle Angelo’s girlfriends before.”

I literally stumble.

Luckily, I catch myself before Angelo’s forced to save me. But he does slide his hand up my spine, gently gripping the back of my neck.

“Okay brat, who put you up to that? Your dad or Grandma?” Angelo asks her.

Annie just grins. “Grandma.” Then she spins and skips ahead of us, past Giana, who I swear whispers *snitch* as she passes.

Angelo keeps his hand on me as we follow his mom into what can only be described as a great room. The apartment itself is clearly high-end, the size and wall of windows fitting the penthouse price tag. But I’m a little taken aback by the warm family feel the space has. Ever since Angelo told me

where he works, I've been meaning to look up information about Mazzanti Enterprises. The place reflects the sort of money I'd expect the owner, CEO, whatever Vincent is, to have. But for some reason I was expecting a swanky black and crystal bachelor pad. I wasn't imagining him as someone with a wife and tween daughter.

One side of the large room has a kitchen and dining area, but my eyes quickly focus on the opposite side of the space, where I see a familiar head of shaggy hair.

Noah is sitting on one of the large couches, in front of a TV showing some sort of car racing game. The sounds of engines and cheers emanate from the speakers, but I can make out the cadence of Noah's voice as he probably talks shit to his opponent.

Needing to make sure he's okay, but not wanting to interrupt his game, I slip down onto the couch in the open spot between him and the armrest.

"You winning?" I ask.

His body jerks. "Beth!" Instantly Noah drops the controller, turning his body to face me. "Are you okay? Why were you at the hospital? They told me you were fine, but... you know, strangers." He shrugs, eyes wide.

A sound of amusement comes from the other side of Noah.

"No offense." Noah says looking back, giving me my first glimpse of the man.

And holy hell, the man is *hot*. Like sex in a suit. And dark. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Dark everything. This man is everyone's type. Except I've recently discovered that my type runs towards absurdly large, blue-eyed, alpha assholes.

He leans forward extending a hand. "Hi. I'm Vincent."

I take his hand. "Angelo's cousin, right?"

He nods and grins. Good grief, what do they feed this family? Why are they so good looking? I'm also stunned by how much Annie looks nothing like him. Except for the onyx eyes.

Letting his hand go, I place my palm on Noah's knee. "Thank you so much for letting Noah come over here. I don't know how to repay you."

"Not necessary. Between Angelo and Uncle Enzo, you're practically family. Besides, Noah here is a great opponent," Vincent says giving Noah a pat on the back.

I catch the movement as Angelo walks up behind me. "Vin, you suck so much you'd consider a lawn chair a great opponent."

Vincent narrows his eyes at Angelo. “I’m not the one who Hulk Smashed my Nintendo after losing in Mario Kart.”

Angelo shrugs as he uses his foot to nudge the coffee table back a few inches, before sitting on it. Our knees brushing. “Whatever. I bought you a new one. Plus, you knew my limits. Not my fault you pushed them.”

Vincent laughs before looking at Noah. “He means, I knocked him off Rainbow Road one too many times.”

I have no idea what they’re talking about, but the three of them seem to find it all very amusing.

Then without notice, Angelo’s tone flips to complete seriousness as he looks at Noah. “It was smart of you to question what you were told about Beth. Complacency is dangerous. But from now on, no matter what, I want you to know that you can trust me, Vincent and anyone else in this apartment. You’re safe here. You’re safe at my office.” His gaze slides over to me. “That goes for both of you. No matter what.”

His eyes stay locked on mine, and I understand what he’s telling me. No matter what happens between us. No matter if we’re together or not, we’ll always be safe with him.

I believe him. I believe him so much it hurts. Without me even being aware of it, a heavy weight slips away from me. The weight of always being on edge. Alert. Of never feeling safe. For months, I’ve been on guard. I’ve been worried. Looking over my shoulder. I’ve been triple checking locks and tensing at every phone call. Every door knock. Every flash of headlights behind me.

“Beth.” Noah’s voice holds a note of worry.

I blink away the tears that had begun forming. “I’m okay.” My voice cracks and I swallow to clear it. “Are you okay?”

He nods at me but doesn’t look convinced.

I grab Noah’s hand. “I’m fine. I promise. I was just at the doctor for a normal appointment. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you this morning. I meant to, but then it slipped my mind. I promise I won’t do that again.”

“It’s alright.” Noah says.

“It’s not.” I shake my head. “I always want you to know where I am. Just like I need to know where you are. Until all of this...” I trail off, remembering where we are. “Thank you for being smart today. You did exactly the right thing going to Angelo. He might be a little unconventional, but I think he knows what he’s doing.”

That gets a smile out of Noah.

“Damn right.” Angelo’s voice doesn’t hold his usual cocky edge.

Footsteps approach, and Vincent rises from the couch. “Beth, this is my mother, Marie.”

I turn to meet another lovely older woman. “Hello.” I give her a small wave, not ready to get up and leave Noah’s side just yet.

“So nice to meet you, Beth. I’m so glad everything’s okay.” Her vibe is just as motherly as Giana’s. “I know it’s a bit early, but dinner’s ready and food makes everything better. We have lasagna, garlic bread, and green beans. There’s more than enough, so there’ll be no arguments, or empty bellies.”

Not wanting to argue, Noah and I both stand.

“We should wait for Sasha. She’ll be done soon,” Vincent tells his mother.

“I’m here!” The newest voice precedes the woman who steps out of the hallway at the far end of the room. “So sorry, that damn call took forever.” She holds her cellphone up as if to prove she was on it.

I watch as she and Vincent move to each other, like magnets being pulled together across the open space. He might be mysteriously handsome, but she is simply gorgeous. She looks to be about 30, wavy brown hair, hourglass figure, wrapped in a boardroom-bombshell outfit. Now more than ever, my comfy clothing and ponytail have me feeling more than a little self-conscious. Feeling frumpy, I silently pray that she’s not a bitch.

Like an absolute creeper, I continue to watch Sasha and Vincent as they embrace. She obviously came from somewhere within the apartment, but still they greet one another like they’ve been separated all day.

Angelo’s hard chest presses against my back, his breath tickling my ear. “Quit fidgeting, baby girl. You look beautiful.”

My hands, which I didn’t realize were tugging on the front of my sweater, still. I don’t know how he can read me this easily, but I’m glad for it. His kind words, and warm presence, are exactly what I need. This is Angelo’s family. They love him. They’ll be kind to me no matter what I’m wearing. Wanting Angelo to know how grateful I am, I lean back into his body.

That’s the moment that Sasha looks over at us. Her eyes flick between myself and Angelo, and I watch as the biggest smile takes over her face.

With Angelo still touching me, I can feel his groan. Sasha’s smile widens even more.

She steps away from Vincent and heads right to us, stretching out her hand

as she gets near. “Hi! I’m Sasha. You must be Beth.”

“Hi.” I say, shaking her hand. “Thanks for letting Noah come over unannounced. And me, too, I suppose. That was really kind.” I feel my cheeks warm and now I’m embarrassed for feeling embarrassed. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Anytime.” Sasha’s still grinning. “Sorry I wasn’t free when you got here. Someone in this family needs to actually work.”

Angelo scoffs. “Oh please, you just socialize all day.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sure, Shrek, whatever you say.”

A very unfeminine snort leaves me, and I clap a hand over my face.

Angelo moves to stand next to me, his heavy arm dropping over my shoulders. “Don’t listen to her, Beth. She’s just jealous she got stuck with the ugly cousin.”

My hand is still over my mouth, helping to muffle my sound of amusement at that ridiculous thought.

Sasha just rolls her eyes. “Learn that one in your Sasquatch support group?”

Angelo tugs me into his body, so my face is pressed into his side. My laughter is coming out feely now. I can hear Noah chuckling too, fueling more of my giggles.

“Keep it up, sunshine, and you’ll find all your passwords changed to *Angelo Is King*.”

“Hmm.” Sasha hums. “I thought you’d go with *Get Outta My Swamp*.”

I pull my face away from the warmth of Angelo’s body so I can look up into his face. “I like her.”

He rolls his eyes. “Of course you do.”

One of the mothers calls for dinner, stopping any further banter.

“Come on, Fighter.” Angelo nods his head forward, and Noah walks with us to the dining table that’s set with steaming dishes of food.

“Who wants a drink?” Vincent asks.

“I’ll take one.” A familiar voice comes from the entryway.

As I turn, I hear Vincent’s mom sigh. “You know, you could knock like a normal person. Picking locks is just rude.”

Uncle Enzo steps out from the foyer, mischievous smile on his face. “Now sis, where’s the fun in that?”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

BETH

Enzo's voice is like an anchor. The scratchy quality courtesy of his lifelong penchant for cigars. His face, still handsome, covered in a manicured grey beard, shows his age. No doubt accelerated by a life of skirting the lines of the law. His compact frame and barrel chest look the same as always. Sporting his signature 3-piece suit, he's every bit the old school gangster he once was.

Even though we've never been close, Uncle Enzo's always been in the periphery. One of the few constants in my life. And most recently, he's been my savior. I'm positive that I owe him my life, probably Noah's too, and for that I owe him a debt I can never even begin to repay. The irony is not lost on me. My relationship with my brother Aaron dissolved because he got involved with the wrong people. Mafia people. The exact sort of people that Enzo came from.

After the appearance of Uncle Enzo, we all slipped into comfortable conversation over dinner. I sat between Angelo and Noah, giving myself a sense of safety and calm. Uncle Enzo took the seat on the other side of Noah, and I've listened to the two of them talk about hockey for the past hour.

Twirling the stem of my wine glass between my fingers, I let out a sigh.

"You alright?" Angelo asks, speaking quietly for only me to hear.

I nod. "Yeah."

Even with the friendly atmosphere of the evening, I know what's coming. There's a reason that everyone's here. A reason that Uncle Enzo showed up. It's time for me to tell my story. To share it all. And now that I've accepted it, I want to get it over with. I just wish I knew what we're waiting for.

As if conjured by my thoughts, a knock sounds from the front door.

"Oh." Sasha gets up, placing a hand on Vincent's shoulder to keep him from rising. "I'll get that."

The conversation around the table dies down as Sasha leaves to let the new guest in.

I look up to Angelo, but he's looking across the table at Vincent. They seem to be having a silent conversation. My stomach clenches with tension.

Not caring if it's rude, I turn in my seat so I can watch the entryway. Needing to see who's joining us.

A moment later, Sasha reappears with a man I don't recognize. He looks to be in his 40's. Tall, fit, but not built like Angelo. His brown hair is cut short, showing hints of grey. His features and eyes look strikingly similar to Sasha's. His pace is matching hers, but he looks impatient. Like he's always in a rush. And, like every other man in the room, he exudes an air of danger.

Angelo's large hand strokes up my back. "That's John, Sasha's brother."

"Does he work with you?" I ask, wondering why he's here.

"Not exactly." Angelo replies cagily.

I turn back to ask him what he means, but my question is cut off by Uncle Enzo.

"Annie darling, could you take Noah and show him your photography collection?" Enzo asks.

Annie crosses her arms. "You're just trying to get rid of us so the *adults* can talk."

Uncle Enzo smiles. "I'll give you 50 bucks."

Annie nods. "Deal."

Noah slowly slides his chair away from the table. "Equal pay, man."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get you, too." Enzo with a chuckle. "Now get outta here."

I bite my lip as I watch the pair leave the great room.

"Honey. It's time to fill everyone in." Uncle Enzo reaches across Noah's empty chair to place a hand on my shoulder. His eyes full of compassion, but it doesn't prepare me for what he says next. "The men at your house, they were from Philly."

My mouth suddenly feels dry. "Were they..." I can't finish the question.

"We think they're the ones who killed Aaron and Patrick." Enzo finishes for me, his face serious.

A soft inhale comes from Sasha across the table. "Who are Aaron and Patrick?"

My heart jumps behind my ribs. The silence in the room is deafening, until I break it. "Patrick was my boyfriend. And Aaron was... he was my brother."

"Oh my!" The look Angelo's mother gives me has me nearly losing my fragile tether of control.

"What do you mean Philly?" The new man, John, asks.

I look up, assuming he's asking me, but his eyes are on Uncle Enzo.

“The O’Malley family.” Enzo speaks the name I haven’t said out loud in months.

The O’Malley family is old school. Classic mobsters running drugs, girls, and dirty money through Philadelphia. I don’t know how wide their reach is, but I know they have power. And they’re the reason I lost my brother. In every sense of the word.

John makes a sound of understanding. “I have some contacts out there.”

He has contacts out *there*? Who the hell is this guy?

“I believe introductions are in order.” Uncle Enzo says. “Beth, this is Sasha’s brother, John.” He takes a breath. “Special Agent John Clark with the FBI. For the past several years he’s been a part of the organized crime task force.”

My mouth pops open and I’m sure my eyes look like they’re about to fall out of my face. Looking back and forth between Uncle Enzo and *Special Agent John Clark* I’m almost tempted to laugh. Uncle Enzo can’t be serious. Can he?

“Don’t look so stunned, honey. The Mazzanti family is reformed. Or have you not heard?” Enzo tells me with a grin.

The Mazzanti family. And suddenly, it hits me. The Mazzanti family, as in the crime family that ran the Midwest for generations. I never put it together. How could I not put it together? I always knew Uncle Enzo was from the darker parts of the world. But I never knew who he worked with. Who he worked *for*.

Nervously, I take in the faces staring at me from around the table. Is it true? Is this the mighty Minneapolis mob family?

“Woah, doc.” With a hand on the back of my neck, Angelo turns my head so I’m looking at him. “I can see that wonderful brain of yours kicking into overdrive. Whatever you’re thinking, let it go. We aren’t like *that*. Haven’t been for a long time. Vincent’s dad turned the businesses legitimate when we were just kids. A move that he paid for with his life, so you best believe we’re keeping his wishes. Mazzanti Enterprises is just that, a business. A very good one that makes piles and piles of money, but it’s not shady.”

“You traced my phone today.” My tone isn’t accusatory, more a statement.

Angelo’s lips tug up on one side. “The family isn’t shady. I didn’t say anything about me.” He winks.

Special Agent John speaks up. “Beth, I get that you don’t know me, but I’m asking you to trust me. I swear to you, when I first found out my little

sister was falling for *the* Vincent Mazzanti, I dug all the way down. I *wanted* to find something to bury him with. But there's nothing to find. The guys might be hideous, but they're harmless."

"Who you calling hideous, pretty boy?" Angelo taunts, tightening his grip on my neck.

"You heard me, Andre." John smirks a moment before Sasha smacks him in the chest.

She turns her smile on me. "Let us help. Not just for your sake, but for Noah's too."

It's a low blow, but it lands. She's right. I need the help. I've already accepted it from Uncle Enzo. I've accepted it from Angelo, albeit somewhat unwillingly. Shackled by fear, I've been struggling through one day at a time. How long until it all falls apart around me?

I square my shoulders. It's now or never. Pull the band-aid.

"Aaron, my brother, got involved with the O'Malleys a long time ago. I don't know what he did for them, and honestly, I don't want to know." I breathe through that truth, feeling it now more than ever.

Angelo slips his hand into mine, letting me grip his fingers.

"We had a falling out over it. I got mad at him and he stopped talking to me. Just cut me out completely. He still talked to my mom some, so I knew he was okay. I... I just waited, assuming things would get better between us eventually." My voice catches.

I always thought we'd get through it. That one day he'd leave his illegal lifestyle and I'd get my big brother back. I've never been more wrong.

Angelo gives my hand a reassuring squeeze and I continue. "It happened three... almost four months ago. I was in the car with Patrick, my um, boyfriend at the time. He was driving when we were hit. The other car ran into us on the driver's side, pushing our car over an embankment. I hit my head on the side window and lost consciousness for a few minutes, but when I woke up Patrick was still alive. We were both still bucked in, stuck upside down. He was hurt but he was awake. He was alive.

"It was nighttime, and I could see a pair of flashlights approaching. I thought they were coming to help us, EMTs or something. But as they got closer, Patrick started to panic. He was telling me to *look away*. Telling me not to watch. But I couldn't stop staring. The last thing I remember is seeing two silhouettes, holding guns." Sasha gasps, but I keep my eyes locked on my wine glass. I need to finish this. "I passed out again, and - the next time I

woke up - I was in the hospital.”

“How badly were you injured?” Angelo’s mom asks me.

I shrug.

Uncle Enzo answers for me. “Concussion. Several broken ribs. Stitches in the forehead. Multiple lacerations and bruising from the seatbelt.”

Angelo let’s go of my hand and grips the seat of my chair. He pulls me closer to him, thighs are pressed together. His hand goes back to my lap, this time gripping my thigh.

“They shot Patrick, but left you alive?” John asks, sounding doubtful.

I shake my head. “The cops that came to my hospital room to tell me Patrick died said that a piece of glass cut him *just right*, slicing through his Carotid artery. They said it would’ve been a quick death and that he was pronounced dead on scene. I told them that wasn’t possible. I would have seen it if his neck was bleeding like that. I told them about the people with the flashlights and guns. I told them that Patrick had been awake, conscious, talking to me. But they didn’t believe me. They said I’d suffered a head injury and that I wasn’t remembering it right. And since Patrick wasn’t killed by a gunshot, I had nothing to back up my story.”

“Clever.” Vincent murmurs.

“Vincent!” His mother admonishes.

I nod my head, agreeing with Vincent. “It was clever. I knew I wasn’t crazy, but there was no way to prove it. I figured I’d deal with it after I was discharged. But then the cops came back later that same night. Or, well, different cops came back. They, um...” I lean into Angelo’s side. Every time I say this part out loud it makes it more real. More painful.

“It’s alright, baby.” Angelo’s lips press against my hair, his whispered words giving me the courage I need.

“They came to tell me that my brother had been killed in a car accident. Same night. Same type of wreck. They figured it was about an hour after mine. And I knew. *I knew* that it wasn’t an accident. I was still in shock, but part of me started to put it together right then. I had no idea why, but I knew they were connected. A week later, I found out that my brother and my boyfriend knew each other. That they both worked for the O’Malleys. I’d had no idea.” Feeling foolish all over again, my throat tightens.

Enzo cuts in, talking directly to John. “Her brother was higher up. He’d tasked Patrick with keeping an eye on Beth.”

John nods, like this is normal and not a detail that ripped my heart from

my chest. A detail that made me feel devastated. Made me feel worthless. Used. A pawn. John might not bat an eye, but one look at Sasha's face and I see it. The pity. The understanding.

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, well, that all kinda took a backseat. Noah... Noah is Aaron's son. On the night of the accidents, I found out that he had named me as guardian." I drag a hand over my face. "Except my brother never told me about Noah."

"That he'd named you his guardian?" Sasha asks.

I swallow, my chest feeling heavy. "He never told me about *Noah*. At all. I didn't know I had a nephew, let alone that he'd be left in my care."

A symphony of curses and shocked sounds fill the room.

"Oh, sweetie." Angelo's mom sounds like she might cry, so I don't look up to meet her eyes.

"After that, I wasn't able to spend any time trying to solve their murders. I moved across the city, into my brother's place, so Noah wouldn't have to change schools. I was sure that Aaron and Patrick died because of their involvement with the O'Malley Family, but I figured it ended there. I didn't see the guys who did it. The cops didn't believe me. I was no threat. I thought it was over."

I take a sip of my wine. Needing the liquid and the alcohol.

"About a week after I moved, my car got broken into while I was at work, and then I got a call from my old neighbor telling me that my apartment had been broken into. I wasn't living there, so I didn't think too much about it. But then the phone calls started. It was always an unlisted number, and one day I finally picked it up. The man on the phone was furious. Asking me where *it* was. Where Aaron and Patrick hid *it*. I had no idea what he was talking about and I hung up. He kept calling. A few days later, I answered again. I don't know why, but I did. The guy was belligerent, yelling. Telling me that he'd take the hundred grand out of my skin if I didn't give it back." I feel Angelo tense beside me. I hadn't told him this part. "I was scared. I got a new phone number the next day. I didn't know anything about any money, but I was so freaked out that I took Noah and we checked into a hotel. I don't know if it was luck, or if they were waiting for us to leave, but the next day our place was broken into. Just like the other incidents, nothing was really taken, but everything was destroyed. The pattern too big to ignore."

"Let me guess," Angelo growls. "The cops ignored it anyways."

I shrug. "Every break-in was in a different precinct. And nothing was ever

stolen. I was hoping that was it. That they'd looked and realized that we didn't have what they wanted. But then there was a break-in at Noah's high school. His locker was ripped open. That same day an envelope was waiting for me at my work. It had pictures of Noah and me in my car, and a letter saying this was the final warning. That's when I called Uncle Enzo."

I look over to the man himself. The skin next to his eyes crinkle as he gives me a sad smile. He reaches out, and I take his hand.

The gratitude I feel for this man reminds me how good we have it. I look around. "Uncle Enzo got us out of there, found us a house, got me a job, and got us documents with our new fake last name."

Enzo gives a self-deprecating smile. "It's not Witness Protection level paperwork, but it's enough to keep them under the radar. It was the best I could do in the time frame we had."

John nods as he speaks. "So, one or both of them stole \$100-grand, and these two O'Malley assholes are dead-set that you know where it is. The question is, did Aaron and Patrick steal from the family, or from these two assholes?"

"What difference does it make?" I ask.

"All the difference in the world." John keeps his eyes on me. "Do you know where the money is?"

"Hey!" Angelo erupts.

His outrage warming my heart.

I run my hand down his thigh. "It's a fair question. And the answer is no. I have no idea where on earth they'd have put it. Or if they'd split it. Or if they'd screw each other over. This whole thing . . . all it proved is that I didn't really know either of them."

John nods. "I can't answer all your questions, but I can find out where the money came from. If these guys are working on their own, the family won't condone their actions. And they won't want the attention of the FBI or the Mazzanti family. Clean or not, the Mazzantis have the pull, and money, to make their lives hell." He watches me for another moment. "If these two really did find you here, then you need to watch your back."

Angelo wraps his arm over my shoulders. "My guys put new hardware into her house tonight. It's installed and hooked up to my system, so I'll be alerted to any issues."

"Good." John rises. "I'm going back to the office. This is going to take some finesse."

“Thank you.” My words come out quiet, but John nods at me in acknowledgment.

All at once, the trance over the room breaks. John gets swarmed with goodbyes, and I’m free to melt into Angelo.

Warm lips press against my temple. “My brave girl.”

My eyes close. I’m not feeling very brave right now.

Angelo keeps his lips against my skin. “Stay with me tonight. I have plenty of room, and it’s getting late.”

I want to agree, but - “I only asked Miss Sullivan to watch the dogs for a few hours.”

“Hmm. Well, good thing I already called and asked her to keep them overnight.”

“Noah has school tomorrow, and I have work.” My argument is half-assed at best.

“I’ll drive you home in the morning.” Angelo tightens his hold on me.

“Okay.” I sigh. “Okay.”

CHAPTER FIFTY

BETH

Once John left the table, the remaining crowd broke off into their own conversations. After calling the kids back in, Angelo showed Noah and I the new security system that'd been installed in our house. I felt like such an old person, surprised that I was able to access it all from an app on my phone. Noah took to it immediately and I have a feeling I'll need his help when I accidentally call the cops instead of locking the doors.

I'm sure this cost a ton of money, but I'll admit that I feel safer already. There are motion lights on the front and back of the house. Each door has a camera that's always running, and by selecting one on the app, we're able to watch the feed in real time. Along with sensors on every door and window, Angelo had motion detectors installed in the living room that will capture anything over five feet tall. I didn't understand that detail until he explained that this way the dogs won't set it off. The final touch was adding a few *Beware of Dogs* signs along the fence, since apparently the presence of Bam and Pebbles is the ultimate intruder deterrent.

Once Noah and I prove that we've memorized the passcode, Angelo finally pushes back from the table.

I watch as he stretches his hands over his head, revealing a band of skin above the top of his jeans. It's just a sliver of flesh, but it's enough to have me biting my lip and squeezing my thighs together. A minute ago I'd have said I was ready for bed, but after that brief glimpse I'm suddenly wide awake.

"Eyes up here, doc." Angelo's cocky tone has me jerking my gaze up.

"I wasn't..." My cheeks flame red. I was. I totally was.

He winks. "Come on, let's get out of here."

I've already talked to Noah about spending the night at Angelo's, so all that's left is for us to say our goodbyes.

I'm able to sneak through most of the farewells with minimal interaction, but when I reach the front door, I find Angelo's mom waiting for me.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Giana," I tell her with a sincere smile.

When she first surprised us at the front door, I was expecting tonight to be all sorts of awkward. But it wasn't. Even when I bared my soul alongside my story, it felt comforting to know she was there.

Giana opens her arms, and - without hesitating - I walk into her hug. Her hair tickles my cheek as she holds me tight.

"You're good for him," she whispers. "You're good for both of them."

When she releases me, I see Angelo and Noah walking towards us, side by side. Her words hit me deeper than they probably should. Giana finds my hand, giving my fingers a little squeeze before she moves to say goodbye to the boys.

Watching them, my heart twists in my chest. I don't know when it happened. It shouldn't have happened. It hasn't been long enough. But the feeling is undeniable. The ribbon that curls through my heart, twisting and pulling any time Angelo is near, the thread that has been slowly mending my broken heart. It's love.

Angelo's eyes meet mine, and for a moment I worry if he can read the thoughts that are swirling through my mind. And for another moment, I wonder if that would be so bad.

"Ready?" His deep voice vibrates through me and I decide to leave the heavy thinking for another day.

With a nod to Angelo and an arm around Noah, we walk out the door as a unit. I might be able to admit my growing feelings for Angelo, but I'm not ready to admit that this feels a lot like family. Even though it does.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

ANGELO

Well, that could've been a fuck of a lot weirder. It probably should've been with Beth meeting Mama, but I'm not going to overthink it. I'm not going to overthink Beth's story, either, because it will send me into a violent rage. Tomorrow. I'll deal with all of that tomorrow. Tonight, I get Beth in *my* bed.

When the elevator doors slide open, I keep my hand against the bumper as Noah and Beth step in. Following them inside the elevator, I keep a straight face as I press the button for the next floor down. Noah looks up at me, but Beth doesn't seem to notice. Not until the car stops after just a few seconds and the doors slide open again.

"After you." I say, prompting them to exit.

Beth looks confused. And cute.

"Wait?" She says, brows furrowed. "You live here too?"

"Yep." I step past her and start down the hall.

"But..." Her footsteps quicken as she catches up to Noah and me. "But you said this building was pretentious."

I grin as I stop at my door. "It is."

Using my key, I unlock my door and swing it open. "It's even more pretentious if you waste your money on the top floor."

Beth scoffs as she brushes past me. "Yeah, you're so humble all the way down here."

Noah chuckles at our back-and-forth.

"Welcome to my humble home," I say as I shut and lock the door.

Like Vincent's place, we immediately find ourselves in my great room. Only mine is normal sized. It's just me. I don't need 5,000 empty square feet. Straight ahead is a wall of windows looking out over downtown Minneapolis. This time of night, the view is stunning. To the left is a short hallway hosting the guest room, with an attached bathroom. And to the right, past the kitchen, is the master bedroom and my office. It's the perfect set up when you don't want your guest hearing what goes on in your bedroom at night.

Leaving Beth to snoop around my living room, I get Noah settled in the

guest room. There's a TV, and he has my wi-fi password, so I expect he won't leave this room again until morning.

Watching him walk around this room grounds me. With them here, I know they're safe.

Uncle Enzo pulled me aside tonight, reminding me that I need to keep an eye on Beth. He doesn't technically have any authority over me, but I take his directive as if he's my boss and not just my cagey uncle. Not that I need to be directed. Or reminded. I'm fully invested in Beth's safety, and I'll use every tool at my disposal to protect her.

Leaning against the doorframe, I clear my throat. "I've got waters and stuff to eat in the fridge. Help yourself."

"Alright, thanks." Noah nods to me as he sits on the edge of the bed.

"Night, Noah." I tell him, as I turn to leave.

"Angelo?"

Turning back, I find him watching me. Like, really *watching* me. In the few seconds that I wasn't looking at him, he grew up.

"What is it, Fighter?"

"Beth... She's good. She's the best person I know. I've had some crap people who were supposed to be responsible for me. Maybe they tried their best, but Beth, she doesn't just try. I heard what she said tonight. Annie showed me where we could listen without being seen, and I heard it all. My dad. Her boyfriend. They ruined her life. They took everything away from her and gave her a pile of shit that she never asked for." He swallows. "I don't expect you to solve all our problems, but don't add to them. Beth's been through enough. She's given up enough. I don't want to watch you break her heart."

For a moment, I'm frozen. Not at Noah's request, but at his statement. At how he views everything that's happened.

I step back into the room and lean against the wall next to the door. I don't want to invade his space by getting closer, but I need him to know I'm not trying to run out of here.

"The last thing I want to do is hurt Beth. This may have started..." I shake my head. That's a conversation I need to have with Beth, not Noah. "She means a lot to me, too. But I need you to hear something. Yeah, the shit your dad and Patrick pulled spiraled out of control and caused a lot of hurt. But they didn't deserve what came to them. And you didn't deserve any of the crap that's happened to you. But life's like that. It's full of awful shit and

sometimes struggling through one day at a time is the best we can hope for. And asking for help, taking help, that doesn't make you weak. It makes you smart. As for Beth, you got it all wrong. She's been through some shit, sure, but her life is far from ruined. You might not be the kid she asked for, but you're sure as fuck the kid she wants. You know what she called you today?"

Noah's eyes are fixed on me as he shakes his head just the slightest bit. Knowing I'm crossing a line, I do it anyways.

"She called you her son." I watch as his eyes fill, and I have a hard time keeping my voice steady. "She railed at me for sending *her son* off to some stranger's house. And then she absolutely lost it. Cried her pretty little eyes out. She thought I was clueless, but I heard it. I heard the way she meant it."

I watch a tear escape and roll down his cheek even as his lips tug up on one side into a small smile.

I straighten from the wall. "So next time you want to think some stupid shit like how Beth's life is ruined, think again. What you two have, that's something special. Something real. Alright?"

Noah nods.

"Good. Now get some sleep."

Leaving Noah, I gently pull the door shut behind me.

Noah may have gotten part of it wrong, but he hit one bullseye. I can't hurt Beth. I don't want to. I don't plan to. But I need to be careful with her.

My conversation I had in Vincent's office comes back into my head, and I know that the time has come to lay it all out. She told her story tonight. I owe her the rest of mine.

Walking through the living room, I don't see Beth. She must've wandered down to my bedroom already. The thought warms me straight through. Usually having a woman in my space gives me anxiety, but not Beth.

The layer of steam and smell of my body wash when I open my bedroom door tells me she's been in my shower. And every good intention of having a conversation jumps ship at the sight of a dewy skinned Beth laying on my bed. Wearing one of my T-shirts. And nothing else.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

BETH

With my hair piled into a messy bun on top of my head, I'd let myself into Angelo's shower. I wanted to rinse off the lingering memory of my doctor's visit and the scent of Angelo's expensive body wash was just what I needed. Tomorrow, I'll allow myself to freak out at just how loaded he is. He'd told me he did well for himself, but this room, this whole place, is next-level. The black leather couches, grey walls, and oversized king bed are what I expected to see upstairs when we entered the penthouse. But Angelo's place is the real bachelor pad. Except - tonight - it's housing not only me, but also a 16-year-old boy.

I hurried my way through the shower, but what started as a good idea has now turned into fidgeting. Sitting here on Angelo's bed. Wearing one of his shirts that I dug out of a dresser. Spread out against his pillows like some sort of non-virginal offering. I'm wondering if I made the right move.

I wonder that right up until the moment the door opens and Angelo steps through.

"Hi." I don't mean to whisper.

"Hi." Angelo's voice sounds deeper than normal. A little scratchy.

"Noah okay?" I ask.

"Yeah." He shuts the door.

I gesture towards the bathroom, steam still spilling through the open doorway. "I hope you don't mind."

"Never." The click of the door locking skitters across my skin.

I pluck at the hem of his shirt that I'm wearing. "I hope this is okay."

He steps away from the door. "Always."

Holding eye contact, Angelo's hands lower to undo his belt. With slow movements, he pulls the leather free of his pants and drops it on the floor. Two steps closer. He reaches behind his neck, grips the collar of his shirt and pulls it up and over his head in a movement I thought was reserved for movies.

Heat pulses at my core. There's something intoxicating about having a

fine-as-hell man staring at you like you're the last slice of cake. And he's starving.

I squeeze my legs together while my eyes roam over his expansive chest.

"Show me." His voice is a growl that I feel *everywhere*.

At his command, my eyes leave their perusal of his body and I find him staring at my legs. At my thighs. Where I'm trying my hardest to clench my body into submission.

I know what he's asking, and I have only a brief moment of hesitation. My insecurities go up in flames as he lowers the zipper on his jeans, and I see the evidence of my effect on him.

Watching him as he watches me, I slowly spread my legs. His shirt is so big it lands mid-way down my thighs. Gradually, I pull up the hem of the shirt, uncovering my bare skin. I know the moment that I'm revealed to him when he growls low in his chest.

Shoving his pants off, my gaze stays locked onto Angelo as he palms his erection through his boxer briefs.

Stepping to the foot of the bed, Angelo drags his eyes up my body. "Take it off."

It takes a second for me to pull the hem of the shirt out from under me, where I'm sitting on it. I feel like a fumbling teenager and not a fully grown woman, but the heat in Angelo's eyes never dims. And in a movement that's far from graceful, I pull the shirt off.

While I was blinded by the shirt over my head, Angelo managed to get equally naked. Now separated only by the length of the bed, we watch each other. Angelo stroking himself. Me trying to keep my heart from skipping right out of my chest. This build up, this moment, it feels like something. It feels different than our past experiences.

Without a word, Angelo places one knee on the bed. Then the other. He's so tall that when he leans forward onto his hands, he's almost over me. But when I think he's going to crawl forward; he lowers himself instead. His shoulders press my knees wider. In a move that should be mortifying, Angelo drops his face, nose pressed against my pubic bone, and he takes a deep inhale. The breath filling his lungs, causing his back to expand into an even larger wall of muscle.

"Perfect." He groans before gently placing a kiss, right where I want it.

Angelo pulls back and my hips curl towards him, begging for the contact.

Placing chaste kisses on the inside of my thighs, I writhe with anticipation.

My head falls back and my eyes close in an attempt to stop myself from gripping him by the hair and forcing his mouth onto me.

His warm breath against my aching flesh is the only warning I have before he... pulls away.

Tipping my head up, I see Angelo inspecting the small bruises that I have scattered around the juncture between leg and hip.

His fingers skim the skin. "Do these hurt?"

The tickle of his fingers along with the sight of him between my legs has my voice stuck in my throat. So, I just shake my head.

He doesn't look up at me, and a second later he leans up and drags his tongue across one of the bruises. Like he's trying to taste the mark he left on me.

My legs automatically close around his shoulders.

His lick turns into a bite. "Keep these legs open, baby girl. I'm not done."

I open my mouth to give him a snarky reply, but before I can speak his mouth closes over my clit, pulling the throbbing bundle of nerves between his lips. When he starts to suck, my lost words turn into cries.

I was expecting slow. I was expecting gentle. But Angelo never does what I expect. And that's just one more thing that I love about him. No matter how certain I am, Angelo always keeps me guessing. Keeps me surprised. Keeps me happy.

Angelo's attentions morph into open-mouth kisses. Slowly working himself deeper. Slowly swiping his tongue further into me as his hands work their way up my body. With his face buried firmly between my legs, his long arms have no trouble reaching up to squeeze my breasts. When he starts rolling my nipples between his fingers, I don't know where to look.

My body won't hold still. My hips squirm. My hands grip at the blankets. My back arches.

When Angelo brings one hand below my ass, raising me off the bed, pressing his mouth harder against me, his tongue lapping at my clit, I come undone. Slamming my eyes shut, I don't fight it. I take what he's giving me and I groan out in pleasure.

Angelo's matching groan reminds me that I haven't even touched him yet. Releasing the blanket from my grasp, I reach out for him, trying to bring him to me.

Gradually, his mouth pulls away from my sensitive core.

"You okay, baby?" His voice is smug, and he's earned it.

Finally able to reach him, I dig my fingertips into his bulging biceps and pull him up to me. I don't let go until he's close enough for my lips to capture his. His mouth is slick, tasting like me, but I don't care.

Angelo kisses me back with the urgency that I feel. Like this kiss, this connection, is keeping us here. Keeping us real.

Lips still locked together, Angelo adjusts himself until the tip of his cock is pressed against my entrance.

"Tell me what you need, Beth." He pants the words, his breathing as erratic as mine.

He presses in, just an inch. And I clench around him.

"Beth. Tell me." He's trying to remain in control.

I know what he's asking me. What he's trying to get me to say. But I have something else he needs to hear.

"My name." I grip his hair and hold his forehead to mine. "I used to go by Lizzy. I never liked the name Beth. Not until I heard you say it. Because you say it like a prayer. Like it's something special. And I think I'll keep it."

He presses forward, sinking in another inch. "That's right, baby girl. You're my Beth."

I keep my eyes closed. "My real name is Elizabeth Ann Lawler."

He stills, every muscle freezing. And I worry that I ruined it. That I took this too far. That he didn't want to know.

"Fucking perfect." I barely take in his words before he thrusts forward, filling me with his entire length.

He's too big.

He's too much.

He's just what I need.

A moan leaves my lips, and my arms encircle Angelo's neck. Holding him close. Emotion crackles through the air. I can feel the weight of the moment just as real as I can feel the weight of Angelo over me. Tears trail from the corner of my eyes. I squeeze my lids shut even tighter as I cling to the man making love to me.

I let the feelings flow through me. I let myself feel every inch of him. Every breath of him. Every movement. Every spark of emotion.

Wordlessly, we move together. I don't know if he's feeling this too. I don't know if it's all in my mind, but as the pressure inside me builds. . . as his thrusts quicken. . . I let go.

I feel Angelo still above me. I feel his groan reverberate through my body.

I feel his lips on my cheek as he kisses away one of my escaped tears.
“I’ve got you,” he whispers, kissing away another.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

BETH

Falling asleep in Angelo's bed is nearly as good as waking up in his arms. Wrapped in his warmth, dwarfed by his size, I feel delicate. Feminine. Safe. I feel... *loved*. A completion that I didn't know I was missing. And now that I have it, I don't ever want to let it go.

Snuggling my face into Angelo's chest, I realize that I didn't dream last night. Not the nightmarish memory of waking up in the wrecked car. Not even the vague foggy dreams that I can never quite remember but that leave me with a sense of doom. I slept soundly, as though he can protect my subconscious as well as he can protect me in the real world.

The thick arm that's banded around my back pulls me in tighter to his side.

"Mornin'." Angelo's voice is hoarse from sleep.

"Morning." I reply, pretending I haven't been awake for the last ten minutes wondering what it might be like to wake up like this every day.

His internal clock must be phenomenal, because - less than a minute after waking - his phone alarm goes off.

"Fuck," he groans, slapping his free hand around until he grabs his phone off the nightstand.

He presses a kiss to my forehead. Then, like some sort of maniac, he uses just his abs to pull himself straight up into a sitting position. I watch, mouth open, as he reaches his hands above his head and stretches, his back muscles rippling right in front of me. Dear lord, who is built like this? He's like my own personal bodyguard. Scratch that, he's a one-man army.

I hear him yawn again before he grumbles, "I'll go wake Noah up."

Angelo climbs out of bed then looks down at me, eyes still hooded with sleep. "Get your pretty ass out of my bed before I decide to make you late."

I swallow. Wondering if being late would be so bad.

Angelo must read my mind, because he smirks - "Don't fucking tempt me, baby girl."

Not waiting for a reply, Angelo turns and leaves the room.

Knowing Noah is a slow riser, I take my time in the bathroom. Stealing some mouthwash and trying to tame my messy hair before pulling on the clothes that I wore yesterday. I hate wearing dirty clothes, but I just have to make it back home then I can shower and get ready for the day.

Stepping into the kitchen area, I'm surprised to see Noah up and standing with Angelo.

"Morning." Noah mumbles.

So he's up, but not totally awake.

"Here." Angelo hands me a small glass filled with a creamy green liquid.

"Uh..." Is the only reply my caffeine-deprived brain can think of.

"Drink it," he says, then hands a similar glass to Noah.

I don't know if Noah's trying to show off to Angelo or if he's sleepwalking, but he tips the glass back and downs the contents. He doesn't wrinkle his nose or show *any* sign of reaction, so it must not be terrible.

I sniff the drink in my hand and am surprised to find it smells like pineapple.

I can hear Angelo's eye roll. "It has protein. It'll help wake you up."

Shrugging, I drink the thick liquid. The fruity, vanilla-y, green flavor isn't half bad. And the fact that Angelo took the effort to feed us this morning has that pesky warm feeling filling my chest.

"Thanks," I say, handing him back the empty glass.

He reaches one big hand out, using his thumb to brush off the corner of my mouth. "You're welcome."

I'm half tempted to capture that thumb and lick the residue off, but Noah's presence stops me. Angelo's grin tells me he has once again read my mind.

Leaving the apartment, the elevator ride down to Angelo's vehicle is quiet. We're all in a state of half-awareness, happy with the silence that carries on through the car ride. I swear at one point I heard snoring from the back seat, but as we reach our neighborhood, movement behind me proves that Noah's up.

Angelo pulls into the driveway, flipping the car into park.

He looks over his shoulder at Noah. "You remember the code to get in and to disarm the system?"

Noah nods. "Yeah. I got it." He opens his door and tosses out a, "see ya" before he hops out of the backseat and heads to the house.

Not quite ready to leave, I twist my fingers in my lap. "Thanks again for letting us stay over last night."

“Anytime.” Angelo replies.

“And for the ride home this morning.” I add.

“It’s nothing.” I can hear him smile.

I look over at him. “It’s not nothing. You have things to do.”

He shrugs.

I nudge him with my elbow. “You’ve gotta pay for that pretentious place somehow. You do actually work, right?”

“Sure, but this *is* work. My job isn’t traditional.” He says it so casually, I don’t know what to make of it at first.

“What do you mean?” As soon as I ask the question, I see it cross his face. The wince. The shock. The realization that he just said something he shouldn’t have.

Like a slow-moving avalanche, the details roll over me one at a time.

Dread starts at my fingertips, slowing working up my arms, towards my heart.

No. *No no no no.*

“Uncle Enzo.” I breathe the words.

Angelo shifts in his seat so he can face me. “No.”

I stop him. “You meant me. *I’m* the work. He told you, didn’t he. Uncle Enzo told you about me.”

I think about the first time we met at the gym, how he looked at me with suspicion. I think about the night at the club, how he just happened to appear when I got drugged. I think about him stopping by my house to check on me. How that was the first night we had sex. I think about telling him about Patrick and the guilt that ate me up. How I told him about needing to get Patrick out of my system with a new man. I think about Angelo taking shot after shot, preparing to fuck me. My stomach churns, and I swallow against the sudden urge to puke.

“He told you. Before you ever even met me, he told you. Didn’t he?!” I accuse.

“It’s not what you’re thinking -” Angelo tries to argue, but his expression is flooded with guilt.

“You already knew me. You knew my story. You were there when I got drugged because you were watching me. . .” My voice wavers.

Angelo shakes his head. “It wasn’t like that. I was only supposed to watch you at the gym.”

The admission hits me like a slap, and I recoil against the door. It’s true.

He just confirmed it.

“Just the gym,” I repeat. “Was keeping my patients away from me part of the job? Was fucking me in my office part of your *duties*?”

“Beth,” he reaches out for me. “It’s not like that.”

I shove his hands away. “It’s *exactly* like that.”

For a second, I debate if I should be stoic. If I should calmly climb out of the car and turn my back on him. But then something inside of me snaps. I want him to feel what I’m feeling. I want him to understand what he’s done. I want the retribution that I never got with Patrick.

Taking a slow breath, I force myself to look him in the eye. “It’s not your fault, Angelo. You were just doing your job. This is on me. I should have learned last time. Last time when I wasted too much of my life on a man that didn’t love me. I let him use me in exchange for a job I didn’t know about. But I didn’t learn my lesson. I repeated my mistakes. I let you in. I let myself trust you. After everything I’ve been through. After all of the lies and deceit, you’d think I would fucking *learn*.” A laugh escapes me, but it sounds like a sob. “But this is worse. This one hurts more. Because even though I dated Patrick for a year, I never really let him into my heart. But with you... In just a few weeks, you meant more to me.”

“Beth...” Angelo’s voice is choked.

“I was falling for you, Angelo. And it was all a lie.” The tears finally break free, tumbling down my face as I reach for the door handle.

“No. Please don’t go. Let me explain.”

I refuse to let his pleas get to me.

“I’m not here to be someone’s task. Another burden. Not again.” I pause, not looking back. “Goodbye, Angelo.”

With shaking hands, I climb out of Angelo’s vehicle. Shutting the door behind me with finality.

In a blur, I force my feet not to run as I make it to the front door of my house. Using my sleeves, I brush my cheeks. I need to get to my room. I just need to get to my room before I breakdown. Before I totally lose it. I can’t let Noah see me like this.

Rushing down the hall, I hear the sounds of water, signaling that Noah’s in his shower already. Good.

Three more steps. Two more steps. One step, and I’m in my room.

Letting my bodyweight shut the door. I blindly stare at my bed. *How is this happening? How did I let this happen again?* I’m so stupid. So goddamn

naïve. Angelo wasn't interested in me. He didn't want *me*. He was just doing his job. He was keeping me safe because he was told to. And like an idiot, there I was falling in love. It'd be comical if it wasn't so damn sad.

The ribbon lacing through my heart, tying all the pieces together, starts to unravel.

Three more breaths. I stumble towards my bathroom. Two more breaths. I turn on the shower. One more breath and I drop to my knees, as all the pain comes pouring out.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

BETH

With a white-knuckle grip on my steering wheel, I nearly jerk my car off the road when my phone starts ringing. A glance at the display is all I need to decide not to answer it. A call from my mother is absolutely the last thing I could deal with right now.

The snow started falling an hour ago. And since slippery roads freak me out, it's the perfect icing on my shit-cake of a morning. First was the devastating conversation with Angelo when I realized I had once again been duped. That was followed by crying my eyes out on the floor of my bathroom. After that, I literally ran past Noah in the kitchen with my face averted, claiming that I needed to go pick up the dogs from the neighbor *right that minute*.

I should have been mature and talked to him. Made sure he was doing okay after the drama of last night, but I didn't have it in me. I knew he'd see my puffy eyes and know something was wrong. I'm not ready to ruin the hero-worship that he has for Angelo. Hell, Angelo is pretty much the only adult male in his life, outside of school. He'll eventually figure it out when Angelo doesn't come by anymore, but I'll be a coward and push that off as long as possible.

Noah left me a note on the kitchen counter reminding me of his game tonight, in the next town over. And as much as I want to spend the evening curled up under a pile of blankets with a pint of Cherry Garcia, going out will be a good distraction.

I won't let this heartbreak tear me down. I won't allow it to change how I live my life. I've been through worse. Much worse. Angelo and I weren't even dating. Not really. I'm letting myself get hurt over nothing. *What should be* nothing. But instead of brushing it off, I'm allowing Angelo to make me feel worthless. A feeling I've gotten all too familiar with.

Pulling into the lot of Atom's, I square my shoulders. Enough is enough. I can make it through today. Then I'll have the weekend to build up my walls, so I can get back to life as normal.

A small part of my brain tries to remind me that two men tried to break into my house yesterday, but I swat that away. If I can't handle talking to my mother this morning, I certainly can't handle the threat of vengeful gangsters.

Climbing out of my car, I wince a little at the soreness between my legs. Of course, that stupid asshole had to be hung like a porn star. Now I get to spend the day furious with him, while constantly being reminded about how good the sex was last night. And of-freaking-course, last night had to be amazing. The closest thing I've probably *ever* experienced to making love. What a jerk.

"Hey, Beth! Happy Friday!" Sissy's cheery voice greets me as I walk through the front door.

Before I can think better of it, I look up and meet her gaze. The second our eyes connect, her brows furrow.

When I think it can't get worse, Trisha the Prickly Bitch steps into the lobby. I've been doing a good job of avoiding her, but apparently today *all* of my luck has run out.

"Damn girl, what happened to you? Someone run over your dog?" Her snobby voice grates across my last nerve.

Sissy springs up from her seat, leaning over the front desk. "Fuck off, Trish. Someone should run over you, you twat. Go choke on a bag of dicks."

Sissy's immediate jump to defend me is a good reminder that not everyone has betrayed me.

"Now, now -" I tell Sissy. . . "Don't be rude, that's probably what she brought for lunch."

Trisha glares at me. "Very funny. I'm pescatarian."

My eyebrows go up. "That's the reason you didn't pack a bag of dicks for lunch? Or do you only eat fish dicks?"

Sissy's head falls back as she laughs.

Trisha's hands ball into fists. "You two are so childish."

As she turns to leave, Sissy calls out after her. "You started it."

My eyes still feel gritty when they meet Sissy's, but the smile on my face does wonders for my mood.

"Seriously, are you okay?" Sissy asks, voice full of concern.

It's the concern that kills me, wiping away any levity I felt from a moment ago.

I shrug. "Can we talk about it later? Like - *much* later, with alcohol?"

She gives me a soft smile as she nods. "Sure. But you let me know if

there's anything I can do to help, okay?"

I nod in the direction that Trisha just went. "Maybe superglue that viper's hand to a doorknob or something. That would make me feel better."

Sissy grins. "Bitch, I knew I loved you."

Flinging myself into work, I do my best to concentrate on each patient.

During a quick trip to the bathroom, I was so distracted I almost ran face first into a pair of perky tits. With a quick apology, I looked up to see the chest belongs to Rachel, Angelo's not-really-an-ex. Knowing that she's chased him, and that I've actually slept with him, should've made me feel better, but all it did is remind me of what I lost.

I tried to recover after that, but the icky feeling in my chest was never far away. And I spent the rest of the day hiding in my office, wondering if Angelo was somewhere in the building.

The stress has been stifling and leaving work has never felt so good. Sissy let me go with a wave, but I know on Monday she'll be grilling me for information. I'll deal with it then.

-

The dogs are draped over my bed, staring at me, as I stand in front of my full-length mirror, staring at myself. Their unconditional love brought me some peace when I got home earlier, but I swear I can feel their judgement on me now.

I spent more time than usual getting ready for Noah's hockey game. Even taking the time to straighten my hair, which for me is nearly akin to putting on a ball gown. I give myself a mental slap to the face. Just because I've done basic grooming does not mean that I'm overdressed. I have on my stretchy-but-flattering skinny jeans, a black knit sweater that hugs my boobs perfectly, and my knee-high black boots that have a small wedge heel. I look decent. Nice. Like a put together adult. But it's not until I pull on my pompom hat that I feel like myself. Feeling good physically can go a long way to feeling good mentally, and I'll take whatever boost I can get.

"Alright, time to get your shit together." I say out loud, causing the dogs to cock their heads in unison.

A look at the clock tells me that I'm running late. I curse myself as I gather my jacket and purse into my arms. Turning on the new security system, I call out for the beasts to behave before stepping outside.

The falling snow has picked up since I got home, and I shuffle towards my car, not wanting to wipe out. The snow's been going all day but was mostly just the pretty flurry stuff. But what had been a dusting just a couple hours ago has turned into several inches. And it's still falling.

I debate skipping the game, not wanting to drive in this weather, but I don't want to disappoint Noah. *Fuck it.* Climbing into the car, I toss my jacket and purse onto the passenger seat. I find the address for the game and type it into my car's GPS, then shove my phone into my purse. Today of all days, I won't allow myself to get sucked into any sort of distracted driving.

After 20 minutes, I decide I've made a huge mistake. Not only should I just have stayed home, but I think I took a wrong turn back there. The GPS screen hasn't updated in the past couple minutes, and I'm driving through what looks like an industrial area. Large metal buildings surround me, abandoned for the weekend, and the tire tracks on the street are quickly disappearing, filling with new snow.

The farther I go, the less cars I see. I'm definitely lost. And I'm too afraid to take a hand off the wheel to try and fix the display. Straining my eyes, I try to read the road signs in the growing winter darkness, not that I'd know where I was even if I could read them.

Shit. I have to pull over.

I'm slowing down when headlights approach behind me. I don't want to be a bother to them, or risk them rear ending me, so I decide to wait for the next parking lot to stop. With my radio off, the only sound I can hear is the squeak of my wipers as they work to keep the snow off my windshield. I'd forgotten how quiet these heavy snow falls can be. It's as though they blanket the world in an eerie silence. We had winter out on the east coast, but nothing like this.

My eyes catch on a stop sign up ahead, along with a sign indicating that I'm reaching a T-intersection. Alright, which way to go? I look in my rearview mirror, hoping for the car behind me to have their turn signal on. I want to turn whichever way they aren't, so I can stop and get my bearings. But of course, they don't have a blinker on.

I slow, hoping they'll pick a direction before I come to a complete stop. With my eyes on my mirror, I watch their headlights get closer. I think it's a pickup truck, or something else that's large, because as they approach their lights fill my rear window, nearly blinding me.

I'm so preoccupied with the car behind me, I don't notice the headlights

coming up on my right. Not until it's too late.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

ANGELO

My phone rings and I answer it without looking at the caller. “What?”
John’s voice comes over the line. “You still in

your office?”

I sit up straighter. “Yeah. You got something?”

“I’ll be there in a few,” he replies, then hangs up.

I rise from my desk and start to pace the room. He’s calling because he has information on the guys who’re after Beth and Noah.

Beth. Just thinking her name feels like a dagger in the chest.

I drag a hand over my face. I’m such an asshole. She has every right to be mad at me. I get it. But if she’d let me explain I’m sure I could get her to understand. She’s making it sound like I wasn’t interested. Like I was using her. Like I was doing the same damn thing as her last boyfriend. The boyfriend that was basically murdered before her eyes.

Fuck!

I resist the urge to punch the wall. I need to release this boiling restlessness inside of me, but I don’t want my wall to be a constant visual reminder of how much I suck.

I’ll fix this. I will. *I have to.* Because Beth is different. She’s more. She matters. She’s... She’s fucking *mine*, damnit! And the look of hurt on her face, the fact that I made her cry, rips my heart in half. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her. I want to protect her. I want to make her happy.

I was tempted to spend the entire day down at Atom’s Gym in the hopes that I could get Beth alone, so I could talk to her. But even though I’m sure today was awful for her, I’m also sure that she needs some time before she’ll listen to anything I have to say. And knowing that I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from groveling at her feet, I choose to stay away.

Closing my eyes, I take a calming breath. I need to do this one step at a time. I’ll help her get rid of the guys after her, and then I can make this right. Make this up to her. Once the threat is gone, she’ll see that I want her for her. That I’m not with her as some sort of duty.

One hard knock on my door is my only warning before it swings open, revealing Special Agent John Clark with a manila folder in his hand.

“That them?” I nod to his hand.

Stepping into my office, he holds out the file for me to take. “They’re considered AWOL by the O’Malleys. Turns out they’re the ones that stole the 100 grand. Some drug deal gone sour. Not sure how it all went down, but Aaron and Patrick must have found a way to steal it from these two idiots. Or at least that’s the story the O’Malleys are going with.”

“They just hand this over?” I ask, doubtfully.

John gives his version of a smile. “They don’t want trouble with the FBI. And they don’t want trouble with the Mazzanti family. Seems they don’t quite believe the story that you guys are really out of the business.”

I shrug. Some memories are long. If it keeps them cooperating, they can think whatever they want.

John strolls over and takes a seat in one of my chairs. “I have a few people out looking at some suspected locations. Figured I’d wait here. See what crawls out when we start kicking over rocks.”

I sigh and head back to my desk. Guess it’s better than waiting alone.

John pulls his phone out and I think he’s done, until he adds, “They’d like them alive. Something about setting an example.”

My fingertips graze the butt of the Ruger holstered at my hip, while I stare out the window at the falling snow. “No promises.”

Setting the folder on my desk, I flip through the pages. There’s not a lot here, but we have photographs and names. I pause. This face. I’ve seen him before.

I finally have a target for all of my rage.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

BETH

Bright lights fill my passenger window. My brain tells my foot to slam on the gas before I register what I'm seeing. My car lurches a few feet forward before a vehicle slams into mine. My vain attempt at escape, failing.

I hear glass shattering. The sickening crunch of metal and plastic. The sound of two large objects colliding.

My lungs seize up when the impact causes the seatbelt to jerk against my chest. Jaw clenched, I squeeze my eyes shut and hold on to the wheel like that alone will protect me. The force of the hit sends my car spinning across the snow. My foot is pressing the brake all the way to the floor, but it's not helping.

Another collision. More sounds of destruction.

A moment later, it's over.

I open my eyes to a world of white. The snow continues to fall, accompanied by steam or smoke or something rising from the hood of my car. Breaking through the clouds are fractured shafts of light.

Flashes of memories try to swamp over me. The blood. The pain. The fear.

I shake my head and blink my eyes. This is different. *This is different.*

I tell myself that over and over, but I don't believe it.

At least one of my windows is broken. The world around me eerily quiet, like I'm stuck inside a snow globe and none of this is real.

The silence is suddenly broken by the sound of car doors opening and closing.

They're coming.

My fingers feel numb as I work to get myself unbuckled. My engine is off and I don't have time to try to get it working.

Ignoring the pain, I twist my body around, and when I do, I see movement.

There's someone, a man, approaching. He's backlit, giving me a hazy outline of his body. And the gun in his hand.

My system is already flooded with adrenaline, but the sight of the gun has my pulse skyrocketing. It's *them*. They're back to finish what they started.

They're here to kill me.

Fight or flight, I understand the meaning now. Panic is threatening to take over, but my body knows what to do. I need to flee.

One more look, and I see that the man is almost to my rear bumper. Without thinking past this moment, my shaking hands shove my door open. And I run.

A shout follows me, but I don't slow down. And I don't look back.

I don't know where I'm going. I don't even know where I am. I'm just running. Escaping. The need to stay alive pushing me forward.

My feet slip in the snow, my stupid boots offering no traction, but I still run. Sprinting across the street and into a parking lot that hasn't been plowed. The snow is halfway up my calves and impeding my already treacherously slow speed.

In a blanket of white, I can't see where anything starts or ends. Frantically, I look around, hoping to find someone. Anyone. But the industrial park is just as dark and quiet as it was before the accident.

Accident. My lungs are nearly to the point of hyperventilating as my panic spirals out of control. It's *them*. Both cars. The men who killed Patrick and Aaron have found me. And I'm all alone.

A moan of fear pulls at my throat.

With no better option, I aim for the large building in front of me and keep going. There are more shouts, but I can't make out what they're saying.

My foot catches on something and I slam down to my knees. My hands plunge into the snow.

I shove up, fingers already freezing. I'm close to the building. I need to keep going. I need to hide.

I stay close to the wall and run as fast as I can. Terror like I've never felt before floods my bloodstream. I left my phone in the car. My purse. My jacket. Even if I find a place to hide, I'll be stranded. Or I'll freeze to death. A snap of wind blows against my face, the cold twisting through my hair, and I realize I lost my hat in the fall.

Squinting against the wind and darkness, I focus on what's ahead of me.

My legs are burning. My chest is on fire. I can't catch my breath. I'm crying. When did I start crying?

I'm nearing the end of the building. I don't know if I should run past it, or turn the corner, or... Or fucking what? There's nothing here!

I chance a look over my shoulder, and whimper. He's right there. The man

chasing me is so close.

Horror starts to claw its way into my heart. I won't give up. I can't give up. I'll run until I die if I have to.

Urging my legs to go faster, I bring my eyes forward. I hear movement a heartbeat before the second man rounds the corner in front of me.

No! No no no!

I try to stop, try to change direction, but my feet don't listen. They tangle on themselves. But slowing was a mistake. The second man made me forget about the first.

A body slams into my back.

He brings me to the ground in a tackle. The impact causes pain to flare throughout my body. But the snow softens the fall just enough that the air doesn't completely leave my lungs. So, I scream.

I scream and I scream. I yell as loud as I can.

I can't fight off two grown men. I just can't. I have nothing on me. The snow and cold are already numbing my body, but my fear is red hot, and I won't go quietly.

"Shut up, bitch!" A harsh masculine voice snarls into my ear.

The weight of an unwanted body on top of me has every primal instinct firing. I buck and kick. And I cry out.

I don't know who I'm praying to, but I'm begging to be found. To be heard. It's the only chance I have.

The pressure on my shoulder blades eases up and I think he might be letting me go, but then an arm circles around my throat.

The loss of oxygen is immediate. I thought I was panicked before. But that was nothing. *This*. This is the worst feeling I've ever experienced. The feeling of all hope being forcefully taken from my body.

As darkness fills my vision, I think of Noah. I hope he'll be okay. I hope these men won't get him. And I think of Angelo. I think of how safe he made me feel. And how much I need him right now.

Heat spears through my chest. Then, I don't think anything.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

ANGELO

“You can go home,” John tells me, clearly annoyed with my constant finger tapping. “This could take a while.”

I grunt in response.

“Look, I hate to state the obvious, but this could take days. I never said anything would turn up tonight. Not to mention this fucking blizzard.” My eyes follow as John nods towards the window.

Downtown Minneapolis is covered in a sheet of pristine white. The snow is still falling, though slower now than it was a few hours ago.

“I got nowhere better to be,” I say, telling nothing but the truth.

Literally the last thing I want to do is go home and go to bed. The first touch of my sheets will remind me of Beth. I didn’t live the life of a monk before meeting her. And I didn’t have any ridiculous rules, like Vincent did, about not letting women into my apartment. But it’s been a long time since I spent a whole night with someone’s body pressed alongside mine. I don’t remember the last time I cuddled, but even if I did - it wouldn’t matter. Nothing could compare to the feeling of waking up with Beth in my arms. Her cheek on my chest. Her scent in my nose. Her skin, warm against mine.

Rounding my desk, I start pacing again. What if I never get her back into my bed? What if she never forgives me?

“Can you go raid Vincent’s liquor cabinet?” John asks.

“You want a drink? I have some stuff in here.” I gesture to the cabinet.

When John rolls his eyes, he looks just like his sister. “Not for me, asshole.” He makes a pointed look at my fists, clenched at my side.

“I’m fine.” I grunt.

“Sure.”

Any further response is cut off by my cell phone ringing on my desk.

In two short strides, I can see the caller.

A knot forms in my stomach as I answer. “Noah?”

The usually calm kid is breathing heavily. “She’s gone.” He chokes out the words, followed by the unmistakable sound of a boy crying.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

BETH

Coming out of unconsciousness is like walking through a fog. My head feels heavy. My body's sore. And a horrible, bitter taste fills my mouth. The flavor is so overwhelming, it brings me fully to awareness.

I swallow against the bad taste on my tongue, but my throat protests against the action. My neck twitches with the effort, and that small movement causes an ache to pulse in my neck and across my chest.

The car accident filters into my memory.

The men.

My body stills. I remember it all.

I want to cry. I want to go back to sleep. But none of those things will help me now.

Slowly, I take in a breath. I'm not dead. That's good. *That's good.* I tell myself again. But maybe it's not. *Oh god,* maybe it's not.

Slamming a lid down on my panic, I listen. It's quiet, and it's cold, but I can tell that we're inside. There's no wind. No outdoor sounds. Without moving my body, I can feel pressure on my arms. I'm sitting in a chair and my elbows are tied or taped down. Elbows. That doesn't seem right. In movies, they always secure the wrists. Flexing my fingers, I figure it out. And hopelessness pulls at me. With my arms secured this way, there's no way to reach my restraints and release myself.

Relax. If I have any chance of surviving this, I need to stay calm.

Cautiously, I open my eyelids, just enough to see.

The light is dim. My head is tipped down, my chin against my chest, so I can't look around the room without being obvious. I force my eyes open further, staring at my lap. I clamp down on a relieved shudder. I'm still dressed. Thank fucking god. Looking at my restrained arms, I stare at the duct tape holding me in place. This is all so surreal. A thought flutters through my mind; *the tape will ruin my sweater.*

I chastise myself. *Don't be stupid. Pay attention.*

The arms of the chair are shiny metal. Not wide, and the front point where

the arm rest ends is digging into my wrists. The seat below me, and backrest behind me, feel hard. It feels like I'm sitting in some sort of old office chair. The type you might find in a crappy waiting room.

"Rise and shine." The voice is so close I feel the breath on the back of my neck.

My body reacts, my head jerking up and my arms pulling against the duct tape. The quick motion causes pain and dizziness. Followed by nausea.

The man behind me laughs, but my attention is redirected to the movement in front of me when a second man steps out of the shadows.

I try to take in the room. The concrete walls. The lack of windows. The low ceiling. But I can't focus on that. I can only focus on the face approaching me.

The tenuous control I had over my panic is slipping away. My chest rising and falling with rapid breaths.

The man stops in front of me, crouching down until we're eye to eye.

He's familiar. His eyes are cold. Hard. And when he smiles, I recognize him. *The club*. He's the one who approached me when I sat down. This motherfucker drugged me.

His smile grows when he sees the recognition on my face. His hand reaches out to touch my cheek. "We tried doing this the fun way, but your bodyguard ruined that. Now we're gonna do it the hard way."

My arms are taped down, but my legs aren't. With both of my feet, I kick out as hard as I can. My angle isn't great, but my feet make contact. One foot connects with his knee, the other to his inner thigh.

The man grunts in surprise, and hopefully pain. The force of my kick knocks him back, so he's left sitting on the floor.

Before I can enjoy my victory, or question the sanity of my action, a hand grips my hair and jerks my head back.

"That was a mistake," the man behind me says into my ear, and I swear I hear him grinning.

The man in front of me curses as he climbs up to his feet.

He brushes off his jeans, the casual move belied by the anger in his tone. "Usually, we start out with a few questions before we prove that we aren't messing around. But maybe we'll just jump ahead."

That's all the warning I get before his fist strikes my face. Pain and heat explode across my cheek. The grip on my hair never relenting.

"That's for kicking me." He spits.

My eyes start watering and I clench my jaw as the back of his hand collides with my other cheek.

“That’s for your prick of a boyfriend.”

The man behind me snickers. “Fucking Patrick.”

“This is for your brother.” I watch his hands, but it’s his leg that shoots out.

The tip of his boot connects with my shin and a sound leaves me that I don’t recognize.

“Where’s the money!” he shouts in my face.

“I don’t know!” I shout back, my voice tearing through my sore throat like a razor.

I don’t have what they’re looking for. I don’t have anything to give them. And I don’t have any way to convince them.

Tears fill my eyes fall as despair swamps me, and I pray for the safety of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

ANGELO

It takes everything I have not to go to Vincent's penthouse, where Enzo brought Noah. But I'm no use there. I need to be here, in the office, where I can pretend to remain professional.

I have the tracking open for her phone, the same way I found her just yesterday at the hospital. But today, her phone is turned off. Without that, I don't know how we'll find her.

John's been on the phone, getting his resources deployed across the city. And I've been pulling in every favor that's owed me. But it's not enough.

"There's a report for an abandoned car that matches Beth's plates." John says to me, hanging up his phone call.

"Where?" I ask, reaching for my jacket.

John grabs my arm. "My guys will be there in minutes. The report calls it abandoned. We don't need to be there."

"Fuck!" I shout.

I know he's right, but I can't stand this. I need to be doing something. I need to help.

"Where?" I ask again, without the intention of running out the door.

John tells me. Pulling up the address, I try to make sense of it. It's sort of between her house and where Noah's game was, but it's off the route. Way off. Like she made a wrong turn. Or maybe she was lured there. It's an industrial park, and if we're going with the assumption that she was snatched on her way to the hockey game, it would have been empty. The sinking feeling in my stomach gets stronger.

John's phone rings. "Yeah," He pauses. "Alright. Put me on FaceTime."

John holds his phone out so I can watch with him.

At the sight of her smashed-up car, I feel the blood drain from my face. *Beth*. My body recoils, wanting to look away, but I force myself to watch. The man on the other end of the call is showing us the damage. The dented in passenger side. The broken windows. The empty interior.

John keeps his eyes on the screen. "Any signs of struggle?"

“Yeah,” the faceless voice replies as he holds the phone up so we can see a few people across the street. It’s dark out, but they have enough car lights on to illuminate the scene. “The plow that came through reported the car. So that messed up any tracks on the road, but we found footprints across the intersection.”

The view on the phone jostles as he jogs across the street.

A shout in the distance has the phone-holder picking up his pace.

He stops when he reaches the guy who called out.

“You recognize this?” The question is asked a moment before the camera focuses.

Fear, like I’ve never felt before, fills me.

I’m nodding, unable to form words, so John replies in the affirmative.

Beth’s hat. Her stupid, dorky, cute-as-hell pompom hat. My brain can’t grasp the reality of her wearing that hat during our date at the hockey game, and her wearing that hat while she ran for her life through the snow. Every night since that game, I’ve stared at the photo I took of her wearing that hat. Her eyes sparkling. Her lips smiling.

Silently, I vow to myself that I’ll see that smile again. This isn’t how we end.

The voice on the other end of the phone continues. “We found the point of contact at the end of the building.” A hand appears in front of the camera pointing to a large grey structure. “The snowfall has messed with the tracks, so it’s hard to tell exactly what happened. But it looks like one of the perps circled the building. There’s a large impression in the snow at the back corner.”

“What do you mean, *large impression*?” My voice comes out strained.

“Like bodies rolling in the snow.”

I don’t realize that I’m bent over, until John’s hand lands on my back.

CHAPTER SIXTY

BETH

“Why are you making this so hard on yourself?” the asshole in front of me says, like I’m choosing to be difficult.

The swelling in my cheeks, along with the tenderness of my throat from being choked out earlier, is making it exceedingly hard to talk.

“I don’t know what they did with it.” I try to make them hear the truth of my words. “I never knew about the money until one of you told me on the phone.”

The man behind me scoffs. “Is your life really worth a measly 100-thousand? Do you really expect us to believe that you don’t have that money? That your boyfriend *and* your brother planned all of this without you knowing?”

“I didn’t know who Patrick worked for!” I plead with them to understand. “I didn’t even know that he knew my brother!”

They don’t believe me. Why would they? It sounds ridiculous. How could I not know that the man I’d been dating for a year was best friends with my brother. Once again, Aaron and Patrick - no matter their motives - have put my life in jeopardy. *Noah’s* life in jeopardy.

I don’t see the kick to my leg, but I feel it. A sob rips from my throat.

“Where’s the fucking money!?” The man in front of me screams.

My eyes squeeze shut, and I shake my head. Over and over, I shake my head. “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t -”

“Fuck!” He strides away from me, yanking open a door I hadn’t noticed and walking through.

A hand jerks my hair again. “Stay put, princess.”

I keep my eyes shut until his footsteps cross the room and I hear the door shut. Blinking away the tears in my eyes, I look around the room. I haven’t seen the face of the man who lingers behind me in the shadows, and I want to leave it that way.

Their voices filter through from the other side of the door. They sound too loud, but maybe the door is thin, making them sound closer than they are. Whatever it’s made of, it’s enough to muffle the words so I can’t understand

them.

But I don't focus on the door. I need a plan. I need a weapon. I need to get out of this chair.

With my legs free, I could hunch over and walk. But with my arms trapped, and with the two of them close, I need more. I can't very well fight them with my arms taped to a chair, standing in a crouch.

Breathe. Think. Focus.

I repeat the chant until it starts to settle in. The throbbing pain in my face and shin and chest aren't going anywhere. I think I re-cracked a rib. Maybe during the car accident. Maybe when I was tackled. Maybe during transport to wherever-the-hell I am now. But that's not important. What *is* important is escape. Because if they fail to get what they want from me, they'll go after Noah.

I squint my eyes, noticing a workbench lining the wall to my right. Is that...? Holy shit, it's my stuff! My jacket. My purse. I force away my headache and look harder. They must've grabbed my things out of my car before they took me. Maybe to make it look like I left my car willingly. Or maybe they thought I had a clue about the money in my belongings. My heart leaps when my gaze snags on a rectangular item.

My phone.

Angelo.

I glance back at the door. I need to try. And I need to hurry.

Rocking forwards and backwards, I work up a little bit of momentum. I need to move my center of gravity so I can stand up. As my body rolls forward, I press up with thighs, trying to stand. My legs shake and I remain hunched for a moment, but my weight drops back into the chair, dropping the legs back onto the concrete floor.

I'd only been a few inches off the ground, but in the silent room the impact sounded like an explosion. Freezing, I brace for the men to come storming back in.

But they don't.

I exhale a sigh of relief, then steel myself. I need to do this. And I need to do this now. Like right fucking now!

Removing the option for failure, I focus on the task like my life depends on it. Because it does. I lean back then rock forward and put all of my strength into my thighs. My quads shake, trembling like I just finished a marathon, but they hold. I let my breath out in a whooshing exhale and

straighten my legs to standing.

With calculated steps, I move as quietly as possible to the work bench. The phone is right there. Right in front of me. But it's face down. I'm sure the men turned it off. If I can just get it back on, Angelo can track me. He can find me. He can save me.

Hunched over, I can't reach the phone. Eyes on the door, I squat down and slowly lean back. With a small click, the chair legs meet the floor. My fingers are starting to tingle, the tape at my elbows cutting off the circulation to my hands. But I can still use them.

Wiggling my right arm back and forth, the tape at my elbow rolls in on itself, making the pressure a little tighter, but allowing me more movement.

Ignoring the pain in my arm, and everywhere else, I reach out for the phone.

My fingers slip off the edge of my phone case.

Closing my eyes, I take one calming breath. This is going to work.

It feels like time stops when my fingers catch the edge of my phone. I keep the pressure and slowly walk my fingers across the case, pulling it closer. Seconds feel like hours, while I listen to the murmur of voices outside the door.

My fingers grasp my phone, and I nearly weep when I pick up the small device.

The screen remains dark. I use all my strength to hold down the button that will turn it on.

Finally, the screen lights. I urge it to start up quicker. If I can send a text. Or place a call. I can...

The doorknob turns. And my heart stops.

I stare at the door, waiting for the men to come crashing in. Waiting for them to see what I've done. Waiting for the bullet.

But the door stays closed, the handle releasing back into place, and the voices continue talking on the other side.

In gentle movements, I place the phone back, face down, and I nudge it away from the edge of the counter. I want to do more, but if I get caught it's all over.

Holding my breath, I rock forward, getting to my feet on the first try. Staying as silent as possible, I sidestep back to where I think I was sitting before.

My legs give out and my chair legs hit the ground at the same moment that

the door clicks open.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

ANGELO

My computer sounds with an alert.
I can't believe it. It's her. It's fucking her.
"John!" I yell, even though he's feet away. "I've got it!"

We're running for the elevator before I can even register my relief. Her phone is on. *She* turned it on. It has to be her. She has to be alive.

"I'm driving." John says as we hit the parking garage.

I don't argue. My eyes glued to my phone, watching her location in real time with the same tracking software that I have upstairs.

The truck doors are barely shut when John peels out of the garage. "Direct me," he says, while flipping on his dashboard lights.

I guide him towards Beth's location. She's not far from her neighborhood. A search on the address tells me that it's an old office building, currently vacant. They must have been using it as a safe house once they found out where she lived.

I resist the urge to tell John to hurry. I can see how fast he's driving. With the state of the roads this is probably faster than we should be going.

John's eyes are focused ahead, but he's talking to his team through Bluetooth. I relay the coordinates to them while John tells them the plan.

"We're going to beat the team there," John says after he hangs up.

A calmness sweeps through me. "Good."

I watch the dot on the map and see that we're almost there. Confidence fills me.

Then the signal from Beth's phone dies.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

BETH

I keep my eyes averted as the men reenter the room. Their footsteps sound too loud in the small space. My tension over getting caught is ratcheting up all my senses.

One set of footsteps moves behind me, but the other drags a chair across the floor, stopping in front of me.

Slowly, I raise my head. The punch to my face has my eye swelling shut, but I do my best to make eye contact.

He watches me for a long moment. “We might be inclined to believe you.”

My first reaction is relief. But just as quickly as it arrived, it fades. If they believe that, they won’t have a use for me anymore.

“Relax sweetheart, we aren’t gonna kill you yet.” He grins. “I said that we *might* believe you. Only one way to make sure.” He shrugs his shoulders. “We gotta get the kid.”

My last shred of hope slips away.

“No. No, *please*. Leave Noah out of this. He doesn’t know anything. I promise.” I’m begging. Literally begging. “Please. We don’t know anything. They didn’t tell us anything. Please, don’t hurt Noah.”

I didn’t think my fear could get any higher, but - with every second that passes - my terror grows. If they bring Noah here, I’ll break. If I have to watch them hurt that sweet boy, my soul will shatter, and I’ll never get it back.

The pain in my chest and neck is making it hard to breathe through my sobbing. I can feel the man’s eyes on me, but I can’t concentrate enough to see his expression.

Like a thunderclap, a buzzing sound halts all movement in the room.

In unison, we all look over to the workbench, to my phone vibrating across the hard surface.

The man in front of me jumps to his feet.

“I thought you turned the phone off!” he yells.

“I did!” the voice behind me yells back.

The shock on my face hopefully makes me look innocent. Angelo

wouldn't actually try calling me, would he?

Both men stride toward the phone.

I watch them as the first man lifts it, the man I haven't seen still keeping his back to me. "It's her mom."

It's almost funny. Of *course*, my mom would pick *right now* to call. It's not enough that I hate talking to her, this time her call might actually kill me.

The first man drops the phone onto the floor and stomps on it. Smashing it beneath his boot. "We need to go."

"That call doesn't mean anything. It was her mom," the second guy argues.

The first man points a finger at me. "She's involved with Angelo-fucking-Rossi! We aren't taking chances on this. If her phone has been on this whole time, he could be here any second."

The second man nods, then moves back, out of view.

The shock of the last minute has pulled me away from my panic over Noah. But when the man in front of me pulls something out of his pocket, I feel the prickle of fear again. When he holds his hand out, flipping the large knife open, that prickle turns into a lightning bolt.

My eyes close. This is it. I have no desire to look death in the face.

Pressure at my elbow snaps my eyes back open. The guy in front is cutting the tape on my right arm while the guy behind me is freeing my other side.

When the tape tears free, a rush of pinpricks fills my fingers, the blood finally flowing back into my hands.

A shove to my back has me tipping forwards in my chair.

"Get your ass-"

His words are cut off by a crash of splintering wood as the door bursts open.

The man in front of me starts to run across the floor.

A gunshot reverberates through the room. Deafening in the small space.

Red mist blooms from the running man, and I watch in disbelief as he falls to the ground.

My ears ring, but I can feel the vibrations of other sounds. Shouts.

Before I can react, a hand grips my hair and pulls me up to standing. I close my eyes against the pain in my scalp. My chair gets kicked away, then I feel the press of his body against my back.

"Stay back!" the faceless man shouts. "Stay back, or she dies." To punctuate his threat, cool metal presses against my neck.

“Not gonna happen.” The sound of Angelo’s rumbling voice nearly brings me to my knees.

He’s here. He came for me.

My eyes open and lock onto Angelo’s piercing blues.

“You’re okay.” Angelo is telling me, not asking me.

I nod my head, the scrape on my neck halting my movement.

I can hear the grunts of a struggle where the first man fell.

Angelo looks to the man behind me. “Get your fucking hands off her or you’re a dead man.”

The menace in his voice is chilling.

“Put the gun down!” The man behind me sounds frantic. And that’s when I notice the gun in Angelo’s hands. The gun that’s pointed at me. I know it’s aimed at the man holding me hostage, but it’s hard to not feel like I’m standing in the crosshairs.

“Beth.” My eyes are still on the gun. “*Baby.*” At his softened tone, I look up, and his eyes flick to mine before looking back at the man behind me.

“*Drop.*”

My body obeys his command before I even have time to think about it. My legs stop holding my weight, and I crumple. The hand in my hair isn’t expecting the move. There’s a sharp tug, and sting along my jaw, but it’s drowned out by the echoing boom of two quick gun shots.

When my body lands on the floor, my many injuries make themselves known. With a pathetic whine of pain, I pull myself into a fetal position. Arm curled over my head, blocking out the room. *It’s too much. It’s all too much.*

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

ANGELO

“Beth!” Holstering my gun, I run the few yards that separate me from Beth.

Protocol calls for me to check my target, but the first bullet that left my gun hit him in the throat. The second hit him in the middle of the face. That piece of shit is dead. I don’t need a pulse check to tell me that.

Dropping to my knees, I tentatively place a hand on Beth’s shoulder. I don’t want to cause her any more pain, but I can’t not touch her.

“Call an ambulance!” I yell to John, causing Beth to flinch. *Fuck*. I lower my voice. “I’m so sorry, baby. You’re okay. It’s going to be okay.”

I gently grab the wrist of the arm she has up shielding her face and tug it down. I have to see her. I have to look in her eyes.

When we crashed through those doors, I told myself I was prepared for whatever we’d see. But I wasn’t. I wasn’t ready at all. The sight of Beth in the hands of a madman filled me with more terror than I thought possible. It felt as though my heart stopped.

Everything moved in slow motion after that.

“*Angelo*.” Her voice scrapes out, sounding strained, but it’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.

“It’s me. I’m here.” I brush a strand of hair away from her face.

“Is it over?” She asks, finally opening her eyes.

I shift, making sure to block her view of the dead man on the floor just a few feet away. “Yeah. It’s over.”

Beth makes a move to push herself up. I want to help, but I don’t know where to touch her. My hands hover just over her form, and I see that they’re shaking. Trembling. They were steady a minute ago when I had a target in my sights. But now . . . now that I can’t do anything to take away her hurt, I’m losing it.

“Can we go?” Sitting on the floor, Beth’s eyes lock on mine. “I want to leave.” She’s pleading with me.

I nod. “Whatever you need, baby girl.”

I reach out to grab her side. “Wait!” she blurts, and I freeze. “Not that

side.”

I grit my teeth. I don't see a tear in her sweater or any blood, so it must be a blunt impact. Maybe a broken rib. I want to wrap her in my arms and carry her out of here, but if her side is injured, I'm not sure I can even do that.

“Tell me how to help you.” I feel like I'm on the verge of tears, and I don't even know the last time I fucking cried. The combination of fear, frustration, and relief is overwhelming my nervous system.

One of her eyes is nearly swollen shut, bruises already forming on both of her beautiful cheeks. There's a cut on the side of her mouth and blood dripping from the side of her jaw. When I told her to drop, I knew the knife at her throat was a risk. I was sure he wouldn't be able to kill her, and this isn't life threatening, but it's still too much. And it's my fault.

“*I'm so sorry,*” I tell her, my eyes falling to the floor between us.

Beth's hand reaches out, touching my knee and I bring my gaze back up to hers.

“*Thank you.*” Her words are whispered, and my heart crushes further as I watch tears gather in her eyes.

I give her the smallest nod. “Can you walk?”

“I think so.” She looks down at her leg. “If you help me up.”

“Just tell me how.”

She looks around, I'm not sure what she's looking for, but I know when she sees the body. I forgot to move so I'd still be blocking her view when she sat up.

The remaining color drains from her face.

Softly, I place my hand on her cheek. “*Look at me.*” Beth's breathing is getting faster. “*Just at me.*”

She turns back to me, eyes wide. “I never saw his face.”

I don't need to look back at the corpse to know that she'll never get that chance. His face is gone now. Along with his soul.

“*I've got you.*” I place my hands under her armpits and lift her as I rise to standing.

I keep my grip on her, stepping back to look at her. She's not putting weight on one of her legs, so I move to that side to support her. Beth hugs my arm to her side, and we start to move. Beth's shuffling, more than walking, but she's staying upright.

Side by side, with the dead man behind us, my bulk between Beth and the other man who's bleeding on the floor, we exit the room.

Beth was being held in a storage room of some sort. The rest of the basement is one large room. There's old furniture scattered around in dusty piles. The scent of gunpowder, blood, and death is lessened out here, but it still lingers.

"We can wait here, or I can carry you up the stairs," I tell Beth, not trusting the rusty elevator that may or may not work.

"Upstairs, please."

I lead us over to a cracked leather couch. Sitting on the edge, I pat my lap. "I think this will be easiest. Sit down facing me. You can keep your arms down, and I can hold you up by your hips."

Bridal-style would crush her sides. Fireman's carry is out of the question. This is the only way I can think of that won't cause her too much strain. It'll be similar to when I carried her out of that bar, only this time, she won't be able to hold on. But that's okay. I'll hold her.

Beth shuffles closer, carefully straddling my thighs. Placing her hands on my chest, she lowers herself until she's sitting on my legs.

Grabbing her by the hips, I pull her closer. Her hands fist in my shirt and her face falls into the crook of my neck.

As I stand, I feel a shudder roll through her body. Followed by another. With one arm around her lower back, the other banded under her ass, I carry my girl out of the building as she quietly cries into my shirt.

With my lips pressed into her hair, I tell her that everything's going to be okay. I tell her that it's all over. I tell her that she's safe. I tell her that Noah's safe.

I want to tell her that I love her. The words are right there. They're clawing to come out. But I don't say them. It's not the right time.

I carry Beth out the front door, and - with her still in my arms - I sit on the front steps of the building. It's cold, but the crisp air tastes clean. Cleansing. *Purifying.*

I stroke a hand along the back of Beth's head, smoothing down her hair. Her breathing has evened out, but her hands are still clenched into my shirt.

The door creaks open behind me, and John walks out, coming around to stand in front of me.

"Ambulance is about three minutes out. I've got Connor detained and knocked out downstairs."

I raise my eyebrows at his comment about the guy being knocked out, but he just shrugs. People say I can be scary, but they obviously don't know John

the special agent Clark.

He continues, like this is just another normal day. “Ryan’s toast, but one of two ain’t bad. Lucky us, those morons left their guns sitting on a fucking chair. I mean, what the fuck?”

“You telling me you shot an unarmed man?” I ask John, not able to pass up the chance to needle him.

He scoffs. “I shot the idiot in the leg. A fucking flesh wound.”

I almost smile at that. I saw the growling pool of blood down there. That was more than a flesh wound.

A pair of black SUVs pull into the parking lot. The flashing lights of an ambulance not far behind them.

John’s features soften as he looks down at Beth. “You go with her. I’ll clean this up.”

“Thanks, man.” Curious, I ask, “You gonna let the O’Malleys know?”

John’s mouth pulls up into a smirk. “They’ve already got a man on the way to collect the live one.”

I shake my head, then bury my nose into Beth’s hair, pointedly ignoring the swarm of Feds passing us as they head into the building.

I know this doesn’t cancel out Beth’s anger with me. But I’m glad she’s not pulling away. Because I need this comfort as much as she does. She can go back to being mad at me later.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

BETH

“Alright, honey, the doctor will be back in soon.” The nurse pats my foot as she walks past my hospital bed.

My eyes feel raw and gritty, so I let them fall shut as I lie back against the pillow.

I get why they want me to spend the night, but I’m not going to. Even though I’m in a different hospital, different state, being here brings back too many memories. Memories that are too close to the surface after what just happened.

I need to get the hell out of here. I need my bed. I need the quiet of my house. I think I might even need the companionship of the dogs.

Images of my brother flood into my mind. Him as a kid, playing with the neighbor dogs, pretending they were his war horses. Or how he’d sneak them into his room until their owners would start hollering, thinking their dogs ran away. Growing up, we were never allowed pets. And Aaron wanted one so bad. I’m glad he finally got them. For everything else that was a struggle in his life, I’m grateful that he had Bam and Pebbles. And I’m grateful that I have them now. They’re a connection to Aaron that I need now, more than ever.

“It’s over, Aaron. The men that... that killed you won’t hurt anyone else. Never again.” I whisper the words up to the ceiling, hoping he’s somewhere that he can hear them. “I’m so sorry. I never should have shut you out. I would take it all back if I could. Big brother... I’d give anything to hug you just one more time.” I keep my eyes shut against the tears that slowly burn trails down my cheeks. “I miss you *so much*. I wish you’d told me about Noah. He’s a great kid. He’s so much like you. And I love him so much. I’ll keep him safe. I promise you. I’ll keep him safe.”

Finally, after months of keeping it all bottled up, I feel a layer of grief, and guilt, lift off my soul. I’m angry at myself for pushing him out of my life. I’m angry at him for letting me. I’m hurt that he kept Noah from me. And I’m devastated that there’s no going back. That we’ll never get a chance to make things right.

The cathartic release has me crying in earnest now. I try to wipe the tears away, but everything is so sore . . . I just hold my hands over my face while I weep. In all this, I don't hear the door open.

"Beth!" Noah's panicked voice startles me.

I drop my hands, and I watch as his steps falter. Oh right, I forgot how awful I look. One eye swollen shut, most of my face covered in purple bruising. Bandages on my chin. My voice is still scratchy, but luckily getting choked out didn't leave a visual mark on my throat.

Noah's near shout has Angelo plowing into the room behind him.

I clung to Angelo the whole ambulance ride in, but I still let the doctor kick him out of the room as soon as my examination started. I'm not ready to deal with all the feelings surrounding Angelo right now. He saved my life the same day he broke my heart, and I can't begin to untangle that.

"Beth?" Noah walks up to my bed, hands out, not sure where he can touch me.

I'm still crying. The sight of Noah, walking into my room safe-and-sound, adds tears of relief into the ones of grief still running down my cheeks.

Noah turns his wide eyes to Angelo. "Help her!"

I shake my head, reaching out for Noah, but Angelo is already turning back.

Holding the door open, he shouts into the hallway. "Hey! We need a doctor!"

"No." I croak out. I get a grip on Noah's hand and swallow before trying again. "I'm okay."

The doctor comes rushing into the room. "What happened?"

The doctor's looking at me, but Angelo answers in a growl. "She's in pain. Give her something."

Holding up my free hand, I take a slow inhale to calm myself. "I'm fine."

"She was crying." Noah's voice shakes and I look up to see that now he's crying.

And just like that, I lose it again.

"Doctor!" Angelo barks.

The doctor's gaze bounces between the three of us, probably trying to figure out how we fit together.

The whole situation is just too much. I start to laugh. It's manic. Unhinged.

At my change in mood, the doctor looks even more concerned. But now

that I've started, I can't stop. I laugh so hard that my cracked rib starts to throb in protest. Clamping a hand over my side, I force my body to still.

When I'm able to pry my eyes open, I find three sets of male eyes staring down at me.

I look at Noah first. "I'm okay." I squeeze his hand. "We're okay."

He gives me a small nod.

Next, I look to the doctor. "I'd like to go home."

He holds eye contact. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. No offense, but I need to get out of here."

He lets out a sigh. "I'll have your paperwork prepared."

"Beth." Angelo's voice is quiet, but the deep rumble settles the last shaky bits of my spirit.

I meet his gaze. I can't quite get the words out, and I'm not ready to lose my composure again, so I mouth *thank you*.

I watch his jaw clench. He wants to argue. He wants to make me stay. But he must see my resolve, my plea, because he tips his chin down in acknowledgement.

The doctor stops at the door. "I'll send a nurse in to help you get dressed."

"We have it." Angelo replies for me and the doctor walks out.

"Angelo," I start, but he cuts me off.

"Don't fucking argue with me right now." There's a note of hysteria in his voice. "Are you going to let me take you home? Stay with you?" In his eyes, I can see that he knows my answer.

I want to. I want that so much. And that's why I can't. So, I shake my head.

His huge chest expands with a deep breath. "Then you'll let me do this."

Noah gives my hand another squeeze before he lets go. "I'll go pull my truck around to the main entrance."

Angelo follows Noah, making sure the door shuts behind him.

Silently, I let him help me to the edge of the bed. My legs dangling over the side. I bite my lip, not sure how to act. What to say.

Angelo picks up a bag I hadn't noticed before. When he pulls out a pair of my baggy sweatpants, I nearly groan. I hadn't even thought about how uncomfortable it would be to pull on skinny jeans right now. Not to mention the sweater I'd been wearing while I was beaten. And drugged. Turns out that bad taste in my mouth was a side effect of some other disgusting date rape drug the bastards gave me to keep me knocked out when they moved me

from the “accident” site to the basement.

Under the bright lights of the hospital room, I feel way too exposed when Angelo gently unties the thin medical gown. But sitting here, in nothing but my underwear, Angelo looks at me like I’m the most precious thing he’s ever seen.

His hand reaches out - tracing, but never touching - the bruising that’s forming on my side. This man has the strength in him to cause great harm, but - when faced with my abused body - he shows nothing but tenderness.

His fingers ghost over my neck, like he can see the internal marks causing me pain. From there, his fingertips come up to my cheek. I bring my eyes up to watch him. His breathing is heavy, and there’s a look of anguish marring his handsome face. When I realize he’s looking at the gauze along my jaw, I reach up and close my fingers over his wrist. The knife cut only required a few butterfly bandages, but Angelo’s looking at it as though it’s the worst injury I suffered.

“I’m okay,” I whisper.

When his eyes meet mine, the glassy sheen in them nearly kills me. “I should’ve found you sooner.”

“You came when I needed you.”

Angelo tips his forehead to mine, and we stay like that. Just breathing.

I don’t know how long we’ve sat like this, but when a shiver rolls through my nearly naked body, Angelo pulls back.

He reaches down into the bag and comes up with a large zip-up hoodie. When I recognize it as his, the one I kept after the first time he rescued me, I feel my lips tip up into a small smile. He must have told Noah what to grab before coming here. And whether an oversight or on purpose, I’m happy he doesn’t have a bra for me to put on.

Dressed in sweatpants, an oversized hoodie, fuzzy socks, and untied snow boots, I let Angelo load me into a wheelchair. I’d have argued about it, but I knew it’d do me no good.

We take the trip down in silence. The pain meds are working their hardest to knock me out, but the rush of cold air as we go through the front door is enough to wake me back up.

Noah starts to get out of the truck, but Angelo signals him to stay. Then he proceeds to lift me from the wheelchair, gently setting me in the passenger seat. I don’t even fight it when he grabs the seatbelt and buckles me in himself.

With his arm still extended across me, he curves his hand to grip my hip as he tips his head down. “You and I, we’re not done.”

Angelo presses a lingering kiss to my temple, then steps away, closing the door.

I can’t bring myself to look at him as Noah pulls away from the hospital. I want to believe him. I want to believe him so much it hurts.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

BETH

Pebbles groans as I shove against her giant body. A body that's spent the last hour as deadweight across my lap.

Maybe this is her twisted way of teaching me a lesson. She may have a point. I haven't moved, with the exception of bathroom breaks, for the past 12 hours. When we got home from the hospital last night, Noah and I curled up on the couch together. We spent the better part of the night quietly crying, talking about Aaron, and agreeing that we should both start therapy to help us cope with everything that's happened. It was a tough conversation, but I feel better for having it. Our bond feels stronger than ever. And, for the first time, we said *I love you* to each other. After which we fell asleep in a giant pile of humans and dogs, while the Christmas lights filled the room with a colorful glow.

My body still hurts, but I woke up feeling like a different person. We still have a long way to go before finding our new normal, but we've made a big step. The only reason Noah isn't still perched on this couch with me is because I made him go to the grocery store. We weren't really desperate for anything, but - I pretended we were, made up a list, and gave him a stack of Uncle Enzo's cash. Noah needed a task to focus on.

I give up on trying to shove Pebbles off and flop back against the arm rest. A knock sounds at the front door.

I freeze, forgetting for a moment that the bad guys are gone. *I don't need to be afraid anymore.*

Pebbles' head perks up, and Bam rises from his spot on the floor.

"Beth?" Angelo's voice is faint, but instantly recognizable. Even the dogs relax at hearing it.

The curtains are pulled closed, so he can't see in, but I still use slow movements to pick up my phone. Using the security app that Angelo installed on my phone, I pull up the view for the camera.

He's standing close to the door, shoulders hunched, head tipped down. He doesn't knock again. He just stands there. The sight pulls at my chest. I want to pretend none of the bad stuff happened. That my feelings weren't hurt. I

want to pretend that he was with me because he wanted to be with me. I want to pretend, with all my heart, that he wasn't lying to me.

But he did. And it's too soon for me to talk to him.

I watch as Angelo pulls something out of his pocket. He bends down, placing it on the ground.

He doesn't look at the camera, but I can still see the miserable look on his face when he turns to leave.

Like a creeper, I stare at my screen, following Angelo as he walks to where he parked on the street. I continue to stare at the empty space in front of the house for several minutes after he pulls away.

Eventually, curiosity gets the best of me. With great effort I'm able to free myself from Pebbles, and I walk to the door on stiff legs.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting, but when I open the door and look down, I'm momentarily speechless. Careful of my sore body, I crouch down and pick up what he left. Maybe it should bother me. Maybe it should have me flashing back to a bad memory. But instead, as I squeeze the blue pompom in my palm, I feel myself smile.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

BETH

My phone buzzes with another text from Noah checking in, yet again. I was forced to shove him out the door this morning to get him to go to school. We spent the weekend huddled at home, soaking up some much-needed comfort. He wanted to stay home to keep an eye on me, but I put my foot down. If he misses class, then he can't go to practice. And he has another game this week that I'm determined to go to.

Uncle Enzo and his wife Tami came over last night to drop off more food than Noah and I could possibly eat. I wasn't expecting them, and - when the knock came at the front door - I panicked a little, thinking it was Angelo. He's tried calling me. And texting me. But I'm still not ready to face my feelings for him.

I did manage to pull Uncle Enzo aside while Aunt Tami had Noah cornered in the kitchen. I asked him point blank if he asked Angelo to look after me. He watched me for a moment, as if trying to suss out the reason for my question before he confirmed. *Of course, I did. You're family, and he's the only one I'd trust to protect you.*

That's it. That's all he said about it, clearly not understanding the internal torment his answer stirred up.

Enzo also told me that he talked to Trevor, the manager of Atom's, and got me the week off work. I can't even argue about it. Even if my rib wasn't aching at every movement, my face still looks pretty atrocious. Not much I can do about it, so rest is all I have on the schedule for the foreseeable future. That, and Sissy's visit.

After Trevor told her that I was taking the week off, she broke all sorts of rules and pulled my personnel file. She sent me a text this morning with a photo of my home address warning me that she was coming over and that she wanted the *whole story*. I have no idea what she thinks has happened, but I'm kind of looking forward to blowing her mind. Now that the threat has been eliminated, I can tell her the full truth.

The doorbell rings, as though I thought her into existence.

My lips pull into a smile as I walk to the door. I almost forgot we had a doorbell. Leave it to Sissy to do things differently.

But when I pull open the front door, the large body before me has me freezing.

“Angelo.” His name leaves my mouth in a puff.

His eyes dart all over my face. Even though I’m healing, the bruising has gotten darker and more awful looking over the past few days.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my muscles already starting to clench at the sight of him.

“I... Beth, I’m so sorry.” Angelo looms over me, but the uncertainty in his voice almost makes him seem small.

This isn’t the Angelo I know. Or - I suppose - the Angelo I *thought* I knew.

Thinking he’s talking about the damage to my face, I push down my rising tension. “You don’t have to be sorry. I know you got there as soon as you could. I don’t blame you. I don’t blame anyone but myself. I shouldn’t have been driving in the snowstorm alone like that.”

“That’s not what...” Angelo shakes his head. “Don’t even think of blaming yourself. But I should’ve been there sooner. I should’ve protected you.” He drags a hand through his hair. “Fuck, protecting people is what I do, and I couldn’t even do it for you.”

The reminder feels like a needle in my heart. “You don’t need to worry about that anymore. It’s done. You got the bad guys. The job is over.”

“Beth.” His eyes are filled with emotion. “That’s not fair.”

I scoff. “Fair? Not a single damn thing has been *fair* for a long time. But I’m taking my life back. I’m not going to let people use me anymore.”

“I was never using you!” Angelo jerks back as if I’d struck him.

“No? What would you call it?” I don’t give him a chance to answer. “I was a job to you. You were told to watch me. You were *with me* because you had to be. Sure, you made the best of it. I get it. That’s just my thing, I guess. I’m an obligation. Never enough to warrant attention on my own. Well, not anymore. I’m done with men who only spend time with me because they have to. I won’t live like that. I can’t.” My voice catches. “Not again.”

Feeling my composure crumble, I slam the door shut.

My fingers fumble as I lock the deadbolt, but I don’t step away. My feet are rooted to the floor. Without any clue as to what to do, I let my forehead tip forward until it rests against the door.

A soft thud reverberates through the wood. With my eyes closed, I can picture Angelo in the same position on the other side of the door.

“Please don’t cry.” His voice is quiet, but I can still make out the words. “I’m not giving up on us. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever. I should’ve told you everything right from the start. I’m sorry. I’m so incredibly sorry that I didn’t. But you were never a job to me. What happened between us, my feeling for you, it’s all real. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make you believe me. Because I’d do anything for you, baby girl.”

His words are unraveling me. I don’t know what the right call is. The rational part of me tells me to be mad. Tells me not to believe him. But the rest of me... The rest of me tells me that he’s a good man. A good man who’s telling the truth.

I don’t know how long I stand there, with my face to the door, but when the doorbell rings again it startles me so much that I yelp.

“Beth, it’s me!” Sissy calls from the other side of the door. “Angelo’s gone. Let me in.”

Sissy might be just what I need. She doesn’t hold anything back, and I could use some female guidance.

I pull the door open and Sissy barges past me. “Don’t worry, I hung out a few driveways down until he left so he wouldn’t see me. I don’t know what he did, but good on you for not caving to his big sexy self. But *girl*, he looked wrecked.”

Sissy finally turns around to face me. Her eyes widen to a comical size when she sees my black eye and purple bruises.

“Woah! What the hell happened to you?!” She sputters, dropping her purse on the floor.

I let out a breath. “You should probably have a seat.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

ANGELO

“Well, this is pathetic.” Vincent’s voice floats in through my open office door.

The fact that I didn’t hear him approach is the first sign that I’ve drunk too much. The way I yell out when he reaches to flip the light switch on is the second.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, hearing myself as I speak for the first time in hours.

It’s a fair question, seeing as how it’s after midnight and he should be home with his family.

Vincent leaves the lights off and walks to join me on my couch.

I never sit here. I don’t even know why I have a couch in my office, but as I let myself sink back into the cushion, I decide I’ll keep it.

“You aren’t the only one who knows how to track a phone.” Vincent says as he pulls the bottle free of my grip and takes a sniff. “Bourbon straight from the bottle. Classy.” Then he shrugs and takes a swallow.

I snatch the bottle back and take another drink.

“Sasha made me go down to your apartment to check on you.” Vincent says. “She was worried about your state of mind. What with you being in love with Beth and all.”

He pauses, but I don’t argue. He’s right. I’m in fucking love with her.

Vincent lets out a huff. “This isn’t fair.”

That causes me to turn my head towards him. “How the hell is this not fair for you?”

He takes the bourbon back. “Because, when I fell for Sasha you gave me so much shit. I’ve been patiently waiting for you to fall in love so I could rub your face in it. But look at you.” He gestures to me. “You’re a fucking wreck. And apparently you’ve already accepted that you love her, so I can’t even needle you with that.”

He slumps, eyeing the bottle.

“It’s a recent revelation, if that makes you feel better.” I admit.

Vincent grunts. “Yeah? When did you know for sure?”

My throat tightens at the memory, and my voice comes out strained. “When she was missing...” I tug the bottle back. “When I was watching the video of her abandoned car and they found the footprints in the snow. And we knew... We *knew* she’d been taken. There was no more doubt, no more hope that maybe she was just off on another appointment or something. Fuck. I thought my heart was going to stop beating. I’ve never felt fear like that.”

I take another drink. “And then her phone turns on and suddenly I have hope. Like I’ll get her back again. But then the signal went out and I couldn’t even think straight. If it weren’t for John, I never would’ve found her. I’ve *trained* for this. I know how to work under pressure, but I couldn’t even function. I was running on blind rage and desperation. But nothing, man, *nothing* could’ve prepared me for how we found her. Beaten. Bloody. Knife to her throat.”

Vincent’s hand lands on my forearm. He gives my arm a squeeze before taking the bottle for himself.

Vincent’s own voice is thick as he replies. “I get it, man. That night when Randal...”

He doesn’t finish. He doesn’t have to. His daughter and Sasha were both held at gunpoint by a madman. A year later, and it still haunts him.

“What do I do?” I whisper the question. Vincent knows that it all blew up in my face, just like he predicted.

“You have to show her that she matters. That you’re serious. Once she sees that, she’ll forgive you.”

I swallow. “How do I do that?”

He shrugs. “You play dirty.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

BETH

Noah glances around the bleachers as he skates onto the ice. I'm in the opposite corner from last time, so he doesn't spot me. Normally I'd be fine making a fool of myself, waving or yelling out, but I don't want to draw attention to myself tonight. My makeup job isn't fooling anyone. The swelling on my face is gone, but a week isn't quite enough time for the discoloration to fade. Or for the cut across my chin to heal. Which is why I'm hiding over here in the front corner. It's stressful enough to still be the new *hockey parent*. I don't need to add any crazy rumors to the mix.

After a few minutes, Noah finally skates past where I'm sitting. When he sees me his shoulders sag in relief. The poor kid has been so worried about me, but it's not like he didn't know I was here somewhere. We drove together.

While he's watching, I pull my blue pompom hat out of my purse and pull it on my head. Noah's cautious expression morphs into a grin, and he shakes his head before focusing back on his warmup.

This stupid hat is basically my favorite thing. When Angelo left it on my front step, it lifted my spirits more than I can describe. I know I could have bought a new one, but I wanted *mine*. I should hate it, considering how I'd lost it. But it has good memories, too. Good memories that outweigh the bad. Noah's goofy smiles. Angelo's sweet kisses.

Angelo, even when I say his name in my head it comes out as a sigh. Over the past couple of days, I can't stop thinking of my conversation with Sissy. A lot was said, but her advice was to give him another shot. Or rather, as Sissy put it, *give him a fucking chance, you imbecile*.

The teams clear the ice and huddle up at their respective benches to prepare for the start of the game. Noah looks up towards the crowd and I watch as his eyes widen. Before I can even wonder who he's looking at, his gaze shoots over to me. A tingle of fear runs down my neck, but Noah's face shows shock, not alarm.

I aim for nonchalance as I turn my head, wondering who Noah is looking

at. Literally nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me for the sight of Angelo walking towards me.

My mouth pops open and I stare at him as though this is the craziest thing I've ever witnessed. And Angelo stares right back.

Part of my brain is aware of the looks he's getting. His oversized, serious-sex-god thing kinda stands out amongst the high school students and their parents.

Is he really going to do this? Here? Now?

But before he reaches me, he turns and climbs up a few rows. I'm openly watching him as he takes a seat. He's close, maybe ten feet away, but he isn't sitting with me. He's just... here. Angelo is here. At Noah's hockey game. What the fu-

A whistle blows, jolting me out of my stare session.

I turn forward, but - before the game starts, I look back over my shoulder. Angelo is still there. He doesn't shy away from my gaze. Instead, he tips his head in greeting. My eyebrows rise, and I quickly look back to the ice. I can't let him see me smile.

Sissy was pretty convincing. But if I'm being honest with myself, I wanted to be convinced. I want Angelo. I want to be with him. My stupid heart fell in love with him weeks ago. I just needed a reason to forgive him. A real reason. And showing up to my kid's high school sporting event, well . . . I don't know if a better reason exists. The second he comes over to sit with me, I'll give him my forgiveness.

But he doesn't come sit with me. I wait through the first period. I wait through the first intermission thing. I wait through the second period, and the second intermission. And I fidget through the whole third period. But no Angelo.

To say I was distracted would be a gross understatement. Luckily, the crowd was rowdy enough that I could just shout along with everyone else when I missed something. I did see Noah score his goal in the second period. But while I was cheering for him, I heard Angelo's distinctive voice. The sound stopped me mid-clap.

And now I find myself beyond-tense when the final whistle blows, signaling the end of the game. I rise to my feet, clapping along with everyone else. Noah's team won, so I try to focus on that, and not on the giant looming behind me.

As the players leave the ice, the spectators start to exit the bleachers. I stay

standing where I am, waiting for the crowd to thin out.

The stands vibrate with all the moving bodies, but somehow I can feel Angelo's steps as he nears. His long stride allows him to step down over the benches rather than using the designated stairways.

Willing my heart to calm down, I slowly turn to face him. He's come to a stop inches away.

Having no idea what to say, I stay quiet.

His eyes are searching. I don't know what he's looking for, but I know when he sees it. I watch as his shoulders relax. In what feels like slow motion, his hand comes up and he brushes the back of his fingers across my cheek. The touch is so light I barely feel it, yet it still sends heat coursing through my body.

Angelo puffs out a breath then drops his hand.

"Goodnight, baby. Let me know when you get home."

Then he leaves. The motherfucker just turns and leaves. I'm standing here, melting, and he just walks away.

He's too damn big to get swallowed up by the crowd, so I stay planted to my spot, watching his slow retreat.

"Beth? Beth Smith?" A female voice calls out to me.

Looking up the bleachers I see a pretty woman waving at me. I recognize the man she's with and realize this must be Linda, Marcus's mom.

I wave back. I expect them to walk down together, but Linda gives her husband a shooing motion. He has an exasperated look on his face, but he shuffles down the row as Linda heads my way.

"Hey! Sorry!" She's smiling and talking and nearly trips down the steps towards me.

I knew I liked her. "Hi, you must be Linda."

She stops in front of me, hiking her purse up on her shoulder before holding out her hand. "That's me. Sorry we haven't been able to connect before this." As she lets go of my hand, I see her eyes narrow on my face. "Oh dear, Marcus said that you were in a car accident. Are you feeling okay? I know a great chiropractor if you need one."

I smile at her. "Thanks, but I'm fine. One of those *looks worse than it is* things."

"Speaking of looking." She waggles her eyebrows. "Who was that extra-large hunk of masculinity you were talking to?"

"Oh... Umm..." I blush.

“I know it’s none of my business, but girl.” She fans herself. “I’ll assume the answer is something complicated, but if he’s coming to your kid’s games, he’s serious. Forgive him. Or at the very least, on the behalf of the rest of us, sleep with him.”

A laugh bursts out of me. “You’re actually not the first person to give me that advice.”

Linda grins as we start to walk towards the doors. “Then it’s probably time for you to listen.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

BETH

“Oh my god, no more.” Noah groans as he sprawls out across the living room floor, surrounded by discarded wrapping paper and empty boxes.

I can't help the smile on my face. I've been smiling all night. We've both hit our limit of cookies. And hot cocoa. Which wasn't hard to do considering we were already stuffed full of roasted ham, potatoes and pie.

Uncle Enzo invited us to join him and his family for Christmas, but I turned him down. It was a nice offer, but I want Noah and I to start our own traditions. And apparently our new tradition is to spend all of Christmas Eve cooking an elaborate meal while singing along to terrible old carols.

We were going to wait until tomorrow to open our presents, but I changed my mind. Why put off to tomorrow what could bring us joy today?

“Thanks, Beth. That was all too much,” Noah says from his spot on the carpet.

“The cookies?” I ask, laughing.

“Don't say the word *cookie*.” He groans again before pushing himself up to sit. “I was talking about the presents.” He gestures to his leaning pile of gifts.

I shrug. “I have no idea what happened to the receipts, so I hope you actually like everything.” I run my fingers over the sweater on my lap.

“Thank you for my gifts. You weren't supposed to do that.”

It's Noah's turn to shrug. “I don't have the receipts either.”

I toss the corner of a sugar cookie at him. He dodges.

Pebbles is in her post-bone coma, but Bam musters the energy to snarf up the crumbs.

The sweater Noah bought for me truly is gorgeous. The material is cloud soft and it looks a lot like the one that was ruined by my captors. I never did get any of my clothes back from Angelo. I don't know what he did with them. He could have returned them when he brought back my hat, so my guess is that they're long gone.

I glance over my shoulder to look at the potted plant sitting on the kitchen

island. Angelo is such a confusing man. Last week, he shows up at Noah's game. He doesn't sit with me, but he tells me to text him when I get home. So, I did. I fret for 20 minutes on what to say, finally landing on *I'm home*. To which he responds *good*. That's it. Good. Then nothing. No calls. No stopping at the house.

Then I show up at work Monday morning to find this beautiful green plant on my desk. Inside my locked office. Not hard to guess who'd be able to break through that security. Then the next day I show up to find a small tabletop grow lamp shining on my plant. He must have realized my windowless office wasn't a great home for the plant. But again, no card. No communication. And the rest of the week went by with no sign of him. Either he quit working out or he's making sure to come at a time when I'm not working. And I have no idea what that means.

I brought my plant home because I have next week off. Apparently, nobody wants appointments between Christmas and New Year's. So that's one more week I won't see him. Unless... unless he knows about Noah's game on New Year's Eve. But just because he came to his last game, doesn't mean he'll come to the next one.

"Beth?"

I blink. "Sorry, I zoned out there for a minute." Noah's plucking at the hem of his pants. He looks nervous, making me sit up a little straighter. "Is something wrong?"

Noah shakes his head but keeps his eyes averted. I stay quiet.

Finally, he heaves out a big breath. "I want to stay here."

In an instant, I'm off the couch and sitting in front of him on the floor. "Noah, you aren't going anywhere. You're mine now. You get that, right? You aren't going anywhere."

He looks up at me and I see a small smile on his face. "Yeah, I know that. I meant that I want to stay *here*." He gestures around the room. "I like Minnesota. But..."

"But?" I nudge him.

"But if you want to go back to Philly, I'll go with you."

I scrunch up my face. "Why would you think I want to move back there?"

He bites his lip before replying. "Because you don't seem happy."

I let my exhale puff out my cheeks. "I've been pretty miserable company, huh?"

"What, no! That's not what I meant."

Noah's eyes widen but I wave him off with a chuckle.

"I know. But it's still true, and I'm sorry." I make sure he's looking at me. "I am happy. I'm happier than I've ever been. I know that doesn't make sense, after all we've been through, but I like it here too. I like living with you. And with the mutts. It's only been a month, but this place feels like home. I want to stay, too."

Noah cringes a little. "What about Angelo? I know something happened."

I let out a laugh. "Angelo's an idiot. But I like him, too. And whenever he gets the balls to actually approach me, I'll let him know that."

"I like him, too." Noah smiles. "But if you want me to use some of those self-defense techniques he taught me on him, just let me know."

Now we're both grinning. "I'll keep that in mind." I look around with a sigh. "Let's leave this mess for tomorrow."

"Deal."

Moaning like two people that ate way too much, we climb to our feet.

"Want me to let the dogs out?" Noah asks.

I shake my head. "I got it."

Before Noah can walk away from me, I pull him into a hug. We hold each other for a long moment. I feel like I'm finally getting my emotions in check.

After Aaron and Patrick's death, I think we were both in shock. Then the crap with the O'Malleys happened, and we went on the run. And the last month has been a complete rollercoaster. I feel like I've been a wreck for so long, it's reassuring to be able embrace Noah without bursting into tears.

"Merry Christmas." I murmur.

"Merry Christmas." Noah mumbles back.

"I love you." I smile, knowing he'll say it back.

"Love you, too." Now he sounds like a surly teenager.

I give him a tight squeeze before letting him go. "Now go to bed. We have a big day of making snowmen tomorrow."

He rolls his eyes, but I see him smile before he turns away.

I take my time letting the dogs out and getting ready for bed. I've just climbed under the covers when my phone starts vibrating on my nightstand.

According to my bedside clock it's after midnight, so I'm sure it's not my mom. Aside from her, there's really only one person that might be calling me.

With a slightly unsteady hand, I pick up my phone.

Taking a deep breath, I answer the call. "Angelo?"

“Hi, Beth.” His voice is like an aphrodisiac, sending a warm shiver down my spine. “Did you and Noah have a nice day?”

“Umm, yes.” The words come out breathy.

“Good.” *Goddamn* that rumble. I close my eyes, as though that will slow down my body’s reaction to him. “I wanted to hear your voice before I went to bed.”

“Okay.” *Okay? What sort of reply is that?*

I swear I can hear his smile. “Merry Christmas, baby girl.”

“Merry Christmas, big guy.” I whisper.

When the line cuts, I slap my palm to my forehead. How did I go from slamming my door in his face to stuttering like a lovesick schoolgirl?

It takes me a full minute to get past my embarrassment and remember that Angelo called me. He called me so he could *hear my voice*.

When I finally fall asleep, I have a grin on my face, and a dreamless night.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

BETH

My phone rings, cutting off the pre-game music I have playing in the car. We both glance at the name on my dashboard display. I don't realize what Noah's doing until it's too late. I reach out and try to slap his hand away, but I'm too slow. He's already hit accept.

"Hi Grandma." Noah says, giving me a stupid grin.

I try to glare at him, while still paying attention to the road ahead of me.

There's a pause before my mom speaks. "Noah? I thought I called Beth's phone."

I roll my eyes. "You did mom. We're in the car."

She huffs. "You shouldn't be driving and talking."

She says this even though I pretty much *only* talk to her while I'm driving. But I don't let the opportunity go to waste.

"You're absolutely right!" I say with fake sincerity. "You can talk to Noah."

The thud of Noah dropping his head against the headrest is audible and I bite down a chuckle.

"Noah dear, how was your Christmas?"

We glance at each other. It's New Year's Eve. She's a little late.

"It was good." Noah says.

"Just good?" Mom sighs into the phone. "Beth, I know you've had some adjusting to do, but I think it's time for you to get a husband."

I nearly choke. "What the hell does a husband have to do with Christmas? Plus I think I need to start with a boyfriend, or should I just let you *arrange* the whole thing? Maybe I have a secret betrothed out there I don't know about?"

Noah tries to hide his laugh but he's failing.

"Don't get all defensive." Mom acts like I'm the unreasonable one. "I'm just saying that a man can turn a good holiday into a great one."

"I'll take that under advisement." I allow myself to get exasperated rather than pissed. I don't want to be angry right now. "Look, we gotta go. Noah has

a game, and we just pulled into the parking lot.”

Noah makes a gesture around the intersection we’re driving through, demonstrating my lie. I reach over like I’m going to pinch him. He’s the one that answered the phone. If he calls me out, I’m going to hurt him.

“Oh, well, that’s a shame.” Mom says sadly. “Good luck at your game, Noah.”

“Thanks. Bye, Grandma.” Noah says, a second before I hang up the call.

I strum my fingers on the steering wheel as we wait at a red light.

“I’m kinda surprised she didn’t call more while you were recovering.” Noah says absently. “I know she’s... you know. But still.”

I can feel his eyes on me as he turns in his seat to face me. “You did tell her what happened, didn’t you?” Noah asks.

The light changes to green and I focus on driving.

“You at least told her that the bad guys are gone, right?”

When my only answer is to bite my lip, Noah bursts out laughing. “Beth!”

“What?” I toss one hand up. “If we tell her that it’s safe, she’ll take that as an *all clear* to come visit. I don’t know if you want to share your bedroom with grandma, but I sure as hell don’t.”

Noah shudders. “Hard pass.”

“Plus.” I say. “I need to focus on getting a husband.”

We’re both still laughing when I really do pull into the ice arena’s lot. Noah spots a few of his teammates on our way in, and he hustles off to meet them.

It’s a bit early, so I have my pick of seats when I get inside. It’s my first time in this arena, but they all look pretty much the same. I find a seat in the far front corner, just like the last game.

I smooth my hands down the front of my sweater. It’s the one Noah bought me for Christmas, and I tell myself I’m wearing it for Noah and not for the possibility of seeing Angelo. Noah also got me a pair of bright blue mittens that match my trusty pom pom hat.

I find myself fidgeting every time someone new steps into the arena. If I don’t stop soon, I’m going to unravel my new mittens. Shaking my head at myself, I force my eyes to stay on the teams warming up on the ice. Maybe Angelo will show up, maybe he won’t.

The refs blow a whistle, signaling that the game will start soon. Noah skates past me on his way back to the bench, and - catching my eye - I swear he mouths the word *husband* to me.

I'm in the process of rolling my eyes at him when a body settles down in the spot next to me. He's so close that our thighs are touching. I don't even have to look. The heat of him. The smell of him. The whole of him, is a magnet to my soul.

My pulse starts to beat wildly. He's here. Angelo is here.

With my lip between my teeth, I slowly turn my head to look up at the man beside me.

He's watching me, watching him.

Angelo leans towards me, and I think he's going to kiss me. Right here, in front of everyone. But then he reaches back to pull something out of his back pocket.

Eyes on me, Angelo shakes out a familiar blue hat. With a completely serious look on his face, he tugs it on over his head. Angelo stares at me while wearing a matching pom pom hat to my own. The word *hockey* scrawled across the front.

This giant moron.

Like the first time he saw me in my hat, he reaches out and gives my pom a little squeeze. He looks ridiculous. We both look ridiculous. And instead of laughing at the sight, my dumbass tears up. I feel my eyes fill and I quickly look forward, rapidly blinking so none of them will fall.

Angelo reaches over and grabs one of my mitten-clad hands. I don't resist. Instead, I cling to his fingers.

"Angelo." I whisper his name. There's so much to say.

Dipping his head down, he whispers back. "After the game." He places a soft kiss on my temple. "You'll listen to me. After the game."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

BETH

With my hand encased in his, we watch the start of the game.

After a few minutes, I feel myself relax into him. Angelo is who I want. He's who my heart wants. I know there's a lot that still needs to be said between us, but just being near him settles me.

When the first period ends, some of the crowd gets up to stretch their legs or grab snacks, but we stay seated. The silence between us should probably feel weird, but it doesn't.

When the second period starts, Angelo pulls my mitten off. Entwining our fingers. This is the first skin on skin contact we've had in too long. I feel the electricity from his touch sizzle up my arm.

During the next break I lean my head against Angelo's arm. He's too tall for me to rest my head on top of his shoulder, but he's the perfect height for me to lean against. And when the third period starts, he lets go of my hand to wrap his arm around me.

By the time the final whistle blows, his hand is possessively holding my waist, pulling me tightly against his side.

Angelo waits until the applause dies down before he pulls away from me. I think he's going to stand up, but he turns towards me, bringing one leg up to straddle the bench. As I shift to face him, he grips my thigh. Using gentle force, he maneuvers me until I'm straddling the bench too.

Finally facing each other, Angelo's looking at me, and I know he sees me. That he really *sees* me. His large hands rub up and down the top of my thighs. Then in one smooth move, he grips my hips, tugging me forward, while spreading his legs. He pulls me closer until my knees bump his inner thighs.

He's so close. My hands react without thought, reaching out and resting against his chest. The warmth of his body pouring into my palms as the rest of the world fades away around us.

My eyes trace over his body. I can feel him release a deep exhale, and that's when I meet his eyes.

With my hands on his chest, I can feel every word he says.

“You were never just a job. Not ever. Not for one fucking minute. Uncle Enzo told me to keep an eye on you at the gym, but that’s it. He didn’t tell me who you were, or what had happened. And the club, your house, everything that came after, that was me wanting to be with you.

“I know I should’ve laid it all out for you from the start. But I didn’t know how important you’d become to me. How much I’d care about you. And I know that what I did . . . hurt you. I can’t... I hate that I caused you pain. I don’t know how to prove that to you. I’m not good at sharing my emotions and saying the right thing. But I’ll figure it out. I just need you to give me time. Let me show you that I’m trustworthy. Because I am. You can trust me. I want to be someone you depend on. Someone you lean on.” Angelo lets go of my hip, so he can cradle the back of my neck. “I want to be someone you can love.”

I swallow against the tightness in my chest. I’ve cried so many tears of anger and fear and grief, it’s such a foreign feeling to have my eyes filling from happiness.

Angelo’s voice deepens. “I need you here. Please don’t leave.”

My hands grip into the front of his shirt. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Angelo’s eyes search mine. “You’re not moving back?”

It’s not until he asks the question that I realize what he had meant by needing me here.

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving.” I look towards the empty ice rink. “We’re not leaving. We like it here. And we’re going to stay as Beth and Noah *Smith*. It suits us. You suit us, too.” I look back to Angelo. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

Angelo’s hands frame my face as he gets even closer. “I’d do anything for you, baby girl. *Anything*.” He presses a kiss to my cheek. “I’ve never been so scared.” He kisses my other cheek. “When I thought I’d lost you... ” His lips brush over mine. “I’ve already fallen for you. I can’t lose you.”

With an arch of my back, I press our lips firmly together. I don’t want to wait anymore. I don’t want to punish either of us any longer.

Angelo reacts to my kiss immediately, taking it deeper. He slants his lips against mine. Claiming me. Marking me. Promising me.

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, quickly followed by Angelo’s thumb swiping it away.

“Tell me you’re mine,” Angelo whispers the words against my mouth.

“I’m yours, Angelo.” I whisper back. “And you’re mine.”
When our lips meet again, I can feel his smile.

EPILOGUE

BETH

“Look at those two cuties.” Sissy gestures out the front door before snickering. “Your man sure knows how to wear the hell out of those shorts.”

I roll my eyes, but I still turn to look. I expect it to be Angelo and one of his work buddies, but instead I see Angelo and Noah walking through the parking lot.

They make such a pair. I swear, in the eight months since New Year’s, Noah’s grown half a foot. I don’t think he’ll ever be Angelo-sized, but they look more and more like family every day. And every day it makes my heart squeeze.

“What’s Noah doing here?” Sissy asks.

I shrug. “Not sure. But they have that *look*.”

Sissy narrows her eyes. “The look of trouble?”

“That’s the one.”

The doors push open and my boys walk into the gym.

“Hey guys.” I greet them, smiling. “What’re you doing here?”

Angelo waves at Sissy before striding up and planting a kiss right on my lips.

Sissy and Noah both make gagging sounds.

Angelo takes a few steps back, so I don’t have to crane my neck up to look at him.

“I’m here to pick you up.”

“Uh, that’s sweet and all, but I drove myself to work.”

He gestures to Noah with his chin. “That’s what he’s for. Noah will drive your car.”

“Why?” I drag the word out, but I still reach into my bag for my keys.

Angelo snags the keys from my hand and tosses them to Noah. “We need both vehicles.”

“For what?”

Angelo’s features remain relaxed. “To get some stuff outta my place.”

“Alright.” He’s clearly leaving something out. “Like what?”

“Random stuff. The realtor said I needed to clear some of the clutter out. Whatever that means.”

“Realtor?” I repeat the word like I’ve never heard it before. “Are you selling your place?”

“Yeah. Listed it this morning.”

My pulse picks up. “Any reason why?”

Angelo shrugs. “I don’t really need it anymore.”

“Is that so?”

Angelo smirks. “Definitely so.”

I can feel Noah’s and Sissy’s attention shifting back and forth between us.

I put my hands on my hips. “And where are you going to live?”

Angelo’s expression doesn’t change as he replies. “With you and Noah.”

I raise a brow. “You think I’m going to let my boyfriend just move in with me? Without asking?”

Angelo takes a step towards me. “I won’t be your boyfriend. And this is me asking.”

He lowers himself to one knee, and my breath catches in my throat.

“You’ve been mine since the first moment I saw you. And by the time my mind caught up to my heart, I knew I could never let you go. I’m done wasting my time. Every night spent alone in my bed is a night I could be with you.” Angelo opens his hand, revealing a sparking circle. The ring looks so small laying in his palm. “I love you, Beth. And you love me. You can be a Smith, or a Lawler, or you can change your name again and be a Rossi. But you’re going to wear my grandmother’s ring. And you’re going to be my wife.”

My fingers are trembling as Angelo reaches out to take my hand.

“This is you asking?” I breathe out, already smiling and nodding my head.

Angelo slides the ring onto my finger, but my eyes are too watery to even see it.

He kisses the back of my hand. “Will you let me move in with you? Will you marry me? Will you let me share your life from now until forever?”

I try to say it loudly, but my yes comes out as a whisper. It doesn’t matter, Angelo hears me.

As he stands, his arms go around my waist and he lifts me up with him.

Sissy lets out a shriek of joy, and I hear Noah sniff before he laughs.

My legs automatically wrap around Angelo’s waist. Pressing my lips to his, I make sure he can *feel* the yes that my soul is shouting.

I don't notice that we've moved until Angelo spins, using his back to push through the doors.

"Congratulations!" Sissy yells before the doors shut, cutting her off.

I pull my mouth away and look around the parking lot. "Set me down, you crazy man."

Angelo chuckles. "No."

"Angelo, let me go!"

Angelo stops walking to look me in the eye. "Never."

EPILOGUE II

JOHN (a few days before Christmas)

“Shut the fuck up!” I shout at the closed door behind me.

Groaning, I drag a hand down my face. I’ve been sitting with this fuckwit Conor for the past four days. The first day was fine, since he was mostly knocked out while we patched up his leg. But the last three days of babysitting have tried my fucking patience. At least I wasn’t alone with the idiot, having a few of Angelo’s guys to keep me company. But doing this whole thing off the books definitely lowers the luxury level of our surroundings.

I glance at my watch. Again.

The O’Malley guy is late. He was supposed to be here an hour ago. Which means I sent Angelo’s guys home two hours ago. That was the deal. One on one. Easy trade. Then I can go the fuck home. I need a shower, and a beer, and some real food. In that order.

Connor lets out another string of muffled shouts, and I swear to god I’ll put a bullet in his brain myself if this guy doesn’t show soon.

I’m contemplating the potential backlash of an unsanctioned execution when my phone buzzes with the text telling me that Dell is here.

Pulling my gun out of its holster, I level it at the door.

A moment later, the door to the abandoned barn creaks open. A small man steps through. He’s wearing a winter jacket, the hood pulled up, hiding his face in shadows.

My sights stay centered on his chest. “Let them hate.”

“So long as they fear.” The reply is quiet, but it’s the correct phrase.

I lower my gun.

“You’re late,” I bite out the words.

The figure steps farther into the room, palms up, showing that their hands are empty. Slowly, the small hands reach up, pulling the hood back, revealing...

Not a man.

A stunning woman, with wild red hair, stares back at me.

Her pink lips pull into a smile. “I’m Dell. Delilah O’Malley. I believe you

have a package for me.”

Well Hell. I wasn't expecting that.

About the Author

S.J. Tilly lives in Minnesota with her husband and their herd of boxers. She spends an unhealthy amount of time with her face buried in books, reading and writing. If she's not nose deep in text, or harassing her dogs, she's probably playing with her plants, pretending she knows how to garden. You can find her stumbling around on Instagram @sjtillyauthor

Acknowledgements

Oh man, where to start. I feel like this is going to be a repeat the same sappy thank you's for every book...

Thank you, mom, again. Your support and excitement and feedback and constant positivity about my books is overwhelming. You do a ton of editing for me and I should probably make you official but you're my mom and it's just what you do and I can't thank you enough.

Mandi, you're a constant rock for me. Who'd have thought this is what we'd be doing during pandemic life, but I'm so happy to have you as a friend and sounding board.

M. Penna – woman, you're LITERALLY the best. (see what I did there, heh) Seriously, you are the best editor an author could possibly ask for. Your corrections and comments and overall attitude thrill me to no end. I get so impatient for you to do the next book - and the next, and the next* mostly because I can't wait to read your reactions. Their, I said it. *devil face*

James Adkinson, you crazy son of a bitch, you did it! Again! Sin Too's cover is just as gorgeous as Mr. Sin. I'm sure I am the Worst to work with, but you're a goddamn joy to work with so I think it evens out. And I can't wait to see how the rest of the book covers (and other things...) turn out!

Johnny, my jaunty, thank you for your steady support and for your ability to entertain yourself as I blow off the world around me and submerge myself in Book World. I'm sure I'm annoying, but you don't make me feel like it.

And THANK YOU to everyone who read Mr. Sin! Fuck, guys, I can't even begin to tell you how good that makes me feel. Putting my book out into the world was a soul-deep level of terrifying that I was not prepared for. I'm a cocky bitch, I know I am, and I was confident in my story... but when I got that first copy in my hand, I lost it. Half of me was filled with pride and excitement and a feeling of accomplishment. But the other half of me was filled with a *oh-holy-fucking-shit-it's-out-there-and-there's-no-going-back-and-what-if-everyone-hates-it* feeling. But you guys didn't hate it. And that makes me want to squeeze you all sooooo hard. (In a good way!) So for everyone that read it, you get a hug. And everyone that read it and left a review, I'm gonna grab your ass a little during that hug.

And lastly, but certainly not least, this shout-out is to my hometown. Hastings, Minnesota. Just... wow. I never could have imagined the sort of support you all have shown me. H-town for the win.

Books by S.J. Tilly

Sin Series Romantic Suspense

Mr. Sin

I should have run the other way. Paid my tab and gone back to my room. But he was there. And he was... everything. I figured what's the harm in letting passion rule my decisions for one night? So what if he looks like the Devil in a suit. I'd be leaving in the morning. Flying home, back to my pleasant but predictable life. I'd never see him again.

Except I do. In the last place I expected. And now everything I've worked so hard for is in jeopardy.

We can't stop what we've started, but this is bigger than the two of us.

And when his past comes back to haunt him, love might not be enough to save me.

Sin Too

Beth

It started with tragedy.

And secrets.

Hidden truths that refused to stay buried have come out to chase me. Now I'm on the run, living under a blanket of constant fear, pretending to be someone I'm not. And if I'm not really me, how am I supposed to know what's real?

Angelo

Watch the girl.

It was supposed to be a simple assignment. But like everything else in this family, there's nothing simple about it. Not my task. Not her fake name. And not my feelings for her.

But Beth is mine now.

So when the monsters from her past come out to play, they'll have to get through me first.

Sleet Series

Contemporary Hockey Romance

Sleet Kitten (May 2021)

There are a few things that life doesn't prepare you for. Like what to do when a super-hot guy catches you sneaking around in his basement. Or what to do when a mysterious package shows up with tickets to a hockey game because, apparently, he's a professional athlete. Or how to handle it when you get to the game and realize he's freaking famous since half of the 20,000 people in the stands are wearing his jersey.

I thought I was a well-adjusted adult, reasonably prepared for life. But one date with Jackson Wilder, a viral video, and an "I didn't know she was your mom" incident, and I'm suddenly questioning everything I thought I knew.

But he's *fun*. And great. And I think I might be falling for him. But I don't know if he's falling for me, too, or if he's as much of a player off the ice as on.

Sleet Sugar (June 2021)

My friends have convinced me. No more hockey players.

With a dad who is the Head Coach for the Minnesota Sleet, it seemed like an easy decision.

My friends have also convinced me that the best way to boost my fragile self-esteem is through a one-night stand.

A dating app. A hotel bar. A sexy-as-hell man... who's sweet, and funny, and - did I mention? - sexy-as-hell... I fortified my courage and invited myself up to his room.

Assumptions. There's a rule about them.

I assumed he was passing through town. I assumed he was a businessman, or maybe an investor, or accountant, or literally anything other than a professional hockey player. I assumed I'd never see him again.

I assumed wrong.

Sleet Banshee (July 2021)

Mother-freaking hockey players. My friends found their happily-ever-afters with a couple of sweet, doting, over-the-top, in-love athletes. They got nicknames like Kitten and Sugar. But me? I got stuck with a dickhead who riles me up on purpose and calls me Banshee. Yeah, he might have a voice made explicitly for wet dreams. And he might have a body and face carved by the gods. And he might have a level of Alpha-hole that gets me all hot and bothered...

But when he presses my buttons, he presses ALL of my buttons. And I'm not the type of girl who takes things sitting down. I mean, I only got caught on my knees that one time. In the museum. . .

But when my decisions get one of my friends hurt... I can't stop blaming myself. And him.

Except he can't take a hint. And I can't keep my panties on.

