

An
Ethan Frost
Novel

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RUINED
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TRACY WOLFF

National bestselling author of
Full Exposure and *Tie Me Down*

Ruined

AN ETHAN FROST NOVEL

Tracy Wolff



Loveswept
NEW YORK

Ruined is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Published in the United States of America by Loveswept, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.

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eBook ISBN: 9780804179263

Author photograph © Kevin Gourley

Cover design: Lynn Andreozzi

Cover photograph: Lourens Reyneke/ImageBrief.com

This book contains excerpts from the forthcoming titles *Full Exposure* by Tracy Wolff, *Tie Me Down* by Tracy Wolff, and *Wild on You* by Tina Wainscott. These excerpts have been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming editions.

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For Sue and Gina, because you rock

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

The Editor's Corner

Excerpt from Full Exposure

Excerpt from Tie Me Down

Excerpt from Wild on You

Chapter One

No one told me that the reason my brand-new pair of Christian Louboutins are called killer is because they are *actually* going to kill me before the day is over.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. What else should I expect from a pair of five-inch ruby-red stilettos? Even ones that come with the promise of comfort? After all, every woman knows that after a few hours and a few miles, even the most comfortable heels become instruments of torture.

Even I know that, and that's saying something considering I spend most of my life in old jeans and older T-shirts. And ballet flats. I'm a big fan of ballet flats. Right now I'd pretty much sell my soul for a pair of them.

Which is why I'd planned to wear a totally sensible pair of shoes today. Navy open-toed pumps with a two-inch heel that perfectly match the five-hundred-dollar suit I'm wearing. It's the same suit I scrimped and saved for for the better part of last semester, and it's the same suit that helped get me the position I started this morning. My dream job. Technically, I suppose it isn't *actually* a job, as I'm not getting paid for it—a salary *is* the defining quality of being employed, after all—but it is an internship. In the intellectual property department of the most innovative and fastest-growing biomedical corporation in the country. The world, even. If that isn't a job and a damn good one, I don't know what is.

But when I laid the whole outfit out on my bed last night, checking the individual pieces for any stains or tears or wrinkles or scuffs—anything that might give me away as the poor college student I am instead of the ambitious and hardworking future lawyer I intend to be—my best friend and roommate was horrified by my choice of footwear. She'd insisted that a suit as kick-ass as this one deserved shoes just as kick-ass. That's when she'd pulled out the Loubies with a drumroll and a flourish, her gift to me on the first day of the rest of my life.

I couldn't say no, not when Tori had gone through so much trouble to make this day special for me. And not when she'd insisted on me crashing in her guest room, rent free, for the summer just so I could actually afford to take this internship. Just so I could start the journey that would turn my dreams into reality.

So now here I am, tottering around on these skyscraper heels and doing my best not to look like my blisters are growing blisters. And it's only lunchtime. I still have five more hours of this torture to endure.

Things probably wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been able to stay at my desk, or even on the two floors that were devoted to intellectual property law at Frost Industries's main headquarters. But since it was my first day on the job, my mentor—another intern who seems really nice and who's been here awhile—had thought it'd be a great idea to show me around the property. A property that includes five main buildings and a number of smaller labs *and* encompasses several acres of prime beachfront realty here in sunny La Jolla, California. It had been a great tour of a great company, and I probably would have had to pinch myself if my shoes hadn't been doing it for me.

But the tour is finally over, I remind myself as I walk into the huge cafeteria that overlooks one of the prettiest beaches in San Diego. There's nothing on the agenda for this afternoon except lunch and a four-hour-long meeting with the other interns, all of whom have been here a lot longer than I. They're supposed to bring me up to speed on the various patents and contracts we'll be doing research on this summer. I know that probably sounds wicked boring to most people, but I can't wait. This is the only thing I've wanted to do since I found out being the Pink Power Ranger was not actually a viable career choice.

Doing my best not to limp, I try not to look as overwhelmed as I feel in this huge, cavernous room with its 842 seats (that number came directly from my mentor, who is as proud of this place as Ethan Frost himself probably is—maybe more).

Like Google before it, Frost Industries is known for its state-of-the-art cafeteria. With two gourmet chefs and twelve different food stations that change their type of cuisine served on a weekly basis—not to mention the salad, juice, and dessert bars—it boasts something for everyone. And they

do mean everyone. It doesn't matter if you're a janitor or an executive VP; as long as you have your employee badge, you eat free. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, afternoon snack. They're all on the house for Frost Industries employees—another reason I've been able to take this internship. With no rent and no food bills to speak of, my meager savings should get me through until my scholarship and work study come in to offset the cost of my senior year.

Though it's one o'clock, I'm still not very hungry—residual nervousness from my first day still has my stomach flipping a little—so I head over to the juice bar. A smoothie sounds about right for lunch today. It's not too heavy, but it is substantial enough to get me through until dinner. Besides, the juice bar is the closest thing to me, and at this point, every step counts.

When I get there, there's no line—everyone seems to be hanging at the pizza and Indian food stations today. There are two guys behind the counter, neither of whom seems in that big a rush to take my order. Which is fine, since I don't know what I want yet anyway.

The menu's not that extensive—eight different smoothies, and six different juices, including wheatgrass and beet, neither of which is high on my list of things to try—so it doesn't take me long to make up my mind. And still neither guy tries to wait on me. I'm more intrigued than annoyed, though, especially since it looks like I'm not the only one who is new today. One of the guys is definitely instructing the other on the fine art of smoothie making, and he's being very particular, talking about things like the proper juice-to-fruit ratio and how important it is to make sure that the frozen yogurt is just the right temperature. He even goes so far as to instruct him on exactly how many blueberries should go into the smoothie he's making. It turns out thirty-eight is the right number. Not thirty-seven. Not thirty-nine. But thirty-eight.

Coming from another guy, the whole speech probably would have sounded jerky. But this guy is so passionate about smoothie making, so determined that it be exactly right, that he doesn't sound jerky at all. Instead, he comes off like the Dalai Lama of blended-drink making. Patient, wise, omnipotent.

And the guy he's talking to is hanging on his every syllable, like the words that fall from his lips are actually directions on how to reach nirvana.

I'm amused despite myself, and am almost sorry to see the lesson end when the smoothie finally gets poured into two cups. Or I would be if the minutes of my lunch hour weren't ticking rapidly away.

"Excuse me," I say when it eventually becomes obvious that they're both more than happy to stand around staring at the reddish blue smoothie in front of them for many moons to come. It's like they're both completely entranced by the drink, and I can't help thinking that maybe Frost Industries doesn't take their no-illegal-substance policy all that seriously. Because these guys have to be high on something, right? Otherwise a simple smoothie just wouldn't be all that interesting. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm ready to order now."

The trainer looks up at the sound of my voice, his dark blue eyes immediately zeroing in on mine. That's when I realize he wasn't as oblivious to my presence as I'd thought. He'd been testing me as surely as he'd been testing the other employee, waiting to see how each of us would handle the situation.

The knowledge gets my back up. It's just a stupid drink, just a stupid little power play, but I don't enjoy being manipulated. Even over something as ridiculous as a drink.

"No need to order," he says, pressing a lid down onto one of the cups before sliding it across the counter at me. "You can have this one. It's the Ethan Special."

"No, thank you." I don't even glance at the cup. "I'd prefer a Hawaiian Sunrise."

"How do you know that's what you'd prefer? You don't even know what's in the Ethan Special."

Judging from his behavior, I'm thinking grass of the non-wheat variety. And since this is my first day, I'm not exactly prepared to risk it, no matter how hot he is. "I don't have to know what's in it to know that I'm in the mood for" —I glance back at the menu— "A refreshing blend of strawberries, bananas, pineapple juice, and orange sherbet. None of which appear to be in the drink you just made."

"This drink has strawberries in it. Seven, to be exact."

Thirty-eight blueberries and seven strawberries. Is this guy for real? There's a part of me that's intrigued despite myself, but I'm not about to let him see that. So I just look down my nose at him and answer, "One out of four ingredients is not what I would call a perfect match."

"Is that important to you?" he asks, one dark eyebrow raised. "That things match up perfectly?"

Absolutely. I'm obsessive about it, really, making sure things fit exactly where they're supposed to. Making sure the *i*'s are all dotted and the *t*'s are all crossed and the rules have all been followed. Tori calls me OCD, but it's not like that. It's not the routine of doing something a certain way that appeals to me. It's the order of the end result that I crave, the knowledge that things are exactly as they should be.

And while I'm aware that sounds a little crazy, it's actually what's kept me sane the last six years. Ever since Brandon—

I slam that door shut before the memories leak out from where I've buried them. No way am I going to think about him again *ever*, let alone on what is the best day I've had in a very long time. No, I'm going to focus on keeping things simple. Orderly. Easy. After all, I'm not one to rock the boat just to see what falls out.

I don't tell any of this to him, of course. Instead, I raise one of my own brows and say, "You're the one who counts the blueberries in his drink. All I'm trying to do is get what I ordered sometime before the dinner rush. Which, incidentally, starts in"—I make a show of glancing at my watch—"approximately four hours."

"So, we've got plenty of time then. Why don't you pull up a bar stool and we'll get to know each other a little? I don't have anywhere I need to be."

The guy next to him—the trainee—makes a choked little sound in the back of his throat. But he doesn't say anything, just takes a drink from the second Ethan Special cup, so I don't bother looking over at him. Especially since every instinct I have is screaming at me to keep my eyes on the guy in front of me. That looking away would be akin to admitting a defeat I am suddenly hell-bent on avoiding.

"Well, that makes one of us. I, however, have a meeting in fifteen minutes that I can't be late for."

“Hmm. That certainly puts you at a disadvantage then, doesn’t it?”

“Why? Because I have a job that actually requires me to perform the duties that are in my job description?”

This time the noise the trainee makes sounds somewhere between a cat hacking up a furball and a hyena in its death throes. “Are you okay?” I finally demand, still not taking my eyes off his trainer. “Because, frankly, I’m getting concerned.”

He makes the sound again, then slaps his chest hard before taking another long sip from his drink. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Glad to hear it. I was beginning to think he’d poisoned you.”

“I never poison anyone on the first day. The second day, however, is an entirely different story.”

“I wouldn’t go around admitting that to anyone. It makes you—and Frost Industries—culpable if anyone ever suffers so much as a mild case of food poisoning.”

He steps back then, looks me over from top to toes. “God. You’re one of the lawyers, aren’t you?”

I might have been excited that it was that obvious, except he definitely doesn’t make it sound like a compliment. Which, I admit, gets my hackles up even more. “Is that a problem?”

Before he can answer, someone comes up behind me and orders a Hawaiian Sunrise. The trainer chats easily with him even as he begins scooping ingredients into a blender. Less than ninety seconds later, he puts a beautiful, pinkish orange smoothie on the counter. The guy runs his badge through the scanner, grabs his drink, and then heads off with a wave.

I watch the whole thing go down, then turn to him in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? Are. You. Freaking. Kidding. Me?”

He does an admirable job of looking confused. “Is something wrong?”

“You just gave him my drink!”

“No. I just gave him his drink.” He taps the cup in front of me. “That’s your drink.”

I’m not even sure what I’m feeling at this point. Annoyance, definitely. Shock, probably. Amusement? Strangely enough, I think there’s some of

that going on, too. This guy is so brash, so bold, so in-my-face that I can't help being impressed. Even as I'm determined to put him in his place.

"Are you always this insufferable?" I demand.

"Only when I'm right."

"I thought the customer was always right."

He cocks his head to the side, pretends to think for a second. Then says, "Nope. Not always. But hey, how about this? I'll make your drink right now if you give the Ethan Special a try." He pushes the smoothie a little closer to me. "Come on. Just one sip."

"I didn't realize this was a negotiation."

"Life is a negotiation."

"No. It's a cereal." I eye the smoothie. "What if I don't like it?"

"What if you do?"

"It's an unnecessary risk."

"Almost everything is an unnecessary risk. Sometimes the risk is worth the reward." He's smiling now, but the look in his eyes is intense. Interested. *Interesting*. It tugs at something deep inside me, makes me wonder, when I *never* wonder. Makes me want, when I *never* want.

That's when I take a step back and look at him, really look at him. Except for his dark hair, he's the quintessential California surf bum. Bright blue Hurley T-shirt. Quiksilver board shorts with wide, color-blocked stripes in red, orange, yellow, and blue. Tan leather flip-flops. Gorgeous face. Dark stubble on his chin. Too-long hair flopping in his eyes. Even the hint of a tattoo peeking out from under the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. Totally not the kind of guy I would normally go for.

And yet there's something familiar about him. And also something that intrigues me. That makes me want to yield to him when I don't normally yield to anyone. For a moment, just a moment, I think about picking up that stupid purple shake and drinking it. I'm running out of time, after all, and the afternoon will drag by if I don't eat something.

I could just walk away, grab a sandwich and some fruit from one of the coolers, and eat it on my way back to Building Three. But that feels too

much like retreat, something that I suddenly realize would disappoint us both.

Which means we're at a stalemate. Him insisting I try something new. Me insisting I'm fine with the tried and true. It's a stupid fight to have, especially with a stranger, but the look in his eyes can't be denied. We both know there's more going on here than a battle over a stupid drink

I can't believe I'm going to do it, can't believe that after all this fuss I'm going to take a sip of that damn smoothie, but I am. I reach for it, am compelled to reach for it by the look in his eyes and the sudden tension in his body. But as my hand closes around the cup, my stomach growls. Loudly.

It breaks the spell and I flush in embarrassment. So much for first-day nerves. A tangle with the juice-bar guy and suddenly my appetite is back with a vengeance.

"You're hungry," he says. His voice is colored with a sudden regret I don't understand.

"It's lunchtime. That's my lunch."

The next thing I know, he's back at the blender, loading it with cut-up bananas and an extra-large serving of strawberries—definitely more than seven. He adds a large scoop of protein powder, then sherbet and juice.

Moments later, an extra-large Hawaiian Sunrise smoothie appears in front of me.

I'm confused. Uncertain, suddenly, though I don't know why. I like to win. It's kind of an obsession with me, so I should be happy that he backed down so unexpectedly. Except I'm not, because winning like this feels strangely like losing.

Under his watchful gaze, I reach for my smoothie. But at the last second—don't ask me why because I don't have a clue—I grab his instead. Take a long sip. Then place the cup back down on the counter.

Then I gather up my smoothie and turn away without glancing at him again. I can't. I'm too unsettled by what just happened. By what I just did and why I did it.

I've only gone a few steps, though, when he calls after me. "Hey!"

I turn back, even though I tell myself not to. "Yes?"

“What did you think? Of the Ethan Special?”

“Exactly what I thought I would. It’s disgusting.”

He rears back in surprise. “Disgusting? Really?”

“Really. I hate blueberries.”

He doesn’t say another word, but then again, neither do I. Still, the question hangs between us. If I really hate blueberries so much, why did I drink his smoothie when he’d already given me what I ordered?

I don’t know the answer to that question, but as I walk away, I can feel his eyes on me. And somehow I’m certain that until I do know, until I understand, things will never be the same for me again.

Chapter Two

“Hey, Chloe.” My roommate greets me without looking up from where she’s painting her toenails the ugliest cyanide green I’ve ever seen. “A package came for you about an hour ago. I put it on your bed.”

“A package?” The first thing I do after I close our apartment door behind me is to kick the ruby-red torture devices I’ve been wearing all day off my feet and halfway across the apartment. I watch with a demented kind of satisfaction as they bounce off the breakfast nook’s walls. It’s no way to treat a thousand-dollar pair of Christian Louboutins, but to be honest, at this point I don’t really give a damn. Never again will I wear those things to work. Never. Again. “I didn’t order anything.”

“The return address says Frost Industries. It’s pretty heavy, so maybe it’s a bunch of HR paperwork. You know, employee codes of conduct, stuff like that.”

“Maybe, but they emailed me all those things last week, made me sign a confidentiality agreement and a bunch of other stuff before they ever let me out of the HR offices.” I drop my purse on the table near the door, then gratefully shrug out of my jacket. I love this suit, I really do. But all I really want right now is to get the thing off of me. It’s definitely a yoga pants kind of night. “I doubt they’d send physical copies of the documents, too. Especially via UPS or FedEx. Not when they could have just given them to me when I was at work today.”

“How was work? Did you take the world of biomedical engineering by storm on your first day?”

“Not quite. But I managed to not humiliate myself, so that’s something.”

“I say it’s a definite win. And you know what that means—champagne for dinner!”

I glance at her, amused. “Don’t you mean *with* dinner?”

“Only if you want to be a party pooper.”

If those nine words don't sum up my relationship with Tori, than I don't know what does. She's six months older than I, and ever since we were put together as roommates our freshman year at UCSD, she's pretty much considered it her job in life to corrupt me—a position she has only grown more firm on since she turned twenty-one a few months ago.

For the sake of our friendship, some days I even let her think it's working.

Curious about this strange and unexpected package, I head down the hall toward my bedroom. Having finally finished her last toe, Tori gets up to follow me. But since she's worried about smudging the polish, she kind of waddles on her heels, toes in the air. With her hair dyed race-car yellow and cut short and spiky, she looks a little like a top-heavy duck. One that stuck its wing in an electric socket.

She's actually a really pretty girl, with beautifully delicate features and the most haunting green eyes I've ever seen. But she's got major issues with her looks, so she messes with herself all the time, changing her hair, her makeup, her clothes. She has multiple piercings, a few tattoos, has even experimented with scarification and branding on occasion. She says she's just being young, trying to figure out who she really is. But I'm pretty sure it's the opposite. For as long as I've known her, she's been trying to *forget* who she is. To bury deep the sad little rich girl she still sees every time she looks in a mirror.

I've tried to talk to her about it on a few occasions—that's what best friends are for—but every time I broach the subject, she shuts me down, hard. Maybe I should push it, but she's fragile—a lot more fragile than she'd ever admit—and I'm terrified of breaking her with a careless word or too-vehement protest. So most days I just keep my mouth shut. That doesn't mean I don't worry, though.

“Well, open it,” she orders from my bedroom doorway, when I just stand there looking at what is, indeed, a very large box. It covers about a quarter of my double bed, and when I go to pick it up, I find that Tori didn't exaggerate. It really is heavy. It's also marked FRAGILE, with arrows pointing to the words THIS END UP.

Now I'm as curious as she is. Reaching into my nightstand, I pull out a pair of manicure scissors and start hacking at the tape on the box. It takes a couple minutes more than if I'd gone and gotten a knife from the kitchen, but eventually I get the box open. Once I do, though, I'm as confused as I was before I opened it. Because there are no HR manuals in the box. No new employee information. Just a four-hundred-dollar gourmet blender and a dozen pints of strawberries.

Immediately I think of him. Juice Guy. I know he's the one who sent this to me—it's the only thing that makes sense. But how did he get my address? And how does a guy who works in a juice bar afford to throw around this kind of cash? And even if he could afford it, why would he throw it toward me?

My heart is beating a little too fast, and while I try to convince myself it's because I'm creeped out—it smacks of online stalkerdom that he managed to get my address so quickly—I know that it's more than that.

He's flitted through my mind all day, along with my very odd reaction to him. No matter how he did it, it's nice to think that he's been thinking of me, too. Provided, of course, he's not a serial killer who wants to put my head in a box. Because I totally wouldn't be okay with that. Strawberries and a blender I'm strangely fine with, despite their cost. My head in a box, not so much.

When I don't do anything but stand there, peering at his gifts and contemplating what all this means, Tori creeps up behind me. Stares over my shoulder. "Strawberries? Who would send you strawberries?"

I don't know where to begin, so in the end I don't say anything. Just keep staring at the perfect red berries. The pint baskets they come in are stamped with the name of an organic strawberry farm about twenty miles up the freeway, which means he went to a lot of trouble to get this gift here so quickly.

The only question is why.

Tori takes my silence as ignorance and starts poking around in the box. "Is there a card?"

"I don't see one."

But when I reach in and pick up one of the baskets of strawberries, I notice the ivory business card that had slipped between the pints. It's embossed, with Frost Industries name and logo on the front. But the name listed directly below the logo is all wrong. Not that I know Juice Guy's name, but I'm pretty damn sure that the surf bum I met today isn't Ethan Frost. Except when I turn the card over, there's a phone number scrawled on the back in bold black writing.

"Ethan fucking Frost is sending you strawberries?" Tori demands incredulously. "How is that possible? He's a legend. Not to mention the most eligible bachelor under thirty on the entire West Coast."

"He's not. Of course he's not. They're from..."

"Who?" She eyes me suspiciously.

"Some guy I met today. *Not* Ethan Frost."

"You certain about that?" She grabs the basket out of my hands and whirls away. "Because it sure looks to me like he's the one who sent these babies."

"Hey!" Still confused, I follow her. "Where are you going with those?"

"Haven't you ever seen *Pretty Woman*? Strawberries go awesome with champagne."

"We can't eat them!"

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Why not?"

"Because we don't know where they came from!"

Tori snatches the card out of my hand, waves it in my face. "They came from Ethan fucking Frost. That's good enough for me."

"Well, it's not good enough for me. *If* these even came from him—"

"Oh, they came from him. See the watermarks on this business card? Plus the embossing? That's a lot of money to shell out for a fake card."

"But why?" I ask again, appalled by the whininess that has taken over my normally cool tone. "It doesn't make any sense."

It makes perfect sense, a little voice inside me whispers. If I put the puzzle pieces together, if I let myself go there, I know exactly what this all means.

“Well, the guy’s not known for being crazy. Brilliant? Yes. A little different? Sometimes. But out-and-out crazy? Not even close. Which means one of two things.” She uses a finger to tick off the first reason. “Either this is the same welcome-to-the-company gift he sends to everyone who comes to work for him...”

For a moment my world levels back out as I think about the viability of that option. He’s a generous guy, so maybe—

But before I can get any further than basic supposition, Tori continues, “But I’m pretty sure we both know that’s a bunch of bull. The other option—and personally, it’s the one I’m leaning toward,” she says while shooting me her version of the evil eye, “is that a lot more happened at work today than you told me about. If that’s the case, then you’re a bitch. And the only way I’ll be persuaded to forgive you is if you sit down right now with me—and these really delectable strawberries—and tell me everything.”

I know I don’t have much of a choice, not with the way she’s looking at me. So I do what she asks, starting with the moment I met Juice Guy and not stopping until I get to the part where he actually makes me my smoothie. I leave out the rest—about how I drank that noxious blueberry thing—because I still don’t know why I did it. Nor do I know how I feel about the fact that I did it.

Tori’s spellbound by my every word—but then she grew up in the most elite circles the West Coast has to offer, and as such is privy to all the inside gossip I don’t have a clue about. My family entered the world of the rich and notorious late, very late, and they did it in Boston, where it’s a whole different game. And since the only family member I bother talking to anymore is my brother, it’s not like I’m up on the gossip about the East Coast elite, either. Which is exactly how I like it.

“You know it was him, right?” Tori says as she pours herself a third glass of champagne. She tops mine off as well, but I’m still nursing my first glass and the look of disapproval she sends me tells me she’s noticed that fact. “It had to be.”

I hope not. God, I really hope not. Because if Juice Guy really is Ethan Frost...If he really is, then I’d spent my first day sparring with my boss’s boss’s boss’s boss. And none too politely. The thought boggles my mind—and yet it makes sense. I’d known there was something familiar about him,

but I'd put it down to the fact that he looked like half the surfers in California. It had never occurred to me that it was because I had Googled him months ago when I'd applied for the internship, had seen pictures of him then.

Except Juice Guy looks nothing like the Ethan Frost I remember seeing in those photos. I mean, yes, he has blue eyes and dark hair, but...oh, shit. It really *could* be him.

"There's one way to find out for sure." Tori, who seems determined to make me lose it, picks up her tablet from the coffee table where she abandoned it earlier.

Two minutes later I'm staring at an array of Google images, nearly all of which are paparazzi shots of Ethan Frost. Who is very definitely *also* Juice Guy. Only he looks nothing like the surf bum I met earlier today. In most of the pictures he's dressed in expensive suits or tuxedos, his black hair neatly styled and his tattoo completely covered. In others he looks more casual—dress pants and an open-collared shirt, or designer jeans and sweaters with rugged, expensive boots.

It's obviously him, though. Same intense indigo eyes. Same sculpted cheekbones and chiseled jaw. Same broad shoulders and narrow hips. Even the crazy long eyelashes are the same.

And still I don't want to believe it. Because if it is him, then I am totally, utterly screwed.

I spend the next hour searching through dozens of pages, thousands of images—some of them show him with beautiful models and Hollywood starlets, while others show him giving speeches or getting awards—before I find what I'm looking for. A picture of him at the beach in board shorts, carrying a surfboard under one arm. He's bare-chested, his chiseled abs (can anyone say eight-pack?) dripping with seawater, the blue-and-black shoulder tattoo of tribal waves I only saw hints of earlier on glorious display. His hair is messed up, his too-long bangs covering his forehead and part of his face—and he's smiling. A real smile, not like the one he wears in so many of the pap pictures. It's the same smile I saw from him today when he was messing with me, wide and happy-looking with his eyes crinkled up at the corners, and it convinces me that my suspicions aren't wrong.

Juice Guy, this surf bum, and the visionary CEO of Frost Industries are all the same guy. My boss's boss's boss's boss. Awesome. No wonder the other guy working the juice bar had nearly swallowed his tongue. I'd feel bad for bringing him so close to cardiac arrest, except it would have been nice if he'd actually *said something*. He didn't have to do a lot. He could have just called him by name and I would have gotten the hint instead of continuing to stand there and humiliate myself.

"What's wrong?" Tori asks when she finally looks up from the screen and sees my face.

"What's wrong? Are you kidding me? It's a miracle he didn't fire me this afternoon!"

"Fire you? For what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Insubordination, maybe." On the brink of hyperventilating—or at least freaking out—I rest my head on the arm of the sofa and try to figure out what I'm supposed to do. Do I make an appointment so I can apologize for being a bitch? Or do I just pretend it never happened? I could send him an apology letter, maybe. Or—

My roommate interrupts my frantic musing with a snort. "Give me a break. It wasn't insubordination if you didn't know who he was—which, clearly, you didn't. Besides, he obviously wasn't angry with you or you would have gotten a letter canceling your internship instead of that awesome blender. And these strawberries." She pops another one into her mouth, chews enthusiastically.

Just the thought of my internship being canceled makes me freak out more. I need this internship. I have to have it. It'll help me get into law school, help me get a scholarship, give me the references I need to put the next phase of my life plan into action.

And, most important, it will keep me from having to ask my parents for anything. They offer—through my brother, through emails that I don't answer, in phone messages that I don't return—but I don't want their guilt money. I don't want anything from them. And this internship is one of the stepping-stones, one of the keys, that will ensure I never have to take anything from them again.

God, I really am going to hyperventilate. I lean forward and put my forehead on my knees. Concentrate on taking deep breaths as the room around me threatens to go dark.

“Jesus, Chloe.” Tori leans over, smacks the back of my head. “Don’t do that. None of this is your fault.”

It feels like my fault. Why didn’t I spend more time looking at pictures of Ethan Frost instead of just poring over journal articles about his methodologies, his accomplishments, his brain? If I had, I would have recognized him and all this could have been avoided. I still wouldn’t have taken more than a sip of that stupid smoothie, but I could have bowed out a lot more gracefully than I did.

“Seriously, Chloe, you need to chill!” Tori grabs me by the shoulders, shakes me a little. “These aren’t the actions of an angry man. He’s intrigued by you, not annoyed.”

I want to dispute her words, but for a moment—just a moment—I can see the look on his face when he realized I was hungry. The expression in his eyes when he put the Hawaiian Sunrise smoothie in front of me. The way he held himself when I took a sip of his stupid Ethan Special, the name of which suddenly makes a lot more sense to me. And I wonder if Tori isn’t right.

“He gave you his number,” she continues. “He wants to date you, not fire you.” She claps her hands. “This is awesome! You’re being chased by Ethan Frost!”

She’s so wrapped up in her own excitement that she doesn’t notice my lack of enthusiasm. I don’t want to burst her bubble, but if this is true, it’s even worse for me than if he was angry at me. Because I don’t want to date Ethan Frost. I want to work for him.

It’s not that I have anything against him per se. It’s just that I don’t want to date anyone.

Oh, Tori’s been after me for years to go out more. To meet some nice guy and do the fun hanging-out thing. She’s even set me up on numerous blind dates—without my permission—then not told me what she’d done until it was too late for me to get out of them. But she doesn’t get it. She doesn’t

know that I don't want to go out with a guy. I don't want to casually date. And I sure as hell don't want a relationship.

Just the thought makes me shudder. My own parents' relationship is a walking advertisement for what not to do, and my own past—the past Tori knows very little about—makes the very idea unfeasible.

The last thing I want to do is deal with being pursued by a man like Ethan Frost. All that money, all that power, all that privilege...just the thought makes my stomach pitch and roll.

She reaches for the card, which has been resting—discarded—on the table for the past hour. “You should totally call him.”

I look at her like she's insane. Which I'm becoming more and more convinced she is. “I'm not going to call him.”

“But you have to. You should at least thank him for his very generous gift.”

I should, but I don't want to. Truth be told, I want nothing from him but the internship provided me by his company. Not the blender. Not the strawberries, which I admit are a charming gift. Not his attention. And definitely, absolutely, not the unsettled feeling I got when I was around him earlier. The butterflies in my tummy that were somehow both more and less than simple nervousness, as they came with an awareness of him—and myself in relation to him—that continues to be beyond nerve-racking.

“I'll drop him an email.”

“But there's no email addy on the card.”

“Then I'll write him a letter. It's not like I don't know where he works.”

“A letter?” She looks at me like I'm insane.

“Yes. A letter.” I'm warming to the idea. “I can return the blender at the same time. No fuss, no muss.”

“No fuss, no muss? Are you ninety?” Tori looks thoroughly disgruntled. “No offense, but trying not to make a fuss is *not* the way you keep the attention of a guy like Ethan Frost. Neither is returning his gifts.”

Exactly. My plan is sounding better by the second. “I don't want Ethan Frost's attention. I'm not interested in him.”

My roommate lets out an exaggerated sigh as she throws herself into a supine position on the couch. “You do realize that you are the only woman in the history of the world to utter those words. Ever.”

“Surely not. Think of all the lesbians out there.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, then. The only straight woman.”

“And yet, somehow, I’m okay with that.”

“All right, all right.” Grabbing her champagne flute, she waves it under my nose. “If I’m supposed to watch you throw away a golden opportunity like this, then the least you can do is keep me well-liquored. Fill ’er up.”

I laugh, because she expects me to. I even pour her more champagne, though part of me thinks she’s had more than enough. But in my head I’m already composing the letter to Juice Guy. Ethan. Mr. Frost.

Yes. “Mr. Frost” will do quite nicely.

Chapter Three

Dear Mr. Frost,

While I am quite touched by the thoughtfulness of your gift, I am unable to accept it. A fine blender such as this—

Dear Mr. Frost,

While I appreciate the thoughtfulness of this lovely welcome gift, I feel it would be inappropriate to accept it. As an intern, I am not to receive any sort of payment—

Dear Mr. Frost,

Thank you for your very thoughtful gift. However, I believe it would be inappropriate for me to accept it. I apologize for any problems this might cause, and appreciate your understanding in this manner.

It was lovely meeting you yesterday. Thank you for going out of your way to make me feel welcome.

Sincerely,
Chloe Girard

Crazy as it sounds, it took me half the night to write the stupid letter to Juice Guy. Ethan. Mr. Frost. Whoever the hell he is. Seeing as how I'm going on about two and a half hours of sleep right now, I don't particularly care what he wants to be called. Not when I feel like a cast member of *The Walking Dead*.

Twenty-seven drafts. That's how many versions of the stupid letter I wrote. Somewhere around number sixteen, I almost gave up. Almost said to hell with the whole thing. That's when Tori threw in the towel and went to bed and I almost did the same thing. But I couldn't see myself dropping the blender off at his office this morning without at least a small note attached, so I persevered. Five sentences in six hours. It has to be some kind of world record—of the ridiculously awful variety.

Needless to say, I'm skipping my morning workout today. As tired as I am, I'd probably fall asleep on the stupid treadmill and end up killing myself.

I plan to arrive at work thirty minutes early. I figure that will give me time to get to Building One, where the CEO's office is, deliver the package, and make it to the second floor of Building Three, where my office is, with plenty of time to spare. But it turns out all the extra half hour I gave myself did for me was strand me in traffic. So by the time I get to work, I have only ten minutes to deliver my package.

It could wait for lunchtime, but I'm determined to get it out of my car and my mind. Then I can move on with the day and I won't have to think about Juice Guy—Mr. Frost—any more. His office is on the top floor of the building, which means waiting forever for the elevator since I don't use stairwells by myself. Ever. Normally, elevators don't bother me, but with only eight minutes to spare, I know waiting for one will mean I'm cutting it even closer.

So I try to take the stairs, even open the door and start to go in. But even that has me breaking out in a sweat, all the bad memories from years ago at boarding school swamping me. Nope, can't do it. It's definitely the elevator for me.

When I finally emerge onto the fifth floor, I walk straight off the elevator into a lush—dare I say opulent—waiting room. I don't have to read the sign on the wall to know I've found the CEO's office. Overstuffed couches, thick carpeting, expensive art—all done in rich autumnal golds and reds and browns. Even the coffee and side tables are dark, heavy wood instead of the glass and chrome you find in most offices these days. I have to admit I find it interesting that one of the foremost tech guys in the world has an outer office filled with antique furniture.

Not that it matters, except it's another contradiction. Surf bum versus tech genius. Juice Guy versus CEO. Antiques collector versus visionary. Against my will, I'm fascinated. The part of me that's determined to understand how things fit together wants to scatter all the different pieces of him out in front of me, then watch closely as I put them back together so I can see—really see—how they all line up. How they all work together.

Not that I'll ever get the chance. After all, I'm here to return a blender. Anything else is completely out of the question.

The reception area is manned by an attractive older woman, one whose stern look says she could take on the devil and win—and probably already has. As I approach, she looks down her nose at me, no mean feat considering she's sitting down and I'm almost five-nine. It's a good look, one that I vow to practice until I can successfully imitate it. I'm sure at some point in my career as an intellectual property attorney a look like that will come in handy.

“Do you have an appointment?” she asks when I stop directly in front of her desk. Not once does she look at the large box in my arms, which I think shows admirable restraint considering it's not every day people carry giant blenders into the CEO's office with them. Then again, what do I know? Maybe Ethan Frost really does send Vitamixes to all his employees—in which case, I look even more stupid trying to return it than I already think I do.

“I don't have an appointment. But—”

“Mr. Frost doesn't see anyone without an appointment.”

“I understand that. But all I want—”

“You're free to leave a message with your name, number, and what business you'd like to see him about. I will pass the message on. If he's willing to see you, you'll receive a call in twenty-four to forty-eight hours to set up the appointment.”

She delivers the whole speech in a perfectly polite tone, but it manages to get my back up anyway. Maybe it's because of the way she's looking at me—like I'm just a bug buzzing around the esteemed Mr. Frost—or maybe it's because she assumes she knows what I'm going to say before I say it. I get

that she's the first line of defense between the public and one of the most revered CEOs on the planet, but really, he's just not that special.

Liar. The little voice inside me is back, but this time I'm flatout refusing to listen to it. Especially since last time all it did was get me into trouble. So I wait for the receptionist to pick up her pen and message pad and then say, "I don't need an appointment with Mr. Frost."

She sighs heavily. "Everyone needs an appointment if they want to see ___"

Completely fed up by this point, not to mention very aware of the minutes ticking away, I cut her off by dropping the blender on her desk with a resounding thump. "I just want to return this to him. There's a note attached, but I'm sure he'll know who it's from. Thank you."

I turn and walk away before she can say anything else. As I wait for the elevator, I'm conscious of her eyes on me and I try not to fidget as precious seconds and minutes slip away.

By the time eight o'clock rolls around and I am officially late for work, I've had it with waiting for the elevator. Though I'm sick to my stomach at the thought of taking the stairs, I'm even sicker at the thought of showing up any later to work. This is so not how I planned to impress my new boss.

The fear of making an ass of myself and somehow losing the internship is what finally gets me moving toward the stairwell. It's broad daylight in one of the most reputable companies in the country. There's no place safer for me to take the stairs, so I need to stop being a baby and just do it.

I've made it down one flight of steps—a task which is much easier today in my sensible navy pumps than it would have been yesterday in those ridiculous Louboutins, thank God—when I hear the stairwell door above me slam open. Though I know it's ridiculous, know I'm completely safe, ice skates down my spine anyway. Freezes me in place for what feels like endless seconds.

Panic twists up inside me, makes my breathing quicken and my heart beat faster. It's what I need—I start moving again, jogging down the stairs as fast as I can without looking like an utter lunatic.

But whoever is in here with me is moving even faster than I am. I can hear his shoes slapping on the concrete steps, know he's gaining on me.

He's getting closer and closer and the fight-or-flight response goes into full effect inside me now. As images of the past bombard me, every instinct I have is telling me to run, to forget dignity and get the hell out of here as fast as I possibly can.

I listen, start running full-out now, my purse dangling from numb fingertips as I race for the ground floor. Maybe I'd do better exiting onto the second floor, but it's early still, the back halls nearly deserted. The lobby is my best bet. If I can just get there—

My heel catches on the edge of one of the steps and I trip, go flying. I'm about six or seven steps from the bottom of the staircase and I know if I go down, it's going to hurt. Not to mention give whoever's chasing me the chance he's been looking for.

Desperate to stop the fall, I claw at the railing, try to catch myself. I miss, the cool railing slipping through my fingers. I feel a bump, followed by a sharp pain in my hip. But I'm too busy trying to avoid injury to pay much attention. By now I know I'm going to fall, so I attempt to brace myself. Hunch my shoulders and try to tuck myself into a ball, like my self-defense instructors taught me.

But before I can hit the ground, a strong hand grabs my arm, stops my descent in midair. It's the guy who's been chasing me. I just know it. And while logic insists that I have nothing to fear from the man who just stopped my fall, the specter of my past is all around me. Clawing at me. Choking me. Destroying the peace of mind I've worked so hard for.

I'm frantic now, so crazed with fear that everything but instinct goes straight out the window. I lash out, try to kick him even as I'm still dangling over the stairs.

He blocks my kick, then yanks me toward him with his other hand. He keeps pulling until my feet are back on the step—and I'm wrapped in his arms, my back to his front.

I'm surrounded by him on all sides now, the hardness of his chest and stomach and thighs pressing against me even as his scent works itself into my consciousness. He smells like the ocean on a wild, storm-tossed day. Like moonlight on the open water. Like rain falling through leaves. All that with an underlying, barely discernible, hint of blueberries.

Suddenly I know who's holding me, even before he growls, "Damn it, Chloe. Stop fighting me. I've got you."

Juice Guy. Mr. Frost. *Ethan*.

Suddenly I'm furious, so furious that it overshadows the fear of being held so intimately. Of course it's him. Why wouldn't it be? The universe seems to have decided that if I'm going to make a fool of myself, he's going to be there to watch it.

Then again, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been in any of these stupid situations to begin with. I sure as hell wouldn't be in this damn stairwell right now, after having nearly plummeted to certain injury. It also means I wouldn't be standing here, my body pressed intimately against a virtual stranger's while every nerve I have stands at attention and my heart nearly beats out of my chest.

"Can you let me go, please?" I jerk against his hold, try to wrench my elbow from his grasp. Again, not the smartest move, but I need him to let me go. When he touches me I feel all kinds of things, things I don't have a clue how to deal with.

But Ethan's having no part of my bid for freedom. He holds me firmly, painlessly, as he guides me down the last six steps until we're on the landing that opens to the lobby. Only then does he relinquish his hold and step away.

For long seconds he doesn't say anything, and neither do I. I know he's waiting for me to look at him, know he'll wait all day if he has to. But I don't have that luxury, so finally—reluctantly—I turn to him. "Thank you for catching me," I say.

I also want to tell him it's his fault I was falling in the first place, but I think I've done enough to alienate the man in the last twenty-four hours. No need to actually beg him to fire me. Besides, now that I know who was pursuing me on the stairs, my whole headlong flight makes me look a little too much like a basket case for comfort—even without explaining where my phobia comes from.

But then he says it for me. "It seemed the least I could do, since I was the one who made you fall." He eyes me critically, looking for I don't know what. "Are you all right?"

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? It looked like you banged your hip against the railing when you started to tumble.”

“I don’t think so.” But now that he mentions it, I do feel an ache in my right hip that wasn’t there before. Wonderful.

I push at the sore spot a little, bite my lip to keep from whimpering when pain radiates out from under my fingers. So much for those self-defense classes I’ve invested so much time and money in over the last couple of years. What do I do the first time I’m in a sketchy situation? Panic and forget nearly everything they taught me.

Ethan’s watching me closely, so closely that I know he sees me flinch. His eyes darken to near black and he growls, “Let’s get you some ice.” For the first time I see the CEO and not the surf bum, and it has nothing to do with the expensive Italian suit he’s wearing.

Then his hand is back, only this time it’s not grabbing my arm. It’s resting in the center of my lower back as he gently propels me forward. I’m uncomfortable with him so close, with the heat that radiates through him and into me and with the sudden possessiveness of his hold. As a rule, I don’t let men touch me there. It’s too personal, too intimate. Ethan should be no exception.

Except he is, because I don’t step away. Don’t shrug him off. Instead, I let him guide me to the stairwell door, even wait pliantly while he opens it.

I’m limping a little, and he must notice, because he stops. Eyes me sharply. “Can you walk or do you need me to carry you?”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes at him. “It’s a bruise. I think I can handle it.”

He doesn’t answer, just waits for me to pass through the doorway ahead of him. When we get to the lobby, I start to head for the front door—a glance at my watch says I’m already five minutes late reporting for work—but he stops me with a look. “You need ice.”

“What I need is to get to my office.”

“I’m sure the legal contracts department will survive without you for ten minutes.” He guides me across the lobby to the front desk, where two security guards are supervising the scanning of employee badges as people

arrive for their workday. “Jose, Ms. Girard injured herself in the stairwell. Could you please get her a bag of ice?”

The bald security guard all but leaps to his feet. “Sure thing, Mr. Frost.” He turns to me. “Are you all right, Ms. Girard?”

“I’m fi—”

“She tripped, banged against the railway. Nearly fell down the stairs.” Ethan speaks over me, and it gets my back up all over again. I spent most of my life being ignored by my family. No way am I going to put up with it from him, too. He might be my boss three times removed, but the vibes rolling off him today don’t feel like employer-employee to me, any more than the ones yesterday did.

They must not feel that way to Jose, either, because in the course of twenty minutes he’s gone from teasingly calling me “new girl” to calling me “Ms. Girard” in the same formal tone he uses when he speaks to Ethan.

The difference sets my teeth on edge, so much so that when he asks, “Should I call for a doctor?” I all but shout at him.

“No, I don’t need a doctor! I have a bruise. It’s no big deal.” I make a show of glancing at my watch. “I also have a meeting that starts in ten minutes that I do not want to be late for.”

My mentor had explained to me that Tuesday mornings are when the new assignments get divvied up to the interns. If you want a good one, you need to be there early, ready to present your case. Unfortunately, at the rate these two are moving, I’ll probably end up researching the most boring, nastiest contract in the bunch. So not what I had planned for my first week at my dream job.

“Jose.” That’s all Ethan says, but the security guard immediately turns and heads toward the cafeteria at a jog.

Tired of biting my tongue, I turn toward Ethan with an exasperated sigh. “Really! Are you serious with this?”

“I’m very serious. The health of my employees is important to me.”

Once again he rests his hand on my lower back and propels me forward. This time it’s into the small room to the side of the security desk. Inside is one security guard and a ton of monitors that show different areas of the property. “Give us a minute, will you, Danny?”

“Sure, Mr. Frost.” He gets up right away but eyes me curiously as he heads for the door.

At the rate things are going, I can’t begin to imagine what gossip will be circulating about me by lunchtime. Just the thought makes me crazy. I came all the way to California for school three years ago to get away from the gossip about me and another rich guy. The last thing I want is to go through all that again.

I close my eyes, shake my head. I can’t believe this. I just can’t believe it. I wanted so badly to fit in here, to find a place for myself. I’d even hoped that maybe I could return here once I’d graduated, to continue interning while I worked my way through law school. Because of my family—my brother—intellectual property law in the tech world is a subject that’s very important to me. And I know that if I keep my grades up and do as well in law school as I plan to, I’ll be able to find a job at any number of places. But, again, Frost Industries is one of the most exciting companies to work for in the world. Being here is a dream come true, and I cannot believe Ethan Frost himself is screwing that up for me.

Determined to get him to stop this thing—whatever it is—before it gets even more out of hand, I clear my throat. Prepare my arguments. When I finally feel like I’m ready to speak, I say, “Mr. Frost.”

He just looks at me, strokes his fingers over the back of my hand. I shiver despite myself. His touch is light, delicate even—as if he’s afraid he might break me. But there’s a heat that comes with his touch, too. One that confuses me, makes me stumble over my own thoughts. “Call me Ethan.”

“Mr. Frost, I—”

“Ethan.”

I don’t know why this is so important to him, but it is. Obviously. Still, I know if I give in—if I call him by his given name—it will shift things between us. Hand him some kind of power over me, some kind of right to what I say or do, and I’m not okay with that. I think back to the cafeteria yesterday, to that damn blueberry smoothie, and I promise myself that this time I won’t do as he asks.

“Mr. Frost, I really need to get to work. I appreciate your concern, but it’s unnecessary. And, frankly, it’s embarrassing.”

At first he looks like he's going to argue with the fact that I still haven't used his given name, but then he gets distracted by what I've said. "My attention embarrasses you?"

"Well, yeah. Obviously." I gesture to the empty room around us. "Unless commandeering security booths so that you can talk to your female employees is something you do every day—"

"It's not."

"Then this is *extremely* embarrassing. Everyone in that lobby was staring at me because you were with me. You were touching me."

He raises a brow. "A hand at your back is simple courtesy."

"No," I correct him, because I'm not crazy and I won't let him make me feel that I am. "Offering your arm is simple courtesy. Your hand on my lower back is something else entirely."

"Really?" He smiles at me, just a subtle turning up of his lips that shouldn't raise my blood pressure or send shivers down my spine. Somehow it does both. "What is it, then?"

"What is...what?" I stumble over the words a little as I try to get my brain cells back in working order.

"My hand on your back. If it isn't courtesy, what is it?"

Intimacy. The word is right there on my lips, and I nearly say it. Nearly blurt it out. But I can't, because it's crazy to think such a thing, let alone say it. Crazyer still to want it. Which I don't, I assure myself. I never have.

Except I feel strangely bereft now that he has let go of my hand. It's an odd feeling, and one I don't like. I take a step back, two, and I can tell from the way he narrows his eyes that he's not happy with my sudden retreat. But before he can say anything, the door slams open. Jose stands there, a grin on his face and a large bag of ice in his hand.

Ethan walks over to take the ice from him, and I shudder in relief. I feel like a prisoner who's just been granted a stay of execution—relieved but still unsteady, because I know it can be taken away at any moment.

Sure enough, Ethan waits for Jose to back out of the room before closing the door behind him. I watch as he locks it this time, and any relief I felt slowly drains away. Because he's stalking toward me, a long, lean panther

of a man whose intentions are clearly written on his face. Intentions that are a long way from honorable.

“Where does it hurt?” he asks after he stops in front of me.

“Hurt?” My mouth is so dry I can barely get the word out.

“Your hip. Where’s the bruise?”

“Oh, right.” I yank my eyes away from his too-pretty face, gesture awkwardly to the top of my hip. “Here.”

I try to take the ice pack from him, but he brushes my hand away. Then slowly, gently, presses it to my hip.

His fingers are big and warm where they rest against my waist, a direct contrast to the cold of the ice pack. For long seconds, I don’t move. Don’t breathe. I can’t. Not when he’s so close that I can feel the brush of his hair against my cheek as he tilts his head down to watch what he’s doing.

“Is this the spot?”

“Yes.” My breath breaks on the single syllable.

His head jerks up then, his gaze locking onto mine. I’ve never seen eyes so intensely blue—or so turbulent, like the storm-tossed Pacific as it beats against the shore.

The way he’s looking at me is overwhelming. Terrifying. *Mesmerizing*. Like he wants to devour me and at the same time shelter me. I stand frozen—nothing so much as prey to his predator—while I wait to see which instinct will win out.

He lifts his hand to my face, runs his fingers down the line of my jaw. His touch is soft, so soft, and I can’t help myself. I lean into it, press my cheek into the palm of his hand until he’s cupping my face.

The hand on my hip tightens convulsively but then he closes his eyes, takes a few deep breaths. His hand relaxes again, and when he opens his eyes they are filled with unspeakable tenderness.

“Chloe.” My name sounds almost reverent on his lips.

“Yes?”

“Have dinner with me.”

“Dinner?”

“Tonight.” His thumb whispers across my lips. “I want to take you out.”

I'm so lost in his touch, in the feel of his skin against mine, that I can barely focus on his words. Or on my answer. There's a part of me that knows that this is a bad idea. That it won't work out the way he wants it to. It can't, not when I'm involved. It's why I always say no when a man asks me out or when Tori tries to discuss setting me up with someone.

But standing here, wrapped up in Ethan—drowning in him—I want to say yes. I want to go out with him, want to see if he'll touch me this sweetly, this tenderly, when we're on a date together. Want to find out if my instincts, which are telling me that I can trust him, are right.

For a moment, just a moment, I turn my face into his hand. Let my lips brush against his surprisingly callused palm. He stiffens—in surprise or arousal or something else entirely, I can't tell. But before he can say or do anything else, I pull away. And give him the only answer I can.

“No.”

After all, my instincts may want to trust him, but the rest of me isn't nearly as easy to impress...or fool.

Chapter Four

Ethan actually jolts a little in surprise at my answer, his brows raising nearly to his hairline. “No?”

It’s like he’s never heard the word before, but I know for a fact that isn’t true. I said it to him myself, just yesterday. Right before I did exactly what he wanted me to.

Color rushes into my cheeks at the thought, even though I know that this time is going to be different. This time I’m not giving in to him. I can’t. No matter how much I ache to do just that.

“No,” I repeat. “I’m sorry, but it’s just not a good idea.”

At first I think he’s going to argue. He tilts his head to the side, stares at me for long seconds like he’s building an argument in his head. But in the end, all he asks is, “Why?”

“Because! This internship means a lot to me. I busted my butt to get it, turned down other internships at other places just for the chance to work here. There’s no way I’m going to compromise everything I worked for just to go on a date with you.”

“*Just* to go on a date with me, huh?” He sounds more amused than offended, but still I feel the need to clarify.

“You know what I mean! I—”

“It’s okay, Chloe. But I want you to know that no matter what happens with us—or doesn’t happen—your internship is secure. You earned that spot and no one is going to take it away from you for dating me, or for not dating me. The two things have nothing to do with each other.”

And my friends all think I’m naive? I don’t know how Ethan can stand there and tell me so convincingly that my dating him will have no impact on my internship. Maybe he really believes it, maybe he’s just trying to placate me, but the truth is, it’s a completely absurd assumption. Already people are looking at me differently, and I’m pretty sure in the fifteen

minutes we've been in here, gossip has begun to run rampant. After all, Ethan told me himself that he isn't in the habit of closeting himself in the company's security headquarters with all that many female employees.

"Maybe not, but I can't take that risk. I'm sorry, Ethan."

He studies me for a moment, as if assessing the strength of my conviction. But then the calculation slips out of his eyes as quickly as it entered. "Well, at least I got you to call me Ethan instead of Mr. Frost like in that ridiculous letter," he tells me with a grin. "That's something, I suppose."

I blanch as I realize I've done just that when I've been working so hard to keep things professional between us. When did I start thinking of him as Ethan? And how could I be so stupid as to call him by his first name? The last thing I need is to encourage him—or to slip up and refer to him as Ethan when I'm with someone from the company.

My chagrin must show on my face, because he takes a step back. "I'm just messing with you, Chloe. I do know how to take no for an answer." He lifts the ice pack away from my hip. "How's that bruise feeling?"

The abrupt change in subject throws me off balance, as does his switch from teasingly intimate to remotely impersonal. His smile is gone, as are the warm little crinkles by his eyes. In their place is the poker face of a top executive, one who knows how to keep his thoughts well hidden.

I feel an immediate sense of loss. Which is stupid—he's giving me exactly what I want. Treating me like any other employee. And yet as he steps away from me, I immediately miss his heat. His closeness. His concern.

"It's fine. I told you before. It's just a little bruise."

"Still, it doesn't hurt to be careful." He extends the ice pack to me. "Ice it again in fifteen minutes. It will keep the bruising from getting too bad."

"I don't need—"

"Chloe." It's the firmest I've heard his voice in two days, and it snaps me to attention. Speaks to something deep inside me that I still don't understand. "Can you do what I ask without arguing? Just this once. Please? I promise not to let it go to my head."

I find myself nodding and taking the ice pack. I don't know why it's so important to him, but it won't hurt—and will probably help—me to do what he wants. “I have to go now.”

He glances at the Tag Heuer watch on his wrist. “What time was your meeting?”

“Eight-fifteen.”

“You're late.”

“Like I don't know that?” Just that easily I'm annoyed again. He says it so brusquely, like my extended tardiness is my fault instead of his. “You're the one who insisted I put ice on the stupid bruise.”

“It's not stupid. You need to take care of yourself.”

“I do take care of myself. I've managed to get myself to twenty in one piece, after all.”

“Twenty.” He draws the word out like he's contemplating it...or savoring it. Savoring me. “You sound like that's a huge accomplishment.”

I think automatically of Brandon, of my parents. “It's a bigger accomplishment than you might think.”

The words pop out before I know I'm going to say them. Which is a mistake. I regret them as soon as they've left my mouth, and I glance up at Ethan, struggle to say something funny to defuse their meaning.

But it's too late. His lips are tight, his shoulders tense, and his eyes have gone dark and stormy again. For a second it looks like he's going to push for more information, and in my head I start scrambling for an explanation. For something, anything, I can tell him other than the truth.

But in the end, it isn't necessary. Though I can see the questions in his eyes, on his lips, he chooses to back off. At least for now.

“Come on. I'll walk you down to Building Three.”

“You don't need to do that.”

“Sure I do. You're twenty minutes late to your meeting. Definitely not a great sign on your second day on the job.”

“I know that.” Already my stomach is tight with dread at the idea of facing my boss. What am I going to tell her? I doubt she'll believe the truth. Besides, the last thing I want to admit is that I freaked out and nearly fell

down half a flight of stairs. I'd really prefer not to be labeled a basket case, or a klutz, during my first week.

"So I'll talk to Maryanne, tell her I detained you." He opens the door, ushers me through—this time without his hand on my back. I miss it, even as I'm grateful that he's taking my decision seriously. God, the man is turning me into a crazy person, one who can't make up her mind from one second to the next.

"You don't need to do that."

"It's not a problem."

"I'm not a child. I can fight my own battles."

He turns to look at me then. "I am well aware you're not a child. You are a bright young woman with an even brighter future. I don't want to see you start out your time here with undue strikes against you. Not because I'm interested in you, not because I think you're beautiful, but because, after looking at your personnel records yesterday, I have a feeling that you are going to be a real asset to Frost Industries in the future.

"Mentioning my role in making you late is something I would do for any employee of mine, Chloe. Not just you. Okay?"

I struggle to find my voice in the rush of pleasure that hits me at the truth—and the approval—I hear in his voice. "Okay."

"Good." He smiles easily as we pass the security guards. "Thanks, Jose. Thanks, Danny."

"Is Ms. Girard all right?" Jose asks solicitously.

"I'm fine," I tell him, unwilling to be spoken about like I'm not here. I've spent too much of my life as a commodity, worked too hard to make myself more than that, to slip back into the role so easily. Another reason I should avoid Ethan Frost like the plague. It's disturbing how easy it is for me to do what he wants me to do instead of what I think I should do.

Jose flushes a little guiltily. Nods at me. "I'm glad to hear that. Take care of yourself, Ms. Girard."

Immediately I feel churlish. But I get the sense that Ethan is amused as he pauses so that I can precede him out the front door. "You have Jose wrapped around your finger and it's only the beginning of your second day."

“I think *you’ve* got him wrapped around your finger. He was completely normal when he checked me in to work this morning. And since the only thing that’s changed is you...”

We’re walking down the sidewalk at a fast clip now—but not too fast, as if Ethan is aware of just the right speed to go so as not to put undue pressure on my injured hip. Every few steps someone calls out a greeting or waves at him, and he returns each acknowledgment, nearly always calling the person by name. I don’t know how he does it. He’s the CEO of a large corporation, one that’s growing larger every day. And yet he knows all his employees’ names. Even hangs in the cafeteria and makes smoothies for them.

I think of the guy yesterday—not the trainee, but the one who came up and ordered a smoothie while I was there. He was friendly to Ethan, definitely seemed to know who he was. And yet didn’t find it odd at all that the CEO of Frost Industries was the one making him a smoothie.

I don’t understand. He’s a conundrum, a puzzle whose pieces don’t quite fit together, and the not knowing is going to drive me insane. I need to let it go, need to just put Ethan’s odd ways out of my head and go on with my life, but I’m afraid doing so is going to be much harder than it sounds. Especially when I want so desperately to figure him out.

“Why were you behind the juice bar counter yesterday, making that smoothie?” The words come out before I know I’m going to say them. “And why were you dressed like a surfer?”

“I am a surfer.”

“I know. But you’re also a CEO and this is your workplace. Board shorts seem inappropriate.”

He laughs. “You’ve obviously never seen the guys from R&D. Half the time I count myself lucky if they remember to wear clothes.”

If the R&D guys look anything like what I imagine they do, that’s an image I can definitely do without. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“You’re right, I didn’t.” For a minute I’m convinced he isn’t going to, either. But then he shakes his head ruefully. “It’s embarrassing, to be honest. The Frost Foundation gives a lot of money to ocean-centric charities, and the PR people thought it’d be a good idea to have some

pictures of me surfing. Swore it would help draw more attention, and raise more money. Yesterday was the photo shoot.”

Of course. Ethan Frost the philanthropist is almost as famous as Ethan Frost the visionary. But since I can tell he really is embarrassed, I don't comment on what he's told me. Instead I ask, “And the smoothie making?”

“I'm very particular about my smoothies.” He looks dead serious now, which I find hilarious. I actually have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing when he continues, “Rodrigo was doing it wrong.”

“There's really a wrong way to make a smoothie?”

His eyes gleam wickedly. “Chloe, sweetheart, there's a wrong way to do just about everything.”

I'm almost sorry I asked. Almost.

* * *

It only takes us six or seven minutes to go between Buildings One and Three. And yet by the time we're getting off the elevator at my floor, I'm a nervous wreck. Partly because I don't want to face my boss and partly because everyone keeps staring at us. Yes, they're acknowledging Ethan, calling out greetings to him, but they're staring at me, too. Enough so that I know Ethan escorting a new employee around the premises, especially one with a bright green intern's badge, is an unusual sight.

Too late I realize that he could have just as easily emailed my boss or had his secretary make the call. The fact that he's hand-delivering me to the second-floor conference room makes all this feel like more than it is. More than I can let it be.

When we get to the conference room, he once again opens the door and gestures for me to precede him. He's such a gentleman, even when I wish he wouldn't be. It sounds cowardly, and I pride myself on facing up to my fears, but just this once, I wish he'd go in first. I can see my boss at the head of the conference table, the other seven interns I met yesterday sitting at attention on either side of her, hanging raptly on every word that she says. I'm certain none of them was even a minute late for the meeting.

Maryanne looks up the second the door opens. She doesn't see Ethan right away because the way he's holding the door open puts him to the left of her sightline. Which is fine—I don't want him fighting my battles for me anyway—but the first step I take into the room feels like my first step on death row. Like I'm a dead woman walking her way straight to Frost Industries's own version of the guillotine. Or the electric chair.

“Ms. Girard, thank you for joining us.” Maryanne's voice rings through the room, sounding snippy and more than a little put out. “But the meeting started almost half an hour ago—”

“I kept her, Maryanne.” Ethan's voice was charming, the look he shot my boss even more so. I don't know what else he says to her because he crosses to where she's sitting and speaks to her in a voice so low it becomes nothing but an indistinguishable murmur to the rest of us.

The other interns are all staring at me, some with curiosity and some with blatant hostility. I cross to one of the empty seats at the table and slide into it. My injured hip protests a little, but I ignore it. The last thing I want to do is show any weakness now.

I know that Ethan thinks he's doing me a favor—and maybe he is, with my boss. But with the other interns all his appearance here is going to do is cause me grief. I can feel it in the assessing way the male interns are looking at me, as if they know exactly what Ethan and I were talking about earlier. The female interns aren't as blatant—especially not Chrissy, who was my mentor yesterday, and the most welcoming of the group—but I can tell they, too, are putting the pieces together and coming up with a picture I really would rather they didn't.

At the front of the room, Maryanne nods and smiles. Ethan steps back, says a few words to the room as a whole. Even stops to talk to a couple of the interns who are on the side closest to the door. They preen under his attention, and I know what he's doing—he's trying to protect me, trying to make things as easy for me as he possibly can. If him coming here with me ends up giving the other interns a chance to shine, then maybe I won't get as much grief.

The knowledge warms me, even as I doubt that what he's doing will have much of an effect. I've been the pariah before, I know how it works. And a few benign words from on high rarely gets the job done.

Sure enough, once Ethan leaves, most of the room goes back to staring at me. I concentrate on pulling my tablet out of my briefcase and preparing to take notes on whatever shit assignment my tardiness has left me with.

Maryanne makes no move to give me my assignment, though. Instead she dives right back into what they were doing when I got here, which is talking through the main points and areas of interest in each case that is being assigned this week. While different people are in charge of the research and grunt work for different contracts, Chrissy explained to me yesterday that Maryanne likes to go over the main points of all of them with the group so that we all learn the ins and outs of different types of contracts and research. And so we can take over for each other with as little disruption to the actual attorneys as possible if something goes wrong.

It's actually an extremely valuable learning tool and I'm grateful to be included in the process, even if I don't know what research I'm going to be working on. By the time the meeting breaks up at ten-fifteen, I have page upon page of notes and a much better idea of some of the main cases deciding intellectual property law in the tech industry today.

The others file out, but I wait behind for my chance to talk to Maryanne. I still don't have any research assigned to me, but I didn't want to bring that up during the meeting. I've already been the object of enough speculation and interest today to last me for the rest of the summer.

Chrissy hangs at the door for a minute until she snags my attention. Then she mouths for me to come find her when I'm done.

Some of the knots in my stomach slowly untwist themselves. Maybe I'm being too sensitive. Maybe everything will be all right after all.

But then Maryanne finishes the conversation she's having with Rick, one of the interns who has been here the longest. He doesn't look happy when he turns away from her, but he keeps a professional demeanor—at least until his back is to Maryanne and his eyes meet mine. Then he glares at me and mouths the word “slut” before walking to the conference room door with a calmness that belies the hatred I saw in his gaze.

So much for everything being all right.

“Thank you for staying behind, Ms. Girard,” Maryanne says as she walks over to me. “I wanted to speak with you about your work for the next few

weeks.”

“I’m so sorry I was late.” I know Ethan cleared it, but I feel the need to apologize anyway. “It won’t happen again.”

“Don’t be silly,” she trills. “I understand completely. If Ethan had wanted to talk to me this morning, I probably would have blown off the meeting, too.”

Shit. It’s worse than I thought. Though she’s not admitting to it, my boss is angry. Really angry—hence the passive-aggressive wording of that last statement.

“I fell in the stairwell and hit my hip pretty hard.” I show her the now melted ice pack. “Mr. Frost was courteous enough to help me and ensure I got some ice.”

“So he told me. Are you feeling okay now?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“Good, because with the project you’re being assigned, you’ll have a lot of work to do.”

“The project?”

“Yes.” She eyes me coolly. “Whatever you and Ethan spoke about must have impressed him quite a bit. He’s requested that we put you on the research for the Trifecta merger. Have you heard of it?”

I feel my eyes widen and my heart rate increase even as I nod. I don’t know a lot about the Trifecta merger—no one does, as it’s been pretty hush-hush in the business papers—but I know it’s a huge deal. One that stands to make Frost Industries a lot of money, not to mention help them expand into another area of the biotech field.

I tell Maryanne what I’ve read about the merger, which, again, isn’t a lot, but she seems slightly mollified. “I just emailed you what you need to know about the research, along with an outline and timeline that Rick put together on what the lawyers need and when they expect to have it. Please follow the timeline—any deviations will need to be cleared by me.”

“Of course.”

“Do you have any questions?”

I'm sure I do, but until I look at the information she's sent me, I won't have a clue what to ask or where to start. So I settle for a simple "Not at this time."

She must be a mind reader, though—or she understands just how out of my depth I am—because she says, "You will. When you do, start with Rick for answers. If he isn't helpful, feel free to come to me."

"I will."

"Good." She nods toward the door, her face nowhere near as welcoming as it was when I arrived here yesterday. "I suggest you get started."

"I will." Gathering up my tablet and purse, I head for the door as fast as my injured hip will let me.

Right before I get there, Maryanne calls, "And Ms. Girard?"

I turn back to face her. "Yes?"

"This is a big deal. The lawyers you'll be researching for are extremely demanding. Don't mess up."

"I won't," I promise her.

She doesn't say anything, just stares at me until I turn and leave. It's more than a bit daunting.

As is the fact that I am now one of the key researchers for the Trifecta merger. Though I know the important stuff is done by the lawyers and the engineers and the VPs—not to mention Ethan himself—I'm still pretty sure the task I have in front of me is Herculean, especially for a first-week intern who barely knows which research databases to use.

I should be terrified, and a part of me is, but I'm not going to show it. Not to Maryanne, not to Rick, whose intense reaction in the conference room suddenly makes sense, not to any of the other interns who are staring at me like I've turned rabid—or traitor. I can do this. I *have* to do this. Because as I walk into the small area of cubbies assigned to the interns, I realize just how much things have changed in the course of one morning. Not only because of my new assignment but because yesterday Maryanne—like everyone else—addressed me as Chloe. Today I'm suddenly Ms. Girard.

With Jose it was a sign of politeness, of deference. Something tells me that with my new boss, it's the exact opposite.

Chapter Five

I can't do this. I just can't. I'm in the women's bathroom on the second floor of Building Three and I'm using every ounce of willpower I have to not cry. It's stupid, I know. After all, I've been through much worse than this before. I've had people say nastier things to me, *do* nastier things to me.

But that was a long time ago, when I was expecting it. Hardened to it. Here, in this job that I was so excited about, at this place where I so desperately wanted to work and learn and contribute, it's a million times worse than it ever was when I was younger.

To say the day has not gone well would be an understatement. Rick is a total asshole, a sanctimonious bully of the worst kind. He's been the ringleader of the crusade against me—big surprise—and he's done everything he can to make my day as miserable as possible. It all started when he stopped by my desk to “talk” about the Trifecta merger and “accidentally” spilled his hot coffee all over me. Since then, he's bumped into me three different times, the last of which sent me slamming into a wall, injured hip first. I barely kept the tears out of my eyes then, but painful or not, I'll be damned if I give that bastard the satisfaction of knowing he's rattled me.

Of course, he is very much king of the intern castle, the one who sets the tone for the whole group and the one whose behavior they take their cues from, since he's been here longest. Which means I've spent the day dodging everything from passive-aggressive comments to out-and-out confrontations. One of the women, I think her name is Beth, actually stuck her foot out and tripped me. Of course, she played it just the way Rick did, like it was all an accident and I was the clumsy one, but I'm not overly clumsy and I know her foot hadn't been in my path until she very deliberately stuck it there.

I almost came out swinging from that one—I've learned that being passive is the worst thing I can do in situations like this—but when I looked up and found Chrissy laughing at me along with the rest of them, my mind went blank. No sarcastic comeback, no witty joke at my tormentors' expense. All I could do was pick up the binder I'd dropped and all the papers that had scattered in the fall and go back to my desk.

Which is where I was, putting the papers back into some semblance of order, when Rick sidled up like the snake he is. This time instead of messing with me physically, he made some comment about me and my wide-open legs, and all I could think about was plowing my fist into his face. Or my knee into his dick.

But that isn't done—at least not in an office building where all seven of my co-workers would swear that I'm the one at fault. That I started the fight.

So I walked it off instead, and here I am now, cowering in the bathroom, impotent tears burning in my eyes. But I won't let them fall. Not now, not ever again. Besides, it's not that I can't take their insults and their bullshit; I can. But I want to fight back—I *need* to fight back. After I escaped my parents and that school, not to mention the untenable situation with Brandon, I swore to myself that I would never be a victim again. That I would fight my own battles and to hell with what the rest of the world said.

It's worked during the three years I've spent at UCSD so far, but to be honest, I haven't exactly had a lot of opposition. Nothing like what I went through before. And nothing like what I'm experiencing today.

So why didn't I fight back? Why didn't I tell Rick exactly what I would do to his balls if he insinuated one more time that I slept my way to the spot he's spent two years working toward? Why didn't I tell that bitch off for tripping me? Why didn't I do anything?

Because this isn't a schoolyard. This is a workplace and I can't exactly plow my fist into someone's face and call it self-defense. Especially if I'm the one striking first.

Bending over the sink, I splash some cold water on my too-red cheeks. Let it cool the red down, and cool my humiliation right along with it. Because while I'm angry and annoyed and, yes, even hurt by how quickly

and easily my fellow interns turned on me, it's not really them I'm angry at. After all, they're just acting like the hyenas they are, circling and waiting to pounce until my strength gives out.

No, I'm angry at Ethan for putting me in this position. For sending me that stupidly inappropriate blender. For following me into the stairwell and making me freak out. For insisting I put ice on my damn hip. And for handing me this plum assignment that's really more of a nightmare, for no other reason than because he wants to take me out.

And to be honest, that's the real reason I haven't fought back today. That's the real reason I've taken all the abuse they can heap on me. Because while I am definitely not sleeping my way to a better position—the thought has never crossed my mind to do so—Rick and the others aren't wrong when they imply that I only got to do the Trifecta merger research because Ethan likes me. Because he wants me.

I have no problem fighting back against bullies, but I do have problems telling them they're full of shit when they aren't. Rick has every right to be upset at being pulled off the project for someone with one day's worth of experience—we're all fighting for the best projects to pad our résumés and the best chance to show off our stuff so that we can actually get a job here at Frost Industries or somewhere like it.

Frustrated, annoyed, and more hurt than I want to admit, even to myself, I turn the tap off. Dry my face. Then run the towel under my eyes to catch the remnants of mascara that pooled there when I washed my face. Which obviously wasn't such a great idea now that I think about it. I learned to use makeup as a shield years ago, to hide my emotions as surely as my bruises. Standing here without it now, I feel vulnerable. Defenseless.

It's a feeling I like even less than being bullied.

I reach into my purse, pull out the pot of rose-tinted lip balm that I go through like water. I switched purses for my new job yesterday and in my urgency to get out the door and be on time, I forgot to drop in my usual makeup kit. I'd meant to add it last night, but then the great strawberry debacle had distracted me. And when I left the house this morning I was too exhausted to remember my own name let alone anything else.

Which, I realize, is just another thing I can blame Ethan for.

Since I can't do anything about the makeup, I spend the last five minutes of my break doing the next best thing—trying to tame my mile of red curls into some kind of bun. In the end, I twist it up, securing it with two rubber bands and three pencils that I use like Chinese chopsticks. It's not the most glamorous style in the world, but I'm not going for glamour. I'm going for control. And since there's not a hair out of place, I think I've actually managed it.

I ride out the rest of the afternoon at my desk, speaking to no one and asking no questions—though I have about a billion on the best way to utilize the legal databases. Instead I blunder around a little, figuring things out on my own as I dig into the first case on the research list, one that doesn't have anything to do with biomedical technology per se, but that does deal with issues of similar tech patents upon the merging of two companies.

It's a huge case with thousands of pages of documentation, and the attorneys have prepared a list of thirty-five questions they want answered from this case alone. And while I manage to answer three questions in the two hours I have left in the workday, I know I have to learn to work the search engines better or I'm going to end up drowning in the crazy workload. I don't mind that, but I don't want to fall behind and look like a total idiot. Which is why, when I find an interesting interpretation of the case I'm working on, I add it to the pre-notes I'm making for myself and keep going. I don't want to forget it—the case has some fascinating nuances about who owns what during a merger—but it doesn't deal specifically with any of the questions on my list, so I don't want to waste time on it right now, either. Not when there's so much else to do.

Five o'clock comes and goes, but I keep working for about an hour after the other interns leave. I'm in the legal department, so I have plenty of company—the attorneys in a number of the offices around me are working late as well. But sometime around six-thirty my stomach starts to growl and I decide to call it a day. If I'm lucky, Tori will be up for making her famous strawberry margaritas tonight. God knows I could use about three of them after the day I've had.

But as I'm walking to my car I pass the main building—the one with Ethan's office—and my indignation comes back all over again. Before I can

change my mind, I walk straight into the building, check in with evening security, who I'm pretty sure think I'm going to the cafeteria to catch dinner, and then grab an elevator to the fifth floor. No more stairwells for me.

Ethan's probably not even in, but I'll spend all night dwelling on my complete and total pissed-offness if I don't at least try to confront him.

When the elevator finally opens on the fifth floor, I expect to find the reception area dark and empty. Instead, the dragon receptionist is still there, working on her computer. She looks as surprised to see me as I am to see her, and I grind my teeth together in annoyance. It never occurred to me that she would still be here, working, so I haven't bothered to come up with an excuse. I obviously should have.

I brace myself for an argument with her, because if Ethan is here, I am not leaving without seeing him. But unlike when she barked at me this morning, this time she's all sweetness and light when I approach her. Which only makes me angrier.

"Good evening, Ms. Girard. Just let me call ahead and let him know you're here and then you can go right in."

"I thought I needed an appointment."

"Most people do," she says with a benign smile. "But Mr. Frost was very clear on the fact that you're to be allowed access to him whenever you need it."

Unaware that I am now fuming, she picks up the phone and dials two numbers. Seconds later, I can hear Ethan's voice over the telephone. Then she's pointing me in the direction of his office with a smile.

"Have a good evening, Ms. Girard."

"Thank you, Mrs."—I glance down at her nameplate, which holds a position of honor in the center of her pristine desk—"Lawrence."

"Call me Dorothy, dear. Everyone else does."

I'm not sure my heart can handle the shock of calling the dragon lady by her first name, no matter how charming she is right now. So instead of answering, I just nod weakly and then head to where she'd directed me to go.

I end up walking through another reception area, with another desk that obviously belongs to Ethan's personal assistant, at least judging by the nameplate on the desk. Though he's nowhere around—he must have left at five o'clock like a normal person—his desk is about a million times messier than Mrs. Lawrence's.

Right past the reception area is the door to a huge office, one whose lush furnishings make both reception areas look tiny and ill-styled. Certain that this is Ethan's office, I push the half-closed door open without bothering to knock. After all, it's not like he isn't expecting me.

Except once I get in there, I realize he's in the middle of a business call. Though he's leaning against the front of his desk instead of sitting behind it, his conversation makes it very obvious that I've interrupted some major deal brokering. On Trifecta, I wonder, or something else entirely?

Either way, I start to step back out—an intern has no business being in on any of these calls. But he stops me with a wave and a smile, gestures for me to sit anywhere I'd like. I know he expects me to pick one of the chairs immediately opposite his desk, but both are a little close to his long, Armani-clad legs for my comfort.

So I choose the indigo couch that's toward the back of the room, grouped with a couple of chairs into a relaxing sitting area. As I settle onto the cushions, it occurs to me that I probably should have taken one of the chairs, since it sends a different message.

It's too late now, though, so I stay where I am. I don't settle back, though. No need to look like I'm getting comfortable in here. Not that there's any chance of that, to be honest. This office, while incredibly appealing in its own way, is designed to intimidate much more than to welcome. Even the colors—cool blues and grays—while soothing in some small way, scream power and privilege and unemotional calculation.

I'm prepared for a long wait. Though I'm doing my best not to eavesdrop, it's hard not to hear some of the discussion, and it sounds very important. In my opinion, it's definitely got something to do with the merger I've been assigned to research. I think about leaving and coming back tomorrow, after I've had time to plot out my words better and he's no longer on the phone, lounging against his desk looking like a cover model for the Armani summer fashion campaign.

But to my surprise, he wraps his conversation up within a couple of minutes, telling whoever is on the line that “something’s come up.”

Then he’s striding over to me, a smile on his face and a wicked gleam in those Pacific Ocean eyes of his. I stiffen, expecting him to sit next to me on the couch, but instead he takes the chair to my right. Despite the small distance, there’s an unmistakable intimacy in the air between us, one that makes me squirm even as it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up.

“Chloe.” His voice is as warm and familiar as the smile on his face. “How was your day?”

It’s an innocent question, but it triggers all the anger and discomfort I’ve been feeling since the moment he walked into that conference room and spoke to my boss. I tell myself to chill, to temper my response, but the second I open my mouth everything just comes pouring out.

“How was my day? How was my day? How the hell do you think my day was when you deliberately sabotaged me?”

The smile disappears from his face, is replaced by a wariness that tells me he’s as intelligent as all the business and tech blogs give him credit for. He doesn’t make excuses, doesn’t blow me off. Instead, in a voice that says he’s taking me, and my words, very seriously, he says, “Explain.”

“What’s there to explain? You basically painted a target on my back and gave them carte blanche to fire at will.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean, who? Everyone. I’m a brand-new intern who’s just finished her second day with the company. It was bad enough that you walked into that meeting with me, but to take the most coveted research assignment away from the guy who’s been there the longest and give it to me for no reason—”

“There was a reason.”

“Yeah, well, wanting to sleep with me isn’t actually a valid reason. Trust me, if I hadn’t known that already, it would have been hammered home today.”

“What did they do?” The question is deceptively quiet, his face maintaining its placid lines. But there’s a fire in his eyes that tells me there’s

a lot more going on under the surface than he wants me to know about.

“What they did isn’t the point. The point—”

“It’s the point to me.” He leans forward, brushes one of my wayward curls out of my eyes. For the past few minutes they’ve been escaping the stranglehold I put them in earlier. Like the rest of my body, they have a tendency to spring out of my control whenever Ethan Frost gets a little too close.

But I refuse to be shaken by his touch or swayed from what I want to say. Not this time. “No, the point is you can’t just go around showing blatant favoritism. Especially when I’ve given you no encouragement.”

“It’s not favoritism. I read your file yesterday, cover to cover.”

“Why?”

“Because your skill at getting your point across impressed me in the cafeteria.” He smiles at my disbelieving look. “What can I say? I like a woman who knows how to argue.”

“What is it with you?” I’m completely exasperated at this point and don’t even attempt to hide it. I’ll treat him like my boss when he starts acting like it. Until then, he’s just another guy annoying the hell out of me. “Don’t you know getting involved with an intern is never a good idea? That’s got to be on the first page of *CEOs for Dummies*.”

He laughs, not some polite little chuckle but a full-out belly laugh, and the sound is so sexy that it shoots right through me, making my knees tremble and putting the rest of me on alert despite my anger. And that isn’t even taking into account how the laugh changes the sharp and reserved planes of his face, warming everything up until he looks a million times more approachable.

It’s a good look for him, and one that my instinct tells me not many people get to see. Which is ridiculous when I think of how I’ve seen him interact with people over the last two days—the easy way he speaks to everyone from cafeteria workers and security guards to Maryanne, who is an executive in the legal department.

“I think you have *CEOs for Dummies* confused with *Politics for Dummies*.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Politicians are the married idiots who keep getting in trouble for sleeping with the interns when they should be running the country. I’m not married and I don’t want to run anything but Frost Industries.”

“Tell that to someone who believes it. You put me on the Trifecta merger, the biggest merger in this company’s history. You want to run a lot more than just Frost Industries.”

“Touché. But when they’re absorbed by us, they’ll become part of my company and I will have spoken nothing but the truth.”

“That’s a nice loophole. You sure you haven’t been reading *Politics for Dummies* in your spare time?”

He laughs again. “I like you.”

“Well, that’s a shame, since I can’t stand you.”

He leans in even closer, and I have to fight not to swallow my tongue. Which, I know, is anatomically impossible, and yet feels like a totally reasonable description of what happens when he comes within centimeters of brushing against me.

“You sure about that?”

No. “Pretty sure.”

“I don’t think you are.”

I fake boredom that I’m far from feeling at this point. “Oh, yeah? What makes you say that?”

He reaches over, runs his fingers lightly over the hollow of my throat. “I can see your pulse right here. It’s beating fast. That’s a big sign that someone isn’t telling the truth.”

“Don’t get too excited.” I force the words past a suddenly tight throat. His hand on my skin is strangely soothing and also incredibly exciting. I want to lean into him, to arch my neck and press against that hand in encouragement. Not that I have any intention of letting him know what he does to me. “I’m just nervous.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. I know it as soon as the words slip past my lips. His eyes take on a wicked gleam that only makes my pulse beat faster.

“Do I make you nervous, Chloe?”

“You’re my boss. Of course talking to you makes me nervous.”

Ethan doesn't like that. I can see it in his eyes and in the way his jaw clenches. He doesn't take his hand away, but his fingers stop their gentle, rhythmic stroking. I miss it immediately, feel bereft, though I don't know why.

"Why do you always have to do that?" he demands.

"Do what?" If he doesn't take his hand away soon, I'm not going to be responsible for my actions. Like leaping on him and demanding that he touch me all over. Only the knowledge that I would regret it—greatly—keeps me seated with my legs primly crossed.

Well, that and the fact that I'll probably freeze up the second he touches me, really touches me. I'm not that woman, the one who can throw caution to the wind and just enjoy wherever the ride takes her. Not when it means giving up control. And certainly not when it means yielding to a man who could hurt me as easily as pleasure me. I did that once and look what it got me.

"Why do you have to bring everything back to the fact that I'm your employer?"

"Because you are. The power dynamics at work here are a pretty big issue whether you want to admit it or not."

He drops his hand, sits back abruptly. Which is exactly what I want him to do. So why do I suddenly feel even more lost than usual?

Chapter Six

“Have I misunderstood?” he asks after a moment, a truly horrified look on his face. “Am I overstepping my boundaries?”

“Well, duh. I thought I made that clear earlier.”

For a second he looks a little sick, very different from the confident man I’ve seen up until this point. But then his face closes up and all I get is blankness when he says, “I’m sorry. I thought I made it clear earlier that your internship is completely safe. No matter what happens or doesn’t happen between us, you’ll never have anything to worry about on that front.”

“Jesus, Ethan, I didn’t say I thought you were sexually harassing me. I said that you’d overstepped your bounds when you went to my boss and gave me the best assignment. I don’t need your favors. Especially when they end up causing me nothing but grief.”

Though his face doesn’t change and he’s no longer touching me, I can feel the tension slowly leak from him. “You’re wrong about why you got that assignment, you know.”

“Oh, really? So you’re saying I got it on my merits?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” He meets my disbelieving gaze levelly. “I told you, I read your file last night. I was incredibly impressed, not just with your grades but with the paper you submitted with your application. On intellectual property.”

“I know the one.” Suddenly my heart is beating hard for a whole different reason.

“I was fascinated. The argument you made was original, well researched, and well thought out, and also happens to be exactly what I believe about those cases and that particular issue.”

I stare at him. “It’s not a popular stand. In fact, I nearly didn’t submit that paper at all because I was afraid it would work against me.”

“But you did submit it. And while your opinion varies even from that of my chief counsel, it dovetails nicely with my own. If I hadn’t met you, I might not have given you the Trifecta merger based solely on the merits of that paper, but I would have seriously considered it. Having met you and been impressed by both your intellect and your spirit, it was a no-brainer. I’d decided to request that you do the research for the merger even before I saw you this morning.”

I stare at him, trying to judge his level of sincerity. He certainly looks like he’s telling the truth, but that doesn’t really mean anything in the grand scheme of things. *CEOs for Dummies* and all that—I’m sure he’s an expert liar when he wants to be.

But I want to believe him, so badly that it’s a burning in my gut. Because if what he’s saying is true, if he believes in me because of my brain and not just because of how I look, then I don’t want to give up this project. I want to grab on to it with both hands and show him—show everyone—just what I can do. Maybe that’s arrogant, but I don’t give a damn.

I’ve done my research, hours and days and months of research, on intellectual property laws. I know I have more to learn—of course I do—but I would put my knowledge base up against Rick’s any day.

Suddenly the need to take this new position out for a spin is a driving urgency inside of me. One that makes all the shit from earlier seem not so bad. Because as long as I know the truth, as long as *I* believe I got the position because of what I’ve done and not because the boss wants to date me, then the rest doesn’t matter.

“Do you mean it?” I finally ask Ethan. “You think I’m good enough to do this project?”

“My company wouldn’t be as successful as it is if I was in the habit of putting incompetent people into positions that matter, Chloe. I don’t know how many other ways to say it.”

He’s right. I need to either believe him or not, but I can’t keep asking him the same thing over and over again. Deciding that the sincerity on his face is real, as are his reassurances that any attraction he has for me is separate from my work, I relax for the first time since I opened that box last night.

“Thank you for giving me the shot,” I tell him.

He grins. “You look like you swallowed the sun.”

“I feel like I did. I promise I’ll do a good job on the project.”

“I have no doubt.” His smile fades. “But what’s going on over there? You said you’re having problems with the other interns?”

I think of Rick’s smarmy face, of Chrissy’s total lack of friendliness after she realized what project I was assigned. None of it seems so bad now, not when I know that I got the job because Ethan believes in me. “It’s no big deal. I can handle it.”

He doesn’t look pleased. “What exactly do you have to handle?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.” I push to my feet. “Thank you for your time. I won’t keep you.”

He reaches out, snags my elbow. “What if I want to keep you?”

The question hangs in the air between us, and it occurs to me that he’s talking about a lot more than just this moment. A lot more than I’m prepared to even consider.

It’s there in the air between us. In the look on his face and the conviction in his voice.

In the way his thumb brushes against my inner elbow with whisper-soft strokes.

In the way he angles his body so that he’s on the outside, shielding me, protecting me from I don’t know what.

And it’s there in the butterflies in my stomach, the electric sparks racing from one nerve ending to the other.

I’m shocked by how much I want to say yes. Yes to dinner, yes to a walk on the beach, yes to what comes after. But nothing’s changed between when I came charging up here and now. Nothing but my perceptions. The rest of the world is exactly the same. I’m exactly the same. As damaged—as ruined—as ever.

I don’t want Ethan to see it, to see me. If he does, he’ll know just how broken I am, and I’ve spent too many years trying to keep my past private

to simply roll over and expose the underbelly of my secrets now. Even if there is something about him that makes me want to.

“I need to go.”

His eyes narrow at the huskiness of my voice, and he stands up. Steps closer to me. Watches me with an intensity that says he notices everything. *Sees everything.*

It’s what I’m most afraid of, and contrarily what I most want. Someone who really sees me, who takes the time to look beyond the surface and the lies and the No Trespassing signs I wear like my own personal armor. That Ethan can do it so easily cripples my defenses, and I find myself clinging to him, my fingers tangled in the soft silk of his dress shirt. He reaches up to stroke my hair back from my face and even my curls hold on for dear life, wrapping themselves around his fingers in a desperate attempt to keep him close.

His hand tightens on my elbow, not enough to hurt, but enough to let me know that he’s there. Enough to make me feel him, really feel him. And then slowly, inexorably, he pulls me closer until I can feel the powerful beat of his heart against my chest. The hard ridge of his erection against my hip.

I wait for the panic, for the fear. For the inevitable freak-out that has followed every time a man invades my personal space.

This time it doesn’t come. I don’t know why, not when Ethan is as close to me—closer—than I’ve let anyone get in a very long time. It’s not because I’m not nervous, because I am. My heart is nearly beating out of my chest while drops of sweat work their way slowly down my spine.

And yet I don’t feel threatened. Don’t feel like he’ll take any more than I want to give. Maybe it’s a pipe dream. Maybe I’m just as foolish as every other girl caught in the throes of sexual attraction for a powerful man.

I shake my head, look away. There’s no maybe about it. Ethan wouldn’t have built the company he has if he was willing to settle for crumbs and half measures. He wouldn’t be where he is if he couldn’t look below the surface to what lies underneath and figure out how to get it. If he can do that in business, what makes me think for a second that he won’t also be able to do the same with me?

I don't. Standing here, looking into those cerulean eyes, I come to understand the truth. That Ethan Frost is a man who will accept everything I have to give and demand more. Demand everything. And then keep searching for whatever lies beyond even that.

Just the thought should terrify me. And maybe it would—maybe it does. But not enough to send me running from this room, running from him. Because along with the need, along with the demands, I can also see the tenderness. Ethan may want everything from me, but he won't take more than either of us is willing to give.

I don't know how I know that, but I do. And still I hold back. Still I refuse to yield. How can I not when everything inside me screams that this—whatever this is—can't end any way but badly?

"Where'd you go?" he murmurs softly, his mouth centimeters from my ear. My cheek.

My breath catches in my throat. How can it not? There's an electricity between us, a knowledge and a need that throbs in the very oxygen we breathe. It's there when I suck in a gulp of air, sizzling its way down my windpipe and into my desperate lungs. It's there when I try to look away, stopping my head from turning, keeping my eyes pinned to Ethan's. And it's there working its way inside me with every second that passes until I don't—I can't—remember what I felt like without it.

"I'm still here." I shouldn't be, but I am.

"I want you, Chloe." His mouth skims across my cheek, down my jaw. "And I think you want me, too."

I shake my head, but it's more acknowledgment than denial, and we both know it. "Ethan—"

He pulls back, smiles, and it's the happiest look I've seen from him yet. "You said my name again. That's progress."

Progress? Was it only just this morning that I insisted on calling him Mr. Frost? It seems so strange, when he's been Ethan to me all along. Well, Juice Guy and then Ethan. Only when I was determined to defy him was he ever Mr. Frost.

"Most guys wouldn't consider that progress."

"I'm not most guys."

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Yeah, right. I’ve heard that before.” I’m teasing him, actually teasing him. It’s kind of hard to imagine.

He laughs. “That didn’t sound nearly as clichéd in my head.”

“Really?”

“Or maybe I just didn’t think it through well enough.”

“Yeah, maybe not.”

“Since we’re on the subject of clichés, we could try another one.” This time he’s the one who lifts a brow questioningly.

“I have to admit, I’m a little jealous. I’ve always wanted to know how to do that.”

“What?” He looks baffled.

I reach out and touch the eyebrow he just raised, smooth my fingers over it. He grows still. Serious. But I keep talking, not wanting to let this moment go. Not the sweetness nor the easiness of it. In my life, there’s been too little of both. “That whole one-eyebrow thing. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe I’ll teach you someday.”

“I’d like that.”

We’re close now, even closer than we were just a minute ago, and I didn’t think that was possible. But with each sentence, each word we exchange, we move inexorably closer. Like magnets, drawn together by a natural chemistry over which we have no control.

Again, it occurs to me that I should be frightened—that I am frightened—but not enough for me to stop this. Not enough for me to walk away. Not enough for me to do anything but stand here and wait for Ethan to close the final few millimeters between us.

He does, slowly. Oh so slowly. Until I’m nearly insane with nervousness and anticipation and need. Oh, God. The need. It’s overwhelming.

He’s so close that I can see the little crinkles by the corners of his eyes, can feel the heat rolling off him in waves. I can hear the hitch in his breathing, smell the sweet spearmint of his breath. And still it’s not enough. I want to taste him. *Need* to taste him.

And then he's there, his lips whisper-soft against my own. Once, twice, then again and again. Little glancing kisses that do nothing but fan my desire, nothing but make me want more. I kiss him back, part my lips to encourage firmer, deeper contact, but he doesn't take the bait. Instead, he continues with the tiny kisses—on my cheek, my jaw, the corner of my mouth, my upper lip, my lower lip, the other corner of my mouth.

Frustrated, I slide my hands up his muscular biceps, let my fingers rub at his tense shoulders before walking them slowly up his neck. He groans a little, and this time when he takes my mouth, it's no light, glancing thing. It's a full-fledged kiss, one that weakens my knees and makes my head spin even as it grounds me firmly in the here. The now.

Ethan nips at my lower lip, and it's my turn to open my mouth, my turn to moan. He takes instant advantage, his tongue stealing inside to explore. Now that he's got me, I expect an invasion, an annexation. In my experience, that's how most guys kiss. Like they're claiming your mouth for the motherland or something. Like you're some prize they've won and have to mark or risk losing.

But Ethan's been different all along, and in this, he continues to be. He doesn't thrust his tongue inside me, doesn't try to conquer by enthusiastic force. Instead, he coaxes. He charms. He seduces. And against that, I have no defense.

The tip of his tongue slides gently along my own, circling slowly, slowly, slowly. Licking along the top of my tongue, then the bottom before moving on to the inside of my cheek, the roof of my mouth. He plays with the frenulum between my upper lip and my gum, and I shudder a little—no one's ever done that before and it's shocking how good it feels.

His hands come up to cup my face, to tilt my head this way and that so he can delve deeper. So I can welcome him wholly inside me. And I do. For these few, stolen moments out of time, I welcome everything he can give me.

He tastes like spearmint and lemonade. And blueberries. Always blueberries. On him, they taste delicious. Sweet and tart and oh so addicting.

Need, powerful and unexpected, blossoms inside me, and the fingers I still have tangled in his hair tighten as I pull him more tightly against me. I'm the aggressor now, the one on fire. The one who craves, who wants to conquer. And if there's a part of me that's shaking with nerves, with fear, then I ignore it. Shove it deep inside me to the place where everything I don't want to deal with goes, and concentrate on the now.

Concentrate on Ethan.

I press my mouth more firmly against his, relish the groan he makes no effort to hide. Relish even more the feel of his body, hard and hot and aroused, against my own. In that moment, I swear if I could have pulled him inside me, I would have.

Instead, I stroke my tongue along the edge of his bottom lip, then do the same to his top one. I pay special attention to the corners of his mouth—God, I love how he tastes—and the perfect bow at the center of his upper lip. Then, when I can't take it anymore, I pull his lower lip between my teeth and nip softly. Once, and then again.

It must be the sign he's been waiting for, the permission I didn't know he wanted. Because suddenly I'm up against the wall, one leg wrapped around his hip as his mouth plunders mine.

His hand is on my thigh, his fingers stroking the sensitive flesh on the inside of my knee as he kisses me and kisses me and kisses me.

I shudder, clutch at him, arch into him. He groans, low in his throat, his fingers tightening in my hair and on my thigh. Not enough to hurt, but definitely enough to ground me. To let me know that he's no more ready to let go of me than I am to be released.

My own hands come up to tangle in the cool, ebony silk of his hair. To tug and pull and claim. And still the kiss goes on, until my lips feel hot and swollen and achy from the pressure. Until my breasts and my sex feel exactly the same way.

In that one, perfect moment, I want more. I want everything. Everything I've denied myself since I was fifteen years old. Everything I've told myself I don't want and shouldn't have.

Ethan's hand slides up, up, up my thigh, sneaks under my skirt, and skates along the edge of my panties. I freeze at the unexpected caress—and

everything comes rushing back. The reason I'm here, what I wanted to accomplish with this visit, the promise I made myself just minutes ago about not giving in to this thing between us, whatever it is. And the fear that I'm working so hard to pretend it doesn't exist.

But it does exist, and as it rises up inside me, I don't know how to deal with it. How to keep it at bay. Not now, when the rigid control I keep on myself seems as nebulous as the security it brings me.

"Ethan." I drag my mouth from his, use every ounce of willpower I have to stay calm. To stay here with him instead of drifting back to a time and place I've done my best to forget.

"It's okay. I've got you, Chloe." He whispers the words in my ear, his breath hot against my cheek. "I've got you. Let me make you feel good. Nothing else. Just that."

He hesitates, doesn't move as he waits for an answer I don't have. I ache with wanting him to touch me, with the need to feel the agony and the ecstasy that comes with being loved by him. But at the same time I'm afraid I'll freak out and ruin everything. It's what I'm good at, after all. Ruining things.

Again, I try to separate what is from what was. Who I am from who I used to be. I don't know if it works, only that I want Ethan to touch me.

I burrow closer, bury my head against his chest. He relaxes, tension I didn't even know was there slowly leaving his body as he once again strokes his fingers along my sex.

Every bone in my body goes weak and I lean my head back, rest it against the wall as I allow Ethan an intimacy I've never granted anyone before.

I gasp, arch against him as his finger strokes its way inside my panties and down to the very heart of me. He leans forward, murmurs soothingly in my ear once more. But this time it's all nonsense to me. He might be making sense, might be perfectly coherent, but I can't understand him. Can't focus on anything other than his fingers as they slowly—oh so slowly—press into my sex.

I'm wet, so wet. And trembly. And needy. And just a little scared. I've never let a man do this before, never opened myself up so completely. After

what happened when I was younger, I've never wanted to let a man close enough to hurt me.

I'm terrified that Ethan can do just that. Oh, as gentle as he is with me, I'm not afraid of him hurting me physically. But emotionally? This is Ethan Frost, one of the most sought-after bachelors in the world. Genius. Visionary. Charmer. Since I can't even figure out what he's doing with me, how can I believe that he wants anything more than this? Just this?

I should grab his hand, push it away, tell him I don't want him to touch me. Not that he would believe me—I don't believe myself. How can I when my body is on fire, every nerve ending lit up by his touch? His thumb presses against my clit, circles, and I know I'm not going to do anything of the sort. I'm not going to do anything at all unless it involves this man touching me, wanting me.

"God, Chloe, you feel so good," he tells me, his voice as dark and smooth and seductive as the chocolate bar I keep at the bottom of my purse in case of emergencies.

"You too," I manage to gasp out.

He slips one finger, then two, all the way inside of me. I gasp, try to hold still so I can feel every pleasurable thing he does to me. But the truth is, my hips are moving of their own volition now, as beyond my control as the pleasure spiraling through me. I'm riding his hand, chasing the wicked pleasure that I can't get away from now that he's shown it to me.

The pressure is building alongside the pleasure, the fear going hand in hand with the ecstasy, until I feel like any wrong move will have me shattering—but not in a good way. Not in the way I so desperately crave.

And then Ethan's dropping to his knees in front of me. Shoving my skirt up to my waist and pushing my panties aside. Before I can even imagine what he's going to do, let alone give my permission, his mouth is on me. His tongue delving inside me even as his hands move to rest on the line where my thigh connects to my body. He lifts my leg—the same one that was wrapped around his waist a short time ago—and drapes it over his shoulder.

I'm totally open to him now, totally vulnerable. My cheeks flame, and I squirm—no one has ever done anything this intimate to my body before,

and I'm traumatized even as I love it. Even as I crave more. Crave everything, including the release that has been just out of reach.

I whimper, moan, beg, and plead, words falling out of my mouth with no conscious thought or organization on my part. All I know is that I *need*. For this one moment, the fear has disappeared. The worry, the pain, the memories. Everything is gone and my whole body, my whole consciousness and existence, has shrunk to this one moment out of time. To the pleasure, and release, that I am chasing as relentlessly as any junkie has ever chased a high.

Ethan quiets me with a low growl, and then his tongue is there—right there—at the epicenter of my pleasure. He circles my clit, flicks at it, before sucking for one second, two. Combined with the rubbing, twisting motion of his fingers inside me, that's all it takes. With a shudder and a shout, I tumble over the edge and into an orgasm so intense, so pleasurable that I forget everything. Who he is. Who I am. Who I was. Why we shouldn't be doing this. Why I care.

In those moments, all I know is him. All I feel is him. And the warmth, the pleasure, the tenderness—absolute and indescribable—that he's given me.

Chapter Seven

But nothing lasts forever—no matter how much I might wish it would. As the shudders finally stop and thought returns, so do all those things I'd banished in the moments before release.

Ethan is still kneeling on the floor in front of me, his fingers inside me and his mouth brushing glancing kisses across my hip and abdomen. There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to stay here, right here, in this moment. To let him pet and touch and cuddle me until his heart is content...or mine is.

But it'll take a lot more than a few gentle kisses and an out-of-this-world orgasm to make me forget the darkness that yawns inside of me. I was able to bury it earlier, to ignore it, but right now—as the world creeps in—it's just there, waiting to swallow me whole.

I'm too raw, too open. My defenses have been shattered by the pleasure Ethan brought me—and the care he's showing me even now. Tears bloom in my eyes, and I close my eyes, look away, before he can see them. It's an odd feeling, having a man dress me. Having this man dress me. It smacks of gentleness, of care and concern, and isn't at all what I expected of him.

Then again, I don't know why I'm surprised. Nothing about this meeting is turning out as I expected. Why should Ethan's actions be any different? Unexpected tears clog my throat, but I'm not going to cry.

Not here, not now. And certainly not in front of Ethan.

But somehow he sees. The hand on my hip slides up to my lower back, rubs soothingly. "You okay?" he asks softly, standing up so his face is close to mine.

I can smell myself on his lips, and for one wild second I think about leaning forward and kissing him. Finding out not what I taste like but what *we* taste like, together. But just the idea is so strange, so appalling, so *embarrassing* that I take a step back.

Those bright blue eyes of his darken and I know he's not happy. He doesn't like the distance I've just put between us. But how can I not distance myself when the whole house of cards I've spent the last five years constructing threatens to crash down around me at any second?

"That was..." I break off. What's the appropriate adjective to use here? Mind-blowing? Body-numbing? Amazing? "Nice."

As soon as the word leaves my tongue, I want to grab it back. Nice? A hot bath is nice. A warm chocolate chip cookie. A pedicure. What just happened between us was a lot of things, but nice is not one of them.

Ethan stiffens, and I'm afraid I've offended him. Not that I blame him—he gives me an earth-shattering orgasm and I call it nice? But he looks more amused than insulted. "Nice?" he asks, lifting that one damn eyebrow of his again. It gets to me, has me aching all over again. Which—judging from the gleam in his eyes—is exactly what he intended.

"You know what I mean." I reach down, grab my briefcase from where I put it next to the couch. I don't drop my gaze from him as I do, because at this moment he looks far too much like a predator for me to ever be so stupid.

"Actually, I do." He brings his hand to his mouth, runs his fingers—the same fingers that were just inside me—directly under his nose. As he breathes me in, my knees go loose and shaky. I lock them to make sure I don't end up tumbling to the ground.

"Thank you," he tells me, his voice deep and drugged with arousal. "For letting me touch you."

"I think I should be the one thanking you. I'm the one who..." I trail off. It's one thing to think the word, but it's another thing entirely to say it, even to the man who made it happen.

He grins. "You don't ever need to thank me for giving you pleasure, Chloe."

The way he says it makes me think he plans on this happening again. Which it can't. No matter how much I'm aching for it to.

"I should go."

"Why?" He steps closer, and all the oxygen in the room seems to disappear again. "Let me take you to dinner."

“I can’t. I already have dinner plans.”

For the first time, I see a flash of displeasure cross his face. “Break them.”

My spine stiffens at the autocratic bent in his tone. “No.”

“You’re really going to go out with another man? After what we just did together?”

“One experience”—I still shy away from using the word *orgasm* in conversation with him—“doesn’t give you any rights over me. Or vice versa.”

“What if I want rights over you?” His voice is still soft, but there’s a menacing edge that provides a definite warning.

Fear blooms in the pit of my stomach, makes me sweat. Makes me shake. I clench my fists, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how easily he can intimidate me. “Tough luck. No man will ever have the right to tell me what to do.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I know so. I’ll never give a man that much power over me.” Not ever again.

“What about this date you have tonight? He doesn’t get to claim any rights over you?”

For a moment, just a moment, I think about letting him go on thinking that I have a date. And that I plan to keep it, even after what we just did together. Or, more accurately, what he just did to me. If he thinks I’m the kind of woman who dates one guy while getting off with another, I’m pretty sure he’ll lose interest. Ethan’s obviously the possessive type, and I doubt that possessiveness lends itself to sharing.

And that’s what I want. For him to lose interest. Not just because of the work thing, but because I can’t handle the intimacy of what we just did together. Already I feel broken. Cracked open. The pain I work so hard not to acknowledge seeping back into the surface of my consciousness.

Yet I can’t ignore the way he’s looking at me. The hold he’s exerting over me with little more than a narrowed gaze.

“It’s my roommate.” I blurt out the words before I have a clue I’m going to say them. “We’re doing a girls’ night tonight. Dinner and a couple rom-coms. We have standing Tuesday-night plans.”

The tension is gone as quickly as it came, and I feel my shoulders slump in relief. But just as quickly I’m exasperated again—with myself more than him. Yes, Ethan is pushy, but he wouldn’t be in the position he’s in if he wasn’t. Head of one of the fastest-growing—and most lucrative—biomed companies in the country. A forerunner in research that saves the lives of soldiers in combat theaters. A self-made almost-billionaire who’s used his brains and business savvy to go from being the orphaned kid of a U.S. Special Forces soldier to a world-renowned CEO.

No, it’s not his pushiness I’m upset with. It’s the way I constantly want to yield to him. The way I cave to his wishes even when I have no intention of doing so. I haven’t been that girl in years, don’t want to be her ever again. The fact that Ethan can so easily bend me to his will is disconcerting. Worse, it’s alarming.

“Let me walk you to your car, then.” He takes my briefcase from me, slings the strap over his shoulder. Grabs his own. Then, taking a firm—but not too firm—grip on my elbow, he guides me out of his office and through the two reception areas to the bank of elevators.

“Good night, Dot,” he calls to the dragon lady, who is still manning her post. Except when she looks at him, she looks much more like a doting mother than a dragon guarding the entrance to a cave.

“Good night, Ethan. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The elevator comes before he can say anything else, so he simply shoots her a smile and a little wave. We step on, mere seconds after he called it, and I can’t help being disgruntled. It seems like I’ve done nothing but wait for elevators all day, but the second Ethan presses the button, one magically appears. Almost as if it knows who’s waiting on the other end and wouldn’t dare let the CEO of Frost Industries wait for anything.

As he walks me to my car, Ethan asks me how my summer is going. What my favorite class was last semester. If my roommate and I liked the strawberries he sent.

The last question throws me off my game. I'm good at small talk—I like the organized, predictable rhythm of it—and his gift so doesn't qualify as small talk. Not when you consider everything that has happened today because of that damn gift.

I start to tell him so, that I don't appreciate the strawberries any more than I did the four-hundred-dollar blender. But again, it's like he has some kind of magic hold over me that makes me tell the truth, because what comes out is, "I would have returned them, too, but my roommate's already eaten half of them. It seemed churlish to return only the uneaten half. Kind of like, 'I'm going to give this back to you, but only after I take everything I want from it.' So not okay."

Much to my surprise, Ethan laughs at my explanation. "I'm okay with you giving the strawberries back—especially if it gives me another chance to get yelled at by you."

I glance at him from under my lashes. "Like getting yelled at, do you?"

"I don't, actually. At all. You seem to be the singular exception to that rule."

I'm not sure how I feel about that—or how I'm supposed to respond. Thank God I don't have to. We've made it to my car. "Well," I say, stopping in front of the Mini Cooper I bought used when I got to UCSD three years ago. I call her Phoebe, after Lisa Kudrow's character in *Friends*, because she's fun and cute and loaded with eccentricities. Unlike the real Phoebe, however, not all of my Phoebe's oddities are endearing. Like her propensity to break down at the least convenient moment. Or the way her air-conditioning only works in the winter. I'm a pretty decent mechanic and have managed to fix a bunch of her problems myself, but some of them refuse to be fixed. She's stubborn that way.

Tori is after me to get a new car, but I love Phoebe. She's the first thing I've owned that's really mine. Bought with my own money and with my name only on the registration papers. It was an important step for me, helped me create the distance from my parents that I so desperately needed when I was eighteen. And the fact that my father can't just take her from me—when he needs the money, when he's in a mood, when he wants to punish me for some real or imagined slight—means even more.

Plus, she's already paid for, which is very important to me. With tuition at UCSD as expensive as it is, plus living expenses, making ends meet is always a challenge. Doing it in the summer, when all I've got is a nonpaying internship, is even worse. Like the free rent I'm getting at Tori's, no car payment makes this current dream job of mine possible.

"This is me," I say, popping the trunk and loading my briefcase into it.

Ethan doesn't look impressed. He doesn't say anything, though, which is all that matters. After the day I've had, I'm not really in the mood for another argument. And we would have one, because I always defend Phoebe from the naysayers. Always.

"Go out with me tomorrow," he says after I close the trunk and walk around to the driver's-side door.

Shit. Why did I think he wasn't going to push this? Just because he took tonight's plans gracefully—once he realized I was planning on hanging with Tori—doesn't mean that he's willing to back off. But that's what I need him to do. What I want him to do. My stomach clenches sickly, and to be honest, I don't know whether it's because I think he'll take my refusal well...or because I think he won't. Either way, I'm not going out with him.

"I can't," I tell him after a long, uncomfortable silence—at least on my part. I make sure I'm not looking him in the eye when I speak to him, afraid he'll do his Jedi mind trick on me again and have me agreeing to something I have no intention of doing.

I pull open my car door, try to get in. But Ethan isn't going to let me off the hook that easily. He takes my hand in his, bumps the car door shut with his hip—he's way too tall to use his shoulder. At six foot four, he looks like a giant standing next to my little car, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't find his size intimidating. Sexy, too, but mostly intimidating. At least until I think of how perfectly he fit between my legs earlier. Then it's just plain hot.

"More plans with the roommate?" he asks.

"No." Why, oh why, can't I lie to this man? In self-defense, I've spent the past five years lying about nearly everything important, yet now, when I need the ability most, it's totally deserted me.

"Plans with someone else?"

“No.”

I can feel his eyes on me, know he’s willing me to look at him. But this time I refuse to give in. I can’t. Not if I have any hope of maintaining my distance, my sanity, and my ability to say no.

I’m stubborn, more than strong-willed enough that I can usually outlast the best of them—it’s how I made it through high school with my sanity intact—but Ethan has me beat. While I’m struggling with a way to fill the sudden awkwardness between us, one that doesn’t involve looking at him, he just leans against the door of my car.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

Silence stretches between us, taut as a violin string. I tell myself not to say anything, not to babble uncontrollably, but with each second that passes it grows harder and harder.

The words well up on my tongue, all the excuses I don’t want to give but feel compelled to. Desperate to hold out, I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that I taste the metallic tang of my own blood.

And just like that, the standoff is over. Like yesterday, when my stomach growled, the moment Ethan realizes I’m suffering, he puts a stop to it. He rests his hand lightly on my cheek, uses his thumb to tug my cheek out from between my teeth. “Don’t,” he tells me.

“I can’t date you, Ethan.”

“You won’t date me, Chloe. That’s not the same thing.”

No, it isn’t, but my refusal is more than that, more than a simple no just because I don’t want to date the boss. This goes deeper, much deeper, but I don’t know how to tell him that. Not without revealing all my secrets...and all my wounds.

“I need to go.” I turn back to my car, tug on my door. I know I don’t stand a chance of opening it if he doesn’t move, but I’m hoping that he won’t push this. Not now, when the crack inside me is growing larger with each passing second.

For long moments I don't think he's going to move. Instead, his thumb coasts down my cheek to my chin. He tilts my head up, forces me to meet his gaze. I think I'll see anger there, or disgust. Annoyance, at the very least. Instead, there's something else, an emotion so unexpected and undeserved that I can barely wrap my head around it.

Mixed with the same desire and need that are even now bouncing around inside me is a sweetness, a tenderness, that he doesn't try to hide. It's the first time anyone has ever looked at me like that, the first time a man has taken the time to look into me instead of just at me. The first time a man has ever really seen me.

It melts my resistance, makes me question all the reasons I've told myself this is a bad idea. Which, of course, is only proof of how turned around and inside out Ethan has gotten me. Panic sets in, takes me over, and for a minute I feel like a wolf in a trap, willing to chew my own foot off for the chance to get away.

Just when I think I'm going to lose it completely, Ethan steps back—and opens my car door for me. I clamber in before he can change his mind, but then I can't help staring up at him, wondering why. I was about to break, about to give him anything he wanted if it meant I could pull back from the emotional chaos swirling around me. Around us.

He stopped me from shattering, his simple actions giving me back the strength that had slowly leached from me during our battle of wills. I don't understand, don't know why a man who is so intent on winning would step back right before he claimed victory. All I know is that I'm grateful. And confused. But mostly grateful.

“Drive carefully,” he tells me, his voice dark and gruff.

“Ethan—”

“It's okay. I can wait.”

“Wait for what?”

He smiles at me. “For you, Chloe. I can wait for you.” Then he grimaces. “Not, however, if you continue to sit there and stare at me with that adorably befuddled look on your face.”

I don't move, don't look away, don't so much as blink. I'm confused, feeling vulnerable, and terrified that all of it shows on my face. My poker

face seems to have gone the same way as my resolve when it comes to Ethan, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do about that.

“Go!” he orders suddenly, then closes the door firmly between us.

I stick the key into the ignition, start to roll down the window, but he just shakes his head. Takes a couple big steps away from the car. Points at the exit from the parking lot.

There's nothing for me to do but follow his directions. So I do, putting the car in gear and driving toward the exit he gestured to. But as I drive away, I have a terrible time not looking back. Not going back.

And the part of me that's been hurt before, that's been torn apart and put back together like a bunch of mismatched puzzle pieces, can't help but wonder if that's exactly what Ethan intended.

Chapter Eight

By the time I get home, I've stopped shaking. I'm no less confused, mind you, but at least I can hide it better. Which is important, because when it comes to emotional drama, Tori has a nose like a bloodhound. It's one of the many reasons I don't date—if I keep the drama to a minimum, she doesn't know how much is under the surface, just waiting for her to dig it up.

At least that's my theory and I'm sticking to it. I only hope the fact that Ethan just gave me an earth-shattering orgasm isn't written all over my face. God knows it feels like it's written all over my soul.

"Hey, perfect timing! The pizza just got here." She gestures to the box and two plates sitting on the coffee table.

I peel off my jacket, toss it onto the small entryway bench where my suit jacket from yesterday still rests. "What do you want to drink?" I ask, heading for the kitchen—and something alcoholic. After the day I've had, I'm about ready to start mainlining 180-proof liquor. Anything to stop the nerves—and everything else—currently rattling around just under my skin.

"I opened a bottle of Chianti. Grab that and bring it in."

It wasn't tequila, but it would do. And it would probably go better with pizza, anyway.

"Your mom called while you were at work. When I told her you weren't here, she wanted your new cell number."

I nearly drop the bottle of wine. "Did you give it to her?"

"What do you think?" Tori's voice is much closer now, and I turn around to find her standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"You didn't."

"Of course I didn't." She grabs the wine, pours both of us some. Watches without saying a word as I drain mine, then hold the glass out for seconds.

“One of these days, you’re going to tell me what went down between you and your family.”

I nod, even as I think the opposite. That there’s no way in hell I will ever tell her, ever tell anyone, why my relationship with my family is so distant.

“What did she want?” I’ve calmed down enough that I can sound almost unconcerned when I ask the question. I take a small sip of my second glass of wine, wish I could chug it down the same way I did the first. But then Tori’s questions would get more insistent, and after the day I’ve had, I’m just not up for it.

“She asked me to have you call her. She didn’t say it was important. Only that she wanted to talk to you.”

I relax a little more. That means she wants something from me. I can handle that—after all, my whole life has been about giving my parents what they want. “Did she mention Miles?”

“She just asked me to let you know that your brother’s doing fine. He’s working on some new project that he’s very excited about.”

“That sounds about right.” I smile, let the last of the tension go. My older brother, Miles, is a tech genius who never quite learned how to function in the real world. From the time we were little, he’s always been more wrapped up in imagining things and figuring out how to make them a reality than he’s ever been about mundane things like eating or making a living or protecting his ideas.

If it were up to him, he’d share his inventions with the whole world for free and we’d all survive on gumdrops and lollipops and live happily ever after. But not everyone is as nice—or naive—as he is, and he’s had ideas stolen more than once. It’s why I’m so interested in intellectual property law. My brother might not care about protecting himself, but I sure as hell care about protecting him.

Crisis averted and wineglass in hand, I wander back into the living room. As far as I’m concerned, my mother can wait until hell freezes over for me to call her back.

“So, what are we watching tonight?” I ask as we settle down on the sofa. “Something that won’t make me cry, I hope.” Between Ethan and that orgasm and now my mother, I feel so vulnerable that I’m afraid if I start to

cry tonight, I'll never stop. After all, I have a lot of tears saved up. Five years' worth, to be exact.

"Actually, I'm going to have to skip the movie. Maybe we can do it tomorrow? Lisa got tickets for Imagine Dragons tonight. Her boyfriend had to cancel because of work, so she asked me to go." Tori shoots me an apologetic look. "Do you mind?"

"No, of course not! That's amazing. You love them."

"I really do! I didn't even know their tour was stopping here, and then Lisa came into work with the tickets this morning."

"That's awesome. What time are you leaving?"

"I'm picking up Lisa at eight-thirty."

"Cool. So you have time for pizza."

"There's always time for pizza."

Tori takes a big bite of one of her slices of pizza. I say "her slices" because we have two very distinct sides to the pizzas we order from the gourmet Italian place down the street. Her side is loaded with every kind of meat available, plus pineapple and black olives. My side has grilled vegetables on it.

"Who's opening for them?" I keep my voice upbeat, even though the last thing I want is to be stuck in this apartment alone tonight. It's selfish of me, I know, but I don't want her to go. Not tonight. Not when so much of my well-ordered life is already disintegrating around me.

Tuesday-night movies are one of those things Tori and I don't normally mess with. Plans on any other night of the week are subject to change, but since we first started rooming together at the beginning of our freshman year of college, Tuesday night has been our catch-up night. The night where we sit around, drink a little—or a lot, depending on how things are going—read gossip mags, watch movies, eat too much, and generally tell each other everything that's happened over the last week.

And while I don't know if I was really planning to tell Tori about what happened in Ethan's office today—I can barely wrap my head around it myself, let alone expect her to—it still would have been nice to have had that option. To maybe drop it into the conversation after we'd each had a

couple of glasses of wine and had chilled out some. Maybe even ask her advice about what to do. Now I won't have the chance.

"Some band I never heard of. That's why we're blowing them off," she tells me when she finishes chewing. Then she looks at me, really looks at me. I shift uncomfortably under her scrutiny, even before she asks, "Hey, are you okay? You look upset."

"I'm good. It's just been a long day."

"I bet. How did Ethan take the return of his blender?"

"Better than I expected." In fact, now that I think about it, he never even mentioned it. Of course, that could be because he was too busy giving me an orgasm to think about fruit smoothies, but no need to tell Tori that.

"Really?" She sounds a little disappointed. "I expected him to get pissed off about it. Or at least to argue with you about it."

Me too, actually. And maybe he'd planned on doing just that when he chased after me this morning, only to be distracted when I nearly plummeted down half a flight of stairs to certain bone breakage. Now I guess I'll never know.

The thought is oddly depressing. But then, everything is this evening. I decide to chalk it up to girls' night being canceled. On the best of days I'm not great with routine changes. After a day like today, it's no wonder that I'm feeling a little discombobulated. Keeping my life ordered, routine, is the only thing that helps me deal with the chaos of my past. The puzzle pieces that I just can't make fit together, no matter how hard I try.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

The old nursery rhyme runs through my head as I dish up my own piece of pizza and sit back to listen to how Tori's day was at the advertising agency where she's been working this summer. Most days I can fool myself, pretend that everything's fine. That everything's normal. But today isn't most days. From the moment Ethan kissed me, I've felt my brokenness keenly. Felt the cracks in the placid calm of my surface.

Maybe it's good Tori isn't going to be home tonight. After she leaves, I can have another glass of wine, watch some TV, then have an early night.

And while I do all those things, I can work on shoring up my defenses. On getting rid of the cracks, or at least burying them so deeply that it will be another five years before they resurface. Maybe even longer.

Tori takes off about eight-fifteen to pick up Lisa before heading downtown to the concert. She invites me to go with her, tells me she'll buy a ticket and let me have the free one, but the last thing I'm up for tonight is loud music and a crowded venue where I can't even hear myself think. Besides, she's already doing so much for me. There's no way I'm going to take her free ticket and make her buy another one. And since I can't afford to buy one on my own—not with how much they cost and how broke I currently am—I'm going to just sit this one out. Let her have some fun. God knows she deserves it.

But Tori's been gone only a few minutes when the front doorbell rings. Figuring it's one of our neighbors stopping by to hang for a while—Tori's an extrovert who has somehow managed to make friends with half the building in the year she's lived here—I almost ignore it. The last thing I'm in the mood for is having to entertain someone who really only stopped by because they wanted to hang with my best friend.

Still, I go to the door. Check the peephole. Just in case it's Marta from down the hall. When she stops by for girls' night, it's usually with some fabulous creation from the bakery where she works. And since a big slab of sugar and fat sounds incredibly appealing tonight, I'm almost hoping it is her. If nothing else, an hour listening to the latest stories about Marta's messed-up love life will keep me from brooding.

But it's not Marta at the door. Instead, it's a delivery man, carrying a medium-sized box and an electronic clipboard. I'm suspicious—less of the delivery man than of the package—and I almost let him walk away with it. If this is another present from Ethan, it would be better for both of us if I just refused to accept it.

There's no guarantee the package is from him, though. Tori is always ordering things online—the delivery could just as easily be for her. It's a galvanizing thought, one that has me opening the door, despite my misgivings, just as the delivery man is turning away.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

He turns back to me. “Package for Ms. Chloe Girard.”

So much for the online-ordering theory. I take the box gingerly, glance at the return address. Sure enough, it’s from Frost Industries. And it’s heavy.

Despite my best intentions, a hum of excitement works its way through me. Ethan sent me another present. Ethan is thinking of me. Quite a bit, if the speed of this delivery counts for anything. I only left him a little over an hour ago.

I sign the clipboard before carrying the box into the apartment. I set it on the dining room table and then just stand there staring at it for long seconds, trying to decide if I want to open it or if I want to leave it exactly as is.

I know it sounds crazy, but in my experience, sometimes not knowing is better than knowing. Not knowing is filled with possibilities, questions, suppositions. But once you take that final step to find out the truth, then the suppositions fall to the wayside. You lose the chance at what could be, get caught in what is. And in my experience, what is is rarely as glamorous or fun or exciting or *real* as what could have been.

In the end, though, curiosity gets the better of me. I head into the kitchen for a knife—something that will make it easier to open the box than damn manicure scissors. As I cut through the tape I think of everything that happened today. Everything that passed between us despite my best efforts to keep our interaction purely businesslike, and try to figure out what this gift might be.

Yesterday proved that Ethan doesn’t give gifts just to give them. There’s a reason behind what he does, a method to what he chooses.

Knowing that, I shouldn’t be surprised when I open the box, but I am anyway. How can I not be when sitting there in front of me is the blender I so inauspiciously returned to him this morning? In place of the note I taped to the top of the blender sits a large envelope of the palest, purest blue.

For long seconds I just stare at the damn Vitamix, which is quickly becoming the bane of my existence. Then, because I don’t know what else to do, I throw my head back and laugh. And laugh. And laugh.

No wonder he didn’t mention the blender to me this afternoon. He’d had no intention of taking it back, no intention of letting me win this round of our power struggle. Oh, I’d read that about him when I researched him—

that Ethan Frost doesn't take defeat lightly, that he always likes to win—but I'd thought that was in the business world. I hadn't realized it extended to things as minor as an unwanted present.

In retrospect, I probably should have. His personality is so large, so in-your-face, so determined. Why wouldn't that spill over to every aspect of his life instead of just those that deal with business?

Either way, I'm left with a problem. I obviously can't carry this thing back into his office tomorrow morning—today certainly bore out what a disastrous plan that had been. But I can't keep it, either. And not for the same reasons I was determined to return it yesterday. Yes, it's expensive. Yes, it's too much. But that's not the real reason I have to give it back.

No, I have to return it because this isn't just about a blender anymore. It isn't just about a silly meeting in the cafeteria or him giving me a gift. No, with this new delivery, Ethan has turned this present into a battle of wills, one I can't afford to lose. Not when that blender is beginning to feel suspiciously like a collar.

Returning it a second time might actually get across the message that I'm not interested. God knows I tried to do that today. Several times. And it might actually have worked if I hadn't let him go down on me in his office this evening.

I still can't believe I let that happen, can't believe he so easily got around my fears and my objections. My knees weaken at the memory of him kneeling in front of me, his hands on my thighs, his tongue deep inside my sex. My body flushes. My panties grow wet all over again. I've never felt anything like what I did during those moments with Ethan, never imagined I could feel such brain-numbing pleasure.

I want to feel it again.

It's addicting, overwhelming, and there's a part of me that wants nothing more than to surrender. To give Ethan what he wants so that I can feel like that again. And again. And again.

I want his mouth on me. Want his fingers deep inside me. Even more surprisingly, I want to do the same to him. I want to kneel in front of him and take him deep into my mouth. To taste and explore him. To bring him the same kind of pleasure that he has brought me.

The idea arouses me even more, has me pressing my thighs together to stop the incessant ache. But at the same time, nervousness skitters down my spine, a precursor to the fear I know is coming. Because it always does.

Refusing to go there, I focus on the damn blender and try to figure out what I'm supposed to do. I think about keeping it, about taking it into the kitchen right now and using it to whip up a strawberry smoothie. But are those thoughts really mine, or are they the fantasies of this other side of me? The side that Ethan breathes life into, that has me wanting to do his bidding simply because it will make him happy? Can I do that? Can I just blindly do his bidding and trust him to catch me if I fall?

I think about the stairs today, about that strong hand reaching out and grabbing me. Pulling me against him so that I could feel the too-fast beat of his heart against my own. He did catch me. But can I count on him to do it again?

It's the million-dollar question, and the fact that I'm even thinking about it makes me cringe a little deep inside. I push the blender away, promise myself that I'm not going to go down this path again.

I'm not the same girl I was at fifteen, won't ever be her again. Not for Ethan. Not for my parents. Not for anyone. Not anymore.

I spent years being the good girl, doing whatever my parents asked of me even when what they asked was wrong or dangerous or just plain bad for me. Even when what they asked broke me into a million pieces.

It took me years to get away from them, to stand on my own two feet, to put myself back together into the mismatched mess I am today. I'll be damned if I just give that all away again. If I just turn it over to Ethan with his gentle hands and domineering ways. Because I may still be working on putting myself back together again, but I'm doing it, one painful piece at a time. And I will not turn control of my life—of me—over to someone else ever again.

I turn to walk away, to put as much distance between the blender and myself as I can. But as I do, my eyes once again fall on the blue envelope resting on top of the blender. It's large and bumpy and obviously holds something other than just a letter.

I want to know what's in it. Which is why, even as I tell myself that curiosity killed the cat, I'm reaching for it. I can no more leave it there than I could fly to the moon under my own power.

As I touch the envelope for the first time, it hits me yet again how different our lives are. I gave Ethan a typed-up note on flimsy computer paper in a standard envelope. He sends me an envelope of the most exquisite stationery, thick and soft and obviously expensive.

Did he do it on purpose, to highlight the difference in our circumstances? To show me that he's rich and eventually he'll get whatever he wants, even if what he wants is me? It's a terrible way to think about a man who has been nothing but kind to me, but I know how rich men are. How they take what they want and to hell with whoever gets in their way.

It's why I'm here in San Diego, in fact. Because it's as far away from Boston—from my family and everything that happened there—as I can get and still be in the contiguous United States.

So many reasons for me to put the envelope back into the box and walk away.

So many reasons for me to not even think about Ethan, let alone stand here like a lovesick fool wondering about the words he wrote.

I spent hours on the letter I sent him, brief and impersonal though it was. I know he spent not a fraction of the same amount of time on this, a metaphor if ever I've lived one. And yet...and yet I want to know what he has to say.

Being careful to not rip the envelope, I slowly ease the flap back, then reach in to pull out what turns out not to be a card at all, but a collection of mismatched items.

Two herbal tea bags.

A long, thick green satin ribbon the exact shade of my eyes.

A seashell that still has sand on it, like he picked it up from the beach only hours ago.

A sexy black-and-white vintage-looking postcard. The picture is of a woman with pin-up curves stretched across the bed. She's on her stomach, her legs kicked up and crossed at the ankles behind her while her chin rests on her hands. She's dressed in nothing but a corset, panties, stockings, and

high heels. Oh, and gloves. Long, black gloves that reach her elbows and somehow manage to be the most elegant—and the naughtiest—thing about the whole picture.

I blush a little because I can't help wondering if Ethan was thinking of me dressed like this when he selected it. If he imagined me waiting for him as this woman is obviously waiting for her lover. Is it wrong that I want him to have done just that?

Or that, if I close my eyes, I can imagine—just for a moment—that it is me? That I can be like her, smile like her, instead of being the messed-up, terrified control freak that I am?

What would that be like? To just be normal? To be able to accept a guy's attention? More, to want it? To anticipate it? It's been so long since I've felt that way that I can't even remember what it was like. Everything is colored by Brandon, by what he did to me and by what came after.

I put the postcard on the table next to the other presents he sent me, and just stare at them for long seconds. I reach for one of the tea bags with its pretty wrapping, bring it to my nose. It smells like strawberries. I smile despite my confusion. And my pain.

I pick up the ribbon next. It's soft and silky and cool as I run it through my fingers. It's also long—too long to be worn in my hair or around my neck—and I wonder what it's meant for. Why Ethan sent it to me, other than the color.

For a moment, just a moment, I have a flash of it wrapped around my wrists, binding them together. Binding *me*, for Ethan's pleasure. A stab of desire works through me at the image, followed closely by discomfort. By fear.

I drop the ribbon like it's burned me. Nearly walk away from the table and everything laid out there. But the shell is calling to me. It's a brown-and-white torticone, small and tightly furled, with an inside of the softest, palest gold. Sand crumbles onto my fingers as I rub it, and I can't resist the urge to bring it to my nose. Sure enough, I can smell the wild salt of the ocean on it.

I love that it came right off the beach. That Ethan didn't bother to wash it or polish it before he sent it to me. That he gave it to me just as he found it.

I can almost picture him walking on the beach in those board shorts of his, surfboard under his arm as he heads back to his house.

I don't know for sure, but something tells me that the man lives in one of those huge houses off Prospect that let out right onto the beach. Did he step on the shell, hurt himself with it? Is that how he found it? Or did he see just a glint of it from where it was buried in the sand? Did he bend down and dig for it, his strong fingers burrowing through the sand in search of a prize?

After I've examined all of my treasures—and they are treasures, for all that they cost nearly nothing—I drop down into a kitchen chair and just stare at them.

What am I going to do?

What am I going to do?

I'll return the blender, of course I will, but these things he gave me—these little pieces of his soul that have somehow become pieces of mine—they aren't going anywhere. They're mine now. They're me, as I think Ethan always knew they would be.

I reach for the envelope, pull out the last thing inside of it. A thick, cream-colored piece of paper that's been folded in half.

My heart in my throat, I open it. Read the two short lines he has written on it.

Then, as emotion—full-bodied, tempestuous, overwhelming—moves through me, I put my head down on the edge of the table. And try desperately not to cry.

Chapter Nine

By the time morning comes, I've recovered my equilibrium, if not my good sense. Once again I skip my morning run—something I know I'm going to pay for later this week when I finally get back to it—in lieu of getting dressed and heading out early.

I choose a yellow sundress today, one that I picked up for twenty bucks at the end of last summer. It's a little too feminine for work, in my opinion, but I've only got two suits and I've already worn both of them this week, so this will have to do. The fact that it looks really good with my skin and hair is of no consequence—at least, that's what I tell myself when I'm getting dressed.

Before I leave the house, I pack the blender back into the box, along with a “thank you, but no thank you” note. And then I do something really stupid, something I'm already regretting even as I do it.

I take an envelope of my own—a plain manila one, as I don't have any interesting ones lying around—and put inside it a bead of pure lapis lazuli that I bought years ago on a whim. I've hung on to it as a kind of good-luck charm all this time, never paying much attention to it but never losing track of it, either.

When I went to put the ribbon in my jewelry box last night, the bead was just there, like it was waiting for me to remember it. To figure out why I'd really bought it. Richly, deeply blue, it matches Ethan's eyes the way that ribbon matches mine. I can't not give it to him.

To it, I add a handwritten copy of a Pablo Neruda poem, “Leaning into the Afternoons.” It's one of my favorites, and from the moment I met Ethan, the first line has run through my head again and again and again: “Leaning into the afternoons I cast my sad nets / towards your oceanic eyes.”

And finally I add a vintage Armani silk pocket square that I picked up at one of the used-clothing stores in Hollywood a couple of years ago. At the time, I bought it to go in a jacket I wore regularly. I threw the jacket away a few months ago, after wearing it nearly to death, but kept the handkerchief. It matches perfectly the suit Ethan was wearing yesterday. I can't resist spritzing it with the strawberry spray I wear on a daily basis—a direct reference to the fact that he keeps sending me strawberries of one sort or another.

And then I sit down on my bed and try desperately not to shake. I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm flying blind, by the seat of my pants. Scared to death, yet unable to not answer the tenderness implicit in Ethan's gift.

It would be smarter, more logical, better for me to just ignore the words he wrote, the lovely things he sent me. But I'm not strong enough to do that. I never was. And so here I am, casting my nets onto a course that will only lead to disaster. To pain. To heartbreak. And I'm doing it with my eyes wide open.

I only hope I don't drown.

After I finish with my total what-the-fuck moment, I seal up the envelope, drop it into the box with the blender, and then seal the box. I change the recipient information and carry it out to my car. At lunch, if I haven't lost my nerve, I'll run to the UPS place on the corner and send it to Ethan overnight.

I actually make it to work early today, much to my relief and—I think—Maryanne's annoyance. Which only makes me more determined to do everything right. Ethan's words still echo in my head, his belief that I really am the best person to head this research. I don't think there's any reason for him to lie, not about this, so I've decided I'm going to believe him. I'm going to do my job and do it well and not let anything else get to me.

For most of the morning I make a good run of it. I finish up the loose ends on the case I was working late on last night, then blow through questions about three more cases. It's interesting stuff, too—at least to me. I love researching, love the hunt for the answers and all the new things I learn when I'm looking for those answers. And what I love most of all is the guarantee that the answers are out there. The fact that all I have to do is look hard and long enough and I'll find out what I need to know.

I wish life were like that. More orderly. More assured. I think about all the things I'd like answers to—not just guesses or hopes or best estimates, but guaranteed, quantifiable answers. Like whether or not I should mail that stupid box to Ethan. Or if getting involved with him is a bad idea.

I work through my break, and when lunch comes around I try to ignore the fact that all the interns head down to the cafeteria together—and that they very definitely exclude me. I tell myself not to let it get to me, that the best thing I can do is just do my job well and not worry about anything else. But it's one of those things that's easy to say and not so easy to do.

Still, it isn't like I could go with them anyway. I have that damn box to send. Which I do, with my fingers and toes crossed that I'm making the right decision. But the whole box-sending thing only takes ten minutes, which means I have fifty minutes to kill. And since I'm hungry—and broke—I decide it's the cafeteria for me again. Even if it means dealing with the shade Rick and the other interns will throw at me.

I can't help glancing over at the juice bar when I walk in, but of course Ethan's not there today. I think of how he was dressed yesterday, in his full-on Armani suit, and wonder for the millionth time what he was doing working the juice bar on my first day. I can't help wondering if it was fate, or some darker force at work. Either way, I'm afraid that that one meeting is going to change my life in ways I never expected.

As soon as the thought occurs to me, I feel completely melodramatic. Yes, I'm attracted to him. Yes, he's obviously attracted to me. And yes, today I did something about that attraction. Where this thing is going to end up, I don't have a clue. But thinking that it might actually change my life is absurd.

Isn't it?

Deciding against a smoothie, because it just won't be the same if Ethan's not there making sure they add exactly seven strawberries to the blender, I grab a sandwich and some fruit. I think about taking it back up to my desk, but the sad fact of the matter is that I don't want to give the other interns the satisfaction of thinking they made me turn tail and run. They're sitting a few tables away from me and I know they've noticed me. I can feel Rick's eyes raking down my back as I look for an empty table.

As we're in the middle of the lunch hour rush, there aren't any completely empty tables, so I grab an open seat at the first one I come to. Not until after I put down my tray do I realize I've sat down in the middle of a table of guys not much older than I am.

As the three closest ones turn to look at me, I do my best to control the blush creeping up my cheeks. "I'm sorry. Is this seat taken?"

"Not at all," the blond one tells me. He's got a British accent and a cheeky grin that I can't help responding to. "We're just not used to beautiful women plopping themselves down in the middle of our conversation without any warning."

"I can leave," I tell him. "Try to give you a little more warning the second time around."

"That won't be necessary," one of his dark-haired friends assures me as he extends his hand. "I'm Zayn."

"I'm Chloe."

"It's nice to meet you, Chloe." Zayn grins at me.

"I'm Austin," the blond one says.

"And I'm Ro," the third one adds. They're all good-looking, but he's definitely the best-looking of the bunch. With his chiseled cheekbones, shaggy black hair, and dark, soulful eyes, he'd look as much at home on the cover of a magazine as he does here. Maybe even more so.

"Ro?" I ask, wanting to make sure I get his name right.

He sighs while the other two guys cackle. "His mama named him Romeo," Austin tells me in his very proper English. "But he refuses to let anyone call him that."

I raise my brows at him, but he just shrugs. "It's a lot of name to live up to."

"Or down to," I say. "He was a spoiled fourteen-year-old brat way too used to getting his own way."

"See!" Ro slaps the table hard. "That's what I've been telling these guys for the past two weeks, but they insist on calling me Romeo. It's obnoxious."

“Are you kidding? It totally gives you a great opening with the ladies,” Austin protests. “Your name has swagger, dude. You should embrace it.”

“If by swagger you mean it invites women to think of me as an adolescent douche bag with a death wish. One who’ll ask them to commit suicide before the week is out.”

“Hey, I hear whiny-ass adolescents are very big right now,” Zayn says with another huge smile. I grin back at him—I can’t help it. The guy’s personality is totally infectious. “Justin Bieber certainly doesn’t seem to be having any trouble getting women.”

Ro glares at him through narrowed eyes. “You did *not* just compare me to Justin Bieber.”

“I’m sorry.” Zayn holds his hands up in mock surrender. “I know the similarities are a sore spot. I’ll lay off until you’re in better mental health.”

“I’ll be in better mental health if I can shove my fist down your throat.”

“Temper, temper,” Austin *tsks*. “Didn’t you read the new-employee package? Frost Industries frowns on violence.”

“That wouldn’t be violence,” Ro argues. “It’d be doing society a favor.”

I’m full-on laughing at their ridiculousness now. I can’t help it. It’s like watching the Three Stooges in action, minus the eye gouging and face slapping. When I finally get myself under control, it’s to find all three of them staring at me, huge grins on their own faces.

“What?” I ask, my hand going instinctively to my face. “Do I have mustard on my nose or something?”

“You have freckles on your nose,” Austin comments. “Do they count?”

“No.”

“Well then, you’re good.”

“So why are you all smiling at me like you know a secret?”

“You’ve got a great laugh,” Zayn says. “We like it better than the frown you were wearing when you sat down.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I look away, tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s been a rough first week.”

“First weeks usually are,” Austin commiserates. “I got lost like twenty times my first couple of days—and was late almost that many times

because of it.”

“I was late to a meeting yesterday,” I admit. “It totally sucked.”

Ro reaches toward my hip, and I startle and start to shove him away. But it turns out he just wants a closer look at my badge. I flush a little, embarrassed at overreacting. He doesn’t seem to notice, or if he does, he’s nice enough not to say anything.

“So, you’re an intern, too,” he comments.

“I am.”

“What kind?” Zayn looks interested.

“Intellectual property. How about you guys?”

“We’re over in the labs. It’s mostly research, but I’m hoping to get some hands-on stuff once I prove myself.”

“I’m doing research, too. But then, I want to be an attorney, so I need to get used to that.”

“Right?” Zayn says something else, but I don’t hear it. A shiver runs up my spine, and I know, without looking, that Ethan has entered the cafeteria. My body has never responded to anyone else in quite the same way.

I grit my teeth, try to focus on my new acquaintances and just ignore it. But it’s impossible. I can feel the weight of his stare, know that he’s watching me.

I’m not sure what it says about me that I like having his attention. I don’t want to, but I do.

In the end, Ro unknowingly solves my dilemma. He gives a long, low whistle and then says, “Look who just walked in.”

Of course, Austin, who is sitting next to me, immediately turns to look. “Holy crap, that’s Ethan Frost. And he’s staring at us!”

“Yeah, he is.” Zayn looks at me questioningly. “What did you do?”

“Why do you automatically assume I did anything?”

He snorts. “In the time I’ve been here, I’ve seen him four times—and all but one of those times he was a lot closer to me than he is now. And never has he done more than nod a quick hello. I know it’s the same for Ro and Austin. Which means, Chloe, that the only thing that’s changed in this equation is you.”

I can't help it. I sneak a quick glance over my shoulder, then nearly jump when my gaze collides with Ethan's. He doesn't look upset, but there's an intensity about him that's undeniable. And it's focused 100 percent on me.

Even the two men he's with—executives, by the way they're dressed—seem to notice, at least judging by the furtive glances they're sending in my direction. I look away. I know I made the decision to respond to Ethan last night, but that was when I was alone in my apartment with nothing but that damn envelope. And his seashell.

Here, now, it's a different story. I'm overwhelmed and a little frightened. Not of him, but of all the crazy things he makes me feel. I don't know how to deal with these emotions, don't know how to deal with what he does to me.

"It's no big deal," I say when I realize Zayn is still waiting for an answer from me. "We had a disagreement a couple days ago."

"Over what?" Ro asks, wide-eyed.

Austin elbows him, and I don't know why. At least not until Ethan's dark, rich voice slips into the conversation. "Over a smoothie."

I freeze. He's so close that I can hear him breathing, can feel the heat of his body as it soaks into mine. Then his words sink in. A smoothie? Is that really what he thinks we fought about? Or is he just trying to get to me?

Before I can decide, he's putting a hand on my shoulder as he leans across the table to shake hands with Austin and Zayn. For a moment, I'm transfixed by the sight. And the memory of what those hands were doing the last time I saw them. It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to squirm as he says, "Hi, guys. Nice to see you again."

They practically trip over their tongues. "Nice to see you, too," Zayn finally manages to get out.

Ethan shakes Ro's hand as well, then turns to me. "Hi, Chloe."

"Hi, Mr. Frost." I clear my throat, try to get a little of the hoarseness out.

"How has your third day been? Better than your second?"

I reach for my water, take a big sip. "Yes. It's been good, thanks."

"I'm glad to hear that." He smiles his blinding Ethan smile and I'm dazzled despite myself. Damn it. "How's your hip?"

“It’s fine.” Black and blue, not to mention very tender, but I have no intention of telling him that.

“Good. Make sure you let HR know if you need to see a doctor. There’s worker’s comp for stuff like that.”

By this time, my face is so hot I’m afraid I’m going to burn up completely. Ro, Austin, and Zayn are staring at me like I’ve grown an extra head, and I can all but feel the interest from others in the cafeteria. I’m sure Rick and the other interns in my department are falling all over themselves to hear our conversation.

The thought makes me physically ill. I’ve been the object of that kind of vicious focus and conversation before, and it’s not fun. Dealing with the interns is one thing. But half the company is in the cafeteria right now. My fears from yesterday, about being the object of discussion around the water cooler, seem all too real.

I try to hide my upset, but I can tell the moment it registers on Ethan. His smile fades and for a second those brilliant blue eyes of his burn even more brightly, before the intensity fades to a polite disinterest. The hand on my shoulder disappears and he takes a step backward, two.

“Well, I just wanted to check and make sure you were doing okay. That fall yesterday was a little unnerving.”

His sudden distance might have upset another woman, but I see it for what it is. An attempt to protect me. And another small piece of my defenses crumbles on the spot. No one has ever tried to protect me before. Not my parents. Not my brother. No one. Just Ethan.

“I’m good,” I tell him, my own smile in place for the first time since he walked over to me. “Thank you for checking on me.”

“No problem.” He gives a half wave to Ro, Austin, and Zayn, then heads back across the cafeteria without another word. Within seconds, I can feel all the tension leak out of the air, almost as if the entire cafeteria took a collective breath.

“You didn’t tell me your bad day yesterday involved a fall!” Ro scolded me.

I decide to take the out Ethan provided us. “It was awful. My heel caught on the stairs and I would have fallen down the whole flight if Mr. Frost

hadn't caught me. As it is, I banged my hip pretty badly."

"So that's why he came over. To check on you?"

"More likely to make sure you weren't planning on suing Frost Industries," Austin says. "You wouldn't be the first employee injured at work to bring a lawsuit against the company."

"Yes, well, that's not going to happen. I'm just happy to have escaped with my life."

The explanation Ethan provided seems to satisfy the three guys, and there's no more talk about Ethan's unusual interest in me. Which is exactly how I want it.

The rest of lunch passes uneventfully, and when I get up to leave—with ten minutes to spare, so I'm not late getting back to my desk—Ro asks, "Hey. You planning on meeting us here for lunch tomorrow?"

I can't help smiling. The intellectual property interns may not like me, but these guys do. It feels nice to make a few friends. "You bet. And if you're nice, I'll even buy you lunch."

He rolls his eyes at my lame joke. "We'll see you then."

"See you then," I echo, turning to head for the doors of the cafeteria. As I do, I see two things. One, Ethan Frost is sitting with the two executives at a small table near the window. He's studiously not looking at me, but I can tell by the shift in his body—yes, at this point I am that attuned to him—that he is aware I'm leaving.

And two, Rick the intern is looking at me. And the expression on his face chills me to the bone.

Chapter Ten

“Come on, Chloe! Let’s go out!” Tori’s whining is driving me crazy, just as she intends. “We haven’t been dancing in forever.”

“Because the last time we went clubbing, I got groped on the dance floor. You know how I feel about that.”

“That’s what dance floors are for!” She flops back onto the sofa. “I swear, hanging with you is like hanging with my ninety-year-old grandma. Only without the interesting stories.”

I don’t take offense. Partly because I know she’s poking at me, hoping to get a rise, and partly because I know she’s right. I’m a pretty boring person. During the school year, I’m too busy to party because of my heavy class load and the job that helps pay for my tuition. Now that it’s summer, I’m busy with my internship. Honestly, it’s a wonder she hasn’t traded me in for a better friend yet.

“Why don’t you go?” I tell her. “I’m perfectly okay just hanging out here.”

She rolls her eyes. “I bailed on you yesterday. I’m not going to do it two days in a row.”

“You’re not bailing on me. It’s not like we had plans for tonight.”

“It was implied when I took off yesterday.” She sighs heavily. “Fine. No club. What movie do you want to watch?” She sounds so put-upon and so resigned that I can’t help laughing. And try to compromise.

“There’s a bonfire down at the beach tonight. One of the Save Our Oceans groups organized it. They got the fire department involved and everything, so it’s legal. There’s a five-dollar donation to hang out, and they’ll have street tacos. Beer. Margaritas. We could try that.”

“Yay! Let’s go change.” She bounces to her feet, throws her arms around my neck. “Thank you for going out with me.”

I laugh. “Well, it’s not any fun staying home watching movies if you’re not into it. Besides, I like bonfires.”

“Me too. You know what else I like?” she asks, licking her lips.

“Street tacos?” I tease.

She throws a pillow at me and we both laugh as it hits me in the face. “I was thinking more along the lines of the guys who eat them.”

Tori already has her shirt off and she hasn’t even left the living room yet. But that’s my roommate for you, no modesty whatsoever. Which makes me worry about her a little, especially when I think about what she considers appropriate public attire. And yes, I know that makes me sound like I really am ninety—but that’s only because you haven’t gone out in public with her when she’s dressed in a see-through shirt with nothing underneath.

I change quickly, into a pair of jean shorts and a white off-the-shoulder peasant blouse. It’s not my usual style—way too relaxed—but Tori bought it for me and I know she’ll love to see me wearing it. Besides, if I can’t relax at a beach bonfire, then I figure there’s no hope for me.

Fifteen minutes after I make the suggestion, we’re walking up Prospect toward La Jolla Shores. One of the best things about living with Tori is the fact that her apartment is only about a mile walk from one of the most beautiful beaches in the country—which is awesome considering the disaster that is parking around here.

The beach is already crowded when we get there—or I suppose I should say still crowded. It’s a beautiful day and the tourists have obviously come out in droves, but Save Our Oceans has set up a pretty large bonfire on the north end of the beach. They’ve also got a bunch of food trucks set up, selling everything from street tacos and margaritas to gourmet cheesecake. Normally San Diego has an ordinance that prohibits drinking on the beach, but SOO has a large area around the bonfire roped off—people inside the ropes can drink, as long as they purchase the alcohol from one of the vendors at the fund-raiser and don’t take it beyond the ropes.

It’ll be at least an hour before the sun sets and a little longer than that before they light the bonfire, so Tori and I pay our entrance fee and then head for the sand castle contest going on down by the shore.

Imperial Beach in South San Diego has one of the most elaborate sand-castle-building competitions in the nation, with people coming from all over to participate or watch the amazing creations the artists come up with. I've gone down for it every year that I've lived in San Diego, and every year I'm in awe of what people come up with.

I can't say the same about the castles we're walking by tonight. Most of them are tiny and ill-formed, slanting sideways, or just plain disastrous. Still, it's fun to see them, and when Tori grabs a bucket, plops herself down in the middle of a pile of sand, and calls, "Come on, Chloe! Let's make one," I can't resist the invitation.

The only problem is that neither one of us has ever made a sand castle before. Within minutes I've got a whole new respect for the small, sad-looking dwellings popping up all around us, because all we've managed to do is build a round-looking hill. And it's not even much of a hill.

I keep packing the bucket with wet sand and then turning it over to dump it out, just like everyone around us. But instead of coming out in the shape of the bucket, our sand just plops out in a crumbly mess. Over and over and over again.

"I'm getting hungry," Tori says after we've tried—and failed—for about the twentieth time.

"We're not quitting," I tell her through gritted teeth. "There must be a secret to this."

"If there is, we don't know it."

"Well, we're going to figure it out." I nod toward a boy of nine or ten who has managed to build a towering castle, complete with turret and drawbridge. "If he can do that, surely we can build a one room hovel."

She looks at my latest disaster with raised brows. "Somehow I'm not so sure."

"I am." I scoop up more sand, determined to make the hill bigger if nothing else. At this point I'd be happy if it ends up looking like a fire-ant mound. After all, then at least it'd be home to something.

Tori watches me with an indulgent smile for a couple more minutes, but after I've tried—and failed—numerous times to add on to the hill, she stands up and brushes off her legs. "I'm ready for a beer."

“Are you kidding me? This was your idea to begin with.”

“Yeah, because I thought it’d be fun. And it was. But now it’s not anymore, so...time for food. The smell of those carne asada tacos has had my mouth watering for the past fifteen minutes.”

Mine too. Still, I glare at our pathetic excuse for a castle. I hate the thought that a pile of sand has somehow gotten the better of me. “You go ahead,” I tell her. “I’m going to try this a couple more times.”

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue with me. She knows me too well. “Fine. I’ll go grab some tacos and find seats. When I text you, I expect you to stop tilting at windmills and come eat with me.”

“Ooh, a *Don Quixote* reference. I am so impressed.”

“And well you should be.” She sticks her tongue out at me. “I didn’t sleep through my entire Spanish lit class last semester. No matter how tempting it was.”

“You’re a better woman than I.”

She snorts. “I wish.”

There’s something in her voice that has me glancing up. “You okay?” I start to get up. Making a damn sand castle may have turned into a ridiculous quest, but she’s still my best friend. If something’s wrong, she comes first.

But she just waves for me to sit back down. “I’m fine. Finish your beach shack and then get your ass back over to the bonfire so we can gossip about your ridiculously hot boss some more.”

With that parting shot, she turns and walks away, completely oblivious to what her mention of Ethan has done to me. I shift a little, trying to ignore the need that twinges at the very heart of me. It doesn’t work—but then again, when has it? Whether I’ve wanted him there or not, Ethan has been on my mind almost continuously since I met him Monday.

After what happened in his office last night, I expected him to try to contact me today. Something beyond that brief, and weird, meeting in the cafeteria during lunch, I mean. But he hasn’t. No phone call, no delivery, not even a quick text message to say hi. Nothing that might give me the idea that he’s been thinking about me at all.

And while I tell myself I’m being an idiot, that he’s the owner and CEO of one of the fastest-growing companies in the country, I know I still have

my panties in a twist over it. Why do guys act like they're interested and pursue you until they wear down your resistance, only to lose interest right about the time *you* start thinking they might be interesting? I've seen it happen to Tori over and over again, and it drives me nuts every time. This is the first time it's happened to me, but that's only because I don't put myself out there. Or at least I haven't in a very long time. And I'm rethinking whether I want to now or not.

Then again, it's not like I really have anything to say to him if he does call. But still. I expected him to. More, I wanted him to. That thought only makes me more annoyed with him. I was fine before he sent that stupid envelope, completely good with the superficial knowledge I had of him. Then he had to go and show me more. He had to make me want. And that only makes me more annoyed—with him, with myself, with the entire situation.

I slam the bucket down on top of my hill a little harder than I intend, and watch in frustration as a crack works its way straight down the middle of all my hard work. Damn it. I guess it's a good thing I'm pre-law instead of an architecture major.

"I like your sepulcher. It's a very...what's the word I'm looking for here?"

"Uninterested." I don't bother looking up. I don't have to see him to know I've got no interest in some guy trying his luck on the beach. Even if the sudden prickling of my nerve endings says otherwise.

"And here I was going to say it *was* interesting." He leans down a little, puts his mouth closer to my ear so I can hear the tenor of his voice now, even over the din of the crowd. Realization sinks in and I stiffen, even before he says, "Hi, Chloe."

The damn chills are back double time, although how I can feel both hot and cold at the same time—without having the flu—is a mystery to me. "Ethan." I turn to look at him. I can't help it. His presence is like a magnet I have no defense against. I want to see him. "What are you doing here?"

"Building community. Saving the oceans. You know, the usual."

"Frost Industries is sponsoring this event." It's not a question. Only now do I remember reading about Ethan's philanthropic interests. For obvious

reasons, he spends a lot of time and money doing stuff for veterans, but the environment—and the oceans, in particular—is another big interest of his. I think back to the day I met him, to the board shorts and flip-flops. The Save Our Oceans stuff actually makes perfect sense.

“It’s a good event,” I tell him a little grudgingly. I guess I’m more upset about him not calling than I thought.

“I’m glad you approve.” He sits down on the other side of the sand castle, gently extricates the bucket from my sudden death grip, and starts to pack it with sand. “So, are you really building a sand tomb?”

I look at the mess in front of me. “It’s supposed to be a sand castle.”

He laughs. “I guess it’s a good thing you’re pre-law then, hmm?”

His words so perfectly echo my own thoughts from a few minutes ago that I can’t help but stare at him. It feels weird to think the same things as him.

When he sees my expression, his smile fades. “You know I’m just kidding, right?”

I force myself out of my Ethan-induced stupor. “Maybe, but you’re totally right. It’s a disaster.”

“Not a disaster. It just needs—” He breaks off when he sees my face. My lips are pursed, my brows raised, and I know I look as skeptical as I feel. “Okay, yeah. It’s a disaster. But I can fix it.”

“What if I don’t want you to fix it?”

He pauses in his sand-packing activities, his indigo eyes suddenly as deep and fathomless as the Pacific licking at my toes. “Then I should probably walk away now. I’m not very good at sitting by and doing nothing when I know there’s a problem—and how to fix it.”

Suddenly, I’m having a hard time swallowing—or breathing. My throat is tight, my hands shaky. He’s talking about a lot more than the stupid sand castle, and we both know it.

“I’m not broken.” The words come out sounding harsh and jagged.

“Oh, baby.” He reaches for my hand, rubs his thumb gently over my knuckles. “I know that. I just wasn’t sure you did.”

I rip my eyes from his. I don't know what to say to that—don't know if there's anything to say—but it doesn't seem to bother him. He goes back to calmly filling the bucket and I...I go back to watching Ethan.

He looks good. Really good. He's dressed casually tonight, in a pair of worn jeans and a Kings of Leon T-shirt that I can't help coveting a little. They've been my favorite band for pretty much ever, though I've never gotten the chance to see them in person. Tickets cost too much, and besides, I'm not sure I could handle that many people crowded around me. I tend to freak out in big groups.

Another phobia that started when I was fifteen.

Another phobia that I can lay at Brandon's door.

I cut off that train of thought before it can go any further down the tracks—and before it can derail me completely. I'm here on this beautiful beach with my best friend and a very attractive man, who just happens to be looking at me like he wants to lick me all over. My present is good. No reason to dwell on a past I can't change.

As he turns the bucket over and the sand slides out effortlessly—into what I'm sure is to be the first turret of our sand castle—I think about his present yesterday. About the tea bags and the other stuff. It seems churlish not to mention it, especially when he won't get my response until tomorrow.

“Thank you for the seashell,” I tell him, even as I follow his lead and start patting at the sand turret, making sure it is so tightly packed that it won't collapse this time. Then again, it probably wouldn't dare. Not with CEO, genius, and all-around Renaissance man Ethan Frost watching it like a hawk.

He freezes in place. It's just for a second, but I'm watching him so closely that I can't help but notice it. His eyes jerk back up to mine, and they're burning hot, the amusement and control I'm so used to seeing there is suddenly gone.

“You liked it?”

“I loved it. Loved everything, really.”

He relaxes then. “Even the blender?”

I think about the package he's going to get tomorrow and can't help but smile. Nothing to do now but dodge the question. “You seem oddly attached

to that blender.”

“A good blender is an important tool for any kitchen.”

I laugh. “Now you sound like Martha Stewart.”

“You sound like Melissa Etheridge.” This time when he touches me, it’s to stroke one gentle finger down the front of my throat. “I love your voice. All jagged edges and rock and roll. It’s sexy as hell.”

I don’t answer him this time. I can’t. I’ve completely forgotten how to breathe. If I duck my chin just a little, my lips will be against his hand and I’ll be kissing him. It’s all the invitation he needs, and for a moment I’m tempted. Really tempted.

I want to kiss him again, want to taste him and touch him and let him do the same to me.

I crave him on his knees in front of me, crave that wicked tongue of his once again taking me over the edge of orgasm.

I need to do the same to him, need to take him in my mouth, in my body, and give him the same pleasure he gave me.

Except I don’t know how to do that. How to do any of that. Not without inviting the memories back. Not without freezing up completely.

I break eye contact, pull away. Concentrate on the sand castle with a vengeance. Ethan doesn’t say anything, just goes back to building the second turret. But for a moment—just a moment—his fingers brush against, tangle with, *hold* my own, and it feels better than it has any right to.

This whole thing feels better than it has any right to, and I know I’m getting in over my head. Not like that’s a surprise. When I put that envelope together for Ethan this morning, I knew things would get complicated quickly. But now that it’s starting, now that he’s here and he’s interested and I’m interested despite the warning bells clanging in my head, it’s all just a little overwhelming. Like I’m walking a circus high wire without a net and any small miscalculation will send me hurtling toward utter disaster. Utter ruin.

Except I’m already there, and I have been for five long, interminable years. I’ve spent those years just trying to survive, and I have. It’s been no small feat, not when some days it takes every ounce of energy I have just to get out of bed, go to class, build some semblance of a life for myself.

For the first time in a long time, I'm starting to wonder if that's enough. Or if maybe I should want more.

I look down at the sand castle Ethan has helped me build, at our fingers that keep tangling together, sliding against one another. Every instinct I have is screaming at me to pull back. To stand up and walk away before I get in over my head.

But it's too late. It's been too late from the moment he slid that smoothie across the juice bar to me, only I've been too stupid to realize it.

I look up, find him staring at me with an intensity that belies his casual clothes and surfer-boy demeanor, his charming smile and smooth moves. It's an intensity that reaches to the very heart of me—into my soul, into my sex—and for the first time I realize the true enigma that is Ethan Frost.

“Let me take you out tomorrow night.”

It's more a statement than a question, more an order than a request, and normally it would rub me very wrong. But in those moments, caught in Ethan's eyes and his spell, I can do nothing but nod. Do nothing but surrender and hope the ride is worth the inevitable fall.

Chapter Eleven

Ethan builds me a sand castle worthy of an architect—or a genius. It's not the biggest on the beach, but it is the most elegant. The best-made. And he does it with nothing more than a bucket and his hands.

When it's finally done, when my six-turret palace complete with drawbridge and moat is standing tall and proud I take a few long moments to admire it. To wonder what it would be like to live in such a perfect, well-thought-out place. Then I think of the huge, beautiful monstrosity that my parents live in, and I remember for the millionth time that perfection is only ever skin deep.

The thought has my stomach clenching, and I look across at Ethan, who is busy watching me admire his creation. He's perfect, or as close to perfect as I've ever seen. Brilliant, funny, gorgeous, philanthropic, kind. Or at least that's how he appears on the surface. I wonder what's underneath and if I'll ever get the chance to see it.

Just as I'm deciding that I've had enough of the deep philosophy, my stomach growls. Ethan laughs as he climbs to his feet, then holds out a hand to help me to mine. I can get up just fine on my own, but I take his hand anyway. Let him pull me up.

Trust has to start somewhere.

"What do you want to eat?" he asks, and I'm acutely aware of the way he bends his neck so his mouth is inches from my cheek. I'm also aware of his hand on the small of my back, guiding me through the throngs of partiers and sand-castle enthusiasts. There are hundreds of people down here and this area of the beach isn't that big, but somehow he manages to ensure that no one gets too close, that no one touches me.

It's a relief, the way he instinctively seems to know what I need. Later, when I'm home, it may freak me out. But here, now, surrounded by these

crowds—and by the heat and strength of Ethan—I feel protected, safe. It’s not a feeling I have often, so I can’t help but savor it.

“Chloe?” he prompts, and I realize I never answered him.

“My roommate was going to get us some carne asada tacos.” I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. “You’re welcome to join us.”

“I’d like that, if she doesn’t mind.”

“Are you kidding? She’ll be thrilled. Tori loves gorgeous men.”

“So, you think I’m gorgeous?” he asks with a wicked grin.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t fish for compliments. It’s so unbecoming, especially when you know exactly how devastatingly hot you are.”

“I was beginning to think I’d lost my touch. Trying to get your attention has been...challenging.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get ahead of yourself just yet. I agreed to go to dinner, not have sex with you.”

He glances at me out of the corner of his eyes. “I don’t remember asking for sex.”

“You will.”

“Oh, yeah? And how do you know that?”

I turn my head so our gazes meet and for a second I forget my train of thought. Hell, I forget how to breathe, let alone how to make words.

But I can see the gleam of triumph deep in his eyes, can see the hint of a smirk on his lips, just waiting to form. And suddenly I’m determined to not let him get the best of me. I reach up, pat his cheek. “Because they all do, darling,” I tell him in the best femme fatale voice I can muster. Maybe it’s foolish, maybe it’s arrogant, but I don’t want him to know just how messed up I am. How our date tomorrow night will be the first one I’ve gone on in a long, long time.

He stiffens at the challenge in my words, in my eyes, but it’s not an insulted movement. Not a threatening one. No, it’s more like the movement of a large jungle cat moments after it’s scented its prey. A stretching, an awakening, just a hint of danger as awareness prickles in the air all around us.

I wait, breath held, for him to say something else. Do something else. But in the end, he just laughs. I laugh, too, and somehow it doesn't shatter the tension between us like most moments of amusement would. No, it only fans the flames, only ratchets up the attraction and the energy between us.

I hold his eyes as long as I can, let him see just how unafraid I am—and that I have no intention of backing down.

His whole body seems to grow harder, hotter, where it rests against the side of my own. And while he doesn't say anything, I know he understands the gauntlet I've just thrown down, just as I know that he has picked it up.

He leans in closer, ostensibly to be heard over the music and the crowds, but as his breath brushes against my ear, my throat, the sensitive nape of my neck, I know the truth. That he is doing it to torment me, to arouse me. As my nipples peak and my sex throbs, I have to admit that he is very, very good at what he does.

"This is going to be fun," he tells me, the words soft and warm as they caress the sensitive skin behind my ear.

I suck in a deep breath at the sensations rioting inside me, and immediately regret it as I pull his scent deep into my sinuses, into my lungs. He smells like the ocean, only sweeter. Like oranges and secrets and smooth, rich chocolate. There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to roll around in his scent, to wrap it around myself and huddle inside it—inside him—until everything bad in my life just floats away.

Still, I manage to rally. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing just how easily he can throw me off my game. "It's going to be something. I'm not sure *fun* is quite the word for it."

"Sure it is. There's no point in doing anything if it isn't fun."

The words work their way inside me, pull me out of the sensual fog his touch and voice and scent have enveloped me in. I look at him curiously. "Do you really believe that?"

"Absolutely. I wouldn't be as successful as I am if I didn't enjoy what I do."

His answer makes sense, and yet I know there's more to it. I can see it burning in his eyes, feel it in the way his body tenses against mine. But before I can call him on it, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Normally I'd ignore it, but I'm pretty sure it's Tori. I pull it out, glance at it. Sure enough. "Tori's got a spot to the left of the stage. She wants me to meet her there."

Ethan nods, then effortlessly steers us in the right direction until we run straight into Tori. Maybe I should have warned her, because for the first time in the three years I've known her, my best friend is speechless. Face-slack, mouth-open, eyes-wide speechless.

It's not a great look on her, but Ethan doesn't seem overly concerned. Which makes me wonder just how often women look at him like that. Then again, maybe I don't want to know. Especially if it's on a daily basis.

"Ethan, this is my best friend, Tori." I step on her foot in an effort to pull her out of her dazed stupor. "Tori, this is my boss, Ethan Frost."

Ethan gives me a strange look when I call him my boss, but it's not like I have another moniker for him. He's not my date tonight. He's not my friend yet, and he certainly isn't my boyfriend. I guess I could have just introduced him as Ethan, but it isn't like Tori doesn't know who he is. The fact that she has yet to blink is a pretty good clue that the cat was out of the bag before I so much as opened my mouth.

"Hi, Tori. It's nice to meet you."

He smiles at her, one of his I'm-a-charming-bastard-and-I-know-it smiles, and my roommate—my world-weary roommate—giggles like a thirteen-year-old. Ugh. When I get her home I'm going to kill her.

"Nice to meet you, too, Ethan." She runs a hand through her Technicolor hair, shoots me a sly look. "Fancy running into you here."

"Frost Industries is sponsoring the fund-raiser," I quickly interject before she can embarrass me any more than she already has. "The environment is one of the Frost Foundation's big causes."

"Isn't that a coincidence? Environmental foundations are where all your extra money goes, too, aren't they?"

And the girl wonders why I won't let her set me up on any blind dates? If she's this bad with a guy she has no vested interest in at all, imagine how she'd behave if she'd actually set us up together. She'd probably be asking about kid names and china patterns right about now.

Ethan doesn't seem to mind, though. Instead, he looks at me with interest. "You're interested in green issues, too?"

Interested enough that I came close to specializing in environmental law. Not that I'm going to say that—I have no desire to look half as desperate as Tori's rabid interest is painting me. "I think everyone has some interest in green issues at this point, don't you?"

"You'd be surprised." He glances at the table, where Tori has a collection of street tacos. And two margarita glasses, one of which is already empty. "I'm going to go get a beer. Can I get you another one of those?"

"Sure." There goes the fingers through her hair again. "It's a mango margarita."

"Got it." He pulls out one of the vacant chairs with one hand, presses lightly on my back with the other to guide me into it. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"More like half an hour," Tori says. "The booths are swamped."

Ethan just smiles. "Can I get you anything?" he asks me before he leaves.

I take a long sip of my strawberry margarita. It's delicious, and not too heavy on the alcohol—which is exactly how I like it. "If the lines are that long, maybe you could bring me another one of these as well?"

He grins wickedly, and I know he's thinking of my predilection for all things strawberry. "You bet."

Tori and I both watch as he walks away. And we're not the only ones—every woman in the general vicinity has her eyes fastened on Ethan's ass. Not that I blame them. It's a really great ass. And the way his damp jeans mold to it should be illegal.

"Oh my God," Tori says the moment he's out of earshot.

"Don't start."

"Oh. My. God."

I take a long sip of my drink. "He's just a guy."

"Ohmygod!"

Now she's breaking the sound barrier and I put a hand over the ear closest to her in self-defense. "I swear, it's not a big deal. He saw me struggling with that ridiculous sand castle and decided to help."

“Oh, yeah, that’s not a big deal at all. Ethan Frost does stuff like that all the time.”

“He might. You don’t know.”

“I think you forget what social circles I run in when I’m home. I do know. And making sand castles with a woman is totally not Ethan’s normal modus operandi.”

“Oh, yeah? What is?”

“I don’t know.”

I snort. “The truth is, you don’t know what he does with women. Building sand castles might be the same opening move he uses on every girl.”

“Seriously?” She makes an annoyed noise deep in her throat. “I swear, Chloe, you could suck the joy out of anything.”

“Just one of my many charms.”

“Well, stop it. And let me savor the fact that Ethan Frost is wooing my roommate.”

“We built a sand castle and he’s getting me a drink. That’s a far cry from wooing.” But I think of the seashell and the tea bags, of those hot, stolen moments in his office. And wonder if Tori might be right.

“Don’t forget the blender. And the strawberries. The man is obviously interested enough to pay attention to what you like. That’s half the battle.”

“I didn’t realize this was a war.”

She reaches over, pats my cheek. “Poor, sweet Chloe. Didn’t you know? The whole male/female thing is always a war for dominance.”

For the second time tonight I think of Brandon, of lying bruised and bloody when he was done with me. “That’s why I steer clear of romantic entanglements. I’m not much of a fighter.”

“That’s why you’ve got me. I’ve got enough fight for both of us.”

Eight simple words, and yet they sum up my best friend completely. More proof that she’s just as screwed up as I am, only she hides it better.

Before I can think of a retort to her very screwed-up relationship analysis, Ethan’s back. He’s carrying a tray loaded with chips and salsa, guacamole, queso, a half-dozen tamales, a plate of fruit, a couple small

pitchers filled with mango and strawberry margaritas, and two bottles of Corona.

“Planning on settling in for a while?” I ask, even as I reach to help him unload the tray.

“I am.” He dips a chip in queso, holds it to my mouth. I open for him automatically, before I can even think about whether or not I should let him feed me.

He grins in approval as he arranges the rest of the stuff on the table. “It’s getting dark, which means they’ll be lighting the bonfire in a few minutes. Then the band will take the stage and I’d rather watch them perform than fight the crowds for another drink.”

“Good plan,” Tori says, already reaching for a tamale. “Who’s playing?”

He names a local San Diego band that has gotten some major play on the radio stations lately, not to mention a number one video. Tori and I glance at each other, surprised. We hadn’t been expecting anyone of that caliber—not for a five-dollar admission ticket. No wonder the whole area’s jam-packed.

Ethan fills up my glass, then Tori’s, before settling back with his beer and a taco. I expect things to be awkward—we’ve never actually tried to make nice social conversation before—but somehow everything just seems to flow. We talk about the fund-raiser, how awesome the weather’s been, a new movie we all want to see. It’s nice. Relaxed. Fun, just like Ethan promised it would be.

As we talk, he keeps my drink—and my plate—full. He also regularly leans over and pops something into my mouth. A chip, a piece of watermelon, a choice bite of his pineapple tamale. Normally I’d never let a guy feed me, but Ethan seems to enjoy it and, if I’m honest, so do I.

Tori watches the whole thing wide-eyed and approving, and I know I’m going to get an earful when I get home. But right now I’m stuffed with amazing food, halfway through my third margarita, and blissfully, utterly relaxed. The future can take care of itself. I want to stay right here, in this moment, for as long as I possibly can.

As darkness falls, people start to quiet down. Those who haven’t found tables to sit at settle on the sand to watch as the benefit organizers light the bonfire. Then, as it starts to burn, the band takes the stage.

They're good, really good, and it isn't long before I'm swaying and singing along with the music. Tori's doing the same thing, and even Ethan's tapping his foot to the beat.

I'm having a great time—the best time I've had in I can't say how long—and I know at least part of that is because Ethan's here with me. Which should be a huge warning sign, but somehow isn't. Not when he smiles at me with such obvious delight. And not when he wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me closer.

Again, that's not something I'd normally ever allow. But this is Ethan and I decide to go with it. In the back of my head, a lone warning bell is going off, telling me that I'm getting much too comfortable with this guy, but I ignore it. Tori's here. She's got my back and I know she'll make sure nothing happens to me. She might be half infatuated with Ethan herself, but I know she'd never let anyone hurt me. Just like I'd never let any guy hurt her.

The band plays a whole concert instead of just a few songs, but I'm still sad when they wrap up. I'm not ready for the night to end, not ready to say good-bye to the sweet, jean-clad version of Ethan who is sitting next to me. Oh, I know I'll see him at work tomorrow, but once I hit the office, tonight's glow will be long gone. And if it isn't, I'll banish it myself, because there's no way I want to give Rick anything else to hold against me.

As people all around us start to leave, I push myself reluctantly from my chair. Tori and Ethan do the same.

"It was nice to meet you," my roommate says, hand extended to Ethan.

He takes it—too much of a gentleman to leave her hanging—but says, "I was hoping you ladies would let me walk you home."

He phrases it like we'd be doing him a favor, but I know it's really the other way around. Yes, we live in one of the best areas of San Diego, but the beach attracts all kinds of people, including the criminal element looking for an easy score. Add to that all the college kids looking for drugs and sometimes things get a little dicey. Not that Tori or I have ever had a problem, but it's nice that Ethan wants to make sure.

"We're okay," I tell him. "You probably have stuff to do here—"

“I already did all the stuff, the sum total of which was to give a five-minute speech at the very beginning of the night. The foundation staff is in charge of everything else.” He holds a hand out to me. “Come on. Let’s get out of their way so they can get started on the cleanup.”

Again, his tone sounds perfectly innocuous, but there’s a layer of unbending steel beneath it. The message is clear: We might be grown women, but there’s no way Ethan is going to let us walk home alone.

I start to push back—I don’t like being told what to do, by anyone—but he’s got that look in his eye again. The same look he wore in the cafeteria when he wanted me to try the smoothie. The same look he had when he insisted that I ice my hip. And just like in those situations, I find myself caving in to him, though I’m unsure why.

I take his hand, knowing the whole time that Tori is watching us with wide eyes. We’ve been friends long enough that she’s seen me shut down more than one guy for trying what Ethan just did. I know I owe her an explanation—one she’ll demand as soon as the apartment door closes behind us—and I don’t have a clue what I’ll say. Except that with Ethan, everything feels different.

As we make our way off the beach, we pass a row of multimillion-dollar mansions whose backyards belly right up to a cliff that overlooks the Pacific. Their front yards are just as magnificent, and though they all have iron gates and fences, they’re close enough to the curb that you can see most of the structures.

Tori points at one that’s all glass and chrome and sharp edges. “That one’s my favorite.” It’s a little thing she and I do when we pass a row of really amazing houses—pick out the one we’d live in if we ever had the money. Tori’s closer to it than I am—she’s got a couple million dollars in her trust fund—but these houses cost ten, fifteen, even twenty million dollars. That’s out of even her price range. As for mine...well, at the moment, a studio apartment is pretty much more than I can afford.

“I like that one,” I say, pointing to a white Mediterranean-looking villa with a slate-blue tile roof. It’s gorgeous, a total showplace that somehow manages to be inviting as well as awe-inspiring. Unlike Tori’s pick, which is beautiful but way too cold-looking for me.

“How about you?” Tori asks Ethan. “Which one is your favorite?”

“I’ll have to go with Chloe’s pick,” he says with a grin. “Although I hear the guy who lives there is unnaturally attached to his blender.”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. When they do, I whip my head around to look at him. “That’s your house?”

“It is.”

I wait for him to say something else. To brag about it or offer us a tour. He does neither. He just keeps walking, his thumb stroking the back of my hand. It’s not what I expect, but then, when you’re as rich as Ethan Frost, I guess you don’t have to brag. You just accept what you have as your due.

Again my brain shifts to Brandon, and again I try to put him out of my head. I can’t help it, though. I know Ethan is nothing like Brandon, that he’s worked for everything he has instead of having it handed to him on a silver platter. But still, in my head, the money is an issue. Or, more specifically, the sense of entitlement that comes with money is an issue. The rich just don’t think the same way.

It’s one more reason I should keep my distance from Ethan. One more reason I should have said no to that date tomorrow night.

But then I think of that green ribbon, the exact shade of my eyes. I think of that gorgeous, perfect seashell. And know that, money or not, Ethan is nothing like my ex-boyfriend. Chad would never have sent me anything so simple—or so beautiful. He would have sent some expensive piece of jewelry, and expected something for it. Then gotten angry when I didn’t want to play along.

Though I was young, only fifteen, I’ve never felt more like a whore in my life than when I was dating that bastard—and in the months after we were through, when Brandon...I cut the thought off again. It took me forever to get over everything that happened, to get past it all and I never, ever want to feel that way again.

Ethan doesn’t say anything else on our walk home, and neither do I. Tori tries to keep the conversation going for a while, but I guess she eventually gets tired of talking to herself because she turns quiet, too. Which just gives me more time to think, to wonder and worry about what’s going to happen when we get to our apartment.

Should I invite Ethan in? Do I even want to invite him in? I'm tired and I'd really like to go to bed, but maybe he expects it. We *are* supposed to be going out tomorrow night. And he did spend a portion of yesterday evening giving me my first orgasm with another human being. That should count for something. A cup of coffee, maybe. Or some strawberry tea.

It probably even counts for a kiss. Which is fine with me. Really. I liked kissing him in his office. More than liked it, if I'm being honest. It's just the expectation I don't like. Again, that sense of bartering. Of having to do something for him because he's done something for me. And if that's the case, I'd at least like a vote in what happens. In what I'm expected to do. Chad never gave me that voice. Will Ethan? Already he's talked me into doing things I don't want to—simply because he asked me to. The smoothie. The ice. The walk home. It's nothing like what Chad demanded of me, but could it be? If I let it?

By the time we walk into our apartment complex, I'm a nervous wreck. All mixed up and freaked out and unsure of what to say or how to say it. And when we get to our apartment and Tori disappears through the door with a thank-you and a wave, my confusion gets even worse. I'm left staring at Ethan with no idea of what I'm supposed to do. Damn it. Maybe I *should* have dated more these last couple of years. Then at least I wouldn't feel so out of my depth.

“Do you—” My voice breaks, so I start again. “Do you want to come in?”

He leans a shoulder against the wall and just studies me for a moment, those crazy eyes of his the same shade as the sky outside as he tries to figure me out. Knowing what he's doing only freaks me out more, makes me more wary and confused and defensive.

Eventually Ethan shakes his head, and I feel an overwhelming sense of relief mixed with a just as overwhelming sense of disappointment. Which makes no sense but is true nonetheless.

“Oh, um, okay. Then I guess—”

I break off as he rests a light hand on my shoulder. His fingers are warm and firm, but gentle, too. Tentative. Not nervous, like I am, but worried.

Like he's afraid that one wrong move will spook me. Guess I'm more transparent than I thought.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he just stands there, watching me, for several long, tense seconds. I think he's waiting for something, but I don't have a clue what it is. If I did, I'd give it to him and damn the consequences.

I wait him out as long as I can, but eventually the silence gets to be too much for me and I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "Thanks for building my sand castle for me." I sound awkward, and a little breathless from where my voice catches in my throat, but at least there's something out there. Something between us besides tension so thick I could scoop it onto an ice-cream cone.

"Thanks for having dinner with me," he answers.

"I should be thanking you. You bought most of it."

"It's not about the money, Chloe."

Spoken like someone who has always had money. Or at least someone who's had it so long that he doesn't remember what it is not to have it. Because when you don't have much more than a couple of nickels to rub together, it's *always* about the money. My father taught me that a long time ago.

I don't say that, though. Instead I ask, "What's it about, then?" because I really want to know. I'm determined to find out the rules of this game we're playing. Once I know them, everything will make sense again. And I'll have more than a one-in-a-billion shot of actually winning.

His fingers are still stroking my neck, tender, feathery motions that somehow manage to turn me on and relax me all at the same time.

"You. It's all about you."

He leans down toward me, and I brace myself for one of his mind-numbing, breath-stealing, resolve-shattering kisses. But it never comes. Instead, he cups my face between his palms and skims his lips across my forehead. Soft, sweet, and oh-so-seductive in its own way.

Then he's pulling back, smiling at me. Tucking one of my crazy curls behind my ear. "I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow."

He turns to walk away, and though he didn't actually kiss me, it still takes me a few seconds to gather my wits enough to call after him. "Wait! What should I wear?"

He turns back around, spreads his arms wide. And with a grin that somehow manages to be both warm and wicked, he answers, "Whatever feels good."

And then he's gone and I'm left staring after him, wondering what the hell I've managed to get myself into.

Chapter Twelve

After a night of tossing and turning, I get to work to find out that I've been called into a meeting about the Trifecta merger. It's me, two interns from legal, and a bunch of lawyers, all of whom are hyped up on coffee and the thrill of blood in the water.

I'm confused at first, but it doesn't take long for me to figure it out. This merger isn't really a merger. It's a hostile takeover, one Trifecta is fighting with everything they've got. But the lawyers have found the final nail for the coffin, the one that will allow Frost Industries to absorb their current work on an invention whose purpose I don't even understand.

I guess the takeover's been in the works for quite a while and that Ethan has moved more slowly on it than the lawyers would have liked. That extra time allowed Trifecta to mess with their patents, to have the invention—whatever it is—patented under the names of the individual scientists instead of the company. Which their legal department seems to believe means we don't have access to it.

But I found a case earlier this week that proves this assumption false—though at the time I didn't know how Frost Industries would be using it, or the death blow it would deal Trifecta. If I had known, I'm not sure I would have turned the case over to the supervising attorneys.

I know that sounds bad. I am, after all, an employee of Frost Industries. It's my job to do work that benefits them. But does that really include yanking the rug out from underneath a smaller company like Trifecta? Taking away people's only means to keep not just their jobs but their life's work? I want to be an intellectual property attorney to help the little guys, not harm them. I want to see them hold on to their inventions, not watch them be gobbled up by giant corporations with no souls or understanding of what went into the creation of said intellectual property.

My stomach is churning before we're halfway through the meeting, and every time one of the lawyers congratulates me on my good work, it's like a knife driven straight through me. Partly because I'm the one responsible for finding the work and partly because I thought Frost Industries was better than this. I thought Ethan was better than this.

Oh, maybe I was living in a dream world, but all the research I did, every article I read, talked about the ethical Ethan Frost. The son of a war hero, soon-to-be-billionaire who managed to build an empire that actually makes the world a better place. To find out that under the surface he's just like everyone else—taking what he wants and to hell with the consequences—blindsides me in a way I am completely unprepared for.

Our meeting finally breaks up around ten-thirty, but that's only because the lawyers have been called in to a bigger meeting. One that involves the head of R&D, the CTO, and, of course, Ethan Frost himself. It also involves the same people from Trifecta. Sick to my stomach and my soul, I gather up my things and prepare to head back to my desk. I'm lost in my own little world, thinking about my future career and how walking away from this internship will affect my chances of getting into a good law school, when one of the lawyers calls my name.

Dazed, I turn to Carlos, wondering what other morally corrupt task he's going to assign me. But he just smiles and says, "Where are you going? You're coming to the meeting with us."

"I am?" I sound as shocked as I feel. Admittedly, I'm not up on how big corporations handle these things, but I'm pretty sure little interns like myself aren't invited to the big shows.

"Absolutely," Marni chimes in. She's one of the other lawyers, and the woman I've been reporting to since I was assigned to the merger. "We're big believers in rewarding good work around here, and yours has been stellar this week. Now you'll get a chance to see how all your research will help close the deal."

They're both watching me like they expect me to start screaming in excitement at any moment, but all I can think is that what they're offering is absolutely the last thing I want to be a part of. Bad enough to know I've contributed to the death knell of a family business, but to see it all happen

in person...I'm not sure my stomach, or the rest of me, is strong enough for that.

But invitations like this one don't grow on trees, and refusing it would be an extremely stupid thing to do. Part of me doesn't care, but the other part—the one that cares too much about getting into law school—won't let me do anything but nod and say, “Thank you.”

Trifecta is a San Diego company, only about a half hour's drive away from the Frost Industries headquarters. I ride over with Carlos, Marni, and Jace, one of the other interns who is also being rewarded for his “stellar” work. We arrive before Ethan and the other bigwigs so we hang in the lobby waiting for them.

Though I'm facing away from the door, talking to Jace, I know the second Ethan walks into the lobby. The oxygen seems to be sucked out of the room even as an electric charge fills the air. One laced with excitement and determination and an underlying rage that seems completely out of place.

But when I turn to look at Ethan, I see all those emotions—and more—in his eyes. At least until he banishes them behind a poker face that would do Lady Gaga or a Vegas cardsharp proud. He scans the assembled crowd of lawyers, interns, and R&D people without expression. At least until he comes to me. Then his eyes widen slightly and he nods in acknowledgment, though he doesn't address me directly.

Something I'm grateful for, considering the mixed-up state of my emotions. A confusion that only gets worse when Ethan quietly tells the lawyers, “Make no mistakes. We're not leaving here without an iron-clad agreement. This is it.”

They nod accordingly, and any hope I had that this was a bad dream or a misunderstanding, something—anything—to prove this isn't as awful as I think it is, vanishes. With it goes any interest I have in seeing Ethan for our date tonight, or ever. He may make me feel things no other man has, but my body isn't in control. I don't date men who care more about their power and their bank accounts than they do the people whose lives they ruin.

This meeting goes pretty much as expected—which is to say that it goes terribly. Jace and I are relegated to a corner of the table where we don't talk,

don't move, barely breathe. All we do is listen and watch as the pincers of Frost Industries close slowly, relentlessly, around Trifecta.

"We're giving you everything else," the CEO says in a last burst of desperation. "And at a very fair price. It's absurd that you're holding out for these last three patents. They have nothing to do with your current agenda or products. I just don't understand."

The moment the words leave his mouth, I know they're a mistake. I can see it in Ethan's eyes, in the set of his shoulders and his mouth. The man has just pushed him over an edge that none of us had any idea he was close to. Even before he starts to talk, I know that the fallout isn't going to be good.

Calmly—too calmly, in my opinion—Ethan leans forward. He looks the man directly in the eyes and in a voice so low it shouldn't carry but somehow does, he says, "You don't need to understand. All you need to know is that I own fifty-eight percent of this company, and hold nearly two-thirds of the voting shares. Trifecta, in its entirety, will be absorbed by Frost Industries and it will be absorbed now. Not in six months, not in a year.

"I have been patient while the lawyers on both sides worked up an agreement that is more than equitable for you. I'm done being patient. Either you and your board of directors sign the agreement—as is—or the next one you get will be a lot less beneficial to any of you. And you will sign that one.

"Either way, I'm done arguing about it. This merger will happen. I will get the patents that your family holds. And you will be out. The only thing left to decide is if you walk away with enough money to make you, your children, and your grandchildren comfortable for the rest of your lives or if you walk away with nothing. The choice is yours."

Ethan stands up then, his words still ringing in the shocked and silent room. Then he walks out, his CTO and the other executives right behind him. Which means the only people left in the room from Frost Industries are the lawyers—all of whom suddenly look extremely formidable.

After a moment, Carlos clears his throat. He looks their head counsel in the eyes and says, "You heard the man. It's time to make this happen."

The next ninety minutes are some of the most uncomfortable of my life. Blood is in the water, and everyone knows it. Any objections by Trifecta's team are dealt with quickly and ruthlessly, and in the end we walk away with a preliminary agreement in place. One that gives the Trifecta group quite a bit of money but which in return takes every single thing they have. Exactly as Ethan said it would.

My blood is boiling when I climb into the backseat of Marni's car. The two lawyers and Jace are ebullient, nearly high with the thrill of their victory. All I can see, however, are the faces of the Trifecta CEO and his son, both of whom have spent their whole lives working to make the company what it is today, only to have it snatched away from them right before they took it to the next level.

But, really, it's not their faces I see. It's my brother's. My brilliant, trusting brother, whose mind has conceived of some of the greatest breakthroughs in communications technology in decades. My brother, who has had two of his ideas stolen right out from under him by corporations just like Frost Industries. Whose subsequent ideas have all gone to my father and the company he opened with the blood money he received from Brandon's family in exchange for selling me down the river.

My brother doesn't understand my outrage. To him, it's all about the glory of the idea. Seeing what he invented out in the world, doing what it was invented for. As long as he makes enough money to live comfortably and still fund his research, he's happy. And if everyone but him gets rich off what he invents, it doesn't bother him. Hell, he doesn't even seem to notice. My dad tells him the money is all in the family, that there's enough for everybody, but I know the truth. The second Miles stops conceiving of new and exciting things, the second he stops inventing things that will move my family's bright and shiny new company forward, he'll be out. Just like me. My father might draw the line at eating his own young, but he has absolutely no problem with sacrificing us.

The rage is building inside me, making it hard to breathe, to think, to function. So I slam a door closed on my emotions, stop thinking about my family and Frost Industries and what just happened in that conference room. Instead, I pull out my phone. Open up my email. And send a short, not-so-sweet message to Ethan's work account.

I can't make it tonight. Please don't call me again.

We get back to work around one-fifteen. Since we worked through lunch, Marni suggests we all head down to the cafeteria, but I beg off, saying I've got a lot of work to do. Which is the truth. Though the preliminary agreement is in place, there are still a lot of questions in my files that I need to answer, a lot of case law that I need to weed through. And since the last thing I want to do is spend another hour listening to them congratulate themselves for pulling the rug out from under the Trifecta CEO, I might as well get started.

Back at my desk, I open up my email, nearly afraid of what I'm going to find. Sure enough, there's a reply from Ethan, one that came only a few minutes after I sent the original email.

My hand is shaking when I open it, but I force myself to do it. I've made the right decision, for both of us, and I need to see it through. We're too different to ever have made a go of it.

Ethan's email is as terse as mine was. Just two sentences:

You owe me an explanation. I will collect.

Fueled by anger, I type my own response.

You may try.

I hit send before I think better of it. I don't owe him anything, and the sooner he understands that the better. A couple of margaritas and some trinkets don't mean anything, and he'd do well to remember that.

As would I.

I settle down to work, choosing a particularly complicated court case to focus on. Usually I can lose myself in the twists and turns of testimony and judicial decisions, but today all I can think about is Trifecta and Ethan and that stupid email I sent. The more I go over it in my head, the more it sounds like a challenge. Exactly what I didn't want it to be.

Every few minutes I click back over to my email account to see if Ethan has answered me. He hasn't. Which is good. Better than good. It means he's as finished with this thing between us as I am. But no matter how much I tell myself that all I'm feeling is relief, there's something else there. A disappointment I refuse to acknowledge and a trepidation that I'm afraid not to. Because much as I'd like to believe I've dodged a bullet, that Ethan has

written me off as surely as I've done him, I don't believe it. A man doesn't get to where he is in life by just giving up. By letting challenges go unanswered. The fact that I didn't intend to challenge him doesn't mean anything.

Forty-five minutes after I sent the email, I can't take the waiting any longer. I'm jumping out of my skin, waiting for the other shoe to fall. Grabbing my purse, I tell Angela that I'm taking my afternoon break, then head for the cafeteria.

It's no wonder I'm shaky and out of sorts—I haven't eaten anything besides a banana all day. I'll feel much better once I get a sandwich or something. At least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

When I get to the cafeteria, I spot Zayn right away. He's at the coffee bar, chatting up the new barista as she makes him some kind of iced drink. I catch his eye and wave, then move on to the pizza station. Forget a sandwich. Today calls for something ooey, gooey, and calorie-laden.

I've barely slid into a small corner booth on the patio when Zayn joins me. He puts a second iced coffee in front of me and says, "I didn't know what you liked, so I went with an iced mocha. I figure most girls like chocolate."

"Good choice. Thanks."

"No problem. You look like you could use a little pick-me-up. Bad day?"

"You have no idea."

"That's what I'm here for. So you can fill me in."

I take a bite of pizza, then laugh as a long, gooey strand of cheese winds itself around my chin. I reach for it, but Zayn beats me to it, pulling it off and then slipping it into my mouth before I register what he's doing.

Except for Ethan, it's the most intimately a guy has touched me in I can't tell how long. He didn't mean anything by it, but still it feels weird. A little uncomfortable even. I know that for most women, being touched is no big deal. But for me, even the most casual of intimacies is foreign.

I decide not to dwell on it, though, because it's nice to have a friend besides Tori. Especially one who is smart and funny and gets what I'm talking about when I say intellectual property.

So I thank him for saving me from the cheese, and smile at the corny joke he cracks.

“See!” he crows. “I knew I could make you smile.”

“I never said you couldn’t.”

“That’s because you didn’t see your face when you walked in here. You looked like you were going to cry.”

“I don’t cry.”

“Ever?” He looks at me incredulously.

“Well, obviously I have cried. But I don’t do it very often. And not without a really good reason.”

“And a bad day isn’t a good reason?”

I think of Ethan and our never-to-happen date. Then I think of that damned meeting. “Nope. Today is definitely not a good enough reason to cry.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He pauses, takes a sip of his drink. Then says, “I’ve got to get going. I have a meeting in five minutes. But—”

“Oh, sorry!” I interrupt, feeling like an idiot. “I didn’t mean to monopolize your time.”

“You didn’t. I came over to talk because I wanted to. But what I was going to suggest before you so rudely interrupted to apologize”—he winks at me so that I know he’s kidding—“is that we get a drink after work. Or several drinks. You can bitch about your bad day, I can commiserate...it’ll be fun.”

“She’s already got plans for tonight.”

Zayn freezes as Ethan walks up behind where I’m sitting, and so do I. I’d left my cubicle to get away from thoughts of him, and it never occurred to me that I would see him here. Which seems stupid now, considering that two of the four times I’ve seen the man at work it’s been in this very room. But I figured that today he’d be busy with world domination or something—surely he has something better to do than stake out the cafeteria. Trifecta can’t be the only small company waiting around for him to crush their dreams.

“Actually, my plans have been canceled.” I turn to Zayn. “I’d love to get a drink. Where should I meet you?”

“Oh, um, how about—” He breaks off as Ethan turns on him. Ethan doesn’t say anything, but then he doesn’t have to. His look is enough to have Zayn clambering from the table and backing up, hands extended out in front of him in the universal gesture of *I didn’t know she was taken, man*. He doesn’t even bother to look at me when as he calls, “Maybe some other time then. Okay, Chloe?”

Needless to say, he doesn’t wait around for my answer. I turn to Ethan, ready to tell him off for sticking his nose in my business. And find him staring at me with the hyperintense focus of a predator about to bring down his prey.

Chapter Thirteen

I swallow past the sudden lump in my throat, try to force myself to look away from the intensity of his gaze. But I'm trapped, completely ensnared, and he knows it. Worse, he uses it.

Instead of sitting across from me in the booth as Zayn did, Ethan slides in next to me—forcing me to either move deeper into the curve of the booth or sit with my entire body pressed up against his. I move deeper, of course, but it doesn't matter. Those brief moments of contact are branded onto my body from shoulder to knee, so that I can still feel his heat even with close to a foot of space separating us now.

Furious, disconcerted, aroused, I wait for Ethan to say something. He's the one who burst into the conversation uninvited. He's the one who chased my friend away. And he's the one who has yet to look away from me.

His blue eyes are steady, unblinking, as if they're cataloguing everything about me. Worse, as if they can see straight through to the heart of me, to everything I've worked so long to keep hidden.

“Didn't your mother ever teach you not to stare?” The words burst from me without permission. “It's rude.”

“And here I thought rude was canceling plans at the last minute without an explanation.”

“Is that why you're here? For an explanation?”

“It sure as hell isn't so I can watch you make a date with another man!” He closes his eyes, takes a couple of deep breaths, and when his eyelids finally lift again, the intensity is gone. In its place is a flat, hard stare that tells me he wants answers...and warns me that there will be hell to pay if I don't provide them.

But I'm not in the business of jumping simply because a man tells me to, even if that man is Ethan Frost. So this time I do keep my mouth shut and

wait for him to start things off. After all, it's not my job to make things easier for him.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asks after what I swear is the longest, tensest sixty seconds of my life. "I thought last night went well and then suddenly you're writing me a 'get lost' email. And a damn obnoxious one at that."

"I disagree. I was perfectly polite."

"If by polite you mean abrupt to the point of rudeness." He shoves a hand through his hair, and for the first time it occurs to me that he's as frustrated, as mixed up, by the crazy chemistry between us as I am. It's an unexpected revelation, one that should give me some feeling of control but somehow only makes me feel more confused. More frightened.

"I changed my mind. I'm allowed to do that."

"You absolutely are," he agrees. "But I want to know why. I think you owe me that much."

"I don't owe you anything!"

"Really?" Quick as a striking snake, his hand flashes out. Grabs on to my wrist. And then he's pulling me closer, until our bodies are once again touching and his face is only inches from mine.

"Let me go!"

"Not until you tell me what's going on in that head of yours. I've given you time and leeway and as much control as I'm capable of, but it's still not enough for you." He leans forward until his lips are all but touching mine. "Would you really rather go out with that harmless little boy you were just talking to instead of me?"

He's so close that I can see green flecks mixed in with the wild blue of his irises.

So close that I can smell the minty scent of his breath.

So close that I can feel the reckless heat of his body pouring into mine.

I take a deep breath, and as I do, my whole body lights up with arousal. Because it's his air that I'm breathing, his essence that I'm drawing deep inside myself. And despite everything, despite all I know about him and all my righteous indignation, it feels so good. So perfect. So right.

He brings his hand to my mouth, brushes his index finger across my lower lip. Once, twice, then again and again until I yield. My lips part on a shattered gasp and his finger sneaks inside, strokes across the very tip of my tongue.

I gasp again, lean my head back against the cool leather of the booth. I've gone weak, boneless. There's no rage, no indignation, nothing but pure sensation inside me. That's what he does to me so effortlessly. Turns me into nothing but a chaotic mess of cravings and desires.

"Chloe." He whispers my name, and my already splintered resolve breaks wide open.

I close my lips around his finger, suck it deep into the recesses of my mouth. Run my tongue down its underside before swirling over and around it. Top to bottom, top to bottom. Again and again and again even as I pull him deeper inside me.

Ethan groans, low and tortured, and I see it happen. See the last thread of control snap as he rips his finger from my mouth, plunges his hands into my hair and yanks my mouth to his.

There's a part of me that registers where we are. Yes, it's a secluded booth in the back corner of the patio. Yes, we're alone out here. Yes, we're pressed against the back of the booth, so you have to be close to see what we're doing. But we're still at work, still in the most public of venues. We should not be doing this, and we certainly shouldn't be doing this here.

And yet I don't give a damn. I don't try to stop him, don't even think about trying to stop him. I'm too caught up in the taste and scent and feel of him to think of anything else. Too caught up in the pleasure to do anything but grab on to his shoulders and meet his tongue with my own.

I thought his other kisses were intense, powerful, drugging, but those stolen moments in his office have nothing on this embrace. Nothing on this kiss. There's an urgency here, a desperation that was lacking in those earlier moments with him. It should probably scare me—would scare me if I was thinking clearly—but right now all I can think about is more. Taking more. And giving more. Giving everything.

My hands come up, tangle in the cool silk of his dress shirt and tug. Ethan bites at my lower lip in response and I gasp at the darkly seductive

edge of pain that tangles with the pleasure. He takes instant advantage, strokes his tongue across my own. Over the top, then underneath to the slick, sensitive bottom. I've never been kissed there before and it feels shockingly good, so good that I find myself opening even more, sucking him deeper and deeper inside me.

He groans again, a dark, devastating sound that rips right through me, and my hands move of their own volition. Now they're tangled in the wildness his hair, tugging him closer and closer as I yield completely. As I do what I've been afraid of all along and give him everything.

Ethan takes it. Of course he does. And I revel in his possession, in the strong, sure way his arms wrap around me and pull me against his long, muscular torso.

I love the way he tastes, like mint and blueberries and tart, sweet lemonade. Like lazy summer days on the beach and warm, sexy nights in bed. Like my darkest fantasies and deepest fears all mixed into one. He's sex and seduction, danger and desire, all rolled into one explosive package. I should be wary. Hell, I should be terrified, but in these precious, stolen moments all I can be is delighted. And aroused—definitely aroused.

I nip at his lower lip, slide my tongue inside his mouth. Explore him as he has explored me. He shifts a little, shoves the free-standing table back against the other edge of the booth. Then pulls me on top of him so that I'm straddling his lap, my sex pressed intimately against the hardness of his erection.

His hands are on my hips now, lifting and lowering me in time to the slow, sexy thrust of his hips. Need claws at me, and I feel empty, aching, desperate to be filled. I moan, pull at him in a frantic effort to bring him closer, to take him inside me.

He steadies me with his hands, his body, his mouth. Eases the ache even as he stokes it. Calms me even as he takes me higher. His mouth is still on mine, his lips and tongue exploring and enticing, teasing and tantalizing, until I'm afraid I'm going to lose my mind.

“Ethan!” I gasp. “Please!”

“I've got you, Chloe.” His hands clutch at my hips, shimmying me against him in such a way that my whole body lights up at the contact. “I've

got you, baby.”

And then he closes his teeth over my lip, a long, slow bite that hurts just enough to mix with the other rioting sensations inside me and send me hurtling over the edge. Pleasure explodes inside me and I cry out against Ethan’s lips, but he’s got me. His mouth absorbs my cries even as his body moves to wring every last drop of pleasure from my own.

When it’s over, when I can breathe and move and maybe even think again, I lift pleasure-drugged eyes to Ethan’s.

“That’s twice you haven’t gotten to come.”

He smiles at me, strokes a tender hand down my cheek. “I can wait.”

Just then the whoosh of the automatic door sounds, signaling the fact that someone else has joined us on the patio. Ethan immediately lifts me off his lap and onto the seat beside him, then makes a totally useless effort at tamping down my riotous mess of curls.

“I’ve got it,” I say, reaching into my purse and pulling out four hair sticks. As Ethan watches, a surprisingly gentle look on his face considering the fact that he’s still very obviously aroused, I twist and gather my hair into a bun at the nape of my neck. Once it’s as controlled as I can make it, I reach for the hair sticks, but he beats me to it. He gathers them up, then pushes them—one after another—into my hair, taking great pains not to scratch or jab me.

When he’s done, I shake my head a little, just to make sure none of the sticks is going to fall out. They stay put, and while it’s not perfect, at least my hair no longer screams that he’s spent the last fifteen minutes running his hands through it. That’s something, I suppose.

“Let me take you out tonight.”

I stiffen at his words, identical to those he said last night. The last vestiges of orgasm-induced pleasure leak away as all the things I’ve spent the last few minutes not thinking about find their way back into my brain. I’m not angry anymore. Nor am I determined to tell him off. I’m just sad. Sad that the only person I’ve been really attracted to in years—maybe forever—has an outlook so different from my own. Sad that no matter how good he makes me feel and how much I want to return the favor, that there

can be nothing else between us. Which means, really, that there can be nothing between us at all.

I may want him, he may feel the same way, but there's no way I can be with a man who would do what Ethan did in that conference room today. Not when I know firsthand the misery such ruthlessness can cause.

"I can't," I tell him.

"You mean you won't. You had no problem making plans with that kid from R&D for this evening."

For a minute I can't even remember whom he's talking about. Then an image of Zayn asking me for drinks flashes through my mind, followed quickly by the knowledge that he'll be thrilled to find out that Ethan knows who he is. "We're friends."

He snorts. "Yeah. He looked very friendly while he was feeding you."

"You saw that?" I feel myself blushing, embarrassed that he saw me make such a mess of myself.

"Hard to miss it. The guy had his hands all over you."

"No, he didn't! That's rid—" I break off as it occurs to me what's really going on here. "You're jealous!"

"Of course I'm jealous. I don't like any other man putting his hands on you. You're mine, even if you don't know it yet."

"Yours?" The warning bells go crazy, and I scoot farther around the booth, shoving the table back to its normal position as I do. "We haven't even been on a date yet."

"A fact I'm trying my best to remedy." I climb out the other side of the booth, but he's already up, waiting for me. "You agreed to go out with me last night. You were still planning on it this morning in the lobby of Trifecta—I could tell by the way you smiled at me. So what the hell has happened between now and then to change your mind so completely? I just don't get it."

I think about telling him to go to hell, think about just storming away. But now that I'm more sad than pissed off, I can totally see that he deserves an explanation. If a guy treated me the way I've treated Ethan—letting him make me come, letting him buy my friend and me drinks and dinner, letting

him send me presents—I'd be beyond pissed to be shot down without so much as a word.

“Look, I'm sorry. We just have different philosophies on life and—”

“Are you kidding me? Different philosophies?”

“No, I'm not joking. It's important—”

“How do you know?”

“That it's important to share similar values with the person you're dating?”

“That our values and philosophies are so different to begin with.”

“I saw you today.”

He looks baffled. “I saw you, too.”

“No, I mean with the people from Trifecta. You were brutal with them. They had really valid requests and you just shot them down like they were nothing. Stole those patents from them, even though the owner's son was totally responsible for one of them.”

“You can't be serious. You're walking away without giving me a chance because of something that happened in a business meeting?”

“See? You can't even understand what you did. They're people, with dreams and hopes and ideas. Good ideas. It's bad enough that you bought up their stock and forced them into becoming part of Frost Industries. But to take away their only chance at making a good livelihood again...I just can't wrap my head around it.”

I expect him to make another argument, to try once again to change my mind. But instead he's looking at me like he doesn't know me. Or, worse, like he doesn't want to.

I wait for him to speak, but he doesn't. Silence stretches between us, tight and angry. The weight of it pushes on me, makes me feel angrier, gloomier, *lonelier* than I already do. Which, believe me, is not something I need.

I've just about made up my mind to walk away when he says, “You really believe that? You really think that's how I operate?”

“It's not like I read some ridiculous article from the tabloids. I saw you pull the rug out from under them. Saw you destroy them. Worse, my

research had a hand in helping you do it. I'm having a hard time living with that, let alone all the rest."

"Must be nice to sit there in your ivory tower and cast aspersions on things you don't understand."

His words, so close to Brandon's, so close to my father's, make me see red like nothing else could. "Oh, don't you pull that self-righteous act on me. I'm about as far from a princess as anyone can get, and I'm not a moron. I understand plenty. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"I find it rich that you're calling me self-righteous when I've never heard a more sanctimonious load of bullshit in my life. And from a future lawyer."

"Oh, right. A lawyer joke. How original. Especially coming from you. I'm the one standing here talking about doing the right thing, for everyone, and you're condemning me. So don't you dare talk to me about how amoral lawyers are."

"That's what you think? That backing off and leaving Trifecta to flounder in their own incompetence would be the right thing for *everyone*?" He laughs, but there's no amusement in it. In fact, the sound is so painful, so agonized, that it chills my blood. "You know what? You're right, Chloe. We're not a good match. You abhor pragmatists, and I—Well, let's just say I have better things to do than waste my time on supercilious little girls who spend too much time hiding behind their rose-colored glasses."

Chapter Fourteen

I'm still smarting over Ethan's comments hours later, when I let myself into the apartment. He's known me a week—who the hell is he to call me self-righteous and sanctimonious and supercilious? And does the man not know an insult that doesn't begin with an s? Although I have to admit, the ones he'd chosen certainly packed a wallop.

And maybe it is wrong of me to think I know him based on a couple hours' observation of his behavior. But I heard him threaten those people like it was nothing. Watched as he threatened to take everything they had just to get some leverage in a negotiation. I might be wearing rose-colored glasses, but anyone could see that what he did was not okay.

Tori's not in her usual spot on the couch, but I saw her car in the garage, so I know she must be around. After dropping my briefcase by the front door, I go in search of her. I find her sunbathing topless on the patio while the guy from across the courtyard does his best to pretend he isn't totally skeeving on her.

She makes a grab for her bikini top when she sees me, not out of modesty—the girl has none—but because she's practically jumping out of her skin with excitement.

“So, I went through your closet when you were at work and I've narrowed it down to three outfits I think should work for your date. Four, if you consent to borrowing my purple dress.”

“Why would I borrow your purple dress? You're a size two, I'm a size six. If I wore that, I'd look like an eggplant about to split its skin.”

“It's a little big on me—”

“Which means it would be too tight on me.”

“Exactly! But in a good way. It'll show off all those gorgeous curves of yours. Ethan won't know what hit him.”

“Yeah, well, the point is moot. We're not going out.”

“What do you mean?” For a second, she looks like a little girl who’s had her favorite teddy bear yanked from her arms. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day!”

Yeah, well, she isn’t the only one. I’d been excited—nervous and a little overwhelmed, but excited—at least until everything went to hell in that stupid meeting.

Settling down on the chaise longue next to Tori’s, I reach for her wineglass. After draining it, I tell her the whole sordid story.

When I finish, I expect her to offer me some more wine. I figure she’ll at least lead the way on some major guy-bashing before raiding the back of the freezer for some Ben and Jerry’s and watching some ridiculous rom-com. But instead she just stares at me like I’ve grown three heads. Or more. She looks so disgusted that it’s hard to tell exactly what she thinks of me. Except that it’s bad. Really bad.

“Are you kidding me?” she shrieks when she finally finds her voice. “Are you freaking kidding me?”

“What?” I know I sound defensive, but it’s hard not to be when she’s screaming in my face. “We think differently. Which is fine. I mean, he’s entitled to his point of view, his way of doing things. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it or be involved with him when I obviously don’t agree with the way he does things. I figured it was better to stop things before they ever got started than to worry about those differences later.”

I’ve so stupefied Tori that it takes her several long seconds to close her mouth. Then several more seconds before she shakes her head and says, “You are an idiot.”

“Why? Because I don’t jump to do Ethan Frost’s bidding? Because I’m not dying to hop into bed with him?”

“No. Because you are dying to hop into bed with him and you just sabotaged the whole thing!”

“That’s not true!”

“Really?” She sounds more exasperated than anything else. “I saw you with him last night. The way you lit up when he touched your hand or put an arm around you. I’ve never seen you like that with anyone. You want that man, so of course you take the first opportunity to run away from him.”

“I’m not running away. I’m simply choosing not to be with him because ___”

“Because of one incident that you don’t even understand.”

“You weren’t there.”

“No, and neither were you. Not really. Not for all the buildup that led them to that point.” She sighs, then reaches over and pats my knee. “Look, I get it. You saw Ethan strong-arm those people and it freaked you out. Made you think of whatever happened with Miles and your dad. Maybe all of it rolled into one. But he’s not any of those people. He’s Ethan fucking Frost, the man I had to hear about for months when you were researching the internship. You worshipped him before you met him, were completely enthralled with all the things he does for charity and the environment. With how he treats his employees.

“And now you’re basically acting like he’s Satan himself, all because of one business meeting. Even though everything else—the charity, the employee benefits, his business model—are all the same as they’ve always been.”

“You think I’m looking for flaws in him?”

“I think you’re only human. And you’re scared. It would be completely natural for you to try to find something wrong with him before you get in too deep. But I also think you jumped at the first thing you could find without giving him a chance to explain himself, simply because it was your way out.”

I don’t say anything else, and Tori doesn’t push. She’s smart enough to know I need some processing time. I don’t think she’s right, but I do know that from the moment I mailed back that blender—with my own personal letter full of stuff—that I’ve been a nervous wreck. Completely freaked out by what my doing so implied. Seeing the way he treated Trifecta stopped my worries pretty much instantly, gave me something much bigger to focus on. Something I don’t want to see happen to anyone ever again.

But was that one meeting enough reason—enough proof—for me to shut him down the way I did? Especially when I know all the great things he’s done through the years? Or is Tori right? Did I just use that as an excuse to

extricate myself from a situation I was terrified would turn sticky? I don't know. I don't think so, but that doesn't mean I didn't do it subconsciously.

Tori lets me brood for a while as she orders dinner from the Greek place down the block. But when the intercom buzzes with the delivery, she decides brooding time is officially over. She drags me inside to watch *Crazy Stupid Love*, and sometime between eating Greek salads, hummus, and stuffed grape leaves and discussing how awesome it would be to lick ice cream off Ryan Gosling's abs, I get roped into helping Tori dye her hair.

Normally she gets her hair dyed at a salon over on Prospect, but I guess what she wants this time is just too wacky, because her stylist, Geoff, refused to do it for her. He's never said no to her before, no matter how crazy the color is, and I'm a little shocked he managed to stand his ground this time.

At least until I see the myriad boxes of hair dye she lays out on the coffee table in front of me and I realize she's going for rainbow hair. Suddenly I'm not so sure, either. I don't know why it seems more normal for her to have green hair or purple hair, but it does. Having multicolored hair just strikes me as an inability to commit.

I tell her so, but she just laughs. "Who said I had to commit? I'm twenty-one. If I can't be fickle now, when can I be?"

She makes a good argument, but still. "Are you sure they'll let you in the building at work if you do this?"

She waves her hand, and I know what she's saying even without the words. If her job doesn't like it, she'll just quit and find one that does. It's not like she's worried about paying the bills or anything. Not that I'm complaining, considering her money is what has made this last week—and all my future weeks at Frost Industries—possible.

In the end, I agree to turn my best friend's hair the color of Easter eggs—not as though there was ever any doubt. Still, it's a long, time-consuming process. First because it takes hours to bleach out the dark yellow that is her current color, and then because it takes hours more to paint individual clumps of hair with every color of the rainbow from fuck-me red to Ethan Frost blue.

When we're done and she's washed out all the dye and then styled her hair, I have to admit the look is as beautiful as it is striking. Like she's been kissed by a thousand rainbows—or fallen headfirst into a bag of Skittles. Either way, she looks amazing.

We finish the night with a pint of Cherry Garcia ice cream around 3:00 a.m. As I take the last spoonful, I start to congratulate myself for going hours without thinking about Ethan, but that thought blows the whole deal. Suddenly I can't help but think of the disgust in his eyes in those last minutes. The disappointment. Like I was the one who had screwed things up, not him.

Maybe in his eyes I am. Which is just more reason why this thing between us wouldn't work. We see the world in very different ways. Which means Tori's wrong. I wasn't being a coward, wasn't running away because I felt something. I was just doing what I do best. Being pragmatic. Making a plan.

The realization should make me feel better, but instead all it does is depress me. Which only makes me more determined to not think about it. Sinking deeper into the couch, I lay my head on Tori's shoulder and watch Cary Elwes storm the castle in *The Princess Bride*. For the first time ever, it fails to make me laugh.

* * *

I wake up early Saturday morning to a loud pounding. I'm still on the couch, half tangled up with Tori from when our sleeping selves were looking for some comfortable position to sleep in.

“What the hell is that?” she groans as she hefts herself into a sitting position.

I shove my heavy curtain of hair out of my eyes, then immediately wish I hadn't when the sunlight slams into them, makes them burn. “I have no idea,” I answer, burying my face in my hands in a desperate bid to stop the pain.

The pounding gets louder, and Tori's the one who finally identifies it. “Someone's at the door.”

“Oh. Right.” That rhythmic pounding was actually someone knocking.

She nudges me with her foot. “Aren’t you going to get it?”

“You’re the extrovert. If someone is knocking this early on a Saturday morning, we both know it’s for you.”

“Good point.” She groans a little as she pulls herself off the couch—how early is it anyway?—and stumbles toward the door. The second she’s gone, I fall facedown onto her side of the couch and pull a pillow over my head. If I’m lucky, whoever it is will keep Tori busy for a few minutes and I can go back to sleep.

I hear voices near the front door, notice that my roommate is talking a lot more animatedly than she usually does. Which is a good sign. I close my eyes, start to drift. Then groan what feels like mere seconds later when she starts shaking my shoulder.

“What?” I demand without pulling my head out from under the pillow.

“It’s for you.”

Of course it is. What are the odds? The one morning I want to sleep in and lounge around pitying myself is the one time someone actually comes to the door for me. Lifting up the corner of the cushion, I blearily stare at a pair of worn jeans with a hole over one knee.

“What time is it?”

“Nine o’clock,” Tori tells me.

“Go away,” I tell the legs that are standing right in front of me. It’s too damn early for politeness. But even as I say it, a frisson of awareness works its way down my spine and into my heart, which is suddenly beating much too fast.

“Hangover?” asks a warm male voice dripping with amusement.

Sure enough, I know that voice. Tossing the pillow onto the floor, I force myself into a sitting position. Even force my eyes to open wider than little slits. The resultant pain makes me grumpy. “Ice cream coma.” I gesture toward the two empty cartons on the coffee table.

“Nice,” Ethan says with a laugh. “I always go for Phish Food myself.”

“I wouldn’t go around admitting that if I were you. It’s just another black mark against you.”

“I didn’t realize ice-cream-flavor selection was such a serious business.”

I shake my head mournfully. “And you seemed like such a promising young man.”

Out of the corner of my abused eyes, I see Tori slip down the hall toward her bedroom. Coward. So much for the promise of solidarity she offered me halfway through our pints of Ben & Jerry’s. Guess it was just the sugar talking after all.

“Get dressed,” Ethan tells me. “We have places to go.”

I pin him with a look of flat disbelief. Like I would go anywhere with him. “What are you even doing here? I thought we’d both had our say last night.”

“I had to bring the blender back.” He gestures to the coffee table, and for the first time I notice the Vitamix box sitting there. “I got your package.”

“Ugh.” I bury my head in the pillow again. The only thing worse than having Ethan see me looking like this is to have him see me looking like this after he’s gotten a package from me that pretty much proclaims my interest in him. After we’d already had the fight.

This time he reaches down and pries the pillow from my hands. Then he settles on the couch, smooths my hair back from my face.

“I really liked the things you sent me.”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I focus all my wrath on the hapless blender. “Why do you keep giving me that thing when I’ve made it obvious I don’t want it?”

“Balanced nutrition is important.”

“Balanced nutrition doesn’t have to come in a blender.”

“But it tastes better when it does.” He grabs my hand, pulls until I’m standing in the V made by his open legs. “Go get dressed. I’ll buy you breakfast.”

“What if I don’t want breakfast?” I sound like a sulky kid, but the truth is I don’t give a damn. I’m tired and sad and embarrassed and annoyed, all rolled into one volatile package.

“It’ll be a long day without it.”

“What makes you think I’ll go anywhere with you?”

He grins. “My charm? My wit? My generous soul?”

“And here I was thinking what I really liked was your humility.”

He laughs, and the sound warms me despite my determination to keep myself hardened against him. But the truth is, he is charming and witty, and it’s damn difficult not to respond when he is so obviously trying to get back into my good graces. No wonder he’s such a force to be reckoned with in the business world. No one can hold out against him for long.

“Where are we going?” I ask as I make my way down the hall to—surprise, surprise—get dressed. I’m beginning to think I’m destined to give this man what he wants. It’s a disconcerting thought, one I’m sure I’ll dwell exhaustively on later. For now, I’ll settle for thinking about breakfast. French toast in particular.

“I find I don’t like you thinking ill of me.” He’s followed me down the hallway and now lounges in my doorway. “I want to show you something.”

I’m rummaging in my dresser, pulling out underwear and a bra, when I glance back at him. He gets points for looking me in the eye and not staring at the scraps of blue lace in my hands. Then again, he’s probably seen more ladies’ lingerie than I have—and much sexier stuff than what I wear.

The thought depresses me a little, so I shove it away—to the same spot where I’ve buried all my other doubts and concerns about this whole Ethan-and-me thing. For someone who usually confronts life head-on, with a detailed plan in place for every eventuality, I’m becoming quite the master of avoidance.

It’s not a good realization.

“Do you really believe that you can show me something that will change my mind about what happened yesterday?”

His eyes darken to a deep midnight blue, one loaded with a tortured pain I am intimately familiar with—but which I never imagined I’d see reflected in his gaze.

Instinctively I cross to him. Lay a soft hand on his biceps and another on his cheek. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

For long seconds he doesn’t answer. Instead, he just stands there staring at me, a million different demons looking out at me from his familiar eyes. But then he blinks, shakes his head, and everything is as it was. Ethan’s

smiling at me, telling me that casual clothes are just fine for our outing. Urging me into the bathroom for a quick shower.

He's good at what he does, so good that it isn't until I'm standing under a spray of hot water that I realize he never answered my question.

Chapter Fifteen

Of all the places I imagine that Ethan will take me, the VA hospital near Balboa Park doesn't even make the list. And yet here we are, turning into the parking lot in his electric-blue Tesla Roadster.

"What are we doing here?" I ask as he pulls into a parking spot a few rows from the front entrance.

"You'll see."

He comes around and opens the door for me before I even think to reach for the handle. Then his hand is on my lower back and he's guiding me toward the large building with its Spanish architecture and the palm trees that circle it like sentinels.

I can feel the warmth of his hand through the soft cotton of my T-shirt, and there's a part of me that wants nothing more than to arch into his touch like a cat. I can't help it. Though I know he's bad for me, that this thing between us can't go anywhere, I can't help but love the feel of his hands on me.

The tingle of electricity that sizzles over my skin at whatever spot his body comes into contact with mine.

The feel of his fingers, rough and just a little callused, as they glide over my too-sensitive skin.

The strong yet tender way he handles me whenever we're together.

Before I can think better of it—before I can stop myself—I lean into him. Align my body with his so that I'm cradled in the crook of his arm, my side resting lightly against his. Ethan makes a sound deep in his throat at the contact, and his hand shifts until he's holding on to my hip, his whole arm now wrapped around me.

It feels good. Then again, everything about this moment feels good. The summer sunshine beating warmly down on us. The soft sea breeze playing

with our hair. Ethan's arm wrapped so possessively, so tenderly around me—like I'm the most precious thing in the world to him.

It's not true, but that doesn't matter here, doesn't matter now. Not when it's so easy for me to believe that I matter to him and that all our differences can be worked out. Just this once, just for now, I want to stay here in this moment and let the future take care of itself.

The automatic doors that mark the hospital's entrance swoop open as we approach. There's a visitor's desk directly across from us, and the two men who are working it call Ethan by name as we check in. They're obviously military, and obviously on the recovery side of some pretty awful injuries. And from the way they look at him it is just as obvious that they think he's the best person they've ever met. Maybe even the best person in the whole world.

Even more obvious is the fact that the feeling is mutual. Ethan introduces me to them, then chats animatedly with each of the soldiers about their physical therapy schedule and the new treatment they're both receiving—courtesy of the United States government and Frost Industries.

Eventually the conversation finishes and we take the elevator up to what turns out to be the burn unit. Up here there are both private rooms and long wards filled with numerous soldiers. The private rooms are for those who are in the first stages of treatment, when infection is such a problem, while the many-person ward houses those who have already gotten past the most dangerous stages.

Ethan doesn't go into the private rooms—the risk of infecting the patients is too great—but he does take me to the ward. Here, too, he knows most of the patients. As we walk the length of the room, we stop at every bed, talk to every soldier—even those Ethan doesn't know. Some of the conversation is about their injuries, the hospital, how well they're healing. But much of it centers around other things, like the Padres's chances for making the World Series and the opening days of the Chargers's training camp.

Ethan introduces me to each man we come to, and I find myself just as fascinated by them and their stories as he is. To be honest, I've never really known many military men before and have never given much thought to those I do know. But as I wander this ward, see the sacrifices each of these men has made for America, I can't help but be awed.

For the first time, I think about what I know of Ethan's past and how it's shaped him into the man he is today. Oh, everyone knows the story of little Ethan Frost, son of a real-life American hero. Pictures of him at eleven, a beautiful, solemn boy sitting with his grandparents as they received his father's posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor, graced the cover of every newspaper and every political magazine in the country. Hell, in the whole Western world.

I was too young to pay attention at the time it happened, but that doesn't mean I don't know the story of how his father, a Navy SEAL, rescued the vice president and numerous other important politicians from a volatile and deadly hostage situation in the Middle East. It's still one of the first things that comes up when you Google Frost Industries, just as it's something the papers and news shows still bring up on patriotic holidays or when Ethan makes headlines for some new invention or philanthropic interest.

His father's death from catastrophic injuries that couldn't be treated in a battlefield theater with the technology of the day is what has driven Ethan from the very beginning. It's what has made him push for better technology, better medicine, better science for military personnel and civilians alike, and it's what has led him to having the most cutting-edge research in the country.

I'm guessing it is also what brings him here, to this veterans' hospital, to spend time with these soldiers who have lost so much during their own service to this country.

We're halfway down the second row of soldiers when a man with a lot of stripes on his shoulders comes up and shakes both of our hands. Ethan introduces him to me as Dr. Andrew Mitchell, the Navy captain in charge of this hospital.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Ethan, but can I have ten minutes of your time? There's something I want to discuss with you in the surgical wing."

Ethan looks like he's about to refuse, but I can tell he's interested in what Dr. Mitchell has to say. It feels nice to know that he'd put me first, but I don't need him to. Not here. "Go ahead," I urge. "I'll be fine here with Viktor and Alejandro."

I smile at the two soldiers whose beds I am standing between. Both were caught in the same roadside bombing in Afghanistan. Alejandro has third-degree burns over 60 percent of his body, while Viktor got “lucky” and only sustained burns to 30 percent of his body. Of course, those burns were almost exclusively on his upper body—torso, arms, face. They are Marines out of Camp Pendleton, a huge base north of San Diego, which is why they were moved back here for treatment once they were stable.

I stay with them for the next twenty minutes or so—Dr. Mitchell’s discussion with Ethan is obviously more involved than they’d thought it would be. We talk about their families, the ocean, music, Ethan. Both of them have nothing but good things to say about him.

“You know he’s the reason this is the best-outfitted VA hospital in the world, right?” Alejandro says at one point. “He’s here every week making sure the directors have whatever they need whenever they need it.”

“Plus, he’s always talking to the vets,” Viktor tells me. “About their experiences in the field, about their injuries. About what they think is working in their treatment, and what they think isn’t. He doesn’t only listen to the doctors. He talks to us, wants to know what we think, even if we are just grunts from the front lines.”

Of course he does. Their words don’t surprise me at all, not after seeing the way he is with each of the soldiers he meets. The way he listens to them, really listens, no matter what it is they’re talking about. Too many of us tend to underestimate sick people, to think of them as somehow less. The fact that Ethan doesn’t do that is one of his finest qualities, in my opinion.

Still, I can’t resist teasing Viktor and Alejandro a little. “I’m already on a date with him, you know. You don’t have to lay it on quite so thick.”

Viktor laughs. “Just doing what we can to help a brother out.”

“I can tell. When you get out of here, we should get you a job in Frost Industries’ PR department. I bet you’d do wonders for his reputation.”

Alejandro laughs. “We probably would at that. But once I’m out, I’m going home to Chicago. My dad has a mechanic shop there. I think I’m going to settle down, get my mechanic’s license.”

“You want to fix cars?” I ask, excited because that’s always been a secret passion of mine as well. Miles taught me all about how engines work before

I hit high school, even let me help him fix up what had been his pride and joy at the time—a 1967 Shelby Mustang GT. I’ve never had more fun on a project in my life. He’d loved that car—right up until my dad lost it in a poker game.

“I think so. When I was younger, I wanted to see the world and the Marines gave me a chance to do that. But since I got injured I’ve been thinking it might be nice to be home for a while. To have a chance to build things instead of just tear them down.”

“That sounds like a really good plan to me.”

He grins. “You think so?”

“Absolutely. Nothing like a little grease under your fingernails to make everything seem better.”

He glances at my nails, which are currently painted a soft shell pink. “What do you know about grease under your fingernails?”

“More than you’d think.”

We dive into an in-depth discussion of engines that has all three of us grinning. Viktor isn’t much on fixing cars, but he’s thrilled beyond all comprehension that I know how to do it. He and Alejandro take turns quizzing me on what I’d fix if a car behaves a certain way. I get all but two of the questions right.

Alejandro’s in the middle of explaining why I missed the second question when Ethan comes back to get me. I’m facing Alejandro, my back to the door, but I still know the second Ethan gets close to me. There’s an electricity in the air around us, a current that originates with him and flows straight into me whenever he’s around. It sounds crazy, but I don’t know of a better way to describe the way my body lights up when he’s around, my every nerve ending sparking as they wait for contact—any contact—with him.

I turn to him with a smile and instinctively take the hand he holds out to me. “You been taking good care of my girl, guys?” he asks Viktor and Alejandro.

“I think it’s more like she’s been taking good care of us,” Viktor tells him. “I like her. You should keep her around for a while.”

“I’m trying to do just that.” Ethan raises one dark eyebrow. “Any suggestions on how I can accomplish it?”

“Let her get dirty,” Alejandro tells him with a wink.

“Excuse me?” The second eyebrow lifts to join the first, and I get the impression that, injured or not, Alejandro is in danger of getting his ass kicked. I’m not offended because I know exactly what he means, so I put a calming hand on Ethan’s shoulder.

“Your girl’s a grease monkey,” Alejandro continues. “She likes getting her hands dirty. You should get her a car to fix up. I bet she’d like that.”

“I’d love it,” I tell him, leaning over to give him a gentle kiss on his still healing cheek. “But I can buy my own car to fix up, thank you very much.”

“Uh-oh,” Viktor says teasingly. “You got yourself one of those feminists, Ethan. You better treat her right or she’ll be gone.”

“Believe me, I intend to.” He reaches over, shakes both their hands. I kiss Viktor’s cheek as well before we walk away.

“Hey, *chica!*” Alejandro calls after me. “Come back and visit us sometime.”

I turn to smile at him. “I plan on it. Take care, okay?”

He winks. “I always do.”

“I’m sorry I was gone so long,” Ethan tells me after we say a quick hello to the last soldiers in the ward. “Andrew has some interesting ideas for some new bone-grafting technology we’re working on. I wanted to make sure I understood what he was talking about before I went into R&D with his thoughts on Monday.”

“That’s okay. You couldn’t have left me in better company.”

“I could tell. You looked like you were really enjoying yourself.”

“I was. Alejandro and Viktor are great. Really cool guys.”

“And closer to your age than I am, certainly.”

I turn to look at him, confused. “I don’t know what that means.”

He studies me for long seconds, and more than once he looks like he’s going to say something. But in the end he just shakes his head and escorts me back onto the elevator.

He doesn't say anything else until we're out of the hospital and walking through the parking lot to the car. "Have you figured out why I brought you here yet?"

"Frost Industries has done a lot of good at that hospital. It doesn't take an expert to see that everything they have is state of the art."

He waves his hand dismissively. "I didn't bring you there because I wanted to impress you with my philanthropy. That's the least of my worries."

I'm not sure how to react to that. Does he mean he doesn't care about impressing me? Or simply that he doesn't think philanthropy is the way to do it? Either way, I'm pretty sure I should be insulted. Only he looks so annoyed, so frustrated, that it's hard for me to be anything but interested.

"So, tell me. What did you want me to see?"

"Those patents you were so upset about from Trifecta. Do you know what they were for?"

I don't. Obviously something medical, but in the meeting people referred to them by their official numbers, never by what they were for. And my part of the research hadn't dealt with them specifically in any way. I'd been looking at older cases, precedents set before these patents were even filed.

When it becomes obvious that I'm clueless, Ethan thrusts a frustrated hand through his hair. Then walks right past his car to the edge of the parking lot. We're on the edge of Balboa Park, the cultural mecca of San Diego. We're surrounded by museums and theaters, botanical gardens, and even the world-famous San Diego Zoo. Ethan stands there looking out over the lush and verdant landscaping for long seconds before turning back to me.

"They're for artificial skin regeneration. Do you know what that means?"

I shake my head, mutely fascinated by the passion, the determination, in his eyes.

"It means that those patents hold the key to easing the suffering of every man you met today—only Trifecta's too small and too inefficient to do anything with it. The technologies in those patents will make burn recovery faster and less risky, and when combined with some of the research my own scientists are doing, they'll also lessen by at least half the scars these men

will have to deal with for the rest of their lives. That means less painful scar tissue, less disfigurement, less chance of infection setting in early in the process.

“You may think me a heartless bastard for pushing through the takeover, for demanding those patents. But all you see is that family and what they stand to lose. Which really isn’t all that much. I paid them very well for their products, gave them more money than their shares of the company are worth. Because I understand what it’s like to lose what matters most to you.

“But I don’t have the luxury of only seeing them, of worrying about what a couple of guys in suits are going to do if they only make twenty million dollars on their invention instead of the fifty they might make if they ever manage to get their shit together. Not when I have hundreds of thousands, even millions of people depending on the products my company makes.

“When you look at Trifecta, you see victims. I see selfishness and incompetence. People who are so concerned with lining their own pockets and protecting their own interests that they’ll let thousands upon thousands of people suffer needlessly. And that is something I am not okay with.”

He holds my gaze for long seconds, then shoves his hands into his pockets and turns away.

His words reverberate inside me, make me see things in a whole new light—exactly as he intended. They don’t change my mind about wanting to be an intellectual property attorney, about wanting to protect the little guy from corporate domination. But they make me think twice about what happened in that conference room, make me understand in a way I didn’t before that there really are two sides to every story, even when I can’t see the other side.

Ethan might have been ruthless toward Trifecta, but he wasn’t heartless. Not by a long shot. Understanding that makes a world of difference. How can it not when I’ve just met all those men who are suffering? When I saw the way Alejandro winced with every move or the way Viktor faded in and out of the conversation because of the high from the pain medication? If I could find a way to ease their pain, I would. Of course I would.

I want to apologize, but I don’t know how. Don’t know what to say that will make everything I told him yesterday okay. “I’m sorry” just doesn’t

seem good enough.

But it's obvious he's waiting for me to say something. Though he's not looking at me, I can tell from the set of his shoulders. From the clench of his fists in his pockets. From the tightness of his jaw. I think about launching into a flowery apology, but in the end, I settle on the truth and hope it's good enough.

"My brother is a genius. I don't mean that he's a really smart guy. I mean, he's brilliant, so brilliant they can't even reliably measure his IQ. Or at least that's what all the psychologists say.

"Anyway, for as long as I can remember, he's been inventing things. When we were little, it was stupid stuff that made me laugh. Or made one of the chores we had to do easier. Nothing big. But as we got older, he got really interested in global communications and energy efficiency. In how telecommunications was changing everything, and yet also doing a damn good job of destroying the entire planet one cell phone at a time.

"So he decided to figure out how to fix the problem of telecom pollution. He isn't the only guy in the world interested in that, obviously. All the major telecom companies are into it now. But still, his ideas are pretty awesome. He worked up some stuff, showed it to my father, who promised to show it to some people he knew. This was before he started his own business based on my brother's ideas. You see, Miles never wanted to work for corporate America. He just wanted to do what he wanted to do and was happy making enough money to pay for a small garage lab where he could also tinker with cars."

"That's where you got it from." Ethan interrupts for the first time.

"Yeah." I decide to test the waters, to move a little closer to him. He doesn't reach for me, but he doesn't move away, either. For now, it's enough. "Anyway, at the beginning, my dad didn't think what Miles was doing was worth much. He'd sell his ideas for a few thousand dollars here or there. 'Cash in the hand,' he used to say. And then those companies who bought the ideas for nothing—who knew exactly what they were getting and took advantage just because they could—made a lot of money off my brother's ideas. *A lot* of money.

“And my dad got mad. He blamed Miles for not knowing his own worth. Blamed the companies for screwing him over. Basically, blamed anyone and everyone but himself for the fact that my brother got screwed. That’s when he decided they would start their own company once they got the necessary start-up cash.

“Needless to say, it’s kind of a sore spot with me. It’s why I want to be an intellectual property attorney, and it’s why I jumped down your throat without really understanding yesterday. I shouldn’t have done that and I’m sorry.”

I stop there, because saying any more gets dangerous. Gets me into areas I don’t really want to talk about with anyone, let alone with Ethan.

“You still think I was wrong,” he says without looking at me.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I think there are two sides to every story, and I think your reasons for doing what you do are incredibly compelling. And no, I don’t think you’re wrong. I’m just not sure you’re a hundred-percent right, either.”

He doesn’t speak for long moments, and then when he does, the words he says aren’t what I’m expecting at all. “I can live with that if you can.”

I think of my brother, of my father, of the shit storm that’s been my life for as long as I can remember. And then I think of the tender way Ethan holds me. Touches me. Kisses me. And I know that there’s only ever been one answer. “Damn right I can.”

Chapter Sixteen

His arms come around me then, and he's kissing me, his mouth skimming over my forehead, my cheeks, my jaw, my lips, my neck. I tilt my head back to give him better access, then moan as he presses soft kisses over my collarbone.

"Your heart's beating fast," he tells me, even as he delivers more kisses to the rapid pulse at the hollow of my throat.

"I wonder why."

He grins at me. "I don't know. Maybe we should investigate."

"I thought you already were."

He drops more kisses over the base of my neck, darts his tongue out and licks at my mouth, my jaw, the sensitive spot behind my ear. Then he presses two fingers to my jugular. "It's beating even faster now."

I lift my hand to the center of his chest, feel the steady but rapid *boom-boom-boom* of his own heart. "Yours isn't exactly slow, you know."

"You didn't expect anything different, did you, when I've got you pressed up against me, all soft and sexy and sweet-smelling?"

"Wow," I say with mock gravity. "How very sibilant of you."

"Not to mention charming."

I look away, feign an interest in the landscape that I'm far from feeling. I even manage to fake a small yawn.

"So that's the way you want to play it, hmm?" He grabs my hands, gently turns me to face him.

I look at him then, really look at him, and realize that the darkness—the remoteness—that has been in his eyes all day has vanished. In its place is the lightness I'm used to. And something else. Something more. I don't know what it is, and I couldn't describe it even if I wanted to. But whatever

it is, it's got me trembling all over again. Has my breath catching in my throat and my brain slowly moving into meltdown territory.

And then he's kissing me, really kissing me, and nothing in my life has ever felt better.

I tilt my head, open for him. Relish the feel of his lips. Tantalizing. Taking all the broken shards of me I have to offer and giving me pieces of him in return.

I wrap my arms around him, tugging at his simple white T-shirt until I manage to pull it free from his jeans. I want to feel him, want to put my hands on all that warm, golden skin. To slide my fingers over it and feel him tremble in response.

Ethan gasps as I finally manage to press my hands against the hard, muscled planes of his back. There's nothing in between us now, no fabric barricade to get in the way of my touching him.

I skim my fingers up his spine, then back down again. I circle around to the front, to the six-pack that he's rocking and the delicate little happy trail that stretches from his belly button down into the front of his low-rise jeans.

I want to follow it, to delve deeper until I'm touching him. Until his long, hard cock is in my hand and I'm bringing him the same pleasure that he's already given me.

I close my eyes, lean into him. Press my mouth more firmly against his to deepen the kiss, even as my thumb brushes back and forth against the sensitive skin of his lower abs. Ethan groans deep in his throat, and I want to go farther. To drop to my knees in front of him, take him in my mouth and feel the ecstasy as it pulses through him.

But even as I think it, even as I imagine what it would be like to have Ethan in my mouth, in my throat, other images crowd in. Images of Brandon forcing me to my knees, his hands tangled in my hair as his mouth spewed vile words and demands.

I stiffen right away, and the desire I'm feeling vanishes in the space between one breath and the next. Ethan drops his arms, steps back, then smiles ruefully as he tucks his shirt back into his jeans. "You make me forget that we're in a parking lot in broad daylight."

I feel my shoulders sag in relief. Yes, I tell myself. Let him think I stopped because of where we are, not because of who I am. Not because of a past I just can't conquer, no matter how much I want to.

"You okay?" he asks when I don't say anything. His palm skims down my arm until he gets to my hand. Then he entwines his fingers with my own.

"Yeah." My voice is still husky—with desire or fear, I'm not sure which. I decide not to dwell on it. Why bother when doing so won't give me any more answers than I already have?

"You want to get out of here?"

I think about his question, turn it over in my head. Then reach a very unexpected conclusion. "You know what I really want to do?"

"What?"

I point across the landscaping, deep into the heart of Balboa Park. "Go to the zoo."

* * *

Hours later, I turn to Ethan and ask, "So, what do you think?"

He eyes the penguin hat on top of my head, then says, "I think I like the flamingo one better."

"The flamingo? Really?" I reach for it, then change out the penguin. "You don't think it's too pink?"

"It's a flamingo. It's supposed to be pink."

"But does it clash with my hair? I don't think red and pink are supposed to go together. At least not this close."

For a second, Ethan doesn't react at all. Then he throws back his head and laughs and laughs, in a way I've never heard from him before. At first I'm a little insulted, but it doesn't take very long before I'm laughing along with him. Ethan's amusement is like that—totally infectious.

It's been a good day at the zoo. We've seen the giraffes and the zebras, the hippos and the polar bears. We even got a glimpse of the new baby panda. It was absolutely adorable, so precious and tiny.

Now we're in the gift shop, where Ethan has insisted on buying me a souvenir of our day together. At first I resisted, but the fact of the matter is I want something to remember today with at least as much as he wants to buy it for me. So I decided what the hell and have spent the last half hour looking for the most absurd memento I can find.

"What about the frog?" I ask, reaching for a giant green top hat that has an equally giant tree frog attached to it.

Ethan contemplates. "I still vote for the flamingo."

I sigh gustily. "The flamingo it is, then." I hand it to him with a flourish, then watch as he makes a beeline toward the nearest cashier to pay for it.

I wander through the store while I wait for him, and find myself standing in front of one of those old-fashioned coin machines. The kind where you stick in fifty cents and a penny and it stretches out the penny and imprints a design of your choice. I'm not sure what possesses me, but I rummage at the bottom of my purse for some change and put it in the machine. I pick the panda design, because Ethan was as enthralled by the little guy as I was, and then crank the handle until my shiny, stretched penny comes out.

It's no flamingo hat, but it'll have to do. At least for now.

I slip it into my pocket just as Ethan comes up behind me, shopping bag in hand. "You ready to go?"

"You bet." I reach for the bag. "But I absolutely insist on wearing the hat home."

"I'd be upset if you didn't. And remember, just ignore anyone who says it clashes with your hair."

I stick my tongue out at him, try to glare. But he just leans forward and kisses me, sucking my tongue deep into his mouth as he does. It feels so good that I start to melt, to open myself to him, but Ethan pulls away before I can do anything more than press my body against his. Which is a good thing—we are in the middle of a crowded store, more than half of whose occupants are under the age of twelve.

I settle for holding his hand on the way to the car, and I'm so happy—so at peace—after our day together that it's a miracle I don't take off under my own power. I know it was just a simple trip to the zoo, but there's something about seeing Ethan relaxed and having a good time that gets to

me. Makes me relax as well. All the crap I have to deal with at work, with my parents, with my own psyche, takes a backseat to this sunny, perfect afternoon.

Not even the paparazzi standing near the zoo exit as we leave can put a dent in my mood. Ethan growls a little at the intrusion, pulls me close, but I can tell he doesn't really mind, either. Hell, with his life he's probably used to it. Besides, it's not like I'm interesting or famous enough to make the pictures worth much. If they even get picked up, I'll probably be described as Ethan's new lady friend or some such ridiculous moniker. Which is more than fine with me—I don't need or want to add fame to my already fucked-up life. My ebullient mood lasts most of the way home, but the closer we get to La Jolla, the more my thoughts turn to all the things I can't change. I think of the VA hospital and all the men I met there today. Some of them—like Alejandro and Viktor—are in really good spirits, but others are completely destroyed by what has happened to them. It was devastating to see, even more devastating to understand that there is nothing I can do to help them.

“How do you handle it?” I ask Ethan as we turn onto La Jolla Shores Drive.

“Handle what?”

“The pressure. The weight of all those expectations. Everyone knows that Frost Industries works miracles, but there's always more suffering to cure, more pain to try to stop. How do you handle knowing that no matter how hard you work, no matter how many people you help, there will always be others you can't do anything for?”

“By not believing that I'll never be able to help them. By always looking for the next miracle, the next breakthrough that will somehow manage to save someone who couldn't be saved a year ago. Or ten years ago. Fifteen, twenty.”

My mind goes to his father, and I figure Ethan's must be doing the same thing. Is there a product in Frost Industries's arsenal that would have kept his father alive? I want to ask, but it's too soon. Too personal. So not my business.

“Does it work?” I ask.

“What?”

“Visualizing the future you want to have? Believing it so much that it becomes a kind of truth to you?”

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” he says after a moment. “But that’s a perfect description of what I’m talking about.”

“I can’t take credit for it.” The campus counselor I saw once a week for my entire freshman year said those words to me every time she ended a session with me. She told me I just had to visualize the future I wanted, free from the pain of the past, and that I would have it one day. It wouldn’t be easy, it wouldn’t be quick. But I would get there.

I don’t know if I ever believed her, but I took her advice. Started planning for the life I wanted instead of the one I had. And here I am now, studying what I want to study. Interning where I want to intern. Wearing a flamingo hat and sitting next to the most intriguing man I’ve ever known. Yeah, things could be a lot worse.

“Do you really want to know how I handle the pressure?” Ethan asks me as he makes a couple of turns in quick succession.

“Of course I do.” I find myself wanting to know everything about him. Everything special, everything mundane. Everything that makes him who he is.

One more turn and then we’re cruising up the street we walked down together two nights ago. I recognize the houses, especially the chrome-and-glass monstrosity that Tori so admired.

“We’re going to your house?” A shiver of unease works its way down my spine. I ignore it, refusing to live my whole life in the shadow of a few bad memories.

“I had planned on taking you to dinner and then home, but since you seem genuinely interested in how I keep things in perspective...”

“I am.”

“Then, yes, we’re going to my house.”

Seconds later, he makes the left turn into his driveway. He mutters to himself as he plugs the gate code in, and it doesn’t take a genius to see that it’s a sore spot with him. I can see how it would be. Ethan isn’t a big fan of hiding behind walls—he’s open about himself and his business, and always

has been. So I can imagine that an eight-foot privacy fence and a huge iron gate would grate on him.

Which raises the question, why have them?

“The insurance makes me,” he answers tersely as he pulls the car up the driveway and into a six-car garage. One where every bay is taken.

He doesn’t give me time to stop and admire his babies, even though the garage is loaded with some real beauties. He’s got a bright red Porsche Panamera Hybrid, an electric-blue BMW ActiveHybrid 750, and a Lexus LS 600h L. Talk about taking environmentally friendly to a whole new level—Ethan has four of the greenest, most expensive cars in the whole world sitting in his garage. Five if I’m right in guessing that the black Porsche Cayenne in the last bay is also a hybrid. Which makes the only non-environmentally-friendly car in the whole place the yellow Ferrari 250 GTO that I’m actually standing close enough to touch. Not that I would dare.

“Is that what I think it is?” I whisper, leaning down to get a closer look. I nearly whimper as I see the distinctive interior, then clasp my hands behind my back so I’m not tempted to touch it. Or try to steal it.

“You really do know cars.” Ethan sounds surprised, but I’m too busy trying not to lick his Ferrari to get offended.

“You don’t have to ‘know’ cars to know of this one. There were only thirty-six of them ever made. I mean, as long as you don’t count all the imposters that came afterward.”

“It doesn’t bite, you know. You’re welcome to touch it.”

The urge to do just that is a throbbing need inside me. I want to lift the hood, to peer inside it and see if it’s really as beautifully built as all the magazines and websites say. But I’m afraid once I get started pawing at it, it’ll be hours before Ethan can drag me away.

“No, that’s okay.” I try not to sound too reluctant. “I’d rather have my question answered.”

“Don’t look so sad. There’ll be other chances.” This time when he puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me to the house, I barely startle. I’m getting used to being touched by him.

Too bad I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad one.

“Where did you find her?” I ask, craning my head around for one last look at the Ferrari. She gleams under the garage’s recessed lighting.

“I’m not sure if I should be pleased or insulted that you’re a lot more impressed by my car than you are by me.”

I don’t bother denying the obvious. But I do say, “You should be pleased. Most women wouldn’t have a clue how awesome it is that you own one of those babies.”

He narrows his eyes, contemplates my words. “Okay, you’ve convinced me.”

We enter the house, then walk down a short, winding hallway that leads to a huge, state-of-the-art kitchen. Now, I love cooking as much as the next girl—probably even more—but I think the fact that I am chomping at the bit to get back to the garage says everything you need to know about me.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really. The ice cream sundae you bought me at the zoo contained enough calories to keep me going for the next week.” Especially considering the fact that I ate an entire pint of Cherry Garcia by myself last night. When I finally start running again, my heart and my ass aren’t going to know what hit them.

“Don’t worry. You’ll work it off.” Ethan’s grin is wicked as he propels me through the kitchen and into a formal dining room with a table that will sit twenty-four comfortably. I don’t even know twenty-four people I’d want anywhere near me, and Ethan throws intimate dinner parties where he doesn’t even have to put a leaf in the table to entertain that many. It boggles the mind, and underscores just how different we are in so very, very many ways.

Ethan doesn’t seem to notice my discomfort at his friend and furniture situation. He’s too busy throwing open the huge double doors that make up a large portion of the dining room’s back wall. “Come on,” he tells me. “You can get changed out here.”

Relieved because his words don’t sound sexual in the slightest—not that I actually thought he would jump me or anything—I’m still a little wary as I walk out onto his mammoth patio. There’s a gigantic vanishing-edge

swimming pool directly in front of me, and sixteen chaise longues in the exact same shade of blue-gray as his roof.

“We’re going swimming?” I ask cautiously. It doesn’t sound like that bad an idea, actually. I’m a little sticky from a sunny afternoon spent at the zoo, and the pool does look inviting.

Except Ethan has crossed to an outdoor closet at one end of the small pool house that graces the right side of the property. And he’s not pulling out swimsuits for me to try on. He’s pulling out wetsuits.

“Even better,” he tells me. “We’re going surfing.”

Chapter Seventeen

“But I don’t know how to surf.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach you.”

I glance out at the ocean, which I have a perfect view of from his patio, by the way. Not to mention from every room on this side of the house. It’s kicking up some pretty massive waves, actually, churning and spitting all over the place, and I feel more than a little bit of trepidation. My athletic prowess isn’t great at the best of times. Pitting it against a seething, pissed-off ocean seems like a really bad idea.

But Ethan looks so excited, so happy, that I can’t just say no. I am the one who asked how he handled the pressure, after all. And besides, I may not trust the ocean, but I do trust Ethan to keep me safe. He won’t let me drown.

Which is how I find myself in a dressing room a few minutes later, trying to figure out how the hell to put on a wetsuit over the new bikini I found in one of the drawers. It seems self-explanatory, but the truth is it’s a lot more difficult than it looks. The thing is tight and clingy, and no matter how hard I try, it doesn’t quite want to go where it’s supposed to. Instead, it sticks in the most unflattering places until I’m about to scream with frustration.

Ethan knocks on the door more than once, just to check if I need help, but there’s no way I’m going to open the door when the wetsuit is strangling my boobs and somehow riding up my ass all at the same time. There are some things no man needs to see. Especially when I can’t help wondering how many other women he’s loaned this wetsuit to—and how much better they must have looked in it than I do.

Finally I get it sorted out, or at least as sorted out as I can make it, and hope Ethan won’t laugh too hard when he sees me. I open the door to find him waiting on one of the loungers, two surfboards next to him as well as a

small picnic basket. How long was I in there, anyway, if he had time to do all this and change into his wetsuit as well?

Deciding to chalk it up to the fact that he obviously has way more practice at this than I do, I stop myself from apologizing for keeping him waiting. He's the one who wants to do this, after all. I'm the one who is about to risk death simply because I want to impress him. And I'm going to do it in an ill-fitting yellow wetsuit.

So not my finest hour.

Ethan doesn't complain at the wait, however. He just smiles at me and gestures for me to come closer. Which I do, warily. I'm not sure I trust the look on his face.

But all he does is grab my wetsuit in the back and tug a little. Suddenly it seems to slide into place and everything—front and back—feels a lot better.

“Thanks,” I tell him, blushing a little.

I'm not looking him in the eye at this point, so he puts a finger under my chin and tips my head up until our gazes meet. “You're welcome,” he says, right before he bends down and brushes his lips across mine.

Then, before I can even process the taste and feel of him, he's pulling back. Handing me my surfboard. Leading the way to the very edge of his property.

I guess I thought we'd go through the front and back down to the beach that way, but here, on the edge of the cliff, Ethan has another surprise for me: a rocky set of stairs carved into the cliff itself that leads down to a small, private beach alcove.

Here, in some of the most prime, most expensive beachfront property in the world, Ethan has his own little slice of paradise. And it's perfect.

Ethan drops his surfboard close to the water and I do the same. “Are you ready?” he asks, excitement gleaming in his eyes.

“Not even a little bit,” I answer.

He laughs, then positions my surfboard so that the tip is facing the water. “Okay, get on it,” he tells me.

“And here I thought surfing took place in the water.”

“Not until after you learn the proper form. Otherwise you’ll drown.” He gestures to the board. “Now get down there.”

He’s not playing around, so I do what he says, stretching out on my stomach on the board. But I can’t even do that right, because then he’s kneeling next to me, telling me to inch forward, than inch back.

We do this three or four times as he tries to get me in the perfect position—a position I don’t even understand—before I throw my hands up in the air. “I’m not an imbecile. Tell me what I’m supposed to be doing here and I’ll do it. Don’t just give me these ridiculous directions with no explanation whatsoever. It doesn’t work for me.”

Ethan studies me for a second, as if trying to gauge my level of irritation—which, if I’m honest, is pretty much off the charts at this point. He comes to some decision, then says, “Fine,” and points at the front of my board.

“Do you see how that’s pointing up a little bit?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s because you’re too close to the back of the board. Scoot forward, but not so much that the tip digs into the sand or you’ll be too forward-heavy. Surfing is all about finding the balance.”

As if any idiot with eyes couldn’t figure that much out. I bite the retort back, however, and concentrate on finding the perfect spot on the board. The sweet spot, Ethan calls it, without a hint of innuendo. I try not to blush as my thoughts go down an entirely different path, one that has nothing to do with surfing and everything to do with the way I felt when Ethan was kneeling in front of me, his tongue stroking deep inside me.

Once I find the sweet spot, Ethan has me grab on to the side of the surfboard and lift my upper body off it, like I’m about to do a push-up. Which, I guess, in essence I am.

Only Ethan calls it a pop-up, and it involves me doing a lot more than just lifting and lowering my body off the ground.

“Okay,” he tells me when I’m in the right position, elbows bent and toes curled under. “You’re going to want to lift your body up, until your arms are completely straight.”

He watches, waiting, until I do exactly what he’s instructed. “Good. Do that a few times. Get used to what it feels like to take the brunt of your

weight on your arms and shoulders.”

I start to make some crack about knowing how to do a push-up, but while it's the same theory, it's not quite the same thing. The positioning of the hands isn't quite the same—this is harder—and neither is the way I'm supposed to hold my feet. Because the goal isn't to go up and down, like in a set of push-ups. The goal is to build enough momentum to actually get my entire body into a standing position.

Once Ethan is pleased with my beginning form, he lies on his own board and shows me how I'm supposed to pop up, so that my feet come directly under me, the left one in front. He makes it look incredibly easy, but the first time I try I end up falling off the side of the board, arms flailing and legs doing everything but what they're supposed to.

I brace myself to hit the sand, but Ethan catches me before I'm more than halfway down. “Good try,” he says, dropping a quick kiss on my nose. Suddenly I don't feel nearly as ungainly or embarrassed. Which is why I agree when he continues, “Let's try that again.”

Over and over, he has me pop up. Over and over, I lose my balance and fall off the side of the board or the back of the board, or miss the board completely. Ethan's incredibly patient and sweet, but by the third time I land on the sand instead of the board, even he's having a hard time hiding his laughter.

“That's it!” I tell him, throwing myself down onto my back in the sand. “Some people are obviously not meant to surf, and I am one of them.”

“That's not true. It takes everyone a while to get the hang of getting up on a board. You're doing great.”

“Which is why it looks like it's taking every ounce of concentration you have not to laugh your ass off.”

“Not *every* ounce of concentration. Just most of them.”

“Nice.” I roll over to my side, start to mock-punch him. He grabs my hand before it can connect with his shoulder, and uncurls my fist. Then he brings my hand to his mouth and places a long, lingering kiss right in the center of my palm.

From someone else, it probably would have been cheesy. But from Ethan, it's sweet and sexy and emotionally devastating all at the same time.

My fingers curl in of their own volition, like they, too, want to hold on to his kiss for as long as possible.

“What are we doing, Ethan?” I whisper the words into air that is suddenly charged with electricity. With need. And with something else I don’t even know how to define.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but I’m trying my damndest to woo you.”

Woo. There’s that word again, the same one Tori used the other night with such a dreamy look in her eyes. The same one I’ve been afraid to even think in conjunction with Ethan Frost.

Seduce I can handle. *Woo*...it’s a whole different ball game. One I’m not sure I’m up for.

“Hey.” Ethan puts a finger under my chin, tilts my face up until I’m once again looking him in the eyes. “I wasn’t trying to scare you.”

“I know.” The fear is my problem, not his.

“So where’d you go, then?”

Someplace he can’t follow. Someplace I never thought I’d find myself again. But I can’t say that, not when he’s been nothing but sweet to me.

I reach up, and this time it’s my turn to touch his face. My turn to cup his cheeks in my hands and bring my mouth gently to his. Ethan resists at first, and I know he wants to ask more questions. To delve deeper into my damaged psyche and find out what it is that has screwed me up so badly.

But I don’t want him there, don’t want him to see just how ruined I am. Not now, when I’m desperate to feel his arms around me and his lips on mine. Not yet, when I’m so far from being ready to let him go.

“Please,” I whisper against his lips. *Please don’t make me do this now. Please accept what I can give you. Please say that it’s enough, that I’m enough.* “Please.”

His lips part at my first whisper, but it isn’t until I’ve said “please” a second time that he accepts my kiss. More, welcomes it.

Every other time we’ve kissed, he’s been the aggressor. The one who controls what happens while I control what doesn’t. This time we switch,

and if we're both a little uncertain about how the reversal is supposed to work, it doesn't take long for us to figure it out.

I lick at his lips, slowly, carefully. He tastes so good, feels so good, that I want to stay here—right here in this moment—forever. I want to savor this gift he's given me, to explore it as fully as I can before I have to give it back. Give *him* back. And I know, eventually, that I'll have to do just that. The likes of Ethan Frost aren't meant for me.

Misery churns in my stomach at the thought, but I push it away. Ignore it. I might not be able to keep Ethan forever, but I have him right now and I'm not going to waste a second of my time on regrets or maybes or why-nots. Not when there are so many better things to do.

With that thought in mind, I suck his lower lip between my teeth. Nibble softly. Then relish the groan that seems to come from the very heart of him. This time when he opens his mouth, I slip inside. Stroke my tongue along his, once, twice, then again and again as I absorb the sweet mint and lemon taste of him.

He groans again, even as he wraps his arms around me and presses his big, strong hands into the center of my back. I can feel the heat of him even through my wetsuit and he feels so good that I think about yielding, about ceding control, as I always do to him. But then he pulls his mouth from mine, gasps for air, and I know that I'm not giving up the power I have over this man. Not now. Not yet.

I move to recapture his lips and this time I'm not gentle. Instead, I grind my mouth against his in a desperate attempt to get deeper. To take more. To reach the very depths of him.

He nips at me in response, his teeth catching on my lower lip as he pulls me even more tightly against him. I bite back, not hard enough to do damage but definitely hard enough to let him know that I mean business. He groans and mutters a particularly vile curse, and I move to take advantage.

I plunge my tongue into his mouth, run it over his teeth, his tongue, the insides of his cheeks. I want to experience all of him, to find out every single thing I can about this man who is still a mystery to me in nearly every way that counts.

I keep expecting him to take control, to roll me under him and bend me to his will. He can do it easily—I'm so desperate for the taste and touch of him that I'll do nearly anything to get it. But aside from plunging his hands into my hair to keep me close, he seems content to let me set the pace.

The freedom only makes me more frantic. Keeping my mouth on his, I shove at his shoulders until he leans back on his elbows in the sand. I start to scramble on top of him, but he jerks away before I can straddle him. The unexpectedness of it makes me freeze, afraid that I've somehow done something wrong. It's been years since I've made any kind of move on a guy, let alone something this blatantly sexual, and I don't have a clue what I'm doing.

Convinced I've made a fool of myself in front of this man yet again, I scoot a few feet away from him. I think about apologizing, but what am I supposed to say—*Sorry for trying to jump you?* Just the thought makes the humiliation worse. But I have to say something. After all, I'm the one who practically attacked him.

But before I can form words, any words, I realize that Ethan's grinning—and not in a you're-an-idiot kind of way. No, his smile is pure sensuality, pure carnality, and it looks damn good on him. So good that I forget my embarrassment for a moment and simply stare.

How can I, when he's just so damn beautiful? Too beautiful, really, for words or for me. I should pack it in now, give up before I make an even bigger fool of myself. But I can't. I'm transfixed, as much by the way he's looking at me as by his actual looks.

His eyes are a dark and storm-tossed blue that seem to see to the very heart of me, while his dark hair is wild and windblown from the hour and a half we've spent on the beach. Though, if I'm being honest, I have to admit that my fingers are at least as responsible for the disarray as the gentle breeze currently winding itself around us.

His cheekbones are high and sharp, his lips pink and swollen from our kisses. And inviting. So inviting. When his grin widens and his tiny little dimple flashes—so out of place in that fallen-angel face of his—it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to lean forward and pick up back where we left off only moments ago.

When I finally yank my gaze away from his too-perfect face, I notice for the first time that Ethan isn't scrambling to get away from me at all. In fact, he's doing the exact opposite. I watch in awe as he pulls his arms out of his wetsuit before rolling the clingy, uncomfortable material down his chest and over his chiseled abs.

It's the first time I've seen him in person without a shirt on, and I realize I made a mistake when I was touching him earlier. Ethan isn't hiding a six-pack under his dress shirts and suits. No, the man has a full-on eight-working-on-ten-pack, something I didn't even think was possible outside of magazines and movies.

My fingers clench with the need to touch him. To pet him. To *feel* him. For a second I engage in a simple little fantasy that involves nothing but his abs and my tongue, and while it isn't fancy, it definitely gets the job done. Already I can feel drool pooling in my mouth.

In the meantime, Ethan keeps tugging at the suit, rolling it past his hips and down his legs before kicking it off completely. Underneath, he's wearing a pair of relatively tight board shorts that make it exceptionally obvious that he has an erection.

He reaches for me, his hands closing around my upper arms, and I feel a frisson of alarm as he turns me around so that my back is to him. I don't like having any man behind me, not even him—it makes me feel vulnerable—but my fear dissipates as he presses soft kisses to the nape of my neck.

"Your turn," he murmurs, his breath hot against my ear.

"My turn?"

"Making out in wetsuits is not what I would call advisable."

Then he's pulling down my zipper and slowly—oh so slowly—peeling me out of the wetsuit. It takes a lot longer to get mine off than his, because he presses his lips to each part of my body as it is revealed to him. My shoulders, my shoulder blades, my upper arms, the curve of my elbow, my ribs. I try to stand perfectly still, but I can't help the small shivers that run through me as he wraps his arms around me. Clasps his hands on my bare stomach. Trails soft, sweet kisses down my spine.

He licks under the strap of my bikini top while his hands slide up to cup my breasts. I gasp, arch against him as his thumbs brush over my nipples.

They harden instantly and he laughs a little, a breathless sound of delight that only makes me shiver more.

“Stop teasing me,” I gasp between broken breaths as he gently squeezes my nipples, rolling them between his thumb and forefinger until I feel like I’m going to lose my mind.

“Baby, this isn’t teasing.” He drops to his knees, runs his tongue all the way down to the dimples at the base of my spine. Then he moves even lower, licking inside my bikini bottom as he continues rolling the wetsuit down my hips and legs.

“What—what is it then?”

“Pleasure.” He nips gently at my ass, making me giggle even as he sends heat rushing through me. “Pure, unadulterated pleasure.”

I can’t argue with that, not when my entire body is awash in the most amazing sensations. He keeps kissing me, touching me, *stroking* me, anywhere, everywhere, until the last remnants of uneasiness slowly slip away and all that’s left is desire. Need.

Ethan seems to know instinctively when my apprehension disappears, because his touch becomes firmer, more aggressive. His fingers dip below the edge of my bikini bottom, skimming lightly over the curve of my ass and my hips before circling around to the front.

I gasp at the first glide of his fingers over my sex, stiffen despite myself. In my head, I know he’s touched me here before and that he’s given me nothing but the most amazing pleasure in doing so. But I can’t help it—the position is freaking me out. It’s so eerily reminiscent of that long-ago night with Brandon when he forced me to my knees and came at me from behind that I’m having trouble separating the past from the present.

Memories swamp me—fear, pain, helplessness—and I can’t help stiffening. Can’t help panicking. I try to ignore them, to push past them. I remind myself that this is Ethan, sweet, gentle Ethan who has never been anything but kind to me. Who has never done anything to hurt me. But it’s too late. Brandon’s already in my head and the fear is already coursing through me. It turns my desire to panic, my need to desperation.

I try to force the words through my suddenly tight throat. *No. Stop. Don’t.* But all that comes out is a low, inarticulate sound that makes no sense to

anyone, not even me.

Shame courses through me. Five years have passed, five years filled with self-defense courses and counseling and learning how not to be a victim, and here I am, right back where I started. Unable to enjoy the lovemaking of a kind, generous man and unable to find the words to stop him, either.

But Ethan isn't Brandon, not in any way, and it turns out he doesn't need words. That one, desperate sound is enough to have him pulling back, dropping his hands.

"Baby? You okay?"

Tears burn in my throat and behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I haven't cried about this since that long-ago week, and I'm not going to start now. What happened with that bastard might still have the power to shake me up and shut me down, but I won't give him anything else. I won't let him break me any more than he already has. Won't let him ruin what's growing between Ethan and me the way he ruined me.

I can't talk, so I nod. I reach for Ethan's hands, put them back on my stomach, my hips. I can do this, I tell myself. This is Ethan. Ethan, not Brandon, and I've already shared more of my body, and myself, with him than I have with any other man.

But that's the problem, too, because Ethan knows me. Knows what it feels like when I'm responding. Knows what it sounds and looks and smells like. And he knows this isn't it.

"Chloe?"

I try to hold on to him, try to keep his hands pressed to my body, because in some crazy, wild corner of my mind I think that if I can just let him do this it will make everything better. Make me better. Because I don't want to be like this. I don't want to be broken. Not with him. Not anymore.

"Chloe, stop."

I don't listen. I hold on to his hands like a lifeline, press them against my breasts, my sex. But I'm shuddering now, my whole body shaking with fear and rage and a horror I don't even know how to acknowledge.

In some random, disconnected part of my brain I'm aware of Ethan cursing, low and long and vile. I want to apologize, to explain, but the

words won't come. Nothing will, but a low, keening cry I can't seem to control.

Ethan pulls away from me again, and this time he pushes to his feet before circling around so that he's standing in front of me. "Chloe, baby, talk to me. What do you need? What can I do?"

He doesn't sound angry, doesn't sound disgusted. No, the only thing I hear in his voice is a deep, aching concern, and just the sound of it nearly brings me to my knees.

I want him to hold me, to tell me that it's okay.

That he doesn't blame me for freaking out.

That he still wants me.

And that everything between us is somehow going to be all right.

But even as I think it, I know better. I gave up on fairy tales five long years ago, and nothing, nobody, is going to be able to change that now.

Besides, nothing is okay. How can it be when Ethan is standing in front of me, his hands out in the universal I'm-not-going-to-hurt-you position? When he's staring at me with eyes gone dark and blank?

"I'm sorry." I finally manage to choke the words out.

"*You're* sorry?" He sounds so incredulous that the words hit me like a blow. It's the last straw. "Baby, I—"

I don't wait around for him to finish whatever he's going to say. Instead, I push past him, make a mad dash for the uneven stone steps that lead up to his house. That lead to freedom.

"Chloe, stop!" He chases after me, which only makes me run faster. "Baby, you're going to trip! You're going to hurt yourself!"

I ignore the warning, keep running. It doesn't matter. What's the pain of a little fall when I already feel like I've been ripped open, my insides spilling out for everyone to see?

"Damn it, Chloe." He's right behind me. I can feel his breath on my neck, hear his footsteps slapping at the rock right behind me. I half expect to feel his hands on me as he yanks me to a stop. But still he doesn't touch me. For some reason, his reticence only wounds me more.

Tears I still refuse to let fall are in my eyes, in my chest. My vision is clouded and I'm having trouble breathing. I'm strangling on my pain and the aching, painful breaths my body doesn't quite know what to do with anymore.

I'm almost at the top when it happens. I stumble trying to climb up a particularly high step and I bang my shins, hard, on the harsh, jagged edge of the stair. My legs go out from under me and I start to fall, panic coursing through me at the thought of tumbling twenty feet off the side of the open staircase to the sand below.

Ethan does touch me then, his hands jolting out to grab me so quickly that I know he must have been waiting for this to happen all along. Then I'm in his arms, my legs draped over his arm and my side pressed against his chest as he carries me up the few remaining steps.

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on tight, even after we get to his patio. I'm sure he wants to put me down, to show me the door as quickly as he can. But I'm not ready to let go yet, not ready to give up the strange and powerful comfort that comes from just being held in his arms.

Ethan makes no move to put me down. Instead, he crosses to one of the many long outdoor sofas that make up the different seating arrangements out here. He sinks down onto it, keeping me on his lap. In his arms. And then he starts to rock me like a child.

The dam inside me bursts, and emotions—dark, messy, devastating—come pouring out in all directions. I don't know how to stop them. I can't stop them, not anymore.

Unable to do anything else, I bury my face in Ethan's chest and give in to the harsh, ugly sobs that threaten to tear me in two.

Chapter Eighteen

I don't know how long I sit there wrapped up in Ethan's arms as emotions I no longer have control over tear through me.

Long enough for the last remnants of day to fade to twilight and twilight to fade to inky darkness.

Long enough for the lingering warmth of the afternoon to give way to the chill that comes with early summer evenings on the beach.

More than long enough for the tide to roll in on the sand below us.

In a moment of clarity, I think of Ethan's surfboards, of the wetsuits and the picnic basket and the towels, and I wonder if any of them are still there. Or if the ocean has swept in and carried them away in its endless, inexorable grasp.

For years, I wished that it would do that to me. That the ocean would push onto the desolate stretch of beach I used to roam all through high school and cover me. Envelop me. Pull me down, drag me under, carry me away from the taunts, the threats, the hate. Carry me away from *him*.

I haven't felt that way in a while. Not since I graduated from high school and moved to San Diego. Not since I got away from my parents, from that damn boarding school, from Brandon.

Yet at this moment I'm right back there. Looking out at that endless stretch of ocean and wishing, praying, to be swept away. To be dragged under.

It's not fair. Why now, when everything is going right? I have school, real friends, a job that challenges me, Ethan. It should be enough. God knows it's more than I've ever had before.

And yet somehow, it isn't enough. Because underneath all the polish, all the gloss, all the layers I've built up, I'm just as messed up as I've always been. I hate thinking that. Hate even more that it's true.

I've spent three years here in San Diego, hiding, pretending to the world that all that matters is who and what I am now. It almost worked, too. Until Ethan came along. Why he brings it all back I'll never know, not when he's been nothing but wonderful to me.

Eventually the tears stop. So do the self-recrimination and even the sadness. In their place is only numbness, a blank emptiness inside me that I'm afraid will never be filled again.

Long minutes pass. I know I should muster up the energy to move, to apologize, to do something. But there's nothing there, not when it's taking every ounce of energy I have to just be. To just breathe.

Ethan waits patiently. He doesn't shift, doesn't talk, doesn't betray impatience with me or the situation in any way. He just holds me. Rocks me. Strokes my hair. And I know if I could feel anything, it would be gratitude.

The thought has me stirring a little, just enough to lift my head and say, "Thank you." It seems the appropriate thing to do.

But Ethan stiffens against me, his entire body going rigid between one moment and the next. "What did you say?"

"Thank—"

"Don't say that again." For the first time, I hear anger in his voice. "Don't you fucking say that to me again."

"I'm sorry." The harshness of his tone gets to me, makes me nervous and has me squirming to get free. For the first time, he hangs on, refusing to let go.

"Jesus! Don't say that, either."

The first lick of anger works its way in past the numbness. "What should I say, then?"

"Anything else. Anything but thank you. Anything but that you're sorry."

I shove away, harder this time, and Ethan gets the message. He gently sets me down next to him on the couch. I don't want to look at him, don't want to see the pity and the disgust in his eyes, but he doesn't give me a choice. His face is just there, in front of me. His gaze direct, relentless, demanding that I meet it.

So I do. It hurts, but I learned long ago that everything hurts. I ignore the pain and do it anyway. “I don’t know what you want to hear.”

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

My blood runs cold. It’s been so long since I’ve heard those words, so long since I even let myself think about what the truth really is. “No, you don’t. Nobody does.”

“I do.”

I shake my head. I can’t. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“You start by trusting me.” Again, I shake my head, but Ethan cuts me off before I can say anything else. “I know that’s asking a lot. I know you’ve been hurt. I can’t imagine how hard it is for you to trust me with this part of you. But I need you to. I need to know what happened to you. And I need you to know that whatever it is, whatever you tell me, isn’t going to change things.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” His voice is as resolute as the look in his eyes. “I promise you, Chloe. I promise you. It doesn’t matter what you say. I’m not going anywhere.”

I don’t want to believe him. Because if I do, if I lay myself open in front of him and he walks away—or worse, doesn’t believe me—it will destroy me. I’ll fall to so many pieces that this time I won’t even be able to pretend that they fit together.

I’ve been fine in the five years since it happened because I’ve put it away. I’ve shoved all my pain and rage and hate down so deep inside myself that I almost forget it’s there. I survive because I believe the lie. If I do what he asks, if I bring the whole sordid mess back up to the surface, I’m terrified I’ll never be able to shove it back down again.

“Chloe.”

Though it’s the last thing I want to do, I drag my eyes back up to his. I can’t help it, can’t resist. Not when he says my name in that tone. Not when he looks at me the way he is right now.

“Tell me.”

And though it's the hardest thing I've ever done—harder than facing my mom and dad after it happened, harder even than signing that damn piece of paper that Brandon's family demanded—I take a deep breath and a leap of faith, and do exactly what Ethan asks of me.

Chapter Nineteen

“I was fifteen. Young and stupid and desperate to make friends. To have a shot at a normal life. We moved around a lot when I was young, never stayed in one place more than a few months. My dad was not exactly what you would call great at keeping a regular job.” Which is pretty much the understatement of the year, but there’s no need to get into that, too. The story about Brandon is more than enough to spring on Ethan right now.

“We moved to Boston when I was fourteen because there was a job opportunity my dad couldn’t pass up. It wasn’t a great job, at least not at first, so we pretty much lived in this crappy house in this crappy school district where we barely had enough desks, let alone books. It was ridiculous. Not to mention dangerous—there was a lot the school cops and metal detectors didn’t catch.

“I didn’t feel safe, not with the way that some of the guys talked to me or looked at me when I walked by them. Some of them had no problem touching, either, even if they’d never even talked to me. Girls were a commodity in a lot of ways, and guys thought they could treat us however they wanted. The administration had enough trouble keeping the guns out of school and the rival gangs from killing each other. They didn’t have much time or effort left to worry about anything less than actual assault.

“I didn’t know what to do, what to say to keep them away from me, and I didn’t have any friends to watch my back. I complained to my dad, but he said to just ignore them. That it wouldn’t be for much longer, just until the money started rolling in.

“But I’d heard that same story a million times through the years, and it never quite worked out the way my parents thought it would. Sure, now they had my brother and his brilliant ideas, but even the best ideas take financial backing. That’s what my dad was working on, or so he said. In the meantime, I was supposed to keep my head down and not cause trouble. I

did my best, but there was always some other guy who thought he could slap my ass, brush an arm over my breasts. Who thought he could touch me whether I wanted him to or not.”

A breeze comes off the ocean and I shiver, though I don't know if it's because I'm cold or because of the story I'm telling. Probably a little bit of both. I don't want to do this. Already I can feel the rage festering inside me—an angry wound just waiting for a chance to poison everything it touches. My new life. The internship. Ethan. Just the thought has me wanting to give up now, before I've barely begun.

But there's Ethan, watching me with his steady, patient eyes. Holding me with his strong, tender hands. How can I not tell him when he so obviously needs me to?

The breeze gets stronger and I start to shiver in earnest now. He doesn't say a word—probably afraid I'll take any out to postpone the next few minutes—but he reaches into the outdoor chest that doubles as a coffee table and pulls out a blanket. He carefully wraps it around me, then picks me up and settles me back on his lap.

“I'm okay,” I tell him.

“I know you are.” His smile is full of gentle reassurance. “But I'm not sure I am. And I really need to be holding you if you're about to tell me what I think you are.”

“I don't know what you're thinking, but I'm not stupid enough to turn down a hug.”

“Good.” His arms go around me, pull me closer until my body is flush against his. As he does, I rest my head on his chest for just a second, draw reassurance from the strong, steady beat of his heart beneath my ear. I can do this, I tell myself. It's just a matter of stringing one word in front of the other until the whole story gets told.

“Even then, I knew I wanted something more than the life my parents had. More than living from bad job to bad job, crappy paycheck to crappy paycheck. Back then I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but either way—doctor, lawyer—I wasn't going to get into a good college if I stayed at that shit hole of a school. Or so I thought. Add to that the fact that I felt unsafe

every time I passed through the front doors...trying to get out of there was a no-brainer.

“So I started researching all the private schools in the area, finding out which ones offered scholarships. I found a few that weren’t that far away from my neighborhood—it would take two buses for me to get there every day, but it seemed a small price to pay to get out of the school I was in. To guarantee a better future for myself.

“All in all, I applied to seven schools. I made it to the interview process in four, and actually gained admittance—with a full scholarship—to three. I’d never felt more proud. I had gotten great test scores, aced the interviews, and for the first time in my life I had a chance at a normal life. Maybe even a better-than-normal life. Even my parents were excited, my dad certain that the contacts my admittance brought him would be good for his business. As if he had a business to talk about back then.”

I take a deep breath, focus on prying my hands out of fists so tightly clenched my nails are leaving half-moon grooves in my palms. So far, everything I’ve told him has been backstory, but the hard stuff is about to begin.

“I started at the academy the first day of my sophomore year. I was nervous, afraid no one would want anything to do with me because I was a scholarship kid. But to my relief, I fit in pretty well. I made a few friends that first week, and pretty soon I’d attracted the attention of one of the most popular seniors in the school.” I laugh, but it’s a sound devoid of mirth. Nothing that happened next is the least bit funny. At least not to me.

“I should have known better. What was a guy like that—popular, smart, funny, rich, gorgeous—doing with me? At the time I didn’t stop to think about it, but now I wish I had.” Now I wish I’d said no.

“Anyway, we went out a few times. He seemed nice. My parents liked him. He treated me right—or at least I thought he did. In retrospect I can see all the control games he played on me, all the times he messed with me just because he could. Because no one had ever told him he couldn’t do exactly what he wanted when he wanted to do it.

“Every time we went out, he’d push for more. First base, second base, even third base wasn’t enough for him. He wanted to fuck me, and he really

didn't give a shit how I felt about that.”

Ethan stiffens beneath me—I know he thinks he knows how this is going to end, but he's wrong. The truth is so much more twisted and diabolical than he could ever imagine. I lived it and sometimes even I can't believe it was true, can't believe it really happened the way I remember it. But that has as much to do with my parents as it does the actual attack, and that's a door I'm just not ready to open. Not for Ethan. Not for anyone.

“I probably should have dumped him, but I was caught up in being his girlfriend. I liked the popularity that came with it—for the first time in my life, I wasn't the weird new girl—and I liked the fact that I belonged to someone. That he loved me. That he wanted to be with me. So when he wanted me to go with him to a party one night, I never even thought of saying no.

“Once we got there, I knew right away that something was up. It just didn't feel right. There weren't that many people there, for one, and most of the school parties were super crowded. Plus I didn't recognize a lot of the people there.”

I close my eyes as I let myself think about that party—that night—for the first time in what feels like forever. It's getting harder to get the words out, harder to control the trembling that's seized control of the very core of my being. I'm trying to keep it under wraps, but I know it won't be long before Ethan notices.

I don't want him to figure it out. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I've already played the part of the basket case tonight, already done the whole freak-out thing. If I'm going to tell this story, I want to do it on my terms. I don't ask for much. Just for the chance to keep a little bit of dignity, a little bit of my pride intact.

“We're not there very long before Chad ditches me. He's drinking, playing poker with some of the guys. Generally making a total ass of himself—something he did pretty regularly, if I'm being honest. Anyway, to make a long story short, he ends up losing all his money, something like five or six hundred dollars. It was a ton of money to me back then, but barely pocket change to him. Which is why what happens next is so bizarre, the whole thing is so absurd. The money meant nothing to him. Nothing. So why he did what he did—”

I can feel the tears in my throat, hear them in my voice. So I stop talking for long seconds as I try to get control of myself. Ethan's arms tighten around me, and then he's stroking a soothing hand down my spine. Murmuring more of those wordless sounds of comfort.

It works. Somehow I find the strength to push this latest round of tears back. Taking a deep breath, I focus on getting the rest of the story out. I want to get to the end, want to get it over with.

"So he's drunk and pissed that he lost. It's more about his pride than the money at that point. So he asks the guys if he can put a different wager on the table. Something worth a lot more than a couple Benjamins." I shake my head. "He actually talked like that, actually believed what he was saying. Some poor little rich boy playing gangsta in his rich little world.

"He wanted to make me his stake. Said if he lost, whoever won the pot could take me in the back room and—" My voice breaks again.

"The son of a bitch." The rage in Ethan's voice is palpable. I wait for him to ask if I agreed, if I let him use me like I was his property, but the questions never come. I don't understand. My parents asked. The cops asked. Even my so-called friends wanted to know if I'd agreed to do what Chad wanted. If I had let him use me like a goddamned bankroll.

But not Ethan. There's no judgment in the way he holds me, no recriminations. Just pure, unadulterated comfort. I sink into it, let it wash over me as I get to the last part of my story. The worst part. I can't help wondering if this is going to do it. If this is what will change his compassion to disgust, his understanding to blame.

"I tell Chad to go to hell. And I walk out of the party without a backward glance. I might have been slow on the uptake when it came to him, but I wasn't a moron. No way was I going to let him treat me like that.

"The only problem? I'm a long way from home and my cheap shoes are already hurting my toes. So when one of the boys from the party pulls up in his fancy car and offers me a ride, I take it. I know him from school and he seems nice enough. Harmless. He's a casual friend of Chad's and he apologizes for Chad's behavior. Tells me he's being a real jerk. Which he is, obviously.

“So I give him directions to my house. And I’m worried because I don’t want anyone to know where I live. Chad knows, but he’s never said anything, never acted like it was a big deal. At least until he tried to sell me for two hundred dollars. But I don’t know this guy very well and the last thing I want spread around school is how poor I am. It definitely won’t go well for me on Monday if he tells anyone. That’s just the kind of school it is—and the kind of crowd I’m trying to fit into.

“But at the same time, it’s already after midnight and I’m not stupid enough to have him drop me somewhere else and walk home. It’s a bad neighborhood. Anything can happen.” I laugh then, a dark, tortured kind of thing. “I was such an idiot.”

“No. You trusted somebody you shouldn’t. That doesn’t make you an idiot.” Ethan’s voice is firm, unwavering. As his hands continue to stroke me, gentle me.

“It doesn’t make me a very good judge of character, either. Chad. This guy.” My parents.

“You were young.”

“I was a fool. I trusted him because he wore nice clothes and had a nice smile and drove a nice car. I never thought—I never thought a popular, smart guy like him would stop the car in an empty parking lot at the edge of my neighborhood. I never thought he’d shove me down. Rip my dress. Rip my underwear. Rape me. I never thought—”

My voice breaks, and Ethan’s arms tighten around me. I’m trembling so badly that I can barely sit on his lap. Or at least I think it’s me until he puts one unsteady hand on my cheek and I realize that he’s the one who’s trembling.

I look up, surprised, and nearly recoil at the rage on his face. In his eyes. I’ve seen Ethan with a lot of different looks on his face in the last week—amusement, joy, concentration, disgust, annoyance, anger, happiness, peace—but I’ve never seen him anywhere close to displaying this kind of fury. His whole face is alight with it, his gaze burning with it. His whole body literally shaking with it.

He doesn’t say anything, but I get the impression that that’s because he can’t. That his anger is so great that the words just won’t form.

Guilt swamps me, joins all the rest of the emotions swimming around inside me. I've done this. I've brought this strong, beautiful man to the point where he's all but incoherent with rage. It's not a good sign, given that he's considered by many to be one of the most articulate CEO's in the world.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I'm so sorry."

He finds his voice then. "I already told you not to say that. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I got in the car with him. I trusted him."

"There's nothing wrong with trusting someone."

"But I trusted the wrong people all along. From the very beginning, every decision I made brought me closer to that moment. I could have stayed put at my local public high school—at least there I knew what I was getting. I could have chosen a better boyfriend, been less impressed with who Chad was and more focused on who he wasn't. I could have gone out with my brother instead of to that stupid party—Miles had wanted to see a movie that night. And I could have been smarter and never gotten into that car.

"Everything that happened to me that night happened because I made bad choices. That's on me, not on anybody else. I set the whole chain of events in motion. If I'd been smarter, none of it would have happened."

It's my secret shame, my culpability in everything that happened that night and in what came after. I made the choices, no one else. I believed nice, rich boys who were born into luxury would never hurt me. Never force me. Never rape me.

I really had been a total moron.

"No." It's not until Ethan answers in a voice made rusty with too many emotions that I realize I've spoken the last out loud. "The only person to blame for what happened to you is the guy who raped you. And that Chad asshole, who set everything in motion. None of it was your fault."

I've heard those words before, from the policewoman who took my statement and from the counselor I talked to at college, years later. I'd never believed them.

I want to believe Ethan, want to bury myself in the strength of his conviction. In his unwavering belief in me. But I've only told him half the

story. The rest...the rest is something I've never spoken about to anyone. If he knew, he would hate me as much as I hate myself.

“What happened to the guy?” Ethan asks. “Did you report him?”

“Yes.” When he was finished, when he'd climbed off me and tried to drive me home as if nothing had happened, I freaked out. I jumped out of the car at the nearest red light, and though he hurled insults and abuse at me through the open car window, I refused to get back into his vehicle. Refused to go anywhere with him. When he pulled over and threatened to come after me, I ran. Up one alley and down the other, incoherent and lost and desperate to get away.

I still don't know what would have happened if a cop car hadn't been driving along the street at that particular moment and spotted me. They pulled over, got me into the back of their car. They were nice to me, I remember that much. I was shell-shocked, out of it, and they'd been kind. I told them what happened and they took me to the hospital for a bunch of tests I prefer not to remember, even to this day.

That's when everything went bad. The hospital called my parents. My dad showed up and he was furious. Not that I'd been raped but that I'd gone to the police before I'd told him. He had a plan, he told me. To make the rich little bastard pay.

I hadn't understood what he was talking about that night, but I soon learned. He sold me out, traded my silence for three million dollars in start-up money for his company. He threatened me, made me sign papers recanting my statement to the police and other papers that said I couldn't talk about that night with anyone. He'd told me it was for the best, that it would protect my reputation, protect me.

Even then, I'd known he was full of shit. But I'd done it anyway. I'd signed those papers, even knowing it was wrong. Even knowing that it would destroy what little bit of my soul I had left. But I was too shattered—by what had happened with Brandon and by what I considered my parents' betrayal—to do anything else. I had no fight left in me, no strength to do anything but end the arguments and the screaming matches and the threats that came at me from both sides.

I don't tell Ethan any of this, though. How can I? How can I look this beautiful man in the eye and tell him my parents sold me out for three million dollars? Or, worse, that I let them?

No, he doesn't need to know that. Nobody does. God knows a day doesn't go by that I wish I didn't know. Wish I didn't remember.

"Did he go to jail?" Ethan asks, interrupting the silence that stretches between us.

"No. His parents...his parents made sure that didn't happen." And so did mine.

"So you had to keep going to school with him?"

"Yeah. It was...unpleasant."

Because Brandon wasn't one to slink away in shame. He told the whole school how he bagged me, how I begged for it. He turned Chad and all of their friends against me, and since they were the most popular guys in the school, it didn't take long for everyone to turn away from me. For them to trip me and torment me and threaten me.

I can't say how many times one of Brandon's friends caught me alone in the stairwell and tried to touch me, just because they thought they could. Because I was easy pickings and completely unprotected.

I'd walked around terrified the rest of sophomore year, had begged my parents to let me transfer back to the high school I'd come from. But my dad was putting his three million dollars to work and he wanted the connections that came with having a daughter at that school. And so I stayed, terrified every day that Brandon or Chad or one of the other guys they ran around with would rape me again, just because they could.

Ethan doesn't say anything for the longest time. But I can see the rage in his eyes, feel it emanating from his every pore. His jaw is working furiously, his hands clenched into white knuckled fists. But when he finally speaks, his voice is almost normal. If you don't count the rage-filled resolve that runs through it. "Who is he?"

"What?" I don't understand.

"The guy who did this to you. What's his name?"

"It isn't important."

“It is to me.”

“No,” I tell him. “It’s long over. None of it matters anymore.”

“Considering you’re still traumatized by what the bastards did to you, I’d say it still matters a whole hell of a lot.”

“I’m sorry about what happened on the beach. Normally I can handle it better than that. It’s because you were behind me, like he was. I mean, not like he was, obviously. But that’s how it happened. He shoved me face-first into the seat and—”

“Jesus Christ.” He shoves a hand through his hair, looks like he wants to say something a hell of a lot worse. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Neither did you.” He puts two fingers under my chin, tilts my head up so that I’m once again looking him in the eye. “None of what happened to you is your fault. You know that, right?”

“Of course.”

His eyes narrow. “Why do I get the feeling you’re only telling me what you think I want to hear?”

“I don’t know. But it’s not true, believe me. It’s not like I think for one second that you wanted to hear any of the crap I just dumped on you.”

“That isn’t what I meant.” His words seethe in the air between us, raw and painful and honest. I want to respond in kind, to tell him everything, but there’s still that damn nondisclosure agreement to think about. Plus there’s the fact that I don’t want him to know I sold myself for three million dollars. Somehow I don’t think he’ll understand.

“You need to let it go, Ethan.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You have to. I told you because I lost my shit for a minute and I owed you an explanation. But everything we just talked about is in the past. For my own sanity, I left it there a long time ago. It’s the only way I can function. The only way I can live the life I have now. The life I’ve built for myself.

“I need you to leave it there, too. I know it’s hard for you, I know you want to protect me. But going after some guy for something that happened years ago isn’t the way to do that.”

“What is?” He cups my face in his hands, drops his forehead down to rest on mine. “Because Chloe, baby, I’m about to jump out of my skin here. I don’t know what to do for you. How to help you. How to love you.”

His words tear through me, rip a hole down the middle of my already cracked defenses. “Just hold me,” I tell him, burying my face in the curve of his neck. “Hold me and don’t let me go. Not tonight.”

“I won’t,” he says, his breath soft against my temple.

And he doesn’t. Not for a minute. Even after I slip into a fitful sleep, I can feel him holding me. All night long. And for now, for this moment, it’s more than enough.

Chapter Twenty

I drift into consciousness slowly, to the feel of early morning sunlight on my face and the scent of coffee in my nose.

There's no disorientation at waking in a strange bed, no moment of trying to figure out where I am or how I got here. The second I open my eyes, I know I'm at Ethan's house. In Ethan's bed. He brought me to it last night after the temperature dropped so much on the patio that my teeth began to chatter.

Pushing my riot of curls out of my face, I sit up on my elbows and look around at Ethan's private domain. Last night I'd been too wiped to do anything but curl up with him in bed, but this morning I notice the slate-blue walls. The smoky gray of the comforter I'm lying beneath. The huge painting of a sailboat that takes over a significant portion of one of the side walls.

For some, Ethan's color choice might be depressing—dark blues and grays with only a few instances of a lighter accent color—but in my mind, it's perfect. I feel like I'm in the belly of the Pacific Ocean, cradled in the arms of the ever-changing waves. It's a good feeling, especially considering all that happened last night. And not nearly as violent as the drowning I had so often imagined.

On the nightstand beside the bed is a cup of coffee and a long, flat white box. I reach for the coffee first, take a long, deep inhale. It works its way inside me, finding those last little frozen places that I didn't think anything could melt and warming them through. Of course, I know it's not the coffee doing that. Not really. It's Ethan and the perfect care he takes of me.

I spend the next few minutes sipping my perfectly made coffee and contemplating the white box on the nightstand. There's a part of me that wants to grab it, rip the red ribbon off, and dive inside. But there's another part of me that's relishing the surprise. That wants to wait just a little longer

to draw out the anticipation. I'm the kind of girl who believes in delayed gratification.

Except, it seems, with Ethan.

Suddenly I can't wait until I finish my coffee to know what's inside the box. I put my cup aside and grab the present, doing my best not to rip the box to shreds as I open it.

Just like with Ethan's other gift, inside this one is a myriad of things that don't really fit together but are somehow perfect anyway. I push the tissue paper aside and pull out the first treasure, a pair of delicate gold filigree earrings. Flamingos, I realize with a stab of delight, from our zoo trip yesterday. I admire them for long seconds before sliding them out of their container and into my ears. I can't wait to see what they look like.

The second object I pull out of the box is a small vial of perfume. It's one of those specially mixed ones that people can design to their own specifications. The label has only my name on it and the date from three days ago.

Ethan designed it for me.

I pull the little stopper out of the top of the vial, bend my head for a sniff. And nearly cry all over again. Strawberries, jasmine, the ocean, champagne. Somehow he's managed to have my favorite scents mixed into a perfume that's perfect for me in every way.

I can't resist dabbing a little on my pulse points before I close it up and put it back in the box. It smells good, really good, and I couldn't be more delighted.

Except as soon as I reach into the box again, I realize that's not true. Ethan's next gift is a peacock feather, beautiful and exotic and just a touch naughty. For a moment, I stroke it against my throat and imagine that it's Ethan touching me with it, Ethan running it all over my body.

Arousal spikes through me and I nearly leave the rest of the present unopened to go in search of him. I want him to hold me, to touch me, to kiss me. Want to do the same for him, if he'll let me.

In the end, though, curiosity gets the best of me and I pull out the final object in the gift. It's another box, though this one is smaller and flatter than

the original. And a distinctive light blue that I recognize even before I see the name on the top of it: Tiffany & Co.

I bobble the box, watch as it falls to the floor. Instead of diving for it, I just stare. I'm not sure if I want to pick it up, if I want to open it. Oh, I know most women dating Ethan Frost would love to get something from Tiffany's. Hell, they'd probably expect gifts like this regularly.

But I'm not so sure. I've enjoyed my small, thoughtful gifts from Ethan. The strawberries, the tea, the feather. This, though, this feels like something more. It feels like a blender, only much more expensive, and I'm just not sure I want to go there with him. Not because of him, per se, but because money has such negative connotations for me when it comes to things like this. I don't want it to get in the way, don't want to feel like he expects something for his expensive gifts. And I don't want him to feel like I expect him to spend a lot of money on me.

It's a double-edged sword, one I don't want to grab on to until I actually have some idea of how to wield it.

Climbing out of bed, I gingerly pick up the box and place it on the nightstand. Then I go into the bathroom to clean up. I'm dressed in one of Ethan's T-shirts and not much else, but he's Ethan so he's already provided me with a new outfit, a flirty little skirt and tank top in a fun yellow and white pattern that will look great with my hair and complexion. There's also a new bra and a pair of panties, both in sunshine yellow and both costing more than my entire lingerie drawer at home.

I can't help wondering, like with the wetsuit, where the clothes are coming from. Does he have a closet somewhere in this monstrosity of a house that holds clothes of different sizes so that his one-night stands won't have to do the walk of shame in the morning? The thought depresses me, even though we didn't do anything last night that would even remotely qualify as shameful.

After I'm showered and dressed, I pick the Tiffany box off the nightstand and go in search of Ethan. In a house this size, it might take a while.

I get lucky, though, and find him in the third place I check. He's on the patio, standing at the railing and looking out over the roiling Pacific.

He's lost in thought and I hesitate to disturb him. But part of me knows that's just embarrassment talking. Just worry. Talking to him last night, in the dark, is one thing. Facing him in the light of day is something else entirely, especially with the weight of everything I told him stretching between us.

"A summer storm's coming in," he says after a minute. He turns to me, holds an arm out. It seems he wants to touch me as badly as I want to touch him, so I go to him. Cuddle into his arms. Then turn to look at the dark and seething waves.

Though it would probably be the most natural thing in the world for him to stand behind me and wrap his arms around my waist and rest his chin on the top of my head, Ethan stands to the side of me instead. He wraps an arm around my shoulder and hugs me into his side.

Part of me is upset that he's being so careful with me, that he's making sure not to do anything that might freak me out. It's why I didn't want to tell him about the rape to begin with—the last thing I want is for things to be awkward between us.

Yet this doesn't feel awkward, and if I'm honest, I'll admit that I like how careful he is with me. How he makes me feel like I matter, not just because he wants something from me but because he values *me*. It's a novel experience, one I don't think I'll ever take for granted.

"Does everything fit okay?" he asks in between pressing soft kisses to my shoulder and the curve of my neck.

"Yeah, of course. Everything's great."

"I'm glad. I guessed on the sizes when I called Lola's this morning."

Relief courses through me. These aren't generic morning-after clothes—Ethan got them especially for me. Except... "It's only eight o'clock now. On a Sunday morning. What on earth was Lola's doing open so early?"

He just smiles at me, and I'm reminded, again, what it must be like to be Ethan Frost. To have so much money that people jump to do your bidding, no matter what time it is.

His gaze drops to the blue box I'm still clutching in my hand. "Don't you like it?"

"I haven't opened it."

For the first time, he looks confused. “Why not?”

“Because I know I’ll probably love it and I don’t want the temptation.”

“I don’t even know where to start with that.”

I sigh, run a frustrated hand through my hair in a gesture I’m pretty sure I picked up from him. “I don’t need you to spend this kind of money on me. That’s not what I’m here for.”

His face clears. “Like the blender. The strawberries were okay, but in your opinion, the blender was too much.”

“Exactly.”

He reaches up, plays with one of the delicate flamingo earrings dangling from my ears. “But you finally accepted the blender.”

That’s what he thinks. I’d love to see his face when I hand-deliver it to his office again tomorrow morning. “Money doesn’t impress me, Ethan.”

“It doesn’t impress me, either. But there are things I want you to have. Things I think you need to have. Is it so wrong that I want to be the one to give them to you?”

“I need a blender?”

He grins. “For a woman who loves margaritas as much as you do? Absolutely. Besides, now it’s the general principle of the thing.”

It really is, which is why I’m going to hand that damn blender to his assistant first thing in the morning. “And this?” I shake the box a little. “I need this?”

“Why don’t you open it and find out?”

He’s watching me, his face carefully blank. But I can see it in his eyes, just a hint of vulnerability that he’s working hard to hide. It melts my resolve, this proof that his feelings for me are as powerful, as overwhelming, as confusing as mine are for him. Knowing that, knowing how much he needs to give me this present—whatever it is—means there’s no way I can turn it down.

Not sure what to expect, I open the box slowly, gingerly. Then gasp when I see what he’s bought me.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell him, reaching out to touch one of the delicate platinum links.

“Do you like it?”

“What’s not to like?” I remove the belly chain from the box, hold it up to the light to admire the intricate designs on each of the links. As if the actual links aren’t beautiful and elaborate enough, one end of the chain sports a cascade of clear stones. I try to convince myself that they’re crystals, but I know better. Ethan has bought me diamonds, albeit not in the traditional piece of jewelry.

But this is better, so much better than anything else he could have gotten me. Because I know Ethan and he knows me and I understand what he’s saying with this chain without him ever having to say a word.

Last night he promised me that he wasn’t going anywhere. That no matter what I told him, no matter what had happened to me, he would stay. This chain is a physical manifestation of that promise. It’s just between him and me; no one else will ever see it. But it means, despite everything, that I’m his.

It’s not a collar, not a sign of ownership, but a reassurance nonetheless. One I didn’t even know I needed until he gave it to me.

“Do you want me to help you put it on?” His fingers brush against mine as he reaches for the chain.

“Yes. Please.”

He smiles at my acceptance, and the wariness in his eyes slowly dissipates until there’s nothing left but affection and joy and...love? I cut the thought off, refusing to go there yet. He hasn’t said the words and neither have I. And we’re not going to, not for a while. Hell, we’ve only known each other a week.

And yet, as he lifts my shirt and wraps the chain—and his arms—around me, I can’t deny the feelings welling up deep inside me. I wouldn’t want to, even if I could. I’m not sure how it happened, not sure what I did to deserve him, but Ethan Frost is mine as surely as I am his. And I’m not giving him up.

“What do you think?” he asks after he fastens the clasp. His hands are still around my waist, his fingers toying with the navel ring I got my freshman year in college in my first of many attempts to reclaim my body as my own. Tori talked me into it, and though I thought it was crazy at the

time, it actually worked. The pain, and the act itself, grounded me, and now the ring is a reminder that I decide what to do with my body. No one else.

I look down at the chain. Ethan left it loose, so it rests on my hips, right below my belly button. The cascade of diamonds drips down my abdomen, rests directly above my mons. No, this isn't a collar. But it is the most possessive piece of jewelry he could buy me outside of a wedding ring. "It's perfect for me," I tell him as I wrap my arms around his neck, lift my mouth for a kiss. "Just like you."

Chapter Twenty-one

We have breakfast out on the patio. Warm chocolate croissants. Bowls full of succulent berries—strawberries for me, blueberries for Ethan. Mimosas that are heavy on the champagne, exactly as I like them.

“You sure know how to spoil a girl,” I tell him, leaning back on one of the chaise longues with my second drink in hand.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. But you keep resisting.” He reaches for my free hand, kisses my fingers in a gesture that should be cheesy but is somehow sexy as hell.

“No more resisting,” I tell him. “I’m yours.”

He doesn’t say anything to that and I freak out for a second. Have I overstepped? Did I read too much into the belly chain? Into the way he’s been touching me, holding me, treating me? But then he lifts his face to mine and I realize he’s as affected by this thing between us as I am. Maybe more.

That’s when I realize I don’t know Ethan’s story. Not really. Not the way he knows mine. Oh, I know the basics. His parents divorced at an early age. He lost his father in a very public way when he was just a boy. He was raised by his dad’s parents instead of his mother. And he lives through having his dad’s life and death dragged out every couple of years when the government wants to remind people what a hero looks like.

I know he’s spent his life trying to ensure that other people don’t lose their loved ones the same way he lost his father—from injuries that fifteen years ago couldn’t be treated anywhere but in a surgical suite. Self-made soon-to-be-billionaire. Philanthropist. Environmentalist. Genius.

But there’s something else there. Something that doesn’t fit with the charming public image. Something darker and more damaged than he ever lets on. It never stays around for long, but it definitely exists. I’ve seen it a couple of times, lurking in the back of his eyes. I don’t know what it is, but

something tells me it's bad. That deep inside, he's hurting as much—if not more—than I am.

The thought galvanizes me like nothing else could. I drain my mimosa in one long sip—a little Dutch courage never hurt anyone—and deposit the glass on the nearest table. Then I climb off my chaise and onto Ethan's lap, my knees resting on either side of his thighs so that I'm straddling him.

It's by far the most aggressive I've ever been with him, and his blue eyes widen in surprise. Still, it doesn't take long for him to get with the program. His hands come up to cup my face and—looking directly into my eyes—he slowly, slowly raises his mouth to mine.

It's as good as it always is. Better, maybe, now that he knows so much of my truth. I guess subconsciously I've been afraid things would be awkward between us after what happened on the beach yesterday, but as he licks his way inside my parted lips, I know that those worries were for nothing. The heat is still there between us.

His tongue slides against my own and need rips through me, makes me anxious. Makes me hurt. I slide my hands up Ethan's shoulders to his neck and then to the back of his head, grab a fistful of his hair, and pull his lips even more tightly against my own. He's being sweet, gentle, and while I appreciate the concern, it's not what I want from him. Not now when my body's on fire and all I can think of is him. All I want is him.

I grind my mouth against his, suck his lip between my teeth and bite a little harder than I normally do. Not hard enough to do more than sting a little, but definitely enough to let him know I want him. Want this. He tastes like chocolate this morning. Like champagne and berries and Ethan. Just Ethan.

Ethan groans low in his throat at my enthusiasm, and his hands slide down to tangle in my hair. He tugs a little and a frisson of awareness tears through me, increasing the want—and the need.

But he's still moving too slowly. Still savoring where I want him to rush, still showering me with sweet, gentle softness when what I need is a blistering, headlong race toward completion.

"Ethan." I rip my mouth from his, then lick and nibble my way over the dark stubble that decorates his jaw. He groans, his head falling back against

his chair to give me better access. I take instant advantage, racing my lips down his neck to the hollow of his throat.

I find the spot where his heart beats fast and frantic and lick over it. Once, twice, then again and again. He tastes different here, wilder, sexier, though I didn't think that was possible. Salty-sweet like the ocean, earthy like the sand. I love it.

My hands go to the buttons on his shirt and I start to flick them open, one after the other. I want to see his chest again, when I'm not freaking out. I want to study his tattoo before kissing and licking my way over it to the hard, flat planes of his abdomen. And lower. He's brought me pleasure a couple times now, taken me to the edge and hurtled me over into the stars, but I've never done the same for him.

Today I will. Today I'll take him in my hands, in my mouth, in my sex. My mind is a cacophony of rioting images and sounds and longings, everything I want to do to this man coming together in an explosive cataclysm of need. I'm desperate for him, for the taste of him on my tongue, the feel of him inside my body.

I'm clawing at him now, ripping the buttons of what is probably a five-hundred-dollar shirt in my desperation to get to him. His hands come up, cover mine, his thumb stroking across the back of my hand in a rhythm that is somehow both soothing and arousing.

"Chloe, sweetheart, it's okay," he murmurs as he dots kisses across my forehead and down my cheeks. "There's no rush. Let's take it slow."

He doesn't understand. I don't want to go slow. I'm afraid to go slow. Right now I want him, need him, am entirely caught up in the way he smells and tastes and feels. I want to run with that before something happens, before that damn switch gets triggered in my brain again and I freak out on him for the second time.

"Please, Ethan." I shove the shirt off his shoulders, down his arms, then press hot, open-mouthed kisses to his warm, bare chest. "I need you."

"You've got me, baby. I'm not going—" He breaks off, hissing out a breath as I lick across his nipple.

"Jesus." His hands tangle in my hair and for one long, perfect moment he lets me have my way. I roll his nipple between my lips, nibble softly,

relishing the way his hips pump against mine and the groan he can't hold back.

I slide backward a little, bending forward so I can kiss lower on his torso. His abs, his navel, the beginning of the V cut that just shows above the low-rise waist of his jeans.

“Chloe, baby, that’s enough. I want to touch you, too.”

I shake my head as I run the tip of my tongue around his navel, circling it again and again as my fingers fumble with his belt. His hands cover mine, try to move my fingers away, but I nip at his stomach to distract him, then run my tongue under the waistband of his jeans.

“Chloe!” There’s a warning in his voice, a dark urgency that tells me that no matter how much he’s enjoying what I’m doing, he’s not going to put up with being ignored much longer. Which means I have to move faster, take more of him, get him so crazy that he makes love to me without realizing how close I am to freaking out.

The panic is rising, already eating away at the need, the desire, that was so all-consuming just a few minutes ago. I try to ignore it, to push it back down. I want this. I want Ethan. I want us to have a normal relationship, one where he doesn’t have to worry all the time about me freaking out at any second. And the only way I’ll get that is to get through this, get through it now. Because I know if we do this just once, if I feel him inside me and know that it’s Ethan and that he cares about me, that I’ll be okay. I’ll be better. And neither of us will have to worry about me losing my shit again.

Except Ethan isn’t buying into my plan. Instead of just relaxing and letting me give him pleasure, he’s stopping me. Pulling me back up his body so that we’re once again face-to-face.

“I want you,” I tell him, looking into his eyes for the first time since I threw us into this mad rush. I don’t know what I expect to see—pleasure, maybe? Arousal, certainly. The same need that is so much a part of me?

But when he looks at me, I see none of that. Instead, he’s got his thinking face on. His lips are pressed together, his jaw is set, and his eyes—instead of being cloudy with desire—are a clear, bright blue. So clear, in fact, that I can all but see the gears turning in his brain.

Shit. He doesn't want me, not the way I want him. I fucked everything up yesterday—freaking out on him, telling him about Brandon. Is there any wonder he's not into me? He's probably afraid I'll lose my shit all over again. The fact that that's a distinct possibility is all the more humiliating.

The last of my desire dies and I push at his shoulders, start to stand. I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go—

“Chloe, stop.”

Ethan's voice halts me in my tracks. He doesn't touch me, doesn't make any move to make me stay on his lap, but his voice is so commanding that I automatically obey.

I settle back onto his legs, but I duck my head. I can't stand for him to see the hurt and the humiliation that are currently ripping me apart.

“Look at me.”

I shake my head. I can't. There are tears in my eyes, and after the show I put on yesterday, there's no way I'm going to let him see me cry again.

He sighs, his hands clenching where they're resting on his legs. But still he makes no move to touch me. “Come on, baby. I need to see your face. I need to see you.”

Again I shake my head. But I'm lifting my chin even as I do, my eyes shooting up to meet his one more time.

I try to blink the tears away, but I know he sees them. I can feel it in the way his body tenses against mine, hear it in the “fuck me” he mutters beneath his breath.

“Don't blame me for your frustration,” I say with the last bit of spirit I can muster. “That's what I was trying to do.”

He laughs. “God, I'm crazy about you.” And finally his hands come up to touch me, his fingers tracing soothing circles on my back.

“Then why did you stop me?”

“Oh, I don't know. Maybe something about wanting the woman I'm making love to to actually be into it?”

“I was into it!”

“No, you were *trying* to be into it. It's not the same thing.”

“It doesn’t matter!” I smack at his chest, frustrated and furious and terrified that this thing between us is never going to go anywhere. And I want it to. I really want it to, I just don’t know how to get us there.

“Yeah, Chloe, it does.” He grabs hold of my hands, not hard enough to hurt but firmly enough to let me know that he means what he’s saying. “That’s all that matters.”

“I’m not like other women! I can’t just—”

“You can.”

“I won’t be able to—”

“You will.”

“Can’t we just do it?” I wail. “Just get it over with the first time and then I’ll be better. I promise.”

“Sweetheart, if you think I’m going to have sex with you while you are freaking out and terrified, then you have completely lost your mind. I promise you, that’s the one thing that absolutely is not going to happen here.”

I drop my head in defeat, rest the top of it against his chest as I wait for the tears—and the crushing sense of disappointment—to pass me by. “I don’t know what to do, then.”

Ethan puts a finger under my chin, tilts my head back up. Waits for me to open my eyes. When I finally do, he catches my gaze with his own, the deep indigo of his eyes as entralling to me as the depths of emotion I see reflected there. “Do you trust me?” he asks.

I swallow against the sudden desert in my mouth. If he asked me if I loved him, I would have answered in a heartbeat. Or if I wanted him. Needed him. But trust is a funny thing. Just a week ago, I would have said I didn’t have any trust to give, to anyone. But when it’s Ethan Frost, a week makes all the difference. It makes every difference.

“Yes.” I whisper the word, because no matter how true it is, I can’t force myself to say it any louder.

“Then let’s do this my way. I’ll take care of you, baby. I promise.”

Nodding is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Harder than telling Ethan the truth last night. Harder, even, than listening as my parents sold me out. The

control freak in me doesn't like giving anyone else that kind of power over me.

But once it's done, once I've handed myself completely over to his care, it's like a weight disappears from my shoulders. Because I know that Ethan will never hurt me. And he won't let me hurt myself, either. Not anymore.

Chapter Twenty-two

Long minutes pass as we do nothing but lie in the sun, my body stretched over Ethan's as he touches me. Gentes me. He strokes my hair for a long time, his strong fingers rubbing at my scalp until I'm all but purring. Then he moves to my neck, my shoulders, and down my back, following the muscles of my spine. He kneads my waist, my arms. Threads his fingers through mine and rolls my hand around in a circular motion that somehow manages to feel nearly as good as an orgasm.

By the time he's done, I'm nothing but a blissed-out pile of relaxed goo, every muscle in my upper body as soft and runny as melted butter.

"You still awake?" he murmurs, a smile in his voice.

I purr the closest thing to a yes that I can manage.

"Good." He gathers me closer to his chest, slips an arm under my knees, and then stands.

"Where are we going?" I'm too lazy to even wrap an arm around his neck, so I just burrow in and let him do all the work.

"The bedroom."

I smile against his chest. "It's about time."

"Really? You're complaining?"

"Not complaining. Just anxious."

He lifts one of my hands, then lets go, watching as it just flops by my side. "Yeah. You look real anxious."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"So I hear." He mumbles the last under his breath, and this time I do lift my head, just in time to see a look I've never seen before cross his face. But then it's gone, just as quickly as it appeared and I'm left wondering what it was I saw. And why I think it's important.

When we get to the bedroom, he deposits me on the bed before walking into the bathroom. Seconds later, I hear the bathwater start to run.

Then he's back, standing next to the bed. I watch with great interest as he shrugs out of his shirt—he never did rebutton it after I tore it open earlier—and drops it on the end of the bed. His belt buckle comes next, then the top button of his jeans. By the time I hear the snick of his zipper going down, I'm wet and achy and more than ready to pick up what we were doing before I completely lost my shit out on the patio.

But Ethan has other plans. He rolls his jeans and boxer briefs down his legs, and then he stands there, naked and aroused, in front of me.

It's all I can do to keep my mouth from dropping open as I stare at him. I haven't seen very many naked men in my life, but I don't have to have seen that many to know that Ethan Frost is a prime specimen of manhood. Long and lean, with muscles in all the right places, he's got the ultimate surfer's body. Massive biceps for paddling through the big waves, powerful pecs to push him up on the board, tightly stacked abs that help him stay upright when he's got a big swell beneath him and strongly muscled legs for all of the above. And then there's his cock, which is as long and hard as the rest of him.

He's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous, and I itch with the need to touch all that golden skin. To kiss and lick and taste and test every delectable part of him.

He smiles at me like he knows what's going on in my head, but all he says is, "Want to take a bath with me?"

I do. I really do, but I'm nervous as well. Small space, both of us naked. The last thing I want to do is make a fool of myself all over again.

But again, it's like Ethan has a direct line into my brain. Because he reaches a hand out to me and says, "Come on. I've got you, Chloe."

And though I know it may be a bad idea, that it may end with me as disappointed and humiliated and miserable as our last two attempts at sex have, I take his hand. Because when he asks like that I can deny him nothing. And because if Ethan says it's going to be all right, I can't help but believe him.

I take his hand, let him pull me up. I wait, a little tense, a little unnerved, for him to undress me, but he makes no move to do so. Instead, he places a hand on my lower back and guides me gently into the bathroom.

I go where he leads, but I have to admit that it's strange walking with Ethan when he's naked and I'm fully dressed. Not uncomfortable strange, but weird strange, and I can't help wonder why he hasn't stripped me out of my clothes as easily as he stripped off his own.

Then he crouches down to check the temperature of the water, and as I stare at the nape of his neck, at the vulnerable expanse of his naked shoulders, it finally hits me. Him being naked while I'm clothed is a shift in the power dynamic between us. Though he's very clearly in charge—I abdicated my control to him the moment I agreed to trust him in this—the fact that I'm clothed and he's naked makes me the armored one. It takes away some of the vulnerability I'm feeling and puts it squarely on him.

My knees tremble at the thought. This man. This wonderful, strong, thoughtful man is doing everything to make this okay for me. He promised that he would, and while I gave him my trust out there on that patio, for the first time I'm really beginning to believe that things might actually work out. That this moment won't end the way last night did, with me screaming and terrified of the specters from my past.

"It's almost ready," Ethan says from where he's perched by the tub. He's completely at ease with his nudity, completely relaxed being on display for me. Then again, it's not like the man has any reason to be insecure. He's so beautiful to look at that it actually hurts.

I reach for the bottom of the floaty yellow tank I'm wearing and pull it off in one fell swoop. Then I shimmy out of the pretty skirt before hanging both on a set of hammered chrome hooks that decorate the wall closest to the shower. Ethan watches me from eyes gone dark with desire, and I force myself to stand before him in my yellow bra and panties as I wait for him to make the next move.

He doesn't make it. Instead, he smiles at me and says simply, "You're so beautiful."

"So are you."

I can tell from his face that that's the last thing he expected me to say. I flush a little, wondering if I've done something wrong, but then he throws his head back and laughs. "I'm glad you think so."

"Me too."

The water hits the three-quarter mark in the massive tub, and Ethan leans over to turn the faucet off. I figure that's my cue to finish undressing, so I reach behind me and unclasp my bra. I'm smart enough to know if I don't do this now, I'll never do it.

Seconds later, I'm standing naked before Ethan, feeling more intensely vulnerable than I have at any other time in my life, with the exception of that night with Brandon and the mess that followed after it. I can't help being glad that Ethan got undressed first. If he hadn't, if he'd been the fully clothed one watching me disrobe, I'm not sure I could have done it.

"Ready?" Ethan asks, once again holding out his hand. And once again, I take it. It's not like I actually need his help climbing into the bathtub, but it's nice to have it. More proof that I'm really not in this alone. After the last five years, it's a good feeling. Surprising, unexpected, but good.

I settle in at one end of the tub, then watch as he climbs in and settles back against the other end. A little ball of stress I didn't even know I'd been holding on to relaxes at the arrangement. I'd been afraid he would want to sit behind me, my back against his chest. I don't know if I could have done that.

Ethan's watching me, and again I feel like my thoughts are being broadcast across my forehead, because he chuckles a little. "Relax, Chloe. This is supposed to be fun."

"It is fun." I pick up a handful of bubbles and blow them at him, just to prove my point. Then I dissolve in a fit of giggles, because Ethan Frost looks hilarious with a clump of bubbles hanging off his perfect nose.

His eyes narrow at my hilarity, and the next thing I know, I've got a bubble mustache and beard dripping from my face. Not to mention two little horns on top of my head.

Determined not to be one-upped, I fashion a bubble flower—a daisy, or as close as I can get to one—and press it to the side of his head so that it looks like he's got a flower stuck behind his ear.

I wait for him to retaliate, but instead of more bubble games, he grabs onto my foot and slowly presses his thumb to my insole.

An involuntary moan comes from deep in my throat and he laughs a little. But he doesn't let up on the pressure. Instead, he rubs up and down the sole of my foot, pushing down on all the important pressure points. Then he spends a couple of minutes on my toes and heels before slipping his hands up my calf. He massages and kneads the muscles there until I can do nothing but lean back against the wall of the tub, eyes closed, and just enjoy.

Over and over he works up my calf and down my shin. Up and down, up and down, letting the hot water and the jets aid him in his quest to turn me into a quivering puddle of incoherency.

He does the same to my other foot and leg until I'm nearly insensate with pleasure. Then he drapes my foot over his shoulder and presses warm, sexy kisses to my ankle, my calf, the sensitive spot at the back of my knee.

I don't even think to stop him. How can I when I barely have enough functioning brain cells left to remember my own name, let alone form actual words?

He moves to the other leg, kissing and licking and caressing his way from my ankle to my knee. Then, with a quick glance at my face that both excites me and somehow manages to break through my pleasure-drugged stupor to set me on edge, he skims his lips farther up my thigh.

"Chloe, baby, is this okay?" he asks, before nuzzling my inner thighs.

I nod, because how can I say no to something that feels so good? Something that I want so badly.

"Are you sure?" he asks again, even as his hands slide under my hips and lift me up to the surface of the water.

"Yes. Ethan, please. Please." The words falling out of my mouth don't make any sense, but I don't care. I'm so hot, so turned on, and his mouth is right there. Right there. All I have to do is arch a little and his lips will be on me, his tongue inside me.

"If at any time you want me to stop," he says, "just tell me." And then he is there, his mouth on my sex. His fingers inside me. His tongue tracing along my slit until I'm a trembling, incoherent mess.

And it feels so good.

Like that time in his office, only better. Much, much better. Because here he can spread me wide open. Here he can play with me, tease me, torment me until all I can think of is him. All I can feel is him.

I clutch at his shoulders, tangle my fingers in the cool silk of his hair, and tug him closer even as I arch my back, lift my hips.

He laughs then, a low, dark sound that vibrates through my sex and into the very heart of me. And just that easily I move from desire to need. “Ethan, please. I need—” My voice breaks on a moan as he circles my clit. Once, twice, then again and again. Long, slow sweeps of his tongue that bring me right to the edge of climax. And then take me over.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me and I hold on to him like the lifeline he is. His touch grounds me, gentles me, even as it takes me higher, until nothing exists but him and me and the feelings that stretch between us.

I come down with a gasp, and reach for his shoulders, try to pull him over me. But Ethan isn’t having it. Instead, he turns his head and nips at my fingers until I lean back and let him have his way with me.

And what a way it is. The first time he built my orgasm straight up, took me over quickly. This time he goes slower, makes me wait. He licks and sucks, tastes and touches and torments me until I can’t move, can’t think, can’t even breathe. And then he does it some more.

His tongue is everywhere. Everywhere. Circling my clit, tracing my slit, delving deep inside my sex while the pleasure goes on and on and on. Until I’m begging. Until I’m screaming. Until I go beyond individual orgasms to a place where there is no end and no beginning, only continuous, never-ending ecstasy.

And still he pushes me. Still he demands more.

I’m sobbing. Mindless. A body driven by the sweet, hot edges of pleasure and pain. So wrapped up in sensation, in what Ethan is doing to me, that there’s no room for fear. No room for what Brandon did to me. No room for anything but Ethan and the response he draws from me so effortlessly.

“Please,” I beg. “Please.”

He lifts his head, his blue eyes sparkling wildly as he looks at me. “What do you need, baby?”

“You,” I gasp. “I need you.”

“You’ve got me, Chloe. Don’t you know that by now?”

And then he lowers his head and sends me careening over the edge of oblivion one more time.

Chapter Twenty-three

“Are you okay?” he asks minutes later when I still haven’t moved.

“Define okay.” I can’t even muster the energy to open my eyes.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I? Or scare you?”

I smile at that, run a languid hand down his arm until my fingers twine with his. “Do I look scared?”

“You look comatose.”

I laugh. “That’s about how I feel.”

“Good.” He shifts a little, making the water lap against my still-sensitized skin in a way that makes my nipples harden and my breath catch in my throat. Then he turns the water on.

“What—”

“Shh,” he murmurs as his fingers slide up my arm and shoulders to my neck and then my head. He digs through my curls, starts to massage my scalp even as he turns me so that my head is under the gently running water.

Once my hair is completely wet, he reaches for the shampoo and squeezes some into his palm before slowly working it through my hair. He plays with my curls as he coats each strand, strokes my scalp. Then tilts my head back and rinses the soap away.

He does the same with the conditioner, taking his time and rubbing my scalp in a motion that has my eyes all but rolling back in my head. I’m totally sated, completely spent, and yet I can’t help thinking that if he keeps this up, he just might make me come again.

Eventually he rinses out the conditioner, too, then skims his lips across my forehead.

“Okay?” he asks again.

I swallow past the sudden lump in my throat. “Perfect.”

“Good.”

He leans forward and opens the stopper for the bathtub before stepping out of the tub. He grabs a towel and wraps it around his waist before reaching to pull me up and out.

He dries me slowly, spending a lot of time on my hair before moving on to my body. I wait for embarrassment to swamp me—he's caring for me like I'm an invalid, after all.

Or like I'm the most precious thing in the world. The thought slips into my head, but I refuse to acknowledge it. To wish for it. Right now, it's more than enough that he's here with me and still wants me, even after everything I told him.

When I'm completely dry, Ethan picks me up and carries me back into the bedroom. Lays me out on the bed completely naked. Once again I wait for the nervousness to come, and once again it doesn't show up. I'm too busy watching Ethan move, his beautiful body bunching and stretching in all the right places.

Finally—finally—he lies down next to me on the bed. He's on his side, facing me, and while he hasn't taken the towel off I can see his obvious erection. Thank God. Because I know he said to trust him, but if he doesn't fuck me soon, I think I'm going to lose my mind.

He reaches for me and I think he's going to pull me close to him, but instead he trails a light finger over the hollow of my throat before stroking it down the center of my body. Over my heart, down my midriff to my navel ring. "I like this," Ethan murmurs, his voice low and gravelly as he plays with the little silver hoop.

"I like it, too." And I like that he likes it. More, I like that he seems to understand the control it helps me feel over my own body. The same control that I felt when I got the small compass tattooed on the back of my hip. The same control I feel now, in his arms.

He smiles. "I'm glad."

Eventually he moves past the navel ring and slides his finger down the platinum links and glistening diamonds of the belly chain to my mons. I tense despite myself and his eyes jerk right back up to mine. "You okay?" he asks.

I swallow, nod. Because when I'm with Ethan I am okay and that's all that matters.

He strokes me here for long minutes, letting me get used to his touch all over again before he moves down to my sex. By now, any nerves I had are gone and all I can think about is taking him deep inside my body.

Suddenly I'm tired of waiting. Ethan has been wonderful. Sweet. Sexy. More patient than any man should have to be. But I'm ready for the next step. More than ready.

Reaching out, I reach through the opening in his towel and wrap my hand around his cock. He gasps, his wicked blue eyes shooting to mine. I can almost see the indecision in them—he doesn't like that I've circumvented his plan, but at the same time he's a guy. He's not exactly going to complain about the fact that my hand is on his dick.

I lean into him, press a soft kiss to his mouth. Then whisper, "My turn, Ethan."

I start to stroke him, running my hand from the base of his shaft to the tip in one long, smooth motion. He stiffens, drops his hand down to rest on top of mine. "You don't have to do this."

I roll my eyes. "You've made it abundantly clear that I don't *have* to do this. But what if I *want* to do this?"

He studies me for long seconds, looking for I don't know what. Reassurance, maybe? Or just proof that I'm not going to lose my mind this time?

To be honest, I don't know what's going to happen when Ethan actually makes love to me, but I know that I want to try. I know that I've never been less afraid in my adult life than I am at this very moment.

"I don't want to wait anymore," I tell him, dropping soft kisses across his chest. "Please. Don't make me wait."

I think it's the plea that does it—I'm learning that Ethan has a hard time refusing me anything. But this time when I move my hand along the length of his cock, he doesn't try to stop me. Instead he leans back and lets me touch him the way I've been dying to.

I roll over until my body is right next to his. Then I do the same thing he did to me—tracing the center line of his body from his collarbone to his

groin—but I do it with my tongue.

Ethan groans before I even get to his belly button, his hands tangling in my hair, tugging at the curls hard enough to get my attention but nowhere near hard enough to hurt me. I take my time kissing and licking my way down his torso, enjoying everything about his body.

The salty-sweet taste of him that echoes the ocean, that is even now beating on the rocks outside this room.

The warm, firm feel of him that makes me long to touch every part of him.

The dark, musky scent of him that works its way into every part of my body.

For a second, just a second, I think about what it would be like if I could stay here—right here—with him forever. This moment is so perfect, so right, that I want to remember every part of it, so that when the rest of my life gets too much I can pull today out and wrap it around me like my own personal armor.

“Baby?” Ethan asks, his voice even hoarser than it was a few minutes ago. “You doing all right?”

“I’m doing fine.” And with that, I lower my head and take him gently into my mouth.

He groans at the first lick of my tongue down his rigid length, his fingers tangling in my hair. “Chloe, baby...” His whole body tenses, his every muscle going rock hard against me. I’ve never done this before and it’s different than I thought it would be. Better. More exciting. More arousing. Already I can feel my nipples hardening and the throb of burgeoning desire deep inside my sex.

Because I don’t know what I’m doing beyond the basics, I let instinct guide me as I bring my hands up to cup his ass. To pull him closer. To suck him deep into the recesses of my mouth.

His hands tug gently at my hair, guiding my mouth where he wants it to go. I like the sharp little tugs on my scalp, the brief twinges of pain that make the pleasure I feel at learning him this way so much sweeter. Running my tongue along the underside of his cock, I move with him as he gently tugs at my hair, his hands guiding my mouth where he wants it to go.

I lick at him, swirling my tongue around the length of him again and again and again before I stop to linger at the head of his cock.

I probe the little slit there with my tongue and I relish the sound he makes low and deep in his throat as much as I relish the salty taste that comes with the drops of pre-ejaculate he spills. He tastes good, feels good, and as his hips begin to move—as he begins to thrust himself gently into my mouth—I know that I want more. I want everything he has and I want him to give it to me, no holds barred.

But, much to my disappointment, Ethan has other ideas. He doesn't let me play for long, doesn't let me bring him to orgasm as he's done for me. Instead, he pulls me up, his mouth taking mine in a greedy, rapacious kiss that has me seeing stars even as I cling to him.

His tongue sweeps across my lips and I open myself to him. I take everything he has to give me and then demand more. Demand everything. He's held back long enough. I want all of Ethan, and I want him now.

He groans when I suck his lower lip between my teeth, then slides his hands down to cup my ass. I gasp as he pulls me closer to him and settles his heavy cock against the apex of my thighs.

I open my eyes, find him watching me with concern. Which is sweet, but right now I want the fire much more than I want the tenderness. So I hitch my leg over his hip and move so that he's pressed right up against my sex. Then I slide my hands into his hair and tug harder than he ever tugged at mine, while I thrust my tongue deep into the recesses of his mouth.

A deep growl rumbles up from Ethan's chest, and somehow it only stokes the flames that are burning through every part of me. "Ethan, I need—" More. I need more, but I don't know how to say that. Don't even know what exactly it is I'm asking for.

But Ethan does. "I've got you, sweetheart. I've got you." And then his mouth is on me, skimming from my neck to my breastbone to the undersides of my breasts. He sucks my nipple into his mouth, nips at it sharply before soothing the small hurt with his tongue.

Again and again he bites, then soothes, until the experience of mild pain and overwhelming pleasure blends into one glorious mixture so closely related that I can't tell where one begins and the other ends. My nipples, my

breasts, my neck, my shoulders, my back, he explores them all. Again and again and again, until my skin is flushed pink and I have more than a few small hickeys decorating my body.

I love it, the way I love my navel ring and my tattoo. The way I love the brand-new belly bracelet resting against my hips. Because with every love bite he gives me, Ethan is helping me reaffirm my control over my own body. My right to do with it as I please.

But eventually it gets to be too much. And not enough. I need more. I need everything. Ethan seems to know instinctively when I hit that point, or maybe he's hit it, too. But suddenly there's an urgency in his callused hands as they stroke over my body, a sense of desire that will no longer be denied.

"Ethan." His name is a trembling sigh on my lips, a desperate plea that I can't hold back as I tremble and arch against him. "Fuck me, please. Fuck me now."

He's trembling now, too, as he rolls over onto his back and pulls me over him.

"What—" I start to ask, but he stops me with a finger to my lips.

"Right now you're in control, Chloe." Those are the last words I'd ever expect to hear from Ethan, but I know he means them. I can see the sincerity shining in his eyes, feel it in the tight restraints he's keeping on his own needs.

And though I want to tell him that I don't need it, that I'm happy to cede control to him, there's a part of me that knows he's right. That just for tonight, just for this first time, I need to be the one in control of my body.

I need to be the one who takes him.

So I nod even as I twine my fingers with his. "Help me?" I ask, suddenly uncertain despite all my reassurances to the contrary.

He lifts our joined hands to my face, strokes a tender finger down my cheek. "Always, baby. Whatever you need."

With those words, my desire comes rushing back. It drowns the uncertainty, drowns the fear, drowns everything but the need I have for this beautiful, beautiful man.

He slides a condom on before his hands go to my hips, lift me up slowly, and then settle me gently, ever so gently, astride him as he keeps his eyes on

mine. I push down, softly at first and then harder as pleasure—unbelievable, unbearable pleasure—streaks through me. And then, with one downward thrust, he’s buried in me to the hilt.

Part of me wants to rush to completion, to make this a headlong sprint toward ecstasy. But another part of me, the one that is so in tune with Ethan, wants to take it slow. To savor every second.

In the end, he helps me decide, as he’s helped me with everything else on this unexpected journey. He clutches my hips with gentle fingers and slowly—oh so slowly—lifts me up, then lowers me down.

I gasp, take a deep breath. He feels so good. This feels so good. Exactly like I expected, but not. Somehow it’s more. Somehow doing this with Ethan is everything.

And so I ride him slowly, sweetly, cherishing him and us and this one perfect moment the only way I know how. I immerse myself in him in the way he looks at me and the way he feels inside me. Wrap myself in the feelings that grow larger, more tangible with every leisurely glide of my body on his.

He fills me up, and each movement of my body—his body—sends pleasure coursing through me. Indescribable. Unfathomable. Delicious. I rise up on my knees, then lower myself down on him. Again and again and again, biting my lip to keep from moaning. Clenching my muscles around him to keep from coming for just a little while longer. But the relaxed rhythm can’t last forever, not when Ethan and I have been working toward this moment from the moment we met. Tension begins to build in me, in him, the ache deep inside me becoming more and more unbearable. I can tell it’s the same for him, can feel it in the tautness of his body beneath mine and the clenching of his hands on my hips.

I know he’s struggling to keep from wresting control from me and it only makes me want him more. Only makes me need him more.

Soon, desire is a wild thing within me. A desperate, driving force that changes everything. For both of us.

I lean over to give him a kiss and sweat drips from me, mingles with the sweat glistening on him as well. His body entices me, all hot and wet and

muscular, and I dip my head lower. Lick a path up his gorgeous, gleaming chest.

Something breaks free in Ethan then. I can hear it in his swift, sharp intake of breath, feel it in the heavy, powerful thrust of his hips beneath mine.

“Now, Chloe.” His hands clamp on my hips like a vise. “Please. I need you, now.”

And just that easily, I yield control. This is Ethan and I trust him more than I’ve ever trusted anyone else. He’ll take me where we’re both so desperate to go, and take care of me when it’s done.

He reaches between us, strokes his thumb over my clit. With his other hand, he pulls me down hard even as he lifts his hips and thrusts into me. And just like that, we plunge over the edge of the world together.

Chapter Twenty-four

I stay with Ethan all day. Making love, having that evening picnic we never got a chance to have yesterday, talking about a million different unimportant things. Like fireflies and caramel versus peanut butter and what our favorite bands are. And while his taste in music is not something I can get behind, I'm willing to overlook it considering just how talented he is with his tongue.

It turns out Ethan's insatiable, and now that I'm past the stress and insecurity of that first time, so am I. We make love everywhere—in the pool, on the beach, on the patio, in his bed, on his kitchen table.

That might actually be my favorite time. We're in the kitchen, making something for a late lunch in a belated effort to keep from collapsing under the sheer number of times we've made love. Ethan, who is rummaging inside the fridge for cold cuts, turns to me with a can of whipped cream in his hand and a mischievous look on his face. The rest is history...but suffice it to say I've never had so much fun with a dairy product in my life.

Under duress, he drops me off at home late Sunday evening. He wants me to spend the night with him, and while there is nothing I'd like more, I feel like I need to put some boundaries on the relationship. Some boundaries on myself. At this moment I'm so caught up in him that I want nothing more than to stay in his bed forever. I want to wrap myself up in him and never, ever let go.

But that's a problem. We've only known each other a week. Normally I take longer than that to decide on buying a new pair of shoes. The fact that I chose him as a lover in a lot less time than that makes me nervous even as it makes me smile, and I need a little time to process. To decompress.

Which is why I let myself into my apartment late Sunday evening, though Ethan is pouting in the car while he watches me. Or at least doing the best impression of pouting a strong, brilliant, beautiful man can pull off.

It'd be funny if the steamy look in his eyes didn't make me want to run back outside and hurtle myself back into his arms. To hell with distance. To hell with perspective. Ethan Frost is mine and I want him more than I've ever wanted anything.

Even the truth.

The second the apartment door closes behind me, Tori pounces on me. She's been patient for two days, sending little text messages to make sure Ethan hasn't chopped me up into little pieces and hidden me in his fridge. Every time she texted, I made a point of answering her back, but I didn't give any details.

Tonight she wants details.

"Oh. My. God," she exclaims as my legs—still shaky from Ethan's last explosive bout of lovemaking—refuse to carry me any farther and I collapse on the couch next to her.

"I know."

"Oh. My. God."

I close my eyes, bury my face in my hands. "I know."

"Oh. My. God! Is that a hickey?" She points to a bruise on the side of my neck, then leans closer to investigate. "Forget hickey. Are those hickeys?" she screeches, her finger tracing one bruise after another. "There must be fifteen of them!"

And those are only the ones she can see.

"Is he an honest-to-God vampire? Because there's no other explanation for that!" She points at the ring of small love bites that circles my collarbone.

Except there is. Ethan found out during those first moments of lovemaking that the teeny-tiny bite of pain that comes with getting a hickey grounds me. It gives me something to hold on to in the maelstrom of all that pleasure. And it brings my own pleasure to a whole other level. I'm not sure how I feel about it—I've never been one to find anything pleasurable in pain before this—but Ethan has no problem with using it to keep me immersed in the moment. To keep me from losing myself in the torment of my past when my head can threaten to spin completely out of my control.

I don't tell Tori any of that, though. How can I expect her to understand what I myself can't quite grasp? So instead of owning up to the truth, I grab a pillow from the corner of the couch and smack her with it.

"Yes, he's a vampire. He spent the last twenty-four hours keeping me prisoner in his lair and doing unspeakable things to me while he sucked my blood."

She eyes my neck and shoulder. "The way you look right now, I can believe that."

I roll my eyes at her. "I guess that's my cue to go rummage through my closet until I find something to cover most of these." Somehow I don't think Maryanne will be impressed. And since I have no intention of telling her her boss gave them to me, my best bet is to find a shirt that hides them.

But Tori just snorts. "I recommend a turtleneck—and some industrial strength concealer." She taps a small bruise right on my jawline.

I should probably be upset with Ethan for marking me up so conspicuously. But I'm not. One, because it gave me such pleasure for him to do it. And two, because I understand his need to mark me. To claim me. Though I didn't act on it, there's a part of me that wanted to do the exact same thing to him.

"Okay, then." I filch the last sip of wine from her glass before standing up. "I'm off to bed. I'm exhausted."

"I bet. I'm exhausted just looking at you." She pouts. "But tomorrow I want every single detail, no matter how small and insignificant."

I roll my eyes. "We need to get you a boyfriend."

"You are preaching to the choir, baby. Maybe you can check and see if your gorgeous, sexy man has a clone somewhere."

"Nope, sorry. I'm not sharing."

She laughs. "You didn't even pretend to consider it."

"No, I didn't. Ethan Frost is all mine."

"Does he know that?"

I think of the way he held me as I cried. The way he patiently, determinedly claimed every part of my body for his own. The way he growled that he was never letting me go—and how I told him that went

both ways. “Damn straight,” he told me right before he drove me to another explosive orgasm. Thank God.

“He does,” I say to her, dropping a kiss on the top of her head before I walk toward my room.

“Ew,” she says, pretending to wipe my kiss off. “Careful! Who knows where that mouth has been!”

It’s my turn to laugh as she intends me to. “I know exactly where it’s been.” I pause for dramatic effect. “Everywhere.”

She groans, then reaches for the bottle of wine and pours herself another glass. I don’t want to fight, so I pretend not to see that the thing is more than 75 percent empty. Which means that before I got here, Tori was doing nothing but sitting alone in the living room and drinking. Something she seems to be doing more and more of lately.

I’m going to have to find a way to talk to her about it, one that won’t make her shut down, as she is wont to do in situations where she doesn’t like what she’s hearing. I know we’re college students, I know it’s summer. But she can’t go through a bottle and a half of wine or more every night and think that she’s doing okay. Because she’s not.

Tomorrow, I tell myself as I make my way down to my room. Or maybe Tuesday, during movie night, when she’s relaxed and the conversation is not so fixated on my new and exciting sex life. I don’t want to give her a chance for any ammunition.

“By the way,” she calls down the hall after me. “Your mother called a few times. She says it’s important.”

“Thanks.”

I get to my room to find three sticky notes on my door, each with the time my mother called and exactly what she said when Tori answered. My best friend is nothing if not an excellent message taker.

I rip them off the door, toss them into the trash can under my desk. Whatever she wants can wait. I have better things to do with my time tonight than worry about her. Especially when there’s a part of me that wants nothing more than to climb into bed and go over every delicious thing Ethan did to my body today.

Processing, I tell myself as I strip down and climb into my pajamas, my fingers lingering for long seconds on the belly chain that fits like it was made for me. I did say that I needed to process, after all...

* * *

I get to work early on Monday morning so I can run by Ethan's office to see him. And to drop off the blender.

His assistant ushers me right into his office, his eyes on the blender the entire time. I don't know if that's because he's fascinated by the endless possibilities presented by the Vitamix, or if it's because I missed a hickey in the great love bite cover-up that took the better half of my morning and he's desperate not to focus on it.

Either way, I figure it's not going to take much for the rest of the company to start talking about us. Strangely, I find that possibility much less concerning now than I did even a couple of days ago.

That old song about the difference a day makes is right on...or maybe it's just that my perception has changed. Either way, I'm not going to let worry over that color these few stolen moments with Ethan.

He's on the phone when I walk in, but he immediately smiles when he sees me. At least until he notices the blender I'm carrying.

"I've got to go," he tells the person on the other end of the line. "Something's come up."

Then he's walking around the desk to get to me, everything about him just a little more predatory than I remember from yesterday.

"Hello, Ms. Girard," he says as he shuts the door.

"Hello, Mr. Frost."

He takes the heavy blender from me, drops it on the corner of his desk. "I thought we took care of the whole present thing yesterday."

"Maybe you took care of it. I certainly didn't."

"What's the big deal? It's a blender."

"Exactly." I smile as I repeat his words back to him. "What's the big deal? It's a blender."

He narrows his eyes at me. “That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one day.”

I play coy, glance up at him through my lashes. “I thought it already had.”

He groans then, pulls me into his arms. “I missed you last night.”

“I missed you, too.”

He bends his head, nuzzles my neck. “Tonight you’re staying with me.”

“It’s customary to ask, you know.” It’s my turn to moan as he pulls the high collar of my blouse out of the way so that he can lick at the bruises on the side of my throat. Despite my determination to keep things professional during business hours, my head lolls to the side in an effort to give him better access.

“I asked yesterday and all it got me was an empty bed. I’m not making that mistake again.” His hands wrap around my waist, his talented fingers sneaking inside my waistband to rub against the sensitive skin of my stomach. At least, that’s what I think he’s doing until it registers that he’s playing with my belly chain.

“You’re wearing it,” he says, his voice rife with satisfaction.

“I said I would.”

“But you won’t keep the blender.”

“It’s a different thing entirely.”

His hands slip under my skirt to palm my ass, his fingers skating down to toy with my sex. I’m wet already, just from the feel of his lips on my neck, and I moan as he slips first one finger and then a second inside me.

“How is it different?” he asks as he pushes his fingers in before slowly sliding them back out. In and out. In and out.

I moan and spread my legs for him. “How is...what different?” Suddenly I’m having a difficult time keeping up with the conversation.

Ethan’s thumb glides through the tender folds of my sex, finds my clit, circles around and around it in a lazy rhythm that has my eyes closing and my breathing turning ragged.

“The blender,” he murmurs, even as he bends down and presses hot, open-mouthed kisses to the sensitive spot behind my ear.

“What blender?” My voice and my body shatter as he bends the fingers he has inside me so that he’s rubbing gently against my G-spot.

“Forget the fucking blender,” he growls right before he sinks his teeth into the tender skin of my shoulder. At the same time, he twists his fingers deep inside me, a move that intensifies my orgasm and has me screaming his name. Thank God his office is soundproof.

He draws out my climax, pulling every single ounce of sensation from me that he can. Only then, when I’m little more than a puddle of satisfied mush, does he grab on to my panties and yank.

They’re lace, so it doesn’t take much to rip them right off my body. I gasp and he groans, even as he unbuttons his custom-tailored suit pants and slips on a condom I never even saw him open. Then he’s palming my ass again, lifting me up. Wrapping my legs around his waist.

And then he’s inside me, his strong hands lifting and lowering me in a rhythm that has my eyes crossing and need building inside me all over again.

“Fuck,” he gasps as I tangle my hands in his hair and drag his mouth down to mine. And then there are no more words as I lick and suck and bite at his mouth, desperate for him despite the orgasm that just rocketed through me.

Whirling around, Ethan takes a few steps to the right and suddenly my back is against one of his office walls. “You okay?” he demands, one hand still on my ass while the other comes up to squeeze and pet and stroke my breasts.

“Yes,” I gasp, rising to meet each of his thrusts. “Please, Ethan. Please.”

“Please what?” he snarls, his hips pistoning against my own with so much power that I figure I’m going to be adding a few fairly spectacular ass bruises to my collection. But that doesn’t matter now; nothing does but the desperate, clawing need currently tearing through me.

“Let me come again,” I whimper. “Please. I can’t—”

He bends his head down then, bites at my nipple through the thin fabric of my blouse, my bra. At the same time, he reaches between us and pinches my clit. It’s the edge I need, the tiny little pinprick of pain that sends me hurtling over the edge into oblivion.

Seconds later, Ethan follows me, his strong, powerful body shuddering in my arms as he pours himself deep inside me. I hold on tight through it all, determined to keep him in my arms as long as I can. I don't ever want to let him go.

"Damn, baby," he says after he gets his voice back. "I'm sorry that was so fast."

"Do I look like I'm complaining?" I smile up at him, trail a hand over his neck. Relish the flare of heat in his satisfied eyes.

"You look like you've just been fucked," he murmurs in my ear.

"Why, how convenient considering that's exactly what happened to me."

He leans down, captures my mouth with his, then groans when the intercom on his phone buzzes. "Ethan, your eight o'clock is here."

"I need to get going, too," I tell him as I straighten his tie. It amuses me no end that we've just had hot, sweaty, wall-banging sex and yet his tie is barely askew. "I have a bunch of research that's calling my name."

He pulls away reluctantly, both of us gasping a little as he slides out of me and disposes of the condom. "I have an overfull schedule that's calling mine."

Still, he takes the time to fix my skirt for me, to tuck in my blouse and smooth a hand over the rioting mass of curls that is my hair.

When he starts in on his own clothes, I take the opportunity to pick up my purse from where it fell to the floor during his very enthusiastic greeting. I pull out an envelope filled with little presents and mementos—including the panda penny I made for him at the zoo—and slide it onto his desk without him seeing.

Then I'm brushing a kiss across his cheek and breezing toward the door. My whole body is lit up from the inside from the orgasm he just gave me—and the feelings for him that grow stronger every moment we're together. "Have a good day," I tell him on my way out the door.

"I already have."

That puts a goofy smile on my face, one that lasts all morning, despite an escalation in Rick's less-than-friendly campaign against me.

I ignore him like I did all of last week, focus on doing my work instead. I'm still on the Trifecta case, and while it makes me sad to think of a family losing their business the way they are, I can't help thinking about those men at the VA hospital. Can't help wondering if the disputed patents will somehow help Alejandro and the others to heal faster, better.

At eleven o'clock, one of the interoffice messengers drops by a package for me. Surprise, surprise, it's the blender, only this time it's filled with a strawberry and pineapple smoothie.

I open the note attached. *Now it's been used, so it's nonreturnable. Enjoy.*

I can't help it. I throw my head back and laugh and laugh and laugh. It's a good feeling.

Chapter Twenty-five

I start Tuesday morning in Ethan's bed. He tries to convince me to spend the whole day in it—with him, of course—but there's no way I'm calling in sick my second week of work.

"You're a bad influence," I tell him as I climb out of the world's fastest shower. It's a good thing I only live a mile away from here, because otherwise I'd be late for work. I got up in plenty of time but...well, Ethan is a powerful distraction when he wants to be.

"Only because you're such a good girl." He starts to wrap his arms around me from behind, but freezes halfway there.

"It's okay, you know. I'm not that fragile."

He drops a kiss on my nose. "You're not fragile at all. But I never want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"Really?" I ask, brows arched. "Because this whole hickey thing is getting out of control." I gesture to the new love bites that cover my breasts and throat and hip. "Yesterday I caught a couple of the guys I have lunch with staring at them. I was very uncomfortable."

"You're mine."

I wait for him to say something else, but he just smiles at me before climbing in the shower. Which leaves me trying to figure out what those two words mean. I'm his, so he likes seeing signs of that on my skin? Or I'm his and he wants to make sure all the other guys know it? I'm not sure I like how possessive either of those interpretations sounds, but then he turns in the shower and I see the scratches I made on his back last night. And I have to admit, they turn me on a little bit. This physical representation that he belongs to me and only me.

Yeah, maybe I should cut the guy some slack, considering the fact that in my own way, I'm not any better than he is.

I shimmy into my yoga pants and tank top, then stick my head into the bathroom, where Ethan is still in the shower. “I’m taking off. The interns have their Tuesday morning meeting today and I am *not* going to be late this week.”

“If you wait a second, I’ll take you.” He starts to rinse out the shampoo in his hair.

“It’s fine. I could use the run.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Be careful.”

I roll my eyes at him. “It’s a mile. In La Jolla. I think I can somehow make it without getting mugged.”

He doesn’t laugh. “Call me if you need me.”

“I won’t.”

“Chloe.” He sounds more serious than he has all morning, and it’s all I can do not to roll my eyes again. But I restrain myself to just blowing him a kiss and then I’m out the door. On my way to my apartment and the rest of my life, which suddenly feels very far away from where I’m at. And where I’m going.

* * *

At ten minutes to noon, a note from the desk of Ethan Frost arrives at my cubicle. *Can I take you to lunch?*

Maybe I should tell him no—it’s not like he gave me any notice, and he can’t take the fact that we’re together to mean I’m available to him anytime he wants me. But at the same time, I am free for lunch. And I want to see him. And I hate, absolutely hate, playing the games that some couples do with each other. That’s not what I want for my relationship with Ethan.

So I text him back *Yes*, then wait for him to tell me where to meet him. Nothing comes, though, and I’m about to send him another text when I realize that the whole floor is buzzing about something.

I stick my head out of my cubicle just in time to see Ethan turning the corner toward me. He's wearing a perfectly tailored black Anderson & Sheppard suit with a dark turquoise shirt that makes his eyes look like the ocean.

My heart beats faster just watching him walk toward me. Not just because of the way he looks, but because of the way he looks at me. Like I'm everything to him, the same way he has so quickly become everything to me.

He stops outside my cubicle. "Hi, Chloe." He's smiling so wide his cheeks are creased.

"Hi, Ethan." I bend down and get my purse from my bottom drawer. "You didn't need to come all the way over here. I could have met you at your car."

"I'm a big believer in picking up a woman when I ask her on a date."

He doesn't speak loudly, but he doesn't make any attempt to lower his voice, either. And considering half the floor is currently eavesdropping on our conversation, I figure any hope we had of keeping this thing between us quiet just went out the window.

A conclusion that is only reinforced as he wraps an arm around my waist and guides me through the cubicles to the elevator.

"You know, you're not doing a very good job of being discreet," I tell him once we're in the parking lot, walking toward his car.

He turns to me with a frown on his face. "I didn't realize I was supposed to be."

"I just thought, since I work for you, maybe you wouldn't want—"

"Technically, you don't work for me. You work for Maryanne. Also, I'm not paying you, and getting a salary is pretty much the defining characteristic of having a job, so again, technically you don't work for me. And finally, your internship is only for the summer. You'll be back at school in September and it's not like any of this will matter anyway."

"I know, I know. I just don't want to cause problems for you with anyone in the company. I mean, I don't want you to feel like you have to—"

"Chloe, you aren't my dirty little secret. I care about you, I'm proud to be dating you, and I'm not going to hide that. Frost Industries doesn't have a

policy about employee dating, only one about harassment. As long as you don't feel like you're being harassed—”

“No! Of course not!”

“Good. And I don't feel like I'm being harassed—”

“Glad to hear that,” I tell him with an exasperated shake of my head.

“So there's no problem. Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Except I saw the look on Rick's face when we passed by and he wasn't happy. Neither were the other interns. Not that that's any different from how it's been since my second day here, but still. It makes me uncomfortable to know they're all talking about me, and not in a good way. I have to get over that, and I will. But it's going to take time.

Ethan takes me to a Spanish tapas restaurant for lunch, and he's such a charming company that I forget about everything but being with him. He's smart and funny and a great listener who—despite running the company—still seems really interested in the minutiae of my day.

He wants to take me to dinner, too, followed by home to his bed, but it's Tuesday. Girls' night for Tori and me. And while she missed it last week, I feel like it sets a bad relationship precedent for me to blow my friend off for my boyfriend.

It doesn't seem to bother Ethan, though he does ask to take me to breakfast in the morning, before he leaves on his business trip. The fact that he's going to be gone five days almost makes me reconsider my plans with Tori, but I decide to hold firm. Though I do invite him over for some late-night cuddling...and whatever else we happen to get up to.

He accepts with a wicked grin that tells me exactly what he plans to get up to. And into. I can't wait.

* * *

Wednesday morning I watch Ethan drive away in the limo he called to take him to the airport, and a feeling of anxiety crashes into me. Which is stupid, I know. He's an international businessman, CEO of one of the most exciting companies in the country. Of course he's going to travel. Of course he's

going to have to go on business trips. There's no reason to get upset just because I'm going to miss him.

And yet it feels like more than that. A sense of foreboding is settling over me, making me freeze up deep inside. Even as it's happening I tell myself that I'm being ridiculous. That we don't actually have to be in each other's pockets all the time. That it wouldn't be healthy if we were.

Determined to shake whatever this funk is that's settled over me, I grab my briefcase and head toward my cube. As I walk, I send a text to Zayn and the others, asking if they want to meet for lunch in the cafeteria. I haven't even reached my office when I get three affirmative answers. Their friendliness puts a smile on my face. Rick and the other intellectual property interns might not like me, but at least I've made three friends—all of whom are exceptionally cool.

Once at my desk, I dive into the mountains of research Maryanne has heaped on me this week. I thought that with the Trifecta deal having gone through, the amount of stuff they'd need would go down, but it seems like the opposite has happened. There are a million more questions that need answers, dozens of precedents that need to be looked at. It's more than enough to keep me busy and my mind off Ethan.

I've been working steadily for about an hour when I get another delivery. It's not a blender this time—after Ethan's last trick, I've given up on getting him to take the Vitamix back. Instead, it's a fancy black box with a silver bow holding the lid in place.

There are no clues to warn me what might be in the box, but still, something tells me that discretion is probably the route to go with this present. Sure enough, when I peek inside, I find a dozen or so pairs of fancy underwear in a rainbow of colors. Red, pink, blue, purple, black—the only thing they have in common is the fact that they are very fancy and very expensive.

There's a note on top in Ethan's bold scrawl. All it says is *I think I owe you some of these*. My cheeks flame as I think about him ripping off my panties yesterday in his office and then another pair at my apartment last night. At the rate he's going, he should probably set up a standing underwear delivery a couple of times a month.

Not that I'm complaining.

I text him to say thank you, but don't get an answer for several hours, until after he's landed in New York.

I like the red ones.

Having had a chance to look at all of them at this point, I know that the red ones are the skimpiest pair he sent me.

Maybe you can wear them, then. Gives me a chance to rip them off you this time.

I've always been told blue is more my color.

LOL. Safe flight?

Long. I miss you.

I miss you, too.

Gotta go—business dinner.

XOXO

* * *

My phone rings about eleven. With Ethan gone, I took the opportunity to catch up on some of the sleep I've been missing the last few days, so I'm groggy and half asleep when I answer it.

"Hello?"

Ethan's voice, warm and sweet, pours down the line. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I thought you'd still be up. I'll call you tomorrow."

"No! It's fine." I pull the phone closer to my body, wrap myself around it like I would with Ethan if he were here. Considering the amount of time we've known each other, it's crazy how much I miss him. "How was your dinner?"

“Boring. How was yours?”

“Very exciting, actually,” I tease, tongue in cheek. “Tori and I ordered Indian food and watched *Firefly* on Netflix.”

“That was a great show. Joss Wheedon is a genius.”

“He really is.”

We talk for a few more minutes, about silly, mundane stuff that makes us laugh. Eventually Ethan tells me to go back to sleep. I protest, but I know he’s right. Even I can hear the way I’m slurring words.

“Call me tomorrow?” I ask before I hang up.

“It’s your turn. You call me.”

I smile, because every day he proves that we’re together in some new way. And that we really are equals. “I can do that.”

“Good night, Chloe.”

“Good night, Ethan.”

* * *

On Thursday, another delivery comes, this one to the apartment. Tori answers the knock on the door and comes back with a bright pink bakery box.

“Big shock. It’s for you.”

“It looks fattening.”

“I know, right? What is it about men? They like us with perfect bodies, but when they court us, they’re always trying to fatten us up.”

“Court? You think Ethan is courting me?”

She looks at me like I’m a moron. “Obviously.”

“I thought we were in the wooing stage. You said before that he was wooing me.”

“Yes, well, he’s obviously wooed you right into his bed. Now it’s becoming obvious that he wants to keep you there. Hence the courting.”

“Courting.” I repeat the word, try it out to see if I like the sound of it. I do. I really do.

“Oh, God. You’ve got that goofy look on your face again.”

“It’s not goofy.”

“It’s totally goofy. It’s so goofy I’m beginning to feel like you belong in a Disney cartoon.”

I stick my tongue out at her, then reach for the box. There’s no note, nothing to tell me who it’s from. But I know it’s from him, even before I open the box and see the beautiful arrangement of six perfect strawberry Napoleons.

“Have I mentioned that I really like this guy?” Tori asks, reaching in and swiping her finger along the side of one of them to collect the excess cream.

“I do, too,” I say, running my finger along the belly chain I haven’t taken off since he fastened it around my waist. “I do, too.”

Thanks for the Napoleons.

You’re welcome.

How’s your day been?

Ridiculous. Nothing’s moving fast enough.



Exactly how I feel. What have you been up to?

Looking at surfboards online. When you get back, I want you to give me another surfing lesson.

I’d love that.

So it’s a date?

It’s a date.

* * *

Friday comes and there's no delivery. Not like I'm really expecting one, but I still wait, just in case. But nothing comes, which is fine, because it's totally my turn. And since Ethan's recently upped his game, it's time for me to do the same.

Because I'm thinking of him, I text him while I'm stopped at a red light on Prospect. I don't get an answer right away, but I know he's busy. He's probably in a meeting or something.

Later that night I text him again. Nothing big, just the beginning of a joke I'd heard at work today. I figure I can deliver the punch line after I get his attention. But by the time I climb into bed, I still haven't heard from him. It feels strange, but I remind myself that he's juggling a lot of different things. I'm sure he'll call when he gets a chance.

Which is why, when I turn off the light, I make sure the phone's on my nightstand. We've talked every night after his meetings, no matter how late it is. I don't want to take the chance of missing his call.

But the phone doesn't ring that night.

Or the next morning.

Or the next afternoon.

And he never does answer the two texts I sent him.

I start to get worried. What if something happened to him? It's not like we're official or anything. No one would call me if he got hurt or sick or—

“You're being ridiculous!” Tori tells me. “If anything happened to Ethan, it would make the news, and obviously that hasn't happened. And the last time he texted you was to make a date to go surfing. He's probably just busy.”

“I know, I know.”

And I do. He's a busy guy whose job it is to keep a lot of different balls in the air at any given moment. Besides, I'm not a clingy girl. I never have been and I certainly don't intend to start now. He'll call me when he gets a chance. He always does.

Except Sunday rolls around and I still don't hear from him. Before he left, he told me that he was due in around three and asked if he could pick me up around five for an early dinner. So even though he hasn't called or

texted or emailed (I checked), I get dressed for dinner anyway. Surely he'd call if he doesn't plan to make it.

Except...he doesn't show up. Maybe I should be mad, but at this point I'm more terrified than I am angry. Something has to be wrong. It has to be, because the Ethan I know would never behave like this. He'd never just shut me out like this without an explanation. Never cut me off so coldly and completely.

Plus it doesn't make sense. Like Tori said, the last thing he did was arrange to take me surfing again. Unless he didn't really want to and I pushed him into it. Maybe that's it. Maybe I was too pushy—

No. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to spend all night torturing myself over the inner workings of Ethan Frost's brain. It's seven-thirty—two and a half hours past the time he was supposed to pick me up. Four and a half hours past the time he was supposed to land. Surely if he'd actually gotten in today, he would have made it home from the airport by now.

Which means I'm going over there. One way or the other, I'm going to find out what's going on with him. Even if it breaks my heart.

Chapter Twenty-six

There's a light on in Ethan's kitchen window when I pull up to the gate. I know the code from the couple of nights I slept over, so I don't bother pushing the button to alert him that I'm here. I just punch in the five numbers and wait for the gate to swing open.

By the time I get to the top of the driveway, my heart is pounding like a metronome at high speed. My stomach hurts, my heart hurts, and I'm shaking so badly I can barely get the car door open. This is going to be bad. I can tell, can feel it deep down inside myself. No matter how much I try to tell myself that he just forgot about dinner, I know better. Ethan Frost doesn't forget anything.

As I walk up to the house, I realize there are actually three or four lights on in the downstairs alone. So he's definitely home. The knowledge only makes me feel worse. Not as bad as imagining he might not be alone does, but still. I'll deal with that eventuality only if I have to.

I ring the doorbell, wait an acceptable amount of time for him to answer. When he doesn't, I ring it a second time. A third time. Then I start pounding on the front door.

"Ethan! It's me. Open the door. Please, Ethan. Open the door."

I feel like a stalker standing out here, like a crazy person who just won't get the hint. But damn it, this isn't fair. He's the one who came after me. He's the one who made me fall in love with him. He's the one who did all of this. And if he wants out now, that's fine. But he doesn't get to just ignore me. He's going to have to tell me to my face that he's no longer interested. I'm still covered in fading hickeys from the man, for God's sake. Surely I deserve that much consideration.

So I keep knocking, determined to keep it up until he answers. If nothing else, I want to know that he's all right. That this is just about breaking up, not about something terrible having happened to him.

After what feels like forever but is probably no more than four or five minutes, I hear the lock turn, and then the door swings open to reveal a bruised and battered Ethan standing in front of me.

“Oh my God! What happened to you?” All my relationship worries take a backseat to my concern for him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” I push my way past him, off the dark porch and into the bright light of the foyer. And nearly have a heart attack when I do. He looks a million times worse illuminated by the chandelier.

His left eye is black, the cheekbone below it cut and swollen. His jaw is bruised, his lip is split, and there are long gouges down his neck, like someone dug their fingernails in and scratched as hard as they could. The blood still looks fresh.

“Baby, you need to get to the hospital, get looked at. You could have a concussion or internal injuries.”

“I’m fine.”

“Did you call the police? Did somebody jump you? Where did this happen?”

There’s no emotion in his voice, no inflection at all for me to draw a conclusion from when he says, “In Vegas.”

“Vegas?” That doesn’t make sense. “I thought you were in New York.”

“I was. I flew to Vegas this morning because there was someone there I wanted to talk to.”

“Is he the one who did this to you? Did you at least call the police when you were there?”

The look Ethan shoots me is pure affronted male. “It didn’t seem like a good idea considering he’s in much worse shape than I am.”

I stare at him incredulously as the truth sinks in. “So this was a fight, not a mugging?”

He doesn’t answer, which—of course—is an answer all on its own. “Ethan! What were you thinking?”

“You should probably go.”

“Go? Someone needs to check you over and make sure you’re okay. Do you hurt anywhere but your face?” I reach for him, start to lift his shirt up and check his ribs, but he moves away so fast that I’m left grasping at air.

“I’m fine. Just leave, Chloe.” He turns and walks deeper into the house, leaving me to show myself out. As if that’s really going to happen.

Not knowing what else to do, I follow him down the winding hallway to the kitchen. “Look, Ethan, if you want me to go, I’ll go. I just need to know that you’re really all right.”

“I’m fine. And I *do* want you to go.”

“Okay, then.” On the inside, I’m freaking out by this point. But I manage to keep my cool as I walk to the fridge, open the freezer door, and rummage until I find a bag of frozen peas. “Here. You should put this on your eye and cheek. It will help with the swelling, so maybe you can actually see out of that eye tomorrow.”

When he doesn’t take the bag from me, I leave it on the counter next to where he’s standing. “I’ll come check on you in the morning—”

“Don’t.”

The dread I’ve been feeling all day turns to ice in an instant. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t come back tomorrow. Don’t come back at all.”

“Seriously?” I say after one long, stunned second. “That’s how you want to play this?”

He shrugs. “I guess so.”

“That’s not actually good enough. If you want me to walk away from you, you’re going to have to spell it out for me. What’s going on?”

He fixes me with a blank stare that’s so different from the way he usually looks at me that I have trouble reconciling the fact that it’s really him. That this stranger is the same man who held me so tenderly just a few days ago.

“Do I really need to say it, Chloe?” he finally asks.

“Yes, *Ethan*, I think you do. Because I obviously missed something somewhere along the line.” I know he wants me to give it up, to just walk away. But I’m not going to. I know how it felt to be held by him. To be made love to by him. A guy doesn’t do the things he did with me, for me,

and then just walk away with no explanation. Not unless he's a total jerk, and Ethan isn't.

He isn't.

But already the doubts are creeping in. He looks so remote, so untouchable, and so untouched that I feel exposed. Laid bare. On the brink of total humiliation.

Please, God, don't let me have made another huge mistake. I don't think I could take it.

But God isn't listening, and neither is Ethan. Or if he is, he doesn't like what I'm saying. He runs a hand through his hair, starts to turn away from me. Like he's done with this conversation—and me.

I'm not having it. I snag his gaze with my own and refuse to let him lock me out. If he's going to break my heart, he's going to do it looking straight at me. He owes me that much.

Silence stretches between us, cold and lonely and empty, but I'll give him credit. Once I've snagged his attention, he doesn't look away from me. Doesn't try to pretend that I'm not standing there in front of him with my chest ripped open and my heart bleeding. Ethan Frost may be a lot of things, but he isn't a coward.

"Fine," he says. "This thing between us isn't going to work out. It was fun. You're a great person but I think we should—"

"It was *fun*?" I ask him incredulously. "Letting me pour my heart out to you was *fun*? Listening to me talk about how I was raped? How I blame myself for it? That was *fun* for you? Really?"

"I didn't mean that." He sounds sick, but I'm not falling for it. Not now, not ever again.

"Oh, no? Well, what exactly did you mean, then? Because it sounds to me like you let me fall apart for your own amusement."

"That isn't true."

The goddamned tears are back, and it only makes me angrier at him. And myself. "Then tell me why."

"This isn't about you, Chloe. It's about me."

"Fuck you. You can do better than that."

His jaw is clenched, his hands squeezed into fists so tight that I can see his knuckles turning white, even through the bruises and the cuts. For a second, just a second, he looks like the Ethan I thought I knew. “It is me. It is. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Except it has everything to do with me. You can try to assuage your guilt by saying it doesn’t, but it does. It really does. Because I’m the one whose heart is being broken here. I’m the one who was stupid enough to let you in. To trust you. To fall in love with you even though I knew better. And now I’m the one who’s going to suffer for it.” The tears are falling now and I can’t stop them, and that only makes me angrier. I swipe at them with my hand, furious that I can’t keep it together. That he gets to see me breaking down when all I want to do is be strong.

“Just tell me why you did it. Did you think I was too cocky in the cafeteria that day? Or maybe I wasn’t nice enough? Is it because I didn’t like your stupid blueberry smoothie?”

“Chloe, baby.” His eyes are damp now and he sounds almost as bad as I do. Then again, his jaw is swollen to twice its normal size. “You’re talking crazy—”

“Don’t call me baby! Don’t you fucking call me that. And don’t you dare tell me when I’m being crazy. I was fine before you came into my life. I was fine before you charmed me with your fucking strawberries and your fucking blender and your fucking ridiculous care packages. I was *fine*. And now I’m not. Now I’m fucking broken all over again. And I hate you for it.”

I start to cry in earnest now, and I hate myself for that. I hate being such a mess, such a fucking goddamned basket case. Hate even more that I’m doing all this in front of him. I want to be cool, want to be collected, but it just hurts too bad.

Goddammit. I really am ruined. It’s not a bad joke this time, not a measuring stick I hold myself against. This time it’s really true. There are just too many pieces missing and broken, too many pieces that I’ve stupidly given away for me to ever be able to put them back together again. To put me back together again. And even if I could, it hurts too much for me to even think about trying.

“No, Chloe. No. You’re not broken. Can’t you see? I am.”

He walks toward me, arms outstretched, but I back away. Wrap my arms around my waist in a pitiful attempt at protection. If he touches me, it's over. Any small dignity I have left, *anything* I have left, will crumble right along with the rest of me.

I grab on to myself, dig my fingers into my waist in an effort to ground myself. As I do, my fingers slip beneath my sweater and I feel it. The chain he gave me to bind us together. To prove to me that this was for real. That he wasn't just messing with me.

That I really, truly, belonged to him.

My stomach revolts, and for a moment I think I'm going to be sick right here in the middle of Ethan's pristine kitchen.

Panic sets in. Real, live panic, and all I can think is that I want it off.

Want it away from me.

Can't stand it touching me.

Not now, not when everything he told me—everything he did for me and to me—was a lie.

Desperate, damaged, determined, I shove my shirt up over my stomach. Fumble with the clasp. But I'm too panicked, too heartsick, and I can't make it work. Can't get it to release.

"Chloe, no." Ethan's voice sounds panicked now, too, but I'm not paying attention. I'm not listening to him, will never listen to him again.

"Chloe, *don't*."

Nearly hysterical now, I yank as hard as I can. So hard that I can feel the chain digging into my back, feel the blood start to run. And still I pull. Again and again—

The clasp finally breaks and the chain falls off into my hand. I stare at it for long seconds, at the diamonds glowing in the bright, kitchen lights. At the drops of blood glistening on the links.

Ethan's right in front of me now, his face only inches from my own. I freak out. I can't let him touch me, not now. Not if I have any chance of ever being okay again.

I hold my hand out, open my fingers, and let the chain fall to the floor between us.

And then I run.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I don't even make it to the front door before he catches me. I lash out at him, clawing, scratching, desperate to get away. Muttering a curse, he turns me away from him, wraps his arms around me. Then pulls me in close, my back to his front.

“Let me go!” I scream through the tears. The words are garbled, a mess—like me—and Ethan ignores them.

“Just listen!”

“I've heard enough! You wanted me to walk, so goddammit, let me walk.”

“Not yet.” The belly chain is in his hand and he tries to push it back into mine. “Take this.”

“I don't want it.” I refuse to open my clenched fingers. “I never want to see it—or you—again.”

“Please, Chloe. I know I don't deserve anything from you, but please. Take it.” He pries my fingertips from my palm, presses the cold chain into my grasp before once again closing my fingers around it.

“I'm sorry, baby.” He presses a kiss against my temple. “I'm so sorry I did this to you.”

I don't answer. I can't. The fact that he's suddenly being tender, sweet, only makes this whole thing a million times harder. Not to mention more confusing and more infuriating.

I can't take it anymore, so I bring my arm up and hurl the chain away from me as hard as I can. It slams against the foyer wall before sliding to the floor.

“Goddammit.” He growls the word into my ear, his arms tightening around me like a vise. For the first time it registers that he's as messed up,

as out of control, as I am. For the first time a sliver of fear works its way through the pain.

I know that Ethan would never physically harm me, but if you'd asked me twenty-four hours ago I would have said that he would never treat me like this, either. That he would never dump me so callously, never throw me away like I'm nothing.

And yet here we are. The pieces of what we used to have are lying in ruins at our feet and all that's left is the pain and the fury and the heat. Always the goddamned heat. Already I can feel a response rising in me, my body so attuned to his that I'm growing wet even as my mind and my memories rage against the position he's holding me in.

I'm not the only one. His breath is ragged against my ear, his cock hard against my lower back. He's burning up, hot and shaky and so aroused that I can all but taste it in the air around us.

"Let me go!" I say again, jerking against his grip. If I don't walk away now, I'm afraid I won't find the strength to do it later. And I can't stay, not after everything that's been said and done.

"Don't you think I would if I could?" He sounds as tormented as I am. "That's what I've been trying to do. Now it's too fucking late."

He pushes me against the door with a hand flat on my back, while his other hand yanks at the waistband of my yoga pants.

"What are you doing?" I demand as my pants and underwear hit the floor. I'm in agony, aroused and afraid and anguished all at the same time.

"What the fuck does it look like?" he growls, sounding nothing like the Ethan I know. The Ethan I love even now. He's pressed against my lower back and I can feel him fumbling with his own pants. Unbuttoning them. Lowering the zipper.

For a moment, just a moment, terror blanks everything else out. *This can't be happening. Please, God, this can't be happening again. Not now. Not with Ethan. Not when I finally feel safe.*

I lash out, rake my nails down his biceps.

He curses, presses me more firmly against the door.

"Ethan, please." I don't have a clue what I'm asking for—whether I want him to stop or to continue—and I don't think he does, either.

We're standing on the edge of an abyss, one where any wrong move will send us—and the pieces of what we've shared—tumbling into the darkest oblivion.

I'm paralyzed with distress. I don't know what to do, what to say. And all I can think is, *Bring it on, you bastard. Bring. It. On.*

This is the moment where I see what he's made of, what he's capable of. And where I see just how much I can take.

Maybe we've been working up to this all along, maybe we haven't. Either way, I'm not leaving here until I find out exactly how this one moment, this one encounter, is going to play out. He owes me that much, just as I owe him.

At that moment, he pushes himself even more firmly against me. His cock is so hard that it actually hurts to have it shoved against me like that, and I brace myself. Prepare for the worst, even knowing that it may very well send me careening over the last edge of sanity.

I get Ethan instead.

Because no matter how tormented he is, how broken we are, he's still my Ethan. Tender, sweet, soft. And when he touches me, that's all that matters. All that will ever matter.

The thought breaks me into even more pieces, but I don't pull away. I can't. I'm caught in his grip, pulled under by the passion and the power of this connection that just won't break.

But then he moves and I tense as he strokes his hands over my shoulders.

Whimper as he lowers his head and kisses my neck.

Shiver as he nibbles at the ticklish spot behind my ear.

I can't help myself. He's an addiction that I just can't kick. One I'm terrified will haunt me the rest of my life.

He laughs in response, even as he licks his way down to the sensitive place where my neck meets my shoulder. Then he bites me.

My body lights up like the Fourth of July, my fear mingling with his fury, my arousal tangling with his need. And I know—I know—that there's no more reason to fight. Because this is Ethan. He might have torn my heart to pieces, but he still holds me like I'm the most precious thing in his world. I

don't know what that means, and at the moment I don't actually give a damn.

“Ethan. Please.”

This time he knows what I'm asking. We both do.

His hand slides around to my lower back, presses so that my back bows and my ass pushes more firmly against his stomach. At the same time, his other hand reaches up and cups my breast.

I moan as he squeezes my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, whimper as he bends his knees and slowly slides his cock through the wet, aching lips of my sex.

“I need you.” His breath is hot against my ear. “I tried to let you go. Tried to make you leave. But I can't. Chloe, baby, I can't.”

I'm so confused. So turned on. And listening to him is only making it worse. “Ethan. I can't—”

“Yes, you can.” He kisses and licks his way along my shoulder to the nape of my neck before sliding his tongue slowly—oh so fucking slowly—down my spine.

He's talking the whole time, murmuring sex words, love words, words that make no sense except that they make me hotter. Make me burn. I want to turn around, to wrap myself around him and beg him to fuck me right here, right now, but Ethan is completely in control of how this goes down and he obviously wants it this way. Needs it this way.

All I want, all I need, is to feel him inside me one more time. He's barely touched me and already I'm way too close. But I don't want to come. Not on my own. Not if this is the last time Ethan is ever going to touch me like this.

“Do it!” I tell him, my voice so hoarse it's nearly unrecognizable.

His only response is to bite me again, his teeth nipping at my back hard enough to leave a bruise this time. I scream, a high-pitched, primal thing that comes from deep inside me. Ethan must like the sound because he does it again. And again. Then his hand slides down my stomach to my abdomen, my mons, and finally, finally, to my aching, desperate sex.

Usually he's gentle with me, sweet and careful, but this time the need is obviously riding him as hard as it is me. I can feel it in the urgent hardness

of his cock, in the fine shivers that rack his body, in the quick, brutal way he shoves three fingers inside me.

Without warning, I go careening over the edge of an orgasm so intense, so shattering, that for long moments I lose myself. I forget everything—the pain, the fear, the rage, the devastation—and just feel.

Before the tremors even stop, Ethan is on his knees behind me. He grabs on to my thighs with his huge hands, yanks my legs apart. I'm spread wide open for him now, so wide that I'm off balance and the only things holding me up are the wall in front of me and Ethan behind me.

The aftershocks of ecstasy are still tearing through me, and I'm off-kilter. Vulnerable. And hurt—still so hurt. But before any of the feelings can take a firm hold, Ethan lifts me up onto my tiptoes and shoves his tongue deep inside me.

I scream. Clutch at the wall. Try to hold on to the last broken pieces of myself that I can claim as my own. But Ethan won't have it. Not now. Not this time.

He wants everything, every little shard that I have left, and he's not shy about claiming them. Claiming me.

His tongue is everywhere—circling my clit, sliding along my labia, thrusting deep inside me.

His fingers are everywhere—pinching my nipples and my clit, sliding along the sensitive skin at the bends of my knees and elbows, digging into my thighs and grounding me with small pinches of pain.

He's everywhere—behind me, beside me, inside me so deep that I know I'll never get him out.

Not now. Not after this.

The pleasure is building again, taking me higher and higher and higher until I can't think, can't breathe, can't do anything but feel. I'm insensate with it, completely overwhelmed. Completely under his spell. Just the way Ethan wants me.

With a twist of his tongue, he sends me tumbling into ecstasy again. And again. And again.

Time loses meaning, everything does, until there's nothing—no one—but Ethan and me and the cataclysmic heat between us.

I'm holding on to the wall now, my fingers seeking purchase, surcease, as my entire body trembles violently. I can't take much more without breaking, but I don't want it to be over, either. Don't want it to end. Not until I feel Ethan inside me one last time.

"Do it," I choke out. "Damn you. Just do it."

Ethan's only answer is to thrust his tongue even deeper inside me at the same time as he presses his thumb slowly, inexorably, into my anus.

My knees buckle as another climax roars through me. This time not even the wall can hold me up. My body starts to sag, to slide down, but Ethan catches me like he always does. Holds me in place. And sends me careening over the edge one more time.

I'm crying now, hot tears of pleasure and pain rolling down my face as sobs rack my body. It's too much. Too much. Too much. I can't take anymore.

Ethan knows—like he always does—and suddenly he's on his feet again. He turns me to face him and through my tears I see the same ecstasy and agony that I'm feeling reflected back at me from his damn oceanic eyes.

"I'm sorry," he tells me even as he presses hot kisses against my forehead, my cheeks, my lips. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Just do it," I choke out. "Please. I can't—"

His mouth takes mine in a kiss so ripe with emotion—with pain and pleasure and everything in between—that all I can do is open myself and take everything he needs to give me.

Then he's lifting me up, and he's strong enough that he doesn't even need the wall to help support me. Instead, he holds tight and growls, "Wrap your arms and legs around me."

I do, and that's when he slides deep inside me with one powerful thrust.

"Oh, God. Baby. Oh, God." He buries his face in my neck, and even as pleasure races through me I register the feel of hot tears against my skin.

"Ethan." My fingers tangle in his hair, and I try to pull his head up so I can see his eyes. But he refuses to look at me. He's shaking and shuddering now, so badly that he finally does press me against the wall for added support.

He's kissing and licking the bend of my neck, sending new sparks of pleasure shooting up and down my spine. But the tremors are still racking his body and I can still feel the tears.

I can't help it. Destroyed and devastated though I am, I can't see him like this and not ache. I wrap my arms around him, pull him even closer.

"I love you," I whisper into his ear, relinquishing the final, broken piece of myself into his care. I can't stop myself, don't want to stop myself, even knowing he might very well throw it back in my face before this night is over. "I love you, Ethan Frost, and will until the day I die."

"Chloe!" He grabs my face in his hands, his mouth latching onto mine like a dying man who has finally found salvation. Seconds later he starts to come, and I pull him closer, hold him tight, as he empties all that he is inside me.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I don't know how long we stand there like that, Ethan impaled inside me, me wrapped around him. And I don't care. All that matters is that he's mine. For these long, trembling moments Ethan Frost belongs only to me. Even knowing that I'm only minutes away from having to give him up once and for all doesn't mar the preciousness of these moments. How can it when, for the first time, Ethan is as vulnerable, as open as I am?

He's still kissing me, his mouth hot, demanding, *voracious* on mine. I kiss him back. I kiss him and kiss him and kiss him. Until my lips burn and my jaw aches and my tears have finally burned themselves away. And then I kiss him some more.

"I didn't mean it," he finally says, lifting his head just enough so that there's a scant inch of space between us. "I didn't mean any of it."

His breath is hot on my face, his body hard and solid against me. Inside me. And still I don't know what to say. What to think or feel or do. How can I when his earlier indifference is still an open, aching wound inside me?

"Baby, I swear. I never meant to hurt you."

I shake my head, look away. Try not to hear. Try even harder not to listen to the words coming out of his mouth. They're exactly what I wanted him to say twenty minutes ago, thirty minutes ago. But not now.

Not when it's too late.

Not when I feel like I've been ripped open, all my pain and fear and need on trembling display.

Not when I've already broken.

I must have spoken out loud, because he tells me, "It's not too late. It's not." He drops kisses on my cheek, my temple, the side of my neck. For the first time I register that his torn-up lip feels rough against my skin. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The tears have stopped now, and I don't move, don't speak, barely even breathe. My whole body feels like it's been encased in ice, and for the first time I'm grateful for the chill. Because I don't want to feel this. I don't want to feel any of it. But he's still inside me, and as he moves and trembles against me, it's impossible for me not to feel. Impossible for me not to love him.

Still, we can't go on this way. "Let me go, Ethan."

"I tried. Believe me. I tried to let you go. But I just can't. I need you too much." Shuddering, he buries his face against my throat. There's a selfish part of me that wants to shrug him off, to reject him the way he rejected me, but I can't do it. I can't harden my heart to him any more than I can keep my body from him. Good or bad, Ethan Frost owns me. And, I realize as the desperation of his hold finally sinks in, I own him, too.

Silence stretches between us for far too long. Finally, when I can't take it anymore, I demand, "Tell me why. If you want me to stay, you need to tell me why you did this. Why you tried to tear us apart so completely."

He stiffens against me, pulls away. Puts me gently on the floor. My legs try to buckle when they first try to take my weight again, but Ethan grabs on to me. Holds me until I'm steady.

As I wait for him to speak, I retrieve my panties and yoga pants. Start to pull them on, then realize I'm wet with him. Ethan didn't wear a condom.

For long seconds, my mind boggles at the realization. But before I can even begin to wrap my head around what that might mean, Ethan takes my hand and tugs me toward the closest bathroom.

"I wasn't thinking."

"Neither of us was."

"Is it—"

"It's fine," I tell him, having already done the calculations in my head. "We're fine."

He nods but doesn't say anything else. Just wets a washcloth and cleans me up before tenderly—so tenderly—helping me dress. Only then, when I'm fully clothed and as armored as I can get, does he say, "I was trying to save you."

“Save me?” I look at him in disbelief. “Let’s be honest. More likely you were trying to save yourself.”

“It’s too late for that. It has been for more years than I can count.”

“I don’t believe that. Everybody knows how amazing the great Ethan Frost is. Everybody loves you.”

He shakes his head. “Because nobody knows me.”

“I know you.”

“You don’t. If you did, you’d run out that door and never come back.”

“I tried that. You’re the one who stopped me.”

He closes his eyes, lowers his head like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. “Don’t you get it? I’m going to end up destroying you, Chloe.”

I gesture to myself, to the tearstains and the mess and the hands that still won’t stop shaking. “You pretty much already have.”

“Don’t say that.” He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Don’t even think it.”

I watch him for long seconds, trying to figure out what to do. Trying to find the hate or the rage, something that would make it easier to ignore Ethan and walk right out the door. But I’m still weak from his lovemaking and his tears and his need, so nothing comes, nothing but the mangled compassion that reinforces the knowledge that I still love him. That I’ll always love him.

“You need the peas.”

He stares at me without comprehension. “Excuse me?”

“Your face is swelling up more every minute. You need to put the peas on your eye and your cheek.”

“Do you think I give a damn about my face right now?”

“I don’t know what you give a damn about, Ethan. That’s the problem.” I stand up and start toward the kitchen.

This time, he follows me—after picking up the broken belly chain from where it fell on the foyer floor.

A couple of minutes later, he’s settled at the kitchen table holding the bag of peas to his face. I’m across the room, arms wrapped around myself. After

everything that's happened, I don't trust myself to get too close to him, and I don't trust him at all.

"It's been a bad couple of days," he finally says. "I found out some stuff about my family that—" He breaks off, shakes his head.

"Your dad?"

"No. My mom and brother."

"You have a brother? I didn't know that." The news reports never mention him, or Ethan's mom. She and his father divorced long before he became a national hero, so the only people in the public eye when he died were Ethan and his grandparents. It seems strange that no one's picked up on this other side of his family, but then again, they've never been important to the story of his life, so why should the media care?

"He's my half brother. My mom remarried."

"What does that have to do with you?" *With us?*

"My mom's pretty much a crazy person, always has been. Oh, she puts on a good show, but she is definitely a little nuts. Anyway, after she left my father, she never wanted much to do with me. She had a new husband, a new son, a new life. There was no room in it for me.

"And that was fine. I had my grandparents and my dad. I didn't need her. But there was my brother, you know. I worried about him. Her husband seemed nice enough, but...who knew what went on behind closed doors?"

"So from the time I've been old enough, I've kind of made a point of checking in on him. Make sure he's doing okay."

"Is he?" Despite myself, I'm fascinated by this glimpse into Ethan's mind. Fascinated and worried, because if the way tonight has gone is any indication, this story isn't going to have a happy ending.

"Yeah, he's doing good. Better than he should be, probably," he mutters darkly.

"I don't know what that means."

"When he was younger, he got into some trouble. Stupid stuff, mostly. I helped him get out of it. Figured with a mom like his, it was only logical that he'd have some problems. Except I screwed up. I got him out of too much trouble. Made things too easy for him."

I reach for his hand. “You’re his brother. It’s only natural to want to save him from his mistakes.”

“Don’t say that. I can take that from anyone else, but I can’t take it from you. Not right now.”

Now I’m totally confused, but I don’t say anything. I just watch him, let him get it all out.

“On Thursday night, I found out that some of the trouble he was in... some of the trouble I was certain wasn’t his fault actually was. And I got him out of it.”

Thursday night. The night everything changed. The tight ball of hurt inside me loosens just a little. It doesn’t disappear, but I know about making bad decisions. Know about wanting to push people away.

“I fucked up, Chloe. I fucked up bad. Like I always do.”

“Ethan, that’s ridiculous. You fuck up less than anyone I know.” I reach for his hand, squeeze it. “But you’re not perfect. Nobody is.”

He looks from me to the broken belly chain that he still has clutched in his hand. “Yeah, obviously I’m not perfect.”

I bite my lip, look away. “Why did you say those things, Ethan? Why did you break up with me over something that has nothing to do with us?”

He watches me for long seconds, his eyes so dark and miserable that I can barely stand to look into them. I’ve never seen Ethan like this, never seen him look so defeated. So destroyed.

Finally, when I’m certain he’s not going to answer me, he says, “I’ve only ever loved a few people in my life, Chloe, and I’ve fucked it up with all of them. In one stupid, spiteful moment I ruined everything between my father and me, and he died before I could fix it.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know that. My grandparents lost everything trying to help me achieve my dream of getting Frost Industries off the ground. And I let them. I didn’t know what they’d done, but I should have. They died before I could make it up to them.

“My brother. I’ve helped my mother ruin him without even knowing what I was doing.

“And now there’s you. And I’m terrified I’m going to destroy you, too.”

There’s not much I can say to that after the scene I made here tonight. I still don’t like the way he handled things and I’m still hurt that his first thought was to cut me out of his life. But if he thought he was protecting me, saving me from some ridiculous streak of bad luck, then I can forgive him. God knows I’m not exactly logical when it comes to the people I love, either.

My meltdown tonight being a perfect example of that.

“The only way you’re going to destroy me is if you cut yourself off from me. I freaked out tonight because I was already upset, Ethan. Already worried about you because you’d stopped calling and answering my texts. I was afraid you’d been hurt or gotten sick. Then when you treated me like that...it was like you were throwing me away. Like I didn’t matter to you any more than I mattered to those guys from high school.

“I’m not saying you have to stay with me forever. None of us knows what’s going to happen next week or next month or next year. But if you decide to leave again—”

“I won’t.”

I shake my head, refusing to let him get away with such shortsightedness. “If you decide things aren’t working out, all I ask is that you break things off in a reasonable way. I don’t need much, but a little compassion would be nice. Something that proves to me that I’m something more than some girl you picked up to fuck for a weekend.” My voice breaks and I turn away, taking a few deep breaths as I try to get myself under control.

“Don’t even say that, Chloe.” Ethan is up and in my face again, where he’s been pretty much from the moment I met him. “You’re not some girl. You’re the only girl. The only one who’s ever mattered to me. The only one who ever will.”

“You don’t know that.” I unconsciously echo his earlier words. But the truth is neither of us knows what’s going to happen. Not tomorrow and certainly not six months or a year from now.

“I do. I do know exactly that.” He takes my hand, presses it to his lips. “I just got confused and let all the shit in my head get out of control. It won’t ever happen again.”

I want to believe him. Of course I do. But I don't know if I can. There's more than what he's telling me. I can sense it, feel it, and I don't want to be blindsided by it again. Don't want him to push me away the next time it comes up and he can't deal.

But at the same time, it's not like I have room to talk. There are some pretty big things I haven't told him about my past, either. And while someday I hope I can, I know this isn't the right time. For either of us. Not when the wounds from tonight are still so fresh, so raw. Not when we're both still so vulnerable and shaky.

I'm still shocked at how easy it was for me to completely fall apart. I thought I was better. I wanted to be better. Now I don't know if I can trust myself, let alone Ethan. And I hate that I feel that way.

But we've only known each other a couple of weeks, only been together less than that. There's no rule, no timeline, about when we have to parade all our scars to each other. Maybe it's enough that we're trying. That we're getting there, slowly.

"I'm scared," I tell him.

"I know, baby. I know."

"Please. Don't hurt me like this again."

His eyes are raw with a pain I don't understand and can't connect to. "I never want to hurt you again. In any way." They aren't the words I asked for, aren't the words I want to hear. But combined with the tender, desperate look in his eyes, they're enough.

He reaches for me then, pulls me up and into his arms, and I go. Of course I go. Because he's Ethan and he's mine, the same way that I'm his. Absolutely. Unconditionally. Irrevocably.

It's not perfect. Not yet. And maybe it never will be. But as he leans down and takes my mouth with his own, it's more than enough. For me. For him. For us.

Epilogue

“Wake up, sleepyhead.” Ethan rolls over on top of me and kisses my cheeks and lips and forehead.

I smile sleepily, stretch a little. “You’re the one who talked me into playing hooky today. I don’t have to wake up.”

“No. I called Maryanne and told her I needed you for a very important project in the CEO’s office today,” he corrects me as he slips inside me.

I arch against him, moaning softly at how good he feels. “Is that what you call this? An important project?”

“The most important.”

Our lovemaking this morning is as tender as last night’s was wild, as lazy as last night’s was frantic. And I love every second of it. Then again, I love everything Ethan does to me. I always have. I always will.

And while a part of me feels guilty for ditching work today, I know that Ethan and I need this time. After everything that happened yesterday, I’m not ready to be separated from him. I can tell by the look in his eyes and the possessive way he touches me that he feels the same way.

He moves slowly, gliding in and out of me in an easy rhythm that nonetheless stokes the fire that is always burning between us. Sweat breaks out on our bodies, tension builds, and it isn’t long before we’re falling over the edge of the world together. Just like it’s meant to be.

Ethan cuddles me for long minutes, his body curved protectively around mine as he plays with my out-of-control curls and presses soft kisses to my shoulder and back. At first I’m a little nervous about this position—my back to his front—but after everything that happened last night in just this position, it seems crazy to worry about it now.

So I do my best to let the fear and the panic go. Oh, I know I'll never be normal, know that there will always be a part of me that Brandon has a hold on no matter how much I wish it weren't so. But for now, for today, I want to concentrate on Ethan and everything that's going right in my life—in our lives—for once.

Eventually his stomach growls, though, and he rolls out of bed with a laugh. "Shower, then breakfast?" he asks, reaching a hand down to help me up.

But I'm feeling lazy and sated and I don't want to move. Not quite yet. The smell of him and me is on the sheets and I want to linger here for a few more minutes and just immerse myself in what we are together.

"You go first," I tell him. "I'm not ready to get up."

He smiles indulgently. "All right, then. I'll shower, then make you breakfast in bed. How does that sound?"

"Are you going to be in the bed with me?"

He arches one of his brows in that way he has that makes me crazy. "That can be arranged."

"Then I say it sounds very good."

He bends down and gives me a quick kiss that becomes a not-so-quick kiss. But then my stomach wrecks it by grumbling, too. Ethan pulls away instantly. "I'll take a quick shower and then feed you. While I'm in there, decide what you want me to make."

But he's only been in the shower a few minutes before my plans for a lazy morning in bed get derailed. The doorbell rings, and while at first I ignore it—this isn't my house—whoever is outside is determined to get some response. And once it registers that whoever it is obviously has the code to Ethan's gate, I reach for his robe and wrap it around me. Maybe his cleaning lady forgot her key or something.

But when I finally get to the front door and open it, terror slams through me, weakens my knees to the point that I have to reach out and grab on to the door frame to keep myself upright.

"Hey, Chlo. Long time no see."

My world shatters. Because it's not Magdalena on the porch waiting to be let in. Instead it's my worst nightmare, Brandon Jacobs, who's staring back

at me...out of a face that's a million times more battered and bruised than Ethan's is.

He steps forward and instinct takes over. I slam the door in his face, lock it, then turn and press my back against it like I need another barrier to keep him out.

As I do, I look up—straight into Ethan's dark and tormented eyes. And I know that whatever secrets he's keeping are going to tear me apart.

Don't miss the conclusion in book two

Addicted

coming soon from Loveswept

Acknowledgments

I can't begin to tell you how excited I am that *Ruined* is finally making its way into the world. I love everything about this book and know that there is no way I'd be nearly this excited without the wonderful and amazing people at Random House Loveswept, who have helped me so much on every step of the journey.

Sue Grimshaw, I am thrilled beyond words to have this chance to work with you. You are an incredible editor and an even more incredible person and I am so grateful for all you've done for me. Thanks so much for your enthusiasm, suggestions, and help as I struggled to tell Ethan's and Chloe's story. I couldn't have done it without you.

Gina Wachtel, choosing to write for you is the smartest and luckiest decision I've ever made. Thank you so, so much for your excitement, your interest, and your brilliant, brilliant ideas. I can never thank you enough for what you've done for me.

To Allison, Matt, Lynn, Penelope, Kim, April, and everyone else at Random House for their incredible support. Thank you for helping make this book the best it could be.

Emily Sylvan Kim—I'm running out of things to say, but never things to thank you for. You're the best agent in the whole wide world and I love you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Shellee Roberts and Emily McKay—I don't think I'll ever be able to write another book that doesn't credit you two in the acknowledgments. You are the best friends, writing partners, and brainstormers a girl could ever ask for. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My mom, whose support and love have made this year, and every year, so much easier than it could have been.

And finally, my guys, who I love more than I can ever say. We've had a rough and rocky year and I just want to say thank you for hanging in there

and being the coolest, most wonderful sons in the whole world. You amaze me every day.



Tracy Wolff lives in Texas and teaches writing at her local community college. She is married and the mother of three young sons.

www.tracywolff.com/press-kit/

The Editor's Corner

Happy New Year!

Another year may have slipped on by, but don't let these romances slip by you! Ring in the New Year with romance starting with an electrifying journey of emotional and sexual discovery that pushes two damaged souls to their breaking point—and beyond—in, *Ruined*, by Tracy Wolff, the first installment of **The Ethan Frost novels**. Award-winning author Bronwen Evans debuts **The Disgraced Lords series** with Loveswept, book one, *A Kiss of Lies*—tortured and abandoned, can two people recover and ignite each other's deepest passions? Romantic Suspense fans will enjoy *In the Dark*, where passion raises the stakes in Sally Eggert's electrifying novel of deception and desire. Mary Ann Rivers launches her contemporary series with *Live*, a riveting romance sure to please readers of Ruthie Knox, Kristan Higgins, and Jill Shalvis.


Fans of Stacey Kennedy's **Club Sin series** will be thrilled to know another wicked and wild tale of submission, seduction, and love will be available later in the month—*Bared*, Cora and Aidan's story.

A little something for everyone—usher in your New Year with Loveswept.

And, you don't want to miss these classics:

OMG is all I can say about Connie Brockway's **McClairen Isle trilogy**—enjoy these men in kilts, beginning with *The Passionate One*, and continuing with *The Reckless One* and *The Ravishing One*. Then, Ruth Owen programs a code for seduction in *Meltdown*, plus *New York Times* bestselling author

Iris Johansen weaves the unforgettable story of a man and a woman who come together under the spell of danger—and explosive desire, in *The Spellbinder*. Sandra Chastain’s Civil War romance, *Scandal in Silver*, will touch your heart, along with, Linda Cajio’s *Irresistible Stranger* and *At First Sight*. Meet single mom Kitty Reardon in Fran Baker’s heartwarming story, *King of the Mountain*. And for those of you who missed the Grayson boys in Elisabeth Barrett’s **Star Harbor series** don’t fret, the series is being rereleased this month in an eBundle—*Deep Autumn Heat*, *Blaze of Winter*, *Slow Summer Burn*, and *Long Simmering Spring*.



Gina Wachtel
Associate Publisher

Read on for an excerpt from Tracy Wolff's

Full Exposure

Kevin Riley was the stuff fantasies were made of.

Her fantasies, to be exact.

Six foot five, heavily muscled, with the most beautifully intense blue eyes she'd ever seen, he captured her attention like no man ever had. And with his half-naked body in front of her and nature thrashing fiercely around her, it was all she could do to keep her clothes on, her mouth shut and her camera aimed somewhere besides his absolutely fabulous ass.

Not that he should mind—it was one of his best features, after all. And she was being paid, well paid, for taking pictures that showed his *every* side.

Of course, she wasn't sure that fifty shots of his ass were quite what the publishers had had in mind when they'd hired her, no matter how glorious it was. Besides, her humming libido couldn't handle much more without going into severe overdrive anyway.

Serena snorted before she could stop herself. Who was she kidding? She'd passed overdrive a while ago, was now heading straight toward spontaneous combustion at an alarming rate. The thought disturbed her and she moved restlessly, desperate to focus on something—anything—that could bring her traitorous body under control.

She glanced toward the large windows that covered an entire side of the old, redbrick studio and tried to concentrate on the storm raging through Kevin's little slice of bayou. But the wildness of it—the utter lack of control—only made her more uncomfortable.

Rain pummeled the tin roof, flashes of lightning illuminated the darkness beyond the house and thunder shook the studio as it exploded across the

sky. Mother Nature was in a frenzy and much of southern Louisiana would pay the price on this steamy summer night.

She was just one more victim.

It was three a.m. and she should have been asleep, tucked safely into bed in her Baton Rouge condo. Nature whirled around her and she should have been terrified as she witnessed the destruction caused by every gust of seventy-mile-an-hour winds. She was working and she should have been focused, completely absorbed in taking photos for the book that could blow her career wide open. But she wasn't.

She wasn't at home asleep, she wasn't terrified, and she certainly wasn't focused.

What she was, was aroused.

Powerfully, frighteningly aroused.

Wetness pooled between her thighs, her nipples peaked and she had to work—hard—to stifle the moan threatening to part lips it was becoming harder and harder to keep closed.

She'd never been this out of control before, had never been so aroused that she couldn't focus on anything but the throbbing ache between her thighs. Serena pressed her legs together, desperate to stem the sensations bombarding her. But it was no use. Heat swept through her body. Her skin flushed a rosy pink and her heart began to race as the fine tremor of arousal shook her, making hands that were normally rock-steady tremble with reaction.

It was all his fault, she thought resentfully, studying Kevin Riley through the camera lens. Because while Kevin was the living, breathing example of every fantasy she'd ever had, his unbelievable sexiness did nothing to put her at ease. Fantasies were just that—something she could escape to when her hard-earned control stifled her, when life got boring and she needed a little spice. But fantasies were supposed to *stay* fantasies—who expected to encounter them in real life?

This was her work, her livelihood, her big chance, yet all she could think about was that luscious mouth and how it would feel pressed against her own. She wanted to pull him into the storm, to run her hands through his

too-long black hair and feel his muscles ripple beneath her fingers as water and wind lashed at them.

The musky sexiness of his skin called to her, and even with half the room between them she couldn't escape his unique scent—a mixture of sandalwood and the crisp, clean outdoors. Passion, life, vitality rolled off of him in waves, swamping her as her fingers fumbled another roll of film into her old Nikon. She'd used the digital camera earlier, but something about the time, the storm, and Kevin himself had cried out for a more primitive approach.

She lifted the camera again, hands shaking as she snapped the first pictures on the roll. Kevin's jeans rode low on his hips as he bent, blowtorch in hand, to mold the lowest corner of the sculpture. Intensity and passion etched his too-pretty face—his lush lips were molded into a grim line and his eyes burned with concentration. Despite the air-conditioning, sweat rolled slowly down his bare torso before disappearing inside the waistband of his much-abused Levis. Lust roared through her, nearly bringing her to her knees even as the artist in her recognized the power in his unconscious actions.

Click, whirr. This was it. *Click, whirr.* The picture she had been waiting for all night. *Click, whirr.* The shot that would make her famous. *Click, whirr.* Sculpting ecstasy. *Click, whirr.* Bending metal to his every command. *Click, whirr.* A work of art. *Click, whirr.* Of genius. *Click, whirr.* Was she speaking of Kevin or his work? *Click, whirr.* Perhaps both.

She slid to the ground, looked up through the lens. *Click, whirr.* His immense power overwhelming. *Click, whirr.* His talent huge, larger than life. *Click, whirr.* A giant in his field. *Click, whirr.* And she wanted him. *Click, whirr.* This man who was more a work of art than anything he'd ever created. *Click, whirr.* She burned for him. *Click.*

Serena snapped the last picture on the roll before lowering the camera to her lap with unsteady hands. Her chest rose and fell rapidly and her breath came in short, jerky gasps. Lifting trembling fingers to her lips, she struggled for control. But she was shaky, wary, disturbed by the truth she saw through the camera's eye.

Kevin Riley, with his too-long hair and too-feminine features, with his Greek-god body and devil-may-care attitude was the most talented artist

she'd ever seen. She'd known coming into this project that he was considered a genius, but knowing was a far cry from being hit in the face by the sensual power and talent he exuded without trying.

She shouldn't be here. The thought ran—unbidden—through her head. She couldn't take this. What thinking, breathing woman could? His work alone turned her inside out. She was afraid that she hadn't known she was close to an edge she hadn't realized existed seventy-two hours before.

She cursed Steve, the agent she and Kevin shared, under her breath. This whole thing was his idea. If he hadn't called her, thrilled about the "absolutely fabulous" opportunity that came with photographing the many facets of Kevin, she wouldn't be here now. Of course, when he'd called, she hadn't been able to say no. How could she? It was a huge career break for her, one that could send her rocketing to fame. Besides, she'd needed a distraction—desperately—something, anything to keep her mind off the upcoming hearing and her sense of impending doom. How could she have known that photographing Kevin would be nearly as disturbing?

The cell phone attached to her hip vibrated, but she didn't answer it. Refused to even look to see who was calling. If it was *him*, she didn't want to know about it, didn't want to think about it. And she really didn't want to spend the rest of the night tied up in knots over somebody's stupid idea of a joke.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, she pushed the unwelcome intrusion from her mind. Instead, she focused on Kevin again, a subject only a little less uncomfortable than her very persistent and obscene crank caller.

After all, the man was a walking, talking example of human perfection. His muscles strained as he bent the warm metal to his every whim. Faded denim molded every inch of his lower body, cupping his ass in a way that Serena would very much have liked to echo. She sighed unknowingly, absently pressing a hand against herself in an effort to stop the ache that was slowly turning her lower body liquid.

Not that he'd notice if she dissolved into a puddle of unrequited lust on his studio floor. Though he had been pleasant enough when she had shown up on his doorstep two and a half days ago, he'd paid her almost no attention since. Used to a certain amount of attention from men, his complete lack of interest both annoyed and intrigued her.

But how could she be so attracted to a man who didn't even know she existed? She wasn't one of those women who always fell for the man who was just a little cold, just a small step out of reach. Or at least, she never had been before. She'd always liked her men hot, accessible, and casual. Most important, casual. For Serena, nothing was worse than having a lover who didn't understand her boundaries.

Yet she couldn't get him out of her mind.

She snorted again. Talk about an understatement. For the last two hours, she'd fantasized about making love with him in nearly every position possible. Not to mention some positions she had her doubts about but was more than willing to try.

Despite the storm raging outside, cooling the nighttime air, it was nearly stifling in the huge one-room studio. Kevin had the air-conditioning pumping full-blast, but it had little effect against the huge metal welding furnace throwing out heat in the corner of the room. Or the blowtorch Kevin wielded with amazing concentration.

Serena let her camera slide to the floor, fanned herself with a nearby magazine as she watched him. What was happening to her? Nothing ever distracted her or kept her from completing an assignment. But there was plenty of time, she reminded herself. And there was no way she could take any more pictures tonight, not if she had any hope of getting out of the studio without humiliating herself.

Absently, she slid her hand slowly down her bare arm, enjoying the silky smoothness of the skin. Imagined that it was his hand touching her, his fingers sliding slowly over her shoulder to find the hollow of her throat. She wanted to feel those rough, callused hands on her body, needed it with an intensity that shocked her. Her eyes trailed desperately over his naked torso, following the thin line of hair that disappeared beneath the button of his jeans. She wanted a man she shouldn't have. Couldn't have. Serena closed her eyes and silently willed away the need.

* * *

"Fuck!" Kevin cursed viciously as he burned himself for the third time in as many minutes. His concentration was shot, knocked to hell and back by the

beautiful blonde staring at him through her camera lens. From the moment she'd shown up on his doorstep three days before—with her long legs and drop-dead attitude—he'd known that he was in trouble.

How could he not be? Everything about her—from her pixie-cut blond hair to her serious brown eyes—screamed coolly professional. She even buttoned her oxford shirts to right under her chin, a habit that was driving him completely insane. All he'd been able to think about for the past two days was opening those shirts one button at a time, slowly peeling them away to reveal every inch of her smooth, golden skin.

He'd worked hard to maintain his distance, to treat her with the same cool amusement with which she treated him. But while Serena gave every appearance of being oblivious to him and the hunger she ignited inside of him, he was anything but oblivious to her. Under her steady, detached gaze, he'd made a number of stupid mistakes in the last couple of days and it was beginning to seriously piss him off.

Turning the blowtorch off and setting it aside, he stepped back to look at his latest sculpture, frowning. Something wasn't right, though he was hard put to figure out exactly what the problem was. While he planned every detail of his sculptures before he ever began to build them, normally small variations occurred as he worked. A feeling he got that told him to bend this piece or twist that one. Intuition, really, that set his work apart from everyone else's.

He rolled his shoulders, working out the kinks that came from long hours crouching over steaming hot metal as he bent it to his will. Disgusted with himself, his work and his overactive libido, Kevin closed his eyes as he stretched, determined to block Serena, with her too-large eyes and too-curvy body, from his mind.

He'd been down this road before, he reminded himself, had learned his lesson well. After all, Deb had been one hell of a teacher. Yet here he was, lusting after another artist who wanted to use him to further her career. He shrugged restlessly, even as the old anger churned in his stomach. At least Serena was honest about what she wanted, something Deb had never been.

Deb had been drawn to his fame, had exploited it. And he'd let her. He'd been in love for the first time in his life and he would have done anything to

keep her happy. He had wanted to use his influence in the art world to help her make a name for herself. Why shouldn't he? He hadn't realized, then, that he was expendable; that the second she got what she wanted from him she'd be out the door.

Kevin shook his head, loathing his inability to keep the past where it belonged. He'd buried this crap a long time ago, so why was he suddenly dwelling on it? Why was it suddenly right there, front and center in his mind?

His lips curled sardonically. Who was he kidding? Serena was the reason it was all rushing back to him. She shook him up, invaded his mind, made him ache. Usually, when working, he could block out everything from hunger to nuclear holocaust, but not tonight and not with her. Tonight the hair on the back of his neck stood straight up—as did another notable part of his anatomy—and it took everything he had to even remember what the sculpture was supposed to look like, let alone why he shouldn't be thinking about her. Wanting her.

He ground his teeth together, conscious of the ever-present whirring of her camera. How she could concentrate on taking pictures right now, he didn't know. Between the storm, the heat and—he glanced at his watch—the time, his body was telling him that there were better ways to spend the remainder of the night. And every single one centered around the beautiful, sexy woman behind him.

Muttering a curse, he strolled to the refrigerator in the corner of the room and grabbed an ice-cold beer. If he couldn't work anymore, then he could at least try to quench the desire she ignited with alcohol.

He chuckled grimly to himself. Of course, when you added alcohol to fire all you usually ended up with was one hell of a flame.

“You want one?” he asked, keeping his back to her as he fought the strength of his arousal.

“Hmmm?” Her voice was soft and sexy. Shivers shot down his spine and he felt his eyes narrow speculatively. What had put that sultry note in her normally crisp and businesslike tone?

He turned to her, a beer in his extended hand. “Here. I'm done tonight.”

Her eyes were hazy, far away, as if she too were aroused. Kevin's eyebrows rose as he watched her blink several times, trying to bring him into focus. Maybe the attraction wasn't as one-sided as he'd thought.

"Thanks." Serena took the beer, twisted the top off and drank a long, slow swallow.

His eyes greedily followed her every move as she closed her full lips around the top of the bottle, tilted and drank. Her throat moved as she swallowed and her ripe, unpainted mouth slid in a subtle back-and-forth motion that had drool pooling in the corners of his mouth. Suddenly his cock was so hard he thought he'd explode.

When she lowered the bottle a single drop glistened on her bottom lip and he ached to lick it off. Before he could step closer, the tip of her pink tongue darted forward and swept across her lips, once, twice, a third time.

He cleared his throat in an attempt to disguise the groan he couldn't quite smother. He tried to turn away, but couldn't—he was literally frozen in place as his eyes wandered over her from head to toe.

The heat from the furnace was truly overwhelming tonight—he'd had to stoke it up to get the reaction he needed from the metal he was working with. Because of the heat, she had discarded the oxford shirt long ago, and now only a thin, caramel-colored tank top covered her lush, high breasts. One of the spaghetti straps rode low on her shoulder, resting directly above a wicked looking scar on her biceps and revealing the absence of a bra. An absence made even more obvious by the hard peaks of her nipples beneath the soft cotton fabric.

Though he knew it was rude to focus on those lush nipples, he couldn't force his gaze away. He wanted to touch them, taste them, draw them into his mouth and suck the sweetness from her until she writhed beneath him in ecstasy. What would she taste like?

He heard Serena's breath hitch, knew suddenly that she was as aware of him and his body as he was of her. He had never before lusted so obviously after a woman he was working with, had always tried to be considerate of a woman's feelings during working hours. But normal working hours had come and gone. It was the middle of the night, hot as hell and the storm raging outside was tying his gut into knots. He wanted Serena, had burned

for her from the second he'd first laid eyes on her almost seventy-two hours before.

And though he had restrained himself, believing that she was not in the slightest interested, the answering arousal in her own eyes suddenly changed everything.

He took a step closer, his gaze still focused on her telltale nipples. They grew even tauter and he knew—he knew—that there was no way he could stop himself from touching her.

It was way too hot for her to be cold, way too steamy in the studio to question whether it was arousal making her nipples peak. As he drew closer to her, stalking her, really, he forced his eyes back to her face.

Eyes closed, head tilted back, lips soft and open, she rubbed the beer against the back of her neck and down the side of her face. A soft moan revealed the pleasure the contact with the cool bottle brought her. Opening her eyes, she noticed his predatory stance for the first time, saw his eyes blazing with a need he couldn't hide.

He watched her own widen in answer, watched them glaze over as the passion she too was fighting to hold off rose up and overwhelmed her. Her scent, a mixture of wildflowers and hot, spicy woman, teased him, drawing him closer and closer to the edge of his resistance.

Reaching forward, he plucked the beer from her hands and slowly drank, enjoying the taste of her as much as the beer. He watched as her eyes found a drop of sweat at the hollow of his neck, as they helplessly followed it as it worked its way over his bare chest and onto his stomach.

* * *

She wanted to reach her tongue out and sweep the drop from his body. Wanted her tongue to follow the lazy path made by the drop, testing, tasting every inch of his well-muscled torso before working her way slowly, oh so slowly, beneath the waistband of his jeans.

Serena's breath hitched in her throat and her eyes met Kevin's for the first time in many hours. His breath, too, was coming in harsh pants, and

she could tell that he was as aroused as she was. That he wanted her at least as badly as she wanted him.

She reached one still-trembling hand toward him, whether in invitation or denial she didn't know. But when he grasped her fingers with his own, she shivered at the strength in his work-hardened palm. And when he slowly, oh so slowly, lifted her hand to his lips, she shuddered with the power and the pain of her desire.

His tongue reached out and caressed her index finger, once, twice, before drawing her slowly into his mouth. His teeth nipped lightly at her fingertip, even as he pulled her deeper and deeper into him. He sucked her finger gently, his tongue sweeping in slow, lazy circles as his mouth slid back and forth.

Serena's breath came in short gasps and her knees weakened until she feared their ability to support her. Her eyes drifted shut and her head rolled back on her neck. She knew this was wrong, knew she shouldn't be doing this. Kevin wasn't the type to be satisfied with a one- or two-night stand and she didn't have anything else to offer.

But she couldn't deny the need flowing between them. Didn't want to deny it. And his mouth on her finger felt so incredibly good. How would it feel on her lips? Her breasts? Between her thighs?

As Kevin slowly relinquished his hold on her finger, she bit back an instinctive protest. She was on fire, burning, her underwear soaked through. Glancing down at the front of his jeans, she felt her eyes widen at the erection the denim couldn't begin to disguise.

She reached to touch him, but he grabbed her hand before it could connect. "Not yet, *cher*," he whispered, holding her newly captured hand to his chest. His heart pounded heavily, riotously beneath her palm. Her fingers flexed, explored, slid lightly over one nipple, and his heartbeat grew faster, harder.

Echoing her own, she thought, as blood pumped hot and quick through her veins. The storm raging outside had moved inside, buffeting her from every side, sweeping her into its powerful, chaotic embrace and leaving Kevin as her only anchor.

His stormy, heavy-lidded eyes burned into her own, midnight blue and fierce with desire. His musky scent overwhelmed her. Yet his touch was tender and his lips gentle as they moved slowly over her finger, down her palm, his tongue trailing a path of fire wherever it touched. Leisurely, as if he had all the time in the world, his mouth pressed long, lazy kisses across her hand—over her love line, her life line, slowly, slowly working his way down to the rounded pad at the base of her thumb. And there, right there, at the juncture where her palm met her wrist, he bit gently, firmly, his teeth sinking in even as his tongue laved away the hurt.

Serena's knees gave way and with a cry of ecstasy she slid, trembling, down the wall.

Kevin crouched beside her, his eyes on hers, searching for any sign of uneasiness. But she was too hot, too steamy, too far gone to think of the consequences. Reaching out, she tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him forward until his lips met her own.

He tasted like the cinnamon gum he chewed obsessively, a combination of spicy and sweet that drove her to the brink of her control and then beyond. She knew he'd meant to take it easy, slow, but with the first powerful touch of his mouth, Serena was lost and her uninhibited response sparked his own. His tongue swept across her lips—ravenous, demanding, desperate—and she opened for him as lust burned through her.

They plundered each other, tongues testing, tasting, tangling together. She sucked his lower lip between her teeth and bit slowly; he groaned in response, his hands sliding down to cup her ass, to press her against him.

She was hot and wet and frantic to feel him within her. Kevin must have sensed her desperation, for he tightened his hold, pressed more firmly against her, began a gently thrusting between her thighs that sent her pulse soaring. A high, keening sound escaped her, one that would have mortified her at any other time. But here, now, with the frantic grip of her hands on his body and the powerful thrust of his hips against hers, it seemed natural. More than natural. Perfect.

But she wanted more, needed more. Breaking free of his kiss, Serena slid her lips slowly over his cheeks, relishing the stubble on his unshaven jaw before her tongue darted out and explored the inner shell of his ear.

Frenzied, frantic, she closed her teeth around his earlobe and bit gently, even as her hands moved to caress the rippling muscles of his back.

Kevin growled deep in his throat and moved his hand slowly down her chest. As his fingers closed around her breast for the first time, a huge streak of lightning lit the sky beyond the studio and the lights went out, plunging the room into a still and eerie darkness.

Read on for an excerpt from Tracy Wolff's

Tie Me Down

It was hot as only New Orleans could be.

Hotter than a cat on a tin roof.

Hotter than the Cajun cooking her mother used to make.

Hotter than hell.

And she was burning up, fury and sorrow eating her from the inside out.

More than ready for the day from hell to be over, Genevieve Delacroix slammed out of the precinct on the fly, then cursed as she plowed straight into the sticky heat the city was known for. It rose up to meet her like a wall—thick and heavy and all-consuming.

Pausing to catch her breath, she stared blindly at the planters full of cheerful posies that lined the front of the precinct. Her partner, Shawn, had picked a hell of a time to take a vacation—in the middle of the busiest week homicide had seen in years. After working four homicide scenes in as many days, it was a miracle she could still put one foot in front of the other.

Today, she'd awakened to a ringing phone, news of a brutal, sex-related homicide the first thing she'd heard as she surfaced from a sleep so deep it was almost like death itself. Yesterday it had been a murder-suicide. Two days before that, a domestic dispute turned deadly.

Not to mention the bizarre call she'd gotten earlier that afternoon promising her—with sexually graphic delight—that the caller would be seeing her very soon. As the only female on the homicide squad, she got her fair share of calls from weirdos, and this one was nothing unusual—but it still put her back up, as they all did.

Sighing, she rubbed a weary hand over her eyes. This week, the Big Easy was anything but.

Taking the precinct steps two at a time, Genevieve glanced around the French Quarter, where she'd worked and lived for most of her life.

Tonight she could see none of the beauty the Quarter was known for. The architecture, the colors, the history—it all faded beside the sickness she'd witnessed that morning. The most recent in a long line of fucked-up and twisted crimes that ate away at the city's population like a cancer.

Her argument with the lieutenant rang clearly in her head as her long legs ate up Royal Street's narrow sidewalks.

Not enough similarities in the causes of death in the murders.

Not enough similarities in the three victims.

Not enough evidence, in her boss's not-so-humble opinion.

But in the eleven years she'd been on the force, Genevieve's gut had never been wrong, and right now her instincts were screaming that the case she'd caught this morning—the brutal rape and murder of a nineteen-year-old Tulane student—wasn't a freak event. A serial killer was at large.

True, the causes of death in all three murders had been different, as had the body dumps—Jackson Square, a bar called Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, Senator Mouline's house—but the feel of the scenes had felt too similar for it to have been a fluke. The evident, full-out rage the killer had been in when he'd inflicted the wounds had been the same, as had the desperate need to cause as much pain and humiliation to his victims as possible.

Without knowing where she was going, Genevieve made a quick left on St. Peter. She knew only that that she couldn't face going home and reliving the whole damn day over and over in her head until she wanted to scream—or sob.

The image of Jessica Robbins's body was in front of her eyes, the atrocities done to her burned into Genevieve's brain by the hours and hours she'd spent working the case. By the helpless anger she felt at not being able to stop the crime.

By the failure she was already anticipating.

If this was the work of a serial killer—and her experience and instincts shouted that it was—then he was damn good at his job. Maybe the best she'd ever run across. And she'd need more than a condescending smile and

a load of denial from her egotistical boss if she was going to catch the bastard.

Sickness churned in her stomach and turned her legs weak. Chastian couldn't be allowed to sweep this under the rug, like he did so many of the other ideas she went to him with. He couldn't be allowed to discount her ideas just because she was a woman and in his screwed-up opinion didn't belong in homicide. She knew how to do her job, and would be damned if she was going to let his sexist bullshit stand in the way of her doing what she knew was right.

A couple of frat boys cruised by, jostling her, and Genevieve nearly jumped out of her skin. One more sign that she was wound tight enough to break.

"Hey, baby, let me buy you a drink." One of them leered at her, his vacant eyes testimony to just how many drinks he'd already bought.

"I think you've had enough." She started to move away from him.

"Aww, come on, darlin', don't be like that." The second one blocked her way, and Genevieve sighed as she saw her day going from miserable to excruciating in the blink of an eye.

"Guys, you're already drunk off your asses and it's only"—she glanced at her watch—"seven-thirty. Why don't you head back uptown and sleep it off?"

"Is that an invitation?" the first one asked, leaning in so close that she could almost identify the brand of beer he'd been slamming back.

"Not the kind you're looking for." Straightening up, she shoved past them. "Now scram."

With much grumbling, they did, and Genevieve started to walk away. But now the idea of a drink had begun to sound entirely too good to pass up. Maybe a hurricane—or three—would help get Jessica out of her head.

Shouldering around the crush of tourists standing in front of Pat O's, she slunk into the much less raucous bar a few doors down. If she couldn't force the memories out of her head, maybe she could drink them away. At least for tonight.

* * *

Cole Adams slid onto the barstool next to the blond bombshell with more curves than a baseball and wondered how to start up the conversation he was dying to have.

Should he open with the truth? He wasn't sure how well this beautiful woman would take to the fact that he'd been researching her for months. That he'd followed her from the police station. That he'd been lurking around outside the precinct, waiting for her to come out for nearly an hour.

That he wanted a whole lot more from her than she'd be willing to give.

He'd meant to stop her there, to tell her what he wanted right from the start. But she'd looked so enraged—and miserable—that he couldn't help wondering what had caused the devastation written so clearly on her face.

But before he could decide how to approach her, Genevieve had started off at a walk so fast it was nearly a run, and he'd been forced to follow her or lose his chance.

He couldn't afford to mess this up. Not now, when he'd finally gotten everything set up the way he wanted it.

Glancing at Genevieve out of the corner of his eye, he nearly snorted. Yeah, right. Things were going exactly as he'd planned.

Except that she looked more likely to shoot him than listen to him.

Plus, the speech he'd prepared sounded incredibly stupid now. Like a bad pickup line instead of the appeal to her conscience he'd intended.

Maybe he was just paranoid—and who could blame him? He'd done his homework on the NOPD so thoroughly that the face of every homicide detective on the force was familiar to him by now. But Genevieve's picture hadn't done her justice. On the computer screen, her hair had looked more of a dirty gray than the honey blond it really was, and her ample curves had been hidden under an ill-fitting suit. Now Cole was struggling to deal with the arousal that had wrapped around his gut like a fist at his first sight of her, and had only gotten worse as he'd watched her sinuous glide through the Quarter.

Looking at her from beneath his lashes, he watched her long, unpainted fingernails tap an impatient rhythm on the bar as she leaned back on her barstool in a parody of relaxation. What did it say about him that the

guarded accessibility of her frame—combined with the sight of those loose, feminine fingers—had him longing for the feel of her against him? For the feel of her hand on his suddenly—and unexpectedly—hard cock?

Fuck, damn, shit. What was he, a horny teenager who couldn't keep his dick under control? Or a man who knew what he wanted, one with a secret to unravel and could find only one woman to help him do it?

This couldn't be happening. Not now, when he was so close to getting the ball rolling. Not now, when he had Detective Genevieve Delacroix almost exactly where he wanted her.

But it *was* happening, his body spinning rapidly out of control while his mind struggled to find a way to approach her that she wouldn't find threatening—or annoying.

“So, can I buy you a drink?” Her question came out of nowhere, in a non-sense tone and a voice that was pure, sugary Georgia peach. Smooth and silky and sweetly delicious, despite the hint of hard-ass he heard just below the surface.

Surprise swept through him, and he wondered if she would taste as good as she sounded. The contrast between her voice and her tone intrigued him, one more example of the numerous contradictions that seemed to make her up.

The lush body covered by that ridiculous suit.

The indolent pose belied by the watchful eyes.

The gorgeous voice with the don't-fuck-with-me tone.

It made him wonder who the real Genevieve Delacroix was. Made him want to fuck with her—to fuck her—and to hell with the consequences.

As he struggled to regain control—to keep his eye on the prize—the wicked curve of her lips kept interfering with his concentration.

“What are you offering?” He kept his voice low as he angled his body toward hers, savoring the rush of arousal pouring through him. Inconvenient or not, it had been far too long since he'd felt this instantaneous reaction to a woman.

Her barely-there smile turned into a smirk. “That depends what you ask for.”

He nodded to the bartender who had sidled up to the other side of the bar. “A shot of Patrón Silver.”

“Interesting choice.” Genevieve quirked a brow before turning to the bartender. “I’ll take an Absolut and cranberry.”

After the bartender moved away, she leveled a pair of deep blue eyes at him and Cole fought the urge to squirm. Genevieve had cop eyes—world-weary, cynical and more than willing to believe the worst.

For a split second, it was like looking into a mirror, his own tormented emotions of the past few years staring back at him. But then a shutter came down, blocking him from seeing anything but a sardonic amusement that sent shivers up his spine.

“So,” she demanded as she leaned forward until her mouth was only inches from his own. “Do you often drink alone?”

It was his turn to raise a brow. “I’m new in town. I don’t have anyone else to drink with.”

“I’d feel sorry for you, but I get the impression that’s more by choice than necessity.” Her cerulean eyes glowed as they swept over him, and he couldn’t stop his body from clenching in response.

“So what about you?”

She inclined her head. “What about me?” Her peaches-and-cream voice was ripe with approval, and he felt his cock throb. Shifting a little, he tried to adjust himself so his hard-on wasn’t so obvious—or painful. But a quick glance at Genevieve told him that she was more than aware of his dilemma—and that she was enjoying it.

“Do *you* often drink alone?” He parroted her words back at her, determined to gain control of the conversation.

“Who says I’m alone? I could be waiting for someone.”

She was bluffing—pushing him hard with her fuck-off voice and come-hither body language—and normally he’d be more than happy to go along for the ride. But now wasn’t the time for this, he reminded himself forcibly.

“Should I leave?” He started to stand.

“No!” For just a moment her façade slipped, giving him one more glimpse of the frustrated, tired, too-pissed-off-to-be-alone woman behind

the mask.

He sank back into his chair. “I’m Cole, by the way.” He held out a hand.

“Genevieve.” She hesitated before placing her hand against his.

“Afraid?” he asked with a smirk, unable to stop himself.

“Of you?” Her hand met his in a firm, no-nonsense clasp, her eyes narrowing in derision.

“Is there someone else here?” She tried to tug her hand back, but he didn’t let go. Couldn’t let go, any more than he could stop the cocky, shit-eating grin from crossing his face. It was going to be fun as hell testing her, seeing what she was made of.

Seeing just how far he could push before she began to shove back.

It might not be the wisest course of action, but then again, he’d given up being smart when he came to this hellhole of a city, intent on finding a truth that had eluded him for seven long years.

“I don’t know.” She glanced around the bar, let her eyes linger teasingly on some guy near the door. “Is there?”

As the guy straightened up and made a move toward them, Cole scowled fiercely. Then gave a sharp tug on Genevieve’s hand that had her out of her chair and between his legs before she knew what was happening. He wrapped his free hand around her hip and pulled her even closer, so that her thighs rested against his aroused cock.

Those blue eyes sparked with a fury that was cold as ice, and he expected her to struggle—for one brief moment, even wanted her to. His brain was sending all kinds of messages, calling him every name in the book, even as it warned him that he was blowing everything before his plan had a chance to get off the ground.

But for the first time in his life, his body had sole possession of the driver’s seat, his suddenly unruly libido shrugging off the warning signs like they didn’t exist—even as he fought for control.

For one brief, terrifying moment, he thought about forgetting the whole thing, about saying “Fuck it” and just reveling in the moment. About taking this woman any and every way he could have her and letting the chips fall where they may.

How had she gotten him so hot so quickly? In the long years following Samantha's death, he'd never let anyone get under his skin. Ever.

And this wasn't how their first meeting was supposed to turn out—with him fantasizing about what she looked like in the throes of one orgasm after another.

He was supposed to be laying the groundwork. Feeling her out. Checking to see if she really was as good as her record said she was. An hour ago her competence—or lack thereof—had been the most important thing on his mind. But now all he could think about was what it would feel like to come in her mouth. In her pussy. In her lush, gorgeous ass.

He tried to tamp down on the arousal, but that was like trying to put out a wildfire with a spray bottle—especially since he could feel the heat and arousal coming off her. Could see her nipples peaking beneath the thin material of her blouse. Could hear the hitch in her breathing as she too struggled for control.

He'd come to New Orleans looking for peace, had sought Genevieve out for just that purpose. But the aroused, out-of-control, gotta-have-her-now feeling that had grabbed him by the balls the second he laid eyes on her was anything but peaceful.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself back from the edge. It wasn't easy when he wanted to be inside of her more than he wanted his next breath. More than he wanted the answers he'd come here to get.

But the look on Genevieve's face said she'd been pushed—or pulled—as far as she was going to allow. Aroused or not, her next move would be to take a swing at him.

For a minute, he could almost taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. It might be worth it.

“You're going to want to let go of me.” Her voice was low and hot, a warning if he'd ever heard one.

“I'm not so sure about that.” His hands tightened—on her hip and her palm—holding her to him for one endless moment. The image of what she would look like spread-eagle on his bed, her pale skin gleaming against the midnight silk of the sheets, roared through him, and for a second he was afraid he wouldn't be able to let her go.

But his brain was screaming at him, the warning signals having turned into bright red flags of alarm, and somehow he found the strength to release her.

The bartender chose that second to drop their drinks on the bar, and he grabbed the ice-cold shot of tequila like it was a lifeline. Slammed it back and gestured for another one. He was teetering on the brink of madness, his body out of his control. His desire for Genevieve nearly palpable in the small distance she'd created between them.

What was wrong with him? he wondered, tossing back the second shot as quickly as he had the first. He'd never reacted like this to a woman before, had never felt like he would give anything—and everything—just to be inside one.

But Genevieve...in a few brief moments, Genevieve had turned him inside out. It was ridiculous, absurd. And he—

“You’re not as uncomplicated as you look.” Her voice broke into his self-flagellation, had him turning to her with hot eyes he couldn’t hope to cool down.

“I could say the same thing about you.” He forced a calm into his voice that he was far from feeling.

“Yeah, well, I had a crappy day.” She stuck out her chin at him. “What’s your excuse?”

“I wasn’t aware I needed one.”

Very deliberately, she glanced down at where his hands were clenched into fists before taking a long sip of her drink. “It’s pretty obvious that you need something.”

Her words—cold and taunting—slammed through him. God, she was amazing—her icy control housed a hot fire that was tempting as hell.

“And what is it you think I need?”

For the first time, he saw a flash of uncertainty in her eyes and couldn’t help wondering at its cause. A heavy silence stretched between them, long and taut and more than a little uncomfortable. Just when he’d decided that he’d blown it—that she wasn’t going to answer—Genevieve took a deep breath.

“Me,” she said, in a voice that was as steady as it was unexpected.

Read on for an excerpt from Tina Waincott's

Wild on You

The last time Rick Yarbrough got into this limo was right after the Navy court hearing that had made him and four members of his team officially ex-SEAL. The man who provided that limo, Chase Justiss, had offered all five of them an intriguing job opportunity. Six and a half weeks later, Risk was an operational member of the Justiss Alliance. They were unofficially called J-Men, because two of Chase's operatives had a thing for some cult-classic movie called *J-Men Forever*.

Risk, Saxby, and Knox had undergone a week of orientation and training at Chase's Miami estate, nothing compared to the grueling thirty months of becoming a SEAL. Then again, they already possessed most of the requisite skills.

Chase leaned forward from the limo's plush interior and shook his hand. "Welcome to your first mission, Risk."

His new boss even remembered his nickname.

Chase was tall and lean, civilian, with a whiff of former military to his bearing. Government, he'd said, but was otherwise obtuse about his background. Or his reason for starting an agency that masqueraded as a private security firm.

Risk released his grip. "You haven't told me what it is yet." Which was odd, now that he thought about it. Though he was used to being given only bits and pieces of an upcoming mission, that was the military, after all.

"I didn't want to scare you off."

Risk rubbed his hands together. Oh, buddy, this was going to be good. "Fill me in."

What had sold Risk on joining was the Justiss Alliance's real purpose: obtaining justice for those who couldn't get it through normal channels. The government and law enforcement agencies had their limitations, after all.

Chase stretched out his long legs across the interior of the limo. "Some of our jobs come from government agencies that need off-the-record help. But as I said, some come from private citizens. I've known General Wunder a long time."

Which couldn't be that long, considering the guy was in his late twenties, like Risk, maybe early thirties at the most. "Does this involve military matters, then?" He wasn't sure how he felt about sticking his nose in anything military. To be fair, his team had taken on the covert mission knowing full well that if they failed, the government would deny any knowledge of their infiltration; elected officials certainly would not admit to sending in a SEAL team to assassinate the leader of an organization aiming to shut down the violent cartels in Mexico. Nevertheless, anything military still left a bitter taste in Risk's mouth.

"Not at all. The general's retired. This is a private security detail assignment."

"So I'm guarding some retired military brass. Is he going overseas, consulting in Afghanistan or something?" His blood heated at the prospect of danger. Lurking assassins. Clearing vehicles of explosives, maybe even detonating one. His mouth actually watered. Damn, he'd been out of the action for way too long.

"You're guarding his daughter here in Virginia. He thinks her safety is being threatened."

Risk stared at Chase for several seconds. "I'm a *babysitter*?" he pushed out at last, trying not to sound too indignant. "You do recall my years of experience with weapons, interrogation? Running into buildings on moonlit nights, knowing there could be fighters waiting with guns? Tracking down tangos in the frigid desert? You don't need to ease me in, if that's why you're giving me this gig."

Chase slid him a sly smile. "It's not going to be that easy."

Risk held back the *hmpf* that wanted to escape. How hard could guarding a woman be? Unless she was a diplomat in a volatile foreign country, but

Chase had said it was domestic. “What does this assignment have to do with the ‘justice for all, no matter the cost’ credo?”

“You’ll see.”

Color me skeptical.

The last time he trusted his commander, the mission screwed up his life. But Risk held his tongue and mustered as much trust as he could. He wanted this job to work out. After all, it wasn’t like Chase was asking him to assassinate someone.

The limo left the private airfield that Chase’s jet had flown him into. Risk had spent some time with his brother and his family in Pekin, Illinois, while awaiting his first assignment.

Some time later, they entered an exclusive neighborhood with massive brick homes set on large parcels of land. The limo pulled down a curved drive to a house with columns that reminded Risk of a government building, all square and landscaped with military precision. Risk hailed from an Illinois farming community where he’d worked until his muscles burned and his skin was leathery from the sun. This kind of money was a foreign concept.

Risk followed Chase up the steps, and a few seconds after chimes echoed inside the house, a man opened the door. The expression on his hard, square face transformed to relief when he took in Chase.

“Good to see you, son.” He pumped Chase’s hand, then pulled him in for one of those guy hugs. Chase didn’t buckle under the ham-sized hand slapping his back so hard that Risk expected him to cough up something.

“Glad we can help.” Chase gestured for Risk to step up beside him and introduced the two men.

Risk knew the general was sizing him up as he crushed his hand in what was more like an arm-wrestling hold than a handshake. “Pleasure,” Risk gritted out, gripping the man’s hand just as hard.

The general gave him an approving nod and gestured for them to follow him. “Let’s talk in my office.”

Chase said, “I briefed him on the job but figured we would cover the specifics here.”

Briefed. Yeah, like a sentence.

The general nodded for them to take the two leather seats in front of his desk, sinking down in his chair on the other side. “Someone tried to run down my daughter, Adeline, a week ago.” He slid a folder across the desk. “Here’s the police report. There was no proof that it was intentional. It could have been a drunk driver. Although that’s what Adeline wants to think, even she admits she’s made some enemies.” He interlaced his fingers so tightly that they turned red. “I’ve included the detective’s contact information in the paperwork. He hasn’t turned up anything yet. And while he’s a friend, he can only spend so much time on a dead-end investigation.

“In the meantime, whoever tried will no doubt try again. I insisted she move in here for a while, but with her comes a menagerie of animals she’s rehabilitating, and they’re driving me crazy. She’s just as unhappy being here, so you’re our compromise.” That he directed to Risk. “I need someone who can not only protect her but keep her out of trouble. No protests, no investigations. She needs to sit tight and safe until we know who wants her dead or we can be sure that it was indeed an accident.”

Risk’s gaze went to the bookshelf behind the general and a collection of framed pictures of a blond girl at various ages. On a pony at maybe her sixth birthday party. Riding a horse at an equestrian event as a teen. Probably spoiled rotten. Great. Frickin’ great. And Risk was a compromise, which meant she was going to be as cooperative as any tango—terrorist—he’d tried to wheedle information out of.

“Who’d she piss off?” Risk asked, then added, “Sir.”

“There are several possibilities.”

Risk nearly choked. “*Several?* How can one woman make that many people angry enough to potentially try killing her? Is she a liberal? Does she use racial slurs? Was she caught trying to drown puppies?”

The general sat back in his chair with a long-suffering sigh. “She’s an animal hugger. You know, like a tree hugger. It started when she was a kid, saving baby birds that had fallen out of nests, finding homes for stray kittens. I figured her desire to help came from watching her mother work with her various charities. After her mother died—when Addie was twelve—that desire turned into a drive. First she kidnapped a neglected horse from a farm. Then she stole hound pups that she thought were being abused and

found them homes. She went looking for animals to save as though her life depended on it.”

“Maybe she was trying to fill that empty hole you feel when your parent dies young,” Risk found himself saying.

“I thought so, too. But I overheard her talking to her mother up in heaven, telling her about the puppies she’d saved and how she hoped that would make it up to her. When I asked her what she meant, she wouldn’t say.” He shook his head. “She doesn’t always consider the law—or common sense—when she’s got an abused or neglected animal in her sights.” He handed a folder to Risk. “The lead suspect is a guy who runs one of these traveling zoos. She’s been launching protests against him for the last few weeks, and he made some threats. Nothing so obvious as ‘I’m going to run you down.’ More like ‘You crazy animal people need to be hog-tied and trampled by the elephants you’re trying to save!’ He even filed a restraining order.”

Risk studied photos of a middle-aged guy who looked like he was all kinds of pissed about having his picture taken. In another shot, a tiger cub didn’t look any happier about being forced to pose with a young girl.

“Let me show you what I’m dealing with.” The general pulled his keyboard close and began pecking at it. “What *you’ll* be dealing with.” He turned his monitor to show them a Facebook page. The ID read *Addie Wunder, Animal Hugger*. The general frowned. “She used my disparaging title as her organization’s name. Just to poke at me, I suspect.”

The big picture on top was a horse racing across an open field. In the corner was a picture of Addie, with the same blond hair and incredible blue eyes as in the pictures behind the

general...except she was all grown up now.

Way grown up. Risk would guess her to be in her mid-twenties. In the most recent picture on her timeline, she was in front of a makeshift zoo, holding a sign protesting cruelty against a tiger cub, tight white pants and leopard-print tank top wrapped around a nice little figure. Her latest post called out to anyone in the Ruckersville area to protest the zoo’s next stop. Farther down, a YouTube video proclaimed to expose a canned hunt in Georgia, with Addie’s face frozen in passionate ire. Another picture showed

her in a dark pink bikini, bathing dogs at a fund-raiser for a no-kill shelter. If Risk wrapped his hands around her waist, the tips of his fingers would probably touch. She had an amazing set of boobs, a bit more than a handful, firm and—

“I’m a poker player, son,” the general said, pinning him with his gray eyes. “You’re obviously not.”

Risk cleared his throat. “Sorry, sir.”

“I’d worry about how you’re looking at my daughter, a guy like you.”

“Like me?” Risk bristled.

“Good-looking, muscular, with that dangerous gleam in his eyes. So let me dispel any notions you may have. She’s a lesbian.”

Risk looked at that delicate heart-shaped face with the spark of rebellion. *Please say it ain’t so.* “That’s a shame, sir.”

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