



Restraint

MASON FAMILY SERIES

USA Today Bestselling Author
ADRIANA LOCKE

RESTRAINT

MASON FAMILY SERIES BOOK 1

ADRIANA LOCKE

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Dedication

For Annabelle Hickman Fifer.

You were the best pie maker, story-teller, hymn singer, and grandma in the world. So much of who I am is because of you.

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[What's Next?](#)

[Meet the Landry's](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

Holt

“Watch where you’re going.”

I quirk a brow at the man who just bumped my shoulder. He reads me correctly and mutters a half-assed apology just as I switch my brown leather briefcase to the other hand — maybe to avoid a confrontation and maybe to get a hand free for one. It’s up to him.

The stars must align in his favor because the next thing I know, he’s scurrying to the other side of the partition that separates us.

It crosses my mind, once again, that I could avoid this. I could forgo the hassle of airports altogether if I’d just give in and buy a private jet. Oliver, one of my younger brothers, keeps bringing it up, but I keep vetoing the idea. It’s not the money. It’s the pretentiousness of it all. Unless you’re flying weekly or have more money than brains, owning your own jet is a sign you need attention. It’s the more affluent version of the middle-aged, balding man driving a cherry red sports car, and I have no trouble getting attention without an overpriced toy.

Turning the corner, I’m muttering to myself about how Oliver’s going to be on my case about being late when I collide head-on with another body.

“Ah!”

A flurry of gauzy fabric and long, tobacco-colored hair go tumbling in front of me. My mouth falls open, practically brushing against the cheap linoleum of the breezeway, and my eyes feast on the beauty bent on one knee in front of me.

She picks up an array of items that fell from her purse. Each motion is deliberate and graceful. Scents of her perfume—warm and seductive—drift through the air.

She looks up, her blue eyes in stark contrast to the dark hair that sweeps below her elbows. Her fair cheeks pink as she watches me. She runs a hand through her strands as her full lips, a pale red, begin to part.

Holy. Shit.

Travelers scamper around our diversion, but they're no more than a blip on my radar. I'm focused on her as I try to put all the pieces together that are laid, so beautifully, so exquisitely, in front of me.

"Let me help you up," I offer, extending a hand.

She watches me for a long moment before lifting her delicate palm. The handful of gold bracelets encompassing a narrow wrist clamor together before she places her hand in mine. Her skin is warm and soft—so soft it almost makes me shudder. Immediately, I wonder what the rest of her feels like as I tug her gently to her sandal-clad feet.

She stands, removing her palm from mine, and smooths out her skirt. Pulling at a cord nestled between her breasts, two earbuds pop free. "I should've been paying attention. I know better than to listen to an audiobook in the airport."

"Must be a damn good audiobook." I cringe at the reply. It's not my best line, but it's all my brain can come up with to continue this conversation and keep her standing in front of me for a while longer.

"It's a podcast, actually, on a recent Supreme Court case."

Brains and beauty? No wonder my cock is throbbing.

"Do you agree or disagree with the decision?" I ask.

Her perfectly arched brows pull together as she tries to hide a smile. "Well," she says, pausing as if she's unsure whether to answer the question or not. "I believe the Justices followed the Constitution, and that is their job."

"Nice non-answer," I chuckle, watching a sparkle flicker through her irises.

"I'm an attorney. We never say too much. Or," she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "most of us try not to."

Clearing my throat and, hopefully, my head, I pick up a tube of lipstick at her feet and hand it to her. She takes it without touching me. Instead, her eyes roam over my suit, take in my watch, then draw up my arm and over

my chest, landing on my face. She studies me with intent. If I turned around right now, I bet she could draw a composite of me with intricate detail.

As if we've done this before, we turn toward the baggage claim and begin to walk together. Her posture is perfect, her narrow shoulders held just so. There's a cool elegance to her, a sophistication, a refinement that lures me in. But it's the warm complexity, an intelligence in her eyes that holds my attention.

"Are you in town for work?" I ask.

"No," she scoffs. "I'm on vacation." Her long, thin nose crinkles at the end. "For three long days."

"You say that as if it were a death sentence."

"I'd rather be working." She stops in front of a wall of windows. The sunlight streams in, highlighting the red and gold tones in her hair. "My brothers arranged this. How could I not come?"

I laugh. "That was nice of them. My brothers would've sent me to work and taken the vacation on their own."

"How many do you have?"

"Four."

"I have three, and they're a giant pain in my ass." There's a slight upturn to her gorgeous lips as she says the words, and I find myself wondering how much of that I really believe.

"I'll trade you," I offer.

Our eyes lock, her grin pulling my own wider as the throng of bodies hustling around us thickens. A thousand questions are on my lips, an itch to know more about this intriguing beauty in the middle of Savannah Hilton Head International Airport. Before I can figure out which way to go with this conversation, she gestures toward an exit.

"I apologize for running into you," she says. "It was nice to meet you."

"No, wait." It's too quick, too telling—and not my style. I make fun of men for tripping over themselves like this, but it comes out before I can think. "Can I take you to dinner sometime?"

The question surprises me as much as it seems to surprise her, but I don't regret it. As a matter of fact, I like the idea. A lot.

She hesitates, her response on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn't let it pass. I almost think it's on purpose, but I'm not sure if she's fucking with me, or if she has plans. Or a man.

For about a half a second, I contemplate if I care about the latter.

I don't.

My phone buzzes in the jacket pocket of my suit, and I know it's Oliver asking me where I am. I'm never late. But I can't even mull that over right now, not with her standing in front of me and looking at me with the same curiosity about her that's filling every nook of my mind.

"Ugh," she grimaces, taking a large step toward me as the crowd begins to fill the entire hallway connecting the concord with the baggage claim. The top of her head barely reaches my eyes. "I'm not a big people person."

"Me either." I lift my briefcase and step so that my back is against the wall, giving her more room. "So ... dinner?"

She considers this. "I don't typically go to dinner with nameless men."

"That's an easy fix." I grin. "I'm Holton Mason. My friends call me Holt. All three of them."

She laughs, her long lashes fluttering. I fight from reaching out and brushing the stray strand of hair off her cheek.

A hundred people might be swarming around us, but it may as well just be her in front of me. A circus could be clamoring down the hall, complete with elephants and man-eating tigers, and I wouldn't notice.

"I'm not sure what my plans are, actually," she says finally.

"Well, let's meet up, and I'll help you make them."

She smiles. "I bet you would, Holt."

"Ah, you used the nickname. That's a good sign."

"I just feel sorry that only three people like you."

"Does that mean you'll give me your number?"

Digging in her bag and pulling out a small notepad, she rips off the bottom of a sheet in a crisp line. She offers it to me along with a pen. "No, but you can give me yours."

"I could text it to you."

A single, perfectly arched brow rises farther. "And I could exit those doors and get into my rental car. Your call."

My fingers wrap around the scrap of paper, glancing at her delicate fingers in the process. Visions of them gripping my cock pop immediately to mind, and I have to shake them away.

"I can't say I've had a woman refuse to give me her number before," I say, the words mixed with a chuckle.

A part of me wants to refuse, just to see if she'll bend. But when I look at her standing there, the resolution in her eyes means she's not bluffing. So

while that's frustrating in a plethora of ways, it's also really kind of hot.

"But there's a first time for everything, right?" I scratch out my digits and hand the paper back to her.

She presses her lips together and drops the pen and paper into her bag without even looking at it. "Thanks."

"I look forward to seeing you again," I say as she turns toward the doors.

"Nice to meet you," she replies with no indication that I will see her again. In a split second, she disappears.

Like a damn fool, I don't move. I just stand and watch her, breathing in the remaining notes of her perfume. It's a second too late before I realize I don't even know her name.

When I shove my hand into my pocket, it nudges my phone. As if on cue, it begins to ring. Again.

"Yeah, Ollie?" I ask, my voice filled with a level of frustration equal to the pulse in my temple.

"Where the hell are you?"

"On my way."

TWO

Blaire

I jerk the curtains back and swing the sliding glass door open, filling my lungs with wonderful, salty air. The sea a few stories below sparkles in the sunlight. The sandy beach is spattered with sunbathers and kids building castles.

Standing at the window, I watch the activities below. I'm reminded of summers at Lake Michigan with my parents and brothers years ago. My middle brother would be reading a book, my oldest brother creating a track for various toy cars he'd made my mom pack, and the youngest holding a drink in one hand and chasing girls or birds, depending on his age.

No matter how much I really don't want to be here, I can't help but appreciate that they at least picked a beach. It was undoubtedly Sienna's decision. Walker, my eldest brother's girlfriend grew up here, and as I take in the sunshine and palm trees, I have no idea why she ever left.

With another deep breath, I head back into the little condo that my three infuriating, difficult, ornery brothers rented.

I flop on the sofa and take in my new digs for the next few days. The walls are painted white. Decorations in soft pink and seafoam green, most of them seashells and sand dollars, are everywhere. I suppose it's relaxing to most people, but it makes me want to start stripping wallpaper. In lieu of that, I eye my briefcase sitting by the bedroom door across the living room and wonder if it's too early in this little getaway to start working.

As if he knew I was about to grab my client files, my phone rings. Walker's name appears on the screen. I pick it up. "Hello?"

“Did ya make it?” His voice is gruff on the other side.

“Yes. A couple of hours ago.”

“I told ya to call when ya landed, Blaire.”

“This is not the first time I’ve taken a trip by myself, you know.”

“Of course not. Just the first time in, what, a decade?”

“Why do you really care how often I take a vacation?” I ask for the millionth time, squeezing my eyes shut. “I’m just going to sit here and dwell on how far behind I’m falling at work.”

“I care because I heard you go batshit crazy on a man through the phone the other day. And because you were telling me you were afraid your assistant was going to quit over your workload.” He sighs. “I know you feel all fancy and shit in that corner office in the city, but fuck, Blaire. You can’t live to work.”

He’s right. Of course, he’s right. But that doesn’t mean he’s ... right.

“You’re wrong.” I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. “I absolutely can live to work. I find it fulfilling.”

“Whatever. How’s Georgia? Sienna said it’s nice there this time of year.”

I turn my head and peer out the window. Palm trees sway in the sea breeze, and birds loop lazily through the air, highlighted by the cloudless blue skies.

“I can’t imagine it ever not being nice here,” I say. “I’ll never understand why she moved to Illinois.”

“You have met me, you know.”

“My point remains.” Pulling my legs up under me, I rest my head against the pillows. “Sienna made you a sap.”

“I’m not a fucking sap,” he cuts back. “I’m just saying. Been thinking a lot lately ...”

The way his voice trails off hits me right in the heart. My face falls, and I fight the urge to lecture him or mother him in some way. This happens every summer. I think all my siblings start to think of our parents and their accident. It’s the time of year Walker is a bit less cantankerous. Lance drinks a little more. Machlan calls in the middle of the night with philosophical questions that I never can answer.

Before I can figure out what to say, Walker changes the subject.

“Can I ask you for a favor? Well, not for me, but for Sienna?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“Can you meet up with one of her brothers and pick up some paperwork or some shit?” The sound of metal crashing onto a hard surface ricochets through the line. “Fuck!”

I laugh. “What are you doing?”

“Come finish this before I stick a fucking wrench in it!” The line gets muffled before he comes back. “I was trying to take an oil filter off a tractor, but it’s stuck. God knows I’m not gonna get any help with it either. I just shouted for someone to come finish it, but it’ll be there a day from now if I don’t circle back to it.”

“Hey, it’s job security,” I say through a laugh.

He chuckles as the sound of water in the background trickles through the phone. “Anyway, can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Meet with one of Sienna’s brothers?”

Something about the way he says “brothers” takes me back to the man at the airport today. He was devilishly handsome in his business suit with a Rolex strapped around a thick, muscled wrist. He spoke well and seemed educated, which were bonus points to his light-colored hair and jade eyes.

The problem? I see men like him every day. My office is full of them. That controlled, alpha vibe stops being attractive when you peel off the suit. They’re just like other men—overgrown children who want a woman to fight for them.

And fight for herself.

Because if she doesn’t fight for herself, no one is going to fight for her.

“I’m not sure what my schedule looks like,” I say for the second time today.

“You don’t have a fucking schedule. I made your schedule.”

“I’ll happily refund your money and come home.”

“The hell you will.” He sighs. “It won’t kill you to do her this one favor.”

“For what? So, you can get laid?”

“I’ll get laid regardless ...”

“Ew!” I say, getting to my feet. “How did we get here? I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’ll text you the address, okay?” Walker asks.

Moseying across the sage-colored carpeting, I gaze across the water. Families are holding hands, letting the waves rock against them. I wish I

could do that—just throw all caution to the wind and let my guard down. But I can't. Or if I was like that, I'm not anymore.

"Fine," I say finally. "But tell Sienna she owes me blueberry muffins when you pick me up from the airport."

"Will do. Talk to you soon, Blaire."

"Bye."

The line goes dead as he shouts at our cousin again.

Tossing the phone to the sofa, I stretch my arms overhead. For once, I don't feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, don't have to look over my shoulder for a colleague or client. It's an odd sensation that somehow makes me feel more guilty about this little getaway.

I glance at my briefcase. There are only two files situated inside the leather case. My boss plucked the rest out of my hands before I left and shoved me out the door.

Two files. I can have them worked over in forty-eight hours. Tops.

My phone dings with Walker's text, and I wonder how I, Blaire Gibson, got relegated to running my brother's girlfriend's errands.

I sink on the couch next to my phone and sigh.

This might be the longest three days of my life.

THREE

Holt

“What in the hell took you so long?” Oliver hits the gas, barely giving me enough time to shut the door to his sport utility vehicle.

“Delayed flight.”

My briefcase sails across the floorboard in the back, ramming the door behind my brother, as he takes a tight right turn onto the freeway.

“You know, we could always buy a private jet.” He looks at me like he just proved a point he’s struggled to make for years.

As the president of Mason Ltd., I control the purse strings and major financial decisions. I remind him of this with a simple quirk of a brow.

He scoffs. “We’re going to be late to our meeting with Graham Landry.”

“And what the fuck should I have done about it? Explained to the weather gods in Portland my little brother needed me for a business meeting and the storm should just vanish because I said so?”

He’s not entertained. With a roll of his eyes, he sits back in the leather seat and hits cruise control on the steering wheel.

“And stop fucking calling me every twenty seconds and handle shit like a big boy,” I add for good measure.

“Really, Holt?”

We watch each other, a heated standoff like only brothers who run a multi-million-dollar company together can manage. We’re both type A, intelligent, and damn good at what we do. This causes a few skirmishes, but we are also loyal. To a fault. And that’s what makes our bond stronger than any other in the business and why Mason Ltd. kicks ass.

The ringing of Oliver's phone through the car breaks our stalemate. Oliver answers. "Oliver Mason."

"It's Rosie."

"How are you, Rosie?" I ask our shared assistant. She's seventy-five years old and still good at old-fashioned typed things. Neither Oliver nor I can let her go, despite having to hire separate assistants to help pick up the slack. Our brother, Wade, was going to hire her in his architectural office because it's more low-key, but when Oliver brought it up to her, she looked hurt. So, we pretended there was a big fight over her. She was happy again, and we just made do.

"Is that you, Holton?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You've made your brother extremely nervous today. I've warned the Landrys you're running late. Told them you had a weather delay."

I grin at Oliver as he shakes his head. "You're right. It was the weather."

"Of course, it was, dear. I shall ignore any strange credit card charges from the past couple of hours when your bill hits my desk."

"That would be awfully kind of you, Rosie."

Oliver butts in, going over a few things with her while I gaze out the window and try to quiet my head. Meeting with Graham Landry is no joke. The man is a powerhouse all on his own—quick-witted, smart as hell, and cutthroat. If you aren't on top of your game, you're out of play.

We pause at a traffic light and wait as the cars in the opposite lanes barrel across the intersection. Oliver ends the call with Rosie. I'm about to ask him how far away from the meeting we are when a pedestrian with long, dark hair crosses in front of us.

Unlatching my seat belt, I rise in my seat to get a better look. Oliver's eyes are on me as I try to ascertain whether this is the girl from the airport, but I ignore him. Instead, I watch the sway of her hips back and forth and determine, without a doubt, it's not her.

I sink back into the seat just before Oliver slams the gas again.

"Wanna tell me what that was about?" he asks.

"Not really."

"Does it have anything to do with why you were super fucking late?"

"I wasn't that late," I contend. "Just shut the hell up about it."

"Fine, fine. Just be ready for Landry. He knows how much we stand to make if we purchase this property from him, so he's not going to give it to

us easily.”

I look at Oliver and laugh. “Does he ever?”

“Maybe he’ll be nice and use some lube.”

“Let’s hope he remembers how much Dad donated to the Landry mayoral campaign a few years back. Maybe that’ll help.”

He takes a right off the freeway and heads to the outskirts of Savannah where the Landrys’ estate is located. I’ve been there a few times for random events and meetings, and it’s nice as hell. I keep telling my brothers we need something like that, but our personalities are too different to agree on anything. We just meet in Aspen and go skiing every winter instead.

As the car pulls up to the gate, a man takes Oliver’s information and buzzes us through. We slip by tall rows of trees along the freshly paved path leading to the massive farmhouse nestled back away from the road. Oliver parks the car and looks at me.

“You ready, big guy?” he asks.

“Let’s do this.”

BLAIRE

A lot of assumptions are made on first appearances, so for that reason, I strive never to be underdressed for an occasion. Yet as I walk up the steps to the large farmhouse at the address given to me by my brother, I feel totally unprepared.

A flowy, pale yellow sundress hangs from my shoulders and hides the sandals on my feet. It seemed like the perfect easy ensemble to do a little shopping on the quaint little street beside my condo, and I didn’t see the need to change before picking up some papers for Sienna.

I was wrong.

This place is gorgeous and elegant and oh, so Southern. As I knock on the door and wait for someone, presumably a butler, to open the door, I wish to heaven I’d have worn something slightly more professional.

Footsteps sound from the other side before the door is whisked open by a man standing in a pair of dark dress pants and a blue and white checkered shirt. He’s divine with his freshly cut dark hair and clean-shaven face.

“You must be Blaire Gibson?” he asks.

“Yes, I am.”

A smile stretches across his cheeks. “I’m Graham Landry. Nice to meet you.” He extends a hand as he steps out of my way so I can enter.

We shake quickly, his palm heavy and strong, then he leads me into the back of the house. I can hear laughter coming from a room in front of us as Graham turns toward me.

“I’m winding up a business meeting,” he says. “It would’ve been over, actually, had my brother Lincoln not shown up.”

As the laughter grows again, I laugh too. “I have a brother like that.”

“So you feel my pain. On a serious note, Sienna has told me a lot about you. I wanted to thank your family for taking her in the way you have.”

We stop just short of the doorway.

“She’s so good for my brother. He’s smitten with her,” I say.

“I think she’s in about the same shape.” He grins. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to Linc while I grab the papers you’re after.”

He enters the room in front of me and makes his way toward a chair at the head of the table. I, on the other hand, stutter step.

Sitting in front of me is a man in a tailored suit. A Rolex sits on his wrist. A hand runs through his sandy brown hair as he turns my way.

“And then he ...” Holt’s voice trails off as our eyes meet somewhere over the fancy hardwood floor. He leans back as though he can’t quite focus. “Didn’t I ...?”

Recovering more quickly than I anticipate, I paste on a practiced smile. “It’s good to see you again,” I say to him.

He looks at Graham before switching his eyes to me again. “You too.” It’s more of a stammer, a caught-off-guard statement than anything. “Do you know the Landrys?”

“I’m just here to pick up a few papers.”

The gazes from around the room are heavy, heating the air even more than the exchange of energy between Holt and me. The slight drop of his jaw and his furrowed brow are slowly replaced with a twitch of his lip and oh, so narrowed eyes that are enough to make me want to back out of the room slowly.

“Is this why you were late today?” A man across from him sighs. He looks like Holt with lighter hair and darker eyes.

Holt responds, bickering back and forth with the man across the table about minding his own business while I take in the men around me. Graham is ignoring them all as he sorts through a stack of papers. A younger version of Graham sits next to him with a wicked grin on his face.

“Lincoln Landry,” he says with a little wave. “Nice to meet ya. You must be Blaire.”

“Yes. Nice to meet you too.”

“Here they are,” Graham mutters, pulling out an envelope and handing it to me. “I put everything she needs in there. If she’s missing something, she can call.”

“Great. I’ll make sure she gets them,” I say, taking the envelope.

“We’d love to have dinner with you this week,” Lincoln says. “Mom would love to meet you.”

“I need to check my schedule,” I say, reverting to my new go-to line. “I’ll get in touch if I can work it out.”

Holt’s chair scoots back in front of me, and he gets to his feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

“I can do it,” Graham offers.

“Clearly, he doesn’t want you to do it, asshole,” Lincoln says to his brother. “Sit down and pretend you can see what’s happening here.”

My cheeks warm. I look between the Landry men. “Nice to meet you both. And you too ...” I say, pulling my gaze to the other man.

He stands. “Oliver Mason. Holt’s brother.”

“Nice to meet you, Oliver.”

“Likewise.” He tucks his tie beneath his jacket as he takes his seat again. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again.”

My first reaction is to tell him not to sound so excited about the prospect. My second thought is to ask him what makes him think we’ll ever see each other again. Instead, I catch myself and give him a tight grin instead.

“Have a good evening,” I say and turn toward the front door.

Holt’s energy ripples behind me, the musk of his cologne filling my nostrils as I reach the exit. He hops in front of me and opens it before I can get to it.

“Thank you,” I offer as I step onto the expansive front porch complete with hanging ferns. Breathing in the cut grass and coolness to the evening air, I look up at the colorful sky. “It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t notice until now.”

The gravel in his voice snaps my attention to him without me even realizing it. Before I know it, I’m standing in front of Holt Mason as he peers down at me. His irises flicker, greens and golds swirling together in a heady mix of something I don’t want to name.

Passing a hot swallow down my throat, I re-grip the file in my hands. “Look at you, being all charming.”

“It’s one of my many talents.”

“Your confidence is underwhelming,” I tease.

“There’s nothing wrong with confidence if you can back it up.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.” He grins. “It becomes a problem when people tout their abilities and have nothing to fall back on.”

I ignore the look in his eyes and, instead, pretend to ponder his declaration. “The flaw in that logic is in the definitions. Meaning, what if someone truly believes they’re amazing at something, and the other person finds them to be lackluster. Is that confidence wrong?”

“Not if they believe it,” he banters back. “It’s their truth.”

“Fair enough.”

The air flutters around us, almost dancing a private show for our benefit. Crickets sing in the distance; stars begin to shine in the early evening sky. It’s as if the world flipped a switch for this moment. If I believed in goopy girlish things, I’d be delighted. Too bad I’m more realistic than that.

I clear my throat and turn toward my rental car.

“Again, nice to see you, Holt ...”

“Quit it.” He sighs, brushing a stray strand of hair away from my cheek.

The connection roots me in place.

His fingertips lightly brush my skin. They’re warm and slightly calloused in a way that makes my thighs ache.

“Let’s go to dinner,” he says.

“I already have a reservation.”

“For one?”

“For dinner,” I say with a smirk. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I wait for him to move out of my way, but he doesn’t. He just stands in front of me and flashes a shit-eating grin my way.

“I’ll take you to the best restaurant in Savannah,” he tells me. “You’ll love it.”

“Why do men always think they know what a woman wants? It’s annoying, not to mention arrogant.”

“It’s not arrogant if I’m right.”

This should turn me off. This should be a blazing, flashing red light to dress him down, put him in his place, and be on my way. It’s what I do to every other guy who thinks he’s something I can’t live without. But I don’t. Or I can’t. I don’t know which, and I can’t even spare the mental capacity to sort it out because every synapse is firing just for him.

There’s a look in his eye, something behind the brazen façade, that intrigues me. I haven’t given a man more than a dirty look in longer than I can remember. Who has the time? Who has the energy? Who wants to deal with that bullshit?

But as I stand on the porch of this beautiful home in the middle of a perfect Southern evening, I remember Sienna’s instruction to enjoy my vacation.

“You don’t know enough about me to be right,” I volley back, continuing the banter because I can’t help myself.

“I disagree.” He shifts his weight, folding his arms across his chest. “I’ll tell you three things about you besides the obvious. If I’m right, you’ll go to dinner with me.”

I think this over. I didn’t tell him anything about me, not even my name. So, there’s no way he can actually come up with one thing, let alone three, that’s deep enough to warrant a dinner date.

If nothing else, it’ll be a fun little experiment and a chance for me to prove that men don’t know everything.

“Fine,” I say. “But you have to impress me. Hair color, eye color—those types of things don’t count.”

He grins. “Absolutely not. There’s no fun in that.”

“All right. Shoot.”

“Your name is Blaire,” he says, catching me off guard. “You like gummy bears but feel like it’s a childish thing to enjoy, so you try to be discreet about your obsession. You prefer the red ones and hate the green ones. You like shopping but hate spending loads of money on things you think are a waste.”

My jaw almost hits the floor.

“And,” he says, taking a step closer to me, “you don’t date because you don’t have time. You also find men to be barbaric, adolescent creatures which, may I add, I find offensive.”

“How could you possibly know all that?” I demand. “Are you a stalker? Do I need a restraining order?”

The heat rolling off his body clamors into me, upping the beat of my heart tenfold. I hate my reaction to him, and I hate even more that I can’t control it.

“Lincoln said your name. You dropped the candy from your purse in the airport, and I just happened to notice you had it hidden in a little pouch. All the red ones were gone, and it was chock-full of the green. Your lipstick was a type my mother uses, so I know it’s expensive as hell, but your earbuds earlier weren’t a name brand, so I put together you don’t value them as much.”

“I just lose them constantly,” I say, still sorting his observations.

“And now you lost our bet. Ready to go?”

My summer dress billows in the breeze, reminding me, once again, I’m not home.

This wouldn’t be like a dinner with a man I see regularly or could even see regularly if I wanted to. He lives almost a thousand miles from me.

What could one dinner hurt?

“Fine,” I say, stepping around him. “But I’m driving.”

“Great,” he says, much to my surprise. “Let me tell the others I’m taking off.”

“But you weren’t done. We can pick this up tomor—”

“Oh, no.” He laughs, his green eyes lighting up with mischief. “We were done a while ago and now we’re just shooting the shit. I’ll be right back.”

He takes off inside, and I brace myself against the railing.

What have I gotten myself into?

FOUR

Holt

They say a person's eyes are the windows to their soul. You can tell everything you need to know about them by a quick glance. Doors are like that for a business, and the ones leading into Picante are ornate and heavy.

It's my favorite place in all of Savannah. Sitting atop a luxury hotel with views across the water on one side and the city on the other, it's spectacular. Especially at night. It's also impossible to get into without a reservation.

"After you," I say to Blaire as she enters in front of me.

"I should've changed, Holt," she says under her breath. "Look at these people."

"There are people? What people?" I grin.

She tilts her head, clearly unamused.

"Fine." Looking around, I spot the hostess and give my head a subtle nod. She scurries our way.

"Mr. Mason. Good to see you this evening."

"Thank you," I say, less amused at her wandering eye than usual. Moving slightly to the side so I'm closer to Blaire, I clear my throat. "Two, please. For the Radar Room, if it's available."

"I'll rearrange for you, sir. Right this way."

Blaire casts a look over her shoulder with her lips pressed together to hide a smile. She follows the hostess along the wall to one of the private rooms beside the main dining area. I place my palm gently on the small of her back. I want to touch her so fucking bad, but I don't want to come across the wrong way.

She tenses for a brief second before her shoulders relax; mine follow. I flex my fingers against the smooth fabric of her dress, finding her body warm against my touch.

There's a conversation between Blaire and the hostess, one I can't hear, but I'm not mad about it. Just watching her speak, hearing her laugh at the hostess's jokes, is enough for me. Right now, anyway. It's a world-class view without any pressure.

We enter the private room, lit with candles and ambient lighting, and I pull out Blaire's chair before she sits. This seems to please her, which, in turn, pleases me.

Once we've made a drink selection and the hostess is gone, the energy in the room starts to shift. I finally have her to myself.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight," I say as she drapes her linen napkin on her lap.

"I believe you came with me, but that's just semantics."

"Excellent point." I laugh. "How do you know the Landrys?"

"One of my brothers, Walker, is dating, or engaged, I'm not really sure, to their sister, Sienna," she explains.

Lifting the glass of water in front of her, she swirls it lightly around. My question seems to have made her think of something else, and I want to know what it is. I want to know everything about this woman.

"So you grew up around here?" I ask.

"Me? Oh, no. I grew up in a little town in Illinois. That's where my family still lives. I live in Chicago."

I can't imagine living apart from my brothers. We all live and work together in some form, except Coy. When he's not touring with his band, he's right here with us.

"Is that hard?" I ask.

"What?"

"Not being around your family. I see most of mine every day. Hell, my mom still calls me to make sure I've eaten all the colors of the rainbow once a week."

A smile parts her lips. "I miss them a lot. But ..." Her smile wobbles a bit. "I went to law school and work in the city. I can't do what I love to do and live in Linton with them."

I nod.

“I’m still really close to them,” she says. “And I visit as much as I can—at least once a month to see Nana.”

“Nana?”

“My grandmother. She’s as feisty as my brothers, but God, I love her. She was my dad’s mom and spoiled us rotten growing up.” She takes a deep breath and then adds, almost as an afterthought, “Now I try to spoil her when I can.”

Something about the way she says this catches my attention. It’s sweet and careful, something I’m not sure I’ve really attached to Blaire so far. But when she looks back up at me, that’s all washed away.

“What about you?” she asks. “Are you close to your brothers?”

“I work with Oliver, so we’re together every day. We see Wade and Boone a lot. Coy is gone a lot, doing his thing.” I shrug. “But, yeah, we’re all close. We golf together, go boating, play some poker.”

“My brother Machlan has a bar,” she tells me. “They tried to have poker night there a couple of times until I advised him to shut it down. I had no idea those things got so serious.”

“Oh, yeah. If you ever meet Coy, ask him what joker’s wild means.”

She laughs. “I’ll make sure I never do that. Thanks for the warning.”

A soft knock on the door sounds through the room, and a waitress arrives. She takes our orders and disappears quietly.

Once we’re alone again, I relax back in my chair and look at the beauty across from me.

“So,” she says, resting her forearms on the table. “What do you do for fun?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, honestly.”

“I work.”

Her laugh is the freest I’ve heard from her. It causes the corners of my lips to twitch.

“You sound like me,” she says. “I get such satisfaction from finding a bit of evidence the prosecution didn’t think I’d see or hearing a verdict go the right way.”

I lean forward and rest my arms on the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you ever have to take on clients you know are guilty?”

“Yes. Sometimes. But, before you go judging me, I’d like the opportunity to explain.”

I nod. “The floor is yours.”

She smiles, but her game face is on. A finger touches the gold chain sitting around her neck. “My job is to ensure my clients are tried fairly in accordance with the Constitution. Yes, I’ll represent men and women who I know are guilty if, and this is a big if, they haven’t been accused of a violent crime. And I cannot ethically encourage them to plead not guilty, and I won’t put them on the stand if I think they might lie. I have to sleep at night.”

Her eyes shine with a ferocity and intelligence that fucks with me. It raises a hundred questions that I want her to answer if for nothing but to watch her speak.

“For what it’s worth,” I say, “I think that’s highly admirable.”

And fucking hot.

I sit back again and try to block out the image of her in a courtroom.

“What do you do?” she asks. “Work-wise, I mean.”

“Business shit,” I say, trying to brush it under the rug. Going into the ins and outs of my world seems like a waste of time when we could be talking about her.

She grins. “I’m going to need a little more than that, Mr. Mason.”

“I’m the CEO of Mason Limited. My grandfather started it. My father expanded it. Oliver and I are ushering it into a new age.”

“I love the sound of that.”

“It’s fun.”

She slides a lock of hair behind her ear. The candle in the middle of the table casts reflections across her high cheekbones. She looks like a model sitting across from me, but one you could touch without knocking her over.

I’ve been with a lot of women, but none quite like her. She might just be the total package.

“What?” she asks, catching me studying her.

I could toss her a canned line or redirect the conversation to something that’s not how gorgeous she is. But if I know anything about Blaire so far, it’s that she can pick out a line of bullshit a mile away.

“You’re beautiful, Blaire.”

She flushes. “Thank you.”

“It’s not a line. I mean it—you’re fucking beautiful.”

The candlelight flickers as she shifts in her seat. Her eyes pull away from mine, and I instantly regret opening my mouth.

She clears her throat as her fingertips touch her necklace again.

“I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable,” I say carefully. “That might’ve been a little forward.”

“It’s fine.” She takes a deep, steadying breath. “To be frank, I’m not used to situations where someone would say something like that.”

“I don’t understand.”

She sits up a bit straighter. “I don’t have a lot of dinners with men who I’m not trying to outwit or outplay. This whole thing tonight is a little foreign to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t date,” she says simply.

My brows shoot to the ceiling. “You don’t date? At all?”

I tilt my head as though it will help me hear her better—as if the idea of Blaire not dating will make more sense if the octaves are a bit higher.

It’s baffling. How could a woman like her not date? Sure, women say that shit all the time because they think it ups their desirability. But I actually believe Blaire. And, lo and behold, I need to adjust my cock at the thought. So maybe they’re on to something with that line.

“I mean, I’ve dated,” she says. “Just ... not often. I’m just too busy to entertain another human. I can barely keep my own life on target, let alone adding someone else’s life in.”

“I feel the same way,” I say. “My life goes a hundred miles an hour. I can’t be thinking about buying flowers or chocolates or making sure I pick up my shoes.”

“See? That’s a hard limit for me. Pick up your own damn shoes.” She laughs. “That is one of the reasons I find men to be barbaric creatures, as you so carefully noted.”

I point a finger at her and wink. “That’s what you tell yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

“You like to think you find barbaric tendencies in men to be appalling. Society has taught you that. There’s no place in the world for aggressive men, men who know what they want.” My smile deepens. “But deep down, you enjoy an alpha male.”

She bites her bottom lip. “That’s not completely true.”

“Is it not?”

“No. I do find those tendencies appalling. Truly. They insinuate that the woman is the lesser sex—that we should pick up men’s shoes, make them dinner, have a lower paying job—and to that, I call bullshit.”

She lifts her glass and takes a drink, keeping her eyes glued to mine over the rim. There’s a steeliness to the blue irises that feels like a challenge. But as they stay trained on mine, I see a softness, too, that feels like an invitation.

“As you should,” I say, my voice lowering. Breathing in the warm notes from her perfume, I watch her chest rise and fall at a quickened pace. “I have no doubts you are as capable and intelligent as any man I know. But I also know something else.”

She sets the glass down. Her finger runs around the bottom, her chin lowered as she looks at me through her lashes. “What’s that?”

I lean forward and run my teeth over my bottom lip. The movement catches her attention. Her gaze drops to my mouth as her own lips part.

The air between us warms, the connection between us cackles with energy. Her brows arch as if she knows the answer and is waiting on me to deliver.

So deliver I will.

“I have no doubts that if I bent you over a chair and buried myself in you, there wouldn’t be any complaints.”

Her eyes widen as she shifts in her seat.

She wants it as badly as I do, but there’s no way I’d do that. Not here. Maybe with another woman—one who would orgasm all over my balls in the middle of this dining area and not regret it. But Blaire? She’s cut from another cloth, albeit one I’d like to mark.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I silently curse whoever it is. She hears it and motions for me to take it. While I type a quick response back to Rosie, I glance up. She’s watching me carefully.

“Like what you see?” I tease, slipping the device back into my pocket.

Her mouth opens as if she’s going to say something but snaps it shut again before she does. Her brows tug into one long line as she mulls over a thought.

Giving her space to work whatever it is out, I sit back in my chair. She starts to speak again yet stops herself.

“Blair?”

She looks up through her lashes again, her eyes wide.

“Say it,” I demand.

“Say what?”

“Whatever it is you keep stopping yourself from saying.”

She makes no movement to do anything of the like, but I see exactly what she wants.

As soon as our eyes meet, really meet, the desire burning in the blues is undeniable. Her lids hood, her tongue swiping along her bottom lip as she watches me very slowly push away from the table.

My cock is pressed so tightly against my pants that I think it may burst through the seams. It’s all I can do to ignore it for the time being and, instead, sidle up behind Blaire’s chair.

She doesn’t turn to face me. She doesn’t flinch as I brush all the hair off her shoulders so it lays down the middle of her back.

“I’m going to touch you,” I say just loud enough for her to hear.

Pausing to give her just enough time to object, I lay my hands on her shoulders. A slight gasp escapes her lips as I knead my palms against her skin.

She’s warm and smooth and supple, and I want to bury myself in her body on this damn table.

Her head bends to the side, almost laying her cheek on my hand. I continue to work it back and forth, listening to her soft moans as I go. Finally, she sits up again and clears her throat. My hands drop to my side.

She doesn’t turn around to face me. She doesn’t move at all. The only thing that changes is her voice when she says, “Do you think it’s possible to rent a room here tonight?”

“I’ll be right back.”

FIVE

Holt

The key card takes forever to activate the lock on the suite.

The elevator ride was quiet, yet every time our eyes met, I swore I could hear the air vibrating between us. Despite the dilated pupils and labored breathing— something I notice but don't think the other guests in the hallway do—she appears calm. Confident. Controlled.

She's a damn conundrum, a puzzle with equal pieces sexy and soft. If there's one thing I won't do tonight, it's fuck this up. Fuck her up. In order to do that, I need to clear my head.

When I glance over my shoulder, it's clear she needs a second as well. Her blue eyes war, a storm crashing wave over wave as she waits for the chirp of the lock.

The door snaps, freeing itself, and although I've been anticipating the sound, I still jump. Blaire wastes no time taking the power in the situation. She moseys by me, pressing her palm flat against my chest as she enters the suite with the naughtiest grin.

Working the knot in my tie loose, sure as hell I'm going to choke, I step inside and let the door slam shut behind me. It's her turn to flinch.

As she spins around, I step toward her in one deft movement. Her back hits the wall, a soft intake of breath parting her lips just before mine land against them.

Her back arches and her chin tilts back as my hands frame her in along the gold-painted wall. Warm and soft, her lips move against mine but not

like I predict. She's slow, methodical, each kiss a decided choice in an easy, calculated flow.

One hand cradles her cheek, her face a perfect mixture of hollowed and round. I brush my thumb against her jaw and am rewarded with a soft, feminine moan.

The sounds of our connection whisper through the room, echoing in the grand entryway. Years before I'm ready to break the kiss, she does just that.

Breathless, she pants as she pulls away, leaving me dragging air into my lungs. Dropping my hand, I let it skim her arm as it falls to her hand. Placing it in mine, I lead her onto the patio. She doesn't object, just follows me as though it's our nightly ritual.

Large plants in beautiful clay pots line the sides of the balcony, giving the feeling of seclusion. The sky is clear with a host of silver stars dotting the darkness.

The taste of her mouth is still fresh on my tongue as I sit on a chair with a soft crimson pillow. She slips her hand from mine and chooses a chair a few feet away.

A sliver of thigh is unveiled as she gets settled. My cock, already rock-fucking-hard, throbs so much it physically aches. I try not to wince as I will it to ease, sure I already have pre-cum in my boxers.

The breeze catches her hair, making it dance in a cloud around her. She pulls it into a knot on top of her head, and I'm surprised at how much it changes her appearance. Her cheekbones are sky-high, nearly touching the bottom of her lashes. The corners of her eyes are almost an almond shape, something I never noticed before. Everything about her looks more sophisticated, more regal, and I'm left no choice but to adjust my cock before it explodes.

"I'm going to admit something," she says. "This is a little too easy for me."

"What's too easy? I'm fucking hard as hell." Wincing, I openly cup myself and try to find some relief.

She grins. "That's exactly why I sat over here."

"Isn't that a good thing? For you, I mean. That you make me this turned on?"

"Of course," she breathes. "I just ... um ... I feel like we got here in two seconds."

“I’ll tell you what, gorgeous. You sit over there until you’re completely and utterly sure this is what you want. And if you decide it’s not, you can walk out, and I’ll take a cab home.”

She cocks her head to the side as though she’s not sure what to say. She searches my face before smiling. “There has to be a bad side to you.”

“Oh,” I say with a low, rough chuckle, “I can be as bad as you want me to be.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says, her hand waving toward her pinked cheeks.

I grin. “By the way you’re fanning your face, I think that’s exactly what you meant.”

Her hand falls to her side. “Do you always say what you’re thinking?”

“Absolutely not.”

Gripping the edges of her chair, she wars with herself about what to do. I’m not a man who will ever convince a woman to sleep with me, but I will let her know I’m willing. And so fucking able.

“But, for the record, I’m thinking about how wet your pussy is right now,” I say, resting my forearms on my knees. “I’m thinking how your muscles will spasm around my cock as it slides into you, how your eyes will struggle to stay open, the little sounds you’ll make as I suck on your breasts.”

Her breath stalls in her chest as her hips shift on her seat.

“I’m wondering what kind of panties lay under that dress and how easily they’ll slide down your thighs. How hot is your pussy? What does your slit taste like as I run my tongue up it and toy with your clit?”

As the breath she’s holding is released, with it seems to go a decision that is evident in the playfulness in her eyes.

“If I were wearing panties, they’d be soaked,” she whispers. Leaning back in her chair, one long leg lifting and crossing on the other, the corner of her dress slips and hits her right at the top of her thigh.

Gulping past the red-hot lump in my throat, I have to tear my eyes from the sliver of creamy skin. When I look at her face, her eyes shimmer with amusement.

Her tongue darts out, skimming her bottom lip. Her chin lifts ever so slightly, her eyes smoldering with the promise of a tease.

I’m only a man. A very virile, capable man who has limits and restraints just like the mortal I am. And I’ve hit my limit.

“Why don’t you come here?” I spread my legs, my cock clearly locked and loaded through the fabric of my pants, but I don’t give a fuck.

She stands, the hemline of the dress toppling to the floor. The front dips, the roundness of her breasts on full display.

I think I’m going to lose my damn mind.

Taking her time, she strides to me, making a one-second trip into about four. It feels like eighteen. Standing before me, her lips pursed together, she smirks. “I’m here. Now what?”

BLAIRE

My heart is pounding as I look down at him. The moonlight sweeps across his features, the angles causing him to look even more roguishly handsome than before.

As we sat in the dining room, just the two of us, he wore down my resolve. I was certain we’d share a meal, and that would be that. After all, I don’t really even know this man. I barely sleep with men after three dates. Yet here I stand, figuring I’m on vacation and should live a little.

I want to sleep with him. My brain has chosen this moment to let my hormones override any sensibilities, and as I look at him looking at me, I don’t even care how illogical this is. Any regrets I have about this later will be from my decisions. They’ll be my doing. He’s given me a hundred ways out, and I keep shoving my way in.

His hands grasp my waist, his fingers biting into my hips. With a gentle yet firm grip, he urges me to take a step toward him. To close the small distance.

The scent of his cologne fills the void between us, swirling with the warm evening air. My thighs clench together; my legs sticky from my arousal as a grin plays across his lips.

“I’ve never had this problem before,” he grunts.

Making a show of glancing at his lap, I drag my gaze up his chest until it settles on his eyes again. “Doesn’t look like you have a problem to me.”

He bites back a laugh with a slight shake of his head. “There’s no problem there.”

“I could find out for myself if you weren’t so chatty.”

The chuckle comes now, as does a grin. “I was referring to knowing where to start, smart-ass.”

“Have you never done this before?” I tease.

“I’m confident when I say I’m certain I’ve never been with a woman like you.”

There’s a kick to his tone, an almost reverence, that takes my breath away. It’s swoon or seduce, and I choose the latter.

“Well, then let me show you.” Prying one of his hands off my hip, I hold his gaze. Bringing it to my throat, I let the back of his fingers trail down my skin, gliding them over my sternum and between my breasts. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, fighting the urge to take over. But he doesn’t. He lets me direct the moment.

My skin burns beneath his touch, a trail of unseen flames left behind his contact. My brain buzzes, almost drunk, numb to any thought other than him and me. The powerfulness coursing through my veins, that a man like this is responding to me in this way, beats any victory in a courtroom. It’s surreal.

Twisting his hand so his palm is flat as it rubs down my stomach, he turns it at the apex of my thighs. Cupping my sex through my dress, the fabric sinks into the dampness under his palm.

His eyes flick to mine.

“Is that wet enough for you, Holt?” I ask, lifting a brow.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, my dress is bunched up and held in place at my waist. The air brushes against my bare vagina, and I feel incredibly exposed. The sensation startles me for a fleeting moment. He erases any sense of bewilderment with his warm, cradling gaze.

Grabbing the back of my thigh, he squeezes my leg. I try not to yelp because it doesn’t hurt, but a sound comes out as I reach my breaking point. He bites his lip to contain his amusement because he knows I want him. He’s aware that I need him. But it’s apparent that he’s not going to give it to me until he’s ready.

My legs part at his nudging, his fingers trailing up the inside of my thigh. With each inch they go higher, my heartbeat spikes a little more until the tips of his fingers reach my opening.

I suck in a hasty breath as I watch him feel, for the first time, how turned on I really am.

“My God,” he groans. “You weren’t kidding.” Pulling me toward him, he reaches farther back and inserts one long, firm finger in the middle of my slit. I moan, my body turning to gelatin as he drags it through the wetness.

“Holt ...” I gulp as my stomach clenches.

He holds the finger in the air, my desire glistening off it.

“There’s one question answered,” he says, his tone rough. “Let’s answer another.”

“Which is that?”

Looking me dead in the eye, he wraps his lips around his finger. My jaw drops as his eyes light up.

“You taste amazing,” he says.

Before I can react, before I can come up with a witty response, he’s dipping a finger inside me again. It goes in slow, and even I can feel my body squeezing around it. He works it inside, his other hand gripping my bare ass, before sliding it out and inserting it again. With each stroke, the flame in my belly grows hotter.

My fingers dig into his hair and tug his head back, capturing his mouth with mine. He strums my pussy, like a key to an ignition, as his tongue wraps around mine and strokes it to the same tune.

He pulls back, giving my bottom lip a gentle bite before burying his head in my chest. He kisses across the top of my breasts before tugging down the neckline of my dress. My breast pops free of my bra, sitting atop the white lace.

His tongue coats a budded nipple, working a small circle around the engorged flesh. As he sucks it into his warm mouth, he inserts a second finger into my pussy, and it’s all I can do not to scream out in delight.

I can’t focus on either sensation. Every synapse is firing, misfiring, and re-firing in such quick succession that I can’t make sense of any of it. All too soon, he pulls away from my chest, and his fingers slow.

My breath ragged, my sight fuzzy, I release the back of his head and stand straight. “What are you doing?”

“I’m about to do you.”

Needing a release, I swirl my hips against his hand. This only makes him pull it away altogether.

“Take off your dress,” he orders as he unfastens his belt.

“But ...” I look around the balcony. “Here?”

“I’m not waiting to get inside you.”

His pants, shoes, and socks are placed on the chair, his shirt joining them.

Holt Mason stands in front of me, a chiseled portrait of absolute perfection. His muscles are created, not swollen or pumped by a chemical, but designed ... maybe by God or maybe by a trainer. I don't know, but I'd like to thank them.

He takes a condom and rolls it over the top of his swollen cock. While he does this, he watches me expectantly.

Any hesitation I had about getting naked on a balcony is gone. I'd remove my clothes for him in the middle of the street if he told me to right now. This is completely ridiculous, I'm aware of that, but I. Just. Don't. Care.

My dress and bra join his clothes in a heap behind him. He takes a few calculated steps my way.

"I let you call the shots. But from here on out, I'm in control," he breathes. "I will take care of you in every way, but you need to trust me."

"I don't know you well enough to trust you," I whimper as he wraps his arm around me and pulls me against his chest.

"Then give me a chance to earn it."

When I don't respond, his eyes light up. He presses a gentle kiss to the middle of my lips, before turning me around.

His breath is hot against the shell of my ear, his cock heavy and hard at the small of my back. Moving a lock of hair fallen from my bun, he presses another kiss to the side of my neck. "Bend over and grab the railing in front of you," he whispers.

Looking over my shoulder, I'm silenced by what I see.

Lust. Control. Consideration.

A man in power.

And for the first time in my life, I'm okay with giving up that power for one night.

As I grip the rail, my hands sweaty and threatening to slip, he positions himself behind me. The tip of his cock parts my pussy and hovers right at the opening.

Before he slides into me, he pauses. "If you start to fall, I have you." And then he presses into the wetness, parting me into two halves and bringing me more pleasure than I've ever allowed myself to enjoy.

SIX

Blaire

His breathing evened out an hour ago, but I couldn't get out of bed. I laid next to him, his arm protectively around my abdomen, and watched him sleep.

There's been plenty of time for me to second-guess everything that happened today, and I've tried in a very me-like way, but I just can't make it happen.

Holt was rough yet tender, crass yet careful, smoldering yet sensitive, and I can't make myself wish I'd made another decision rather than to be with him. Even so, I know the choice I have to make now, and that's to be realistic. Smart. Gone.

I close my eyes. Even hours later, I can feel him inside me. The taste of his sweat is fresh on my tongue. The strength of his arms as he scooped me up and carried me to bed and lavished kisses against every inch of my body is at the forefront of my brain.

The safety of his gaze. The gentleness of his touch. The absolute control in which he executed every second of last night will be the bar that every man after him is compared to. But the longer I lie here and relish Holt's hard body next to mine, the more difficult it will be to extricate myself from this situation scot-free.

Lifting his arm off my stomach, I slip quietly out of bed. The silk sheets are decadent, and I have a notion to cancel the room my family got me across town and get another one here, but I don't.

My dress slips across my body, and my shoes and purse are in my hands in a couple of seconds flat. I tiptoe toward the door but stop when I see a notepad sitting by the little lamp on the table near the window.

HOLT,

Thank you for a wonderful evening.

Blaire

I PLACE the pen next to it and go to leave but stop again. Fishing through my purse, I find the red panties I removed inconspicuously during dinner and lay them next to the note.

With a final look at a man I'll never see again, I let myself out.

SEVEN

Holt

RING!

I shake off the dream clinging to me and swipe my hand against the nightstand. It collides with something where my bedroom lamp should be. I reach farther in my sleep-induced haze to silence the incessant ringing of my cell phone.

My fingertips hit something smooth, knocking the item—a clock, maybe—onto its side. I sit up in bed, jolted awake by the sound.

“What the fuck?” I ask as I peer around the room.

The sheets bunched around my waist are not mine. The mattress under my ass isn’t mine either. What *is* mine is the ringing phone that’s sitting next to a lamp that isn’t in my bedroom.

It takes a full minute to piece together where I am. And why.

Blaire.

Just like that, I’m wide-awake.

I scan the suite as I reach for the phone. The floor-to-ceiling drapes on either side of the open doors leading to the balcony flutter in the breeze. Soft streams of the morning sunlight filter through the room. The pillow next to me has a single strand of dark brown hair but no head to go along with it.

“Hello?” I ask as I bring my phone to my ear.

“Mr. Mason?”

“Yes.”

“This is Sherrie from the front desk.”

I rub a hand down my face and try to clear my head. “What can I do for you?”

“We found a credit card in the Radar Room after your visit last evening. I believe it belongs to someone in your party.”

My eyes flip to the bureau along the wall. Folded next to a statue of a half-dressed woman are my clothes from last night. Next to them, the spot where I laid Blaire’s clothes after she fell asleep, is empty.

I glance at the clock.

“I’ll pick the card up at the front desk before I leave this morning. Thank you,” I say. Before I can end the call, she speaks again.

“It’s not your card, sir.”

My forehead crinkles. “Is it Miss Gibson’s?”

Sherrie sighs. “I shouldn’t divulge that kind of information. But, yes. Gibson is the name printed on the card.”

My body feels like I went a couple of rounds with Boone in the boxing ring as my feet hit the floor. I stretch my free hand over my head and try to work some life back into my limbs.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mason. May I put you on hold for one moment, please?”

“Sure.”

I switch the phone to my other hand and walk around the suite. There’s no sign of Blaire anywhere ... except on my back. I stop in front of a mirror and spot scratches from her nails etched in my shoulders.

My gaze sweeps through the room again as my brain deciphers my current situation. She’s gone. That’s clear. And while my ego is a little bruised, it’s a total boss move on her part, and I can’t be pissed about it.

I run my hand over my jaw and fight a grin.

“I apologize for making you wait,” Sherrie says. “Is Miss Gibson available to pick up her card?”

I turn—mouth open to speak—when something catches my attention. It takes all of three steps to reach the piece of red lace illuminated in the sunlight. I lift the piece of paper beside the panties to find her goodbye written beautifully in black ink.

I want to laugh at her choice of words. *Thank you for a wonderful evening.*

First of all, I should be thanking her. Men don't often get the pleasure of being with a woman of her caliber without jumping through a lot of hoops. And, second, who uses the word *wonderful* to describe what happened last night?

Blaire. That's who.

My chuckle comes out before I can stop it.

"Excuse me?" Sherrie asks.

"I apologize. Miss Gibson is my guest," I say, picking up the lace. "If you leave the card with the front desk, I'll pick it up before I leave today. As I said."

She starts to object but reconsiders—probably in part due to the rather large tab my family spends at Picante every month. Her sigh is quick but present. "Yes, sir. Have a good day."

"You, too. Thanks."

I toss my phone onto the bed. As soon as it hits the mattress, it rings again.

"Fucking hell," I say, picking it right back up. "Hello?"

"What's up your ass?" Oliver asks.

"You right now."

He chuckles. "Well, let me worm my way up there a little farther. Just got off the phone with Graham Landry."

I bunch the lace up in my hand and hold it at my side. The fabric is soft and stretchy, and I wish I could've seen it on Blaire's skin.

The thought makes me hard.

Pushing the image out of my mind, I try to focus on my brother.

"Do either of you two sleep?" I ask.

"Landry called me at one in the morning. While I do appreciate a good night's rest, I'm thinking he doesn't."

"What did he want?"

I sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress dips with my weight and instantly brings back memories of laying Blaire in this very spot just hours ago. The way she smiled with a vulnerable confidence. How her body molded into my hands. The feeling of her handing over control ... and then taking it back this morning by leaving with only a note.

A fucking note.

Still, I have to admit that it's better than waking up with a woman stuck to me like sleeping together somehow equals monogamy and having to

coax her into a cab as gently as possible. Blaire left. On her own. And while I wouldn't have minded a morning round for good measure, I respect her game.

Hell, I wonder if I could adapt it for my own use.

"Holt?" Oliver draws me back to the phone.

"Sorry. I'm here."

He sighs. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are you doing? You're distracted as hell."

My lip twitches. "I *was* doing Blaire. And I did it well, I might add."

Oliver sighs. "Well, let me turn around."

"Why? What are *you* doing?"

"Well, I was on my way to your house. But if it's this early in the morning, and you've been with Blaire, then you sure as hell aren't at home, are you?"

I rub a hand down my face.

My refusal to take a woman home with me, even for one night, is a running joke with Oliver. He can't understand it. He also didn't help me clean up the mess the last time.

It's a rule that allows me to work and play and keep them in separate, clean little boxes—just like I like it.

"No. I'm at a hotel," I say, bracing for the rant that I know is coming.

"Look, I really don't give two shits about Blaire or what the two of you are or are not doing ... although by the sound of you this morning, I do have to say that I'm leaning more toward the are not. But—"

"Hey, Oliver."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck off."

He laughs. The sound works its way through me and, before I know it, has me smiling too.

"Back to Landry," I say, feeling a bit more focused. "What did he want?"

"Well, Graham talked to his dad, I guess, and he has reservations about selling us the land. Something about a promise they made in a campaign about protecting the environment."

I balk. "Since when did they become environmentalists?"

“Since they needed votes in the last election, I guess. Fuck if I know. Anyway, I assured them that Wade was on board with using environmentally-friendly designs and building methods.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure Wade gives a fuck.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure that I care what Wade gives a fuck about,” Oliver says.

I run a hand down my face.

We’ve spent so much time working on this deal that we’ve neglected others. As the president of the company, that was my call. The future of the company is in my hands in a way it has never been before. And if it falls through ... we fail.

I fail.

I cause my family to fail.

The muscles at the back of my neck tighten.

“You’re right,” I say, working my jaw back and forth. “We have one week to convince Landry to sell to us before he puts it on the market. We have to procure this deal because it’ll change everything for our company.”

“Exactly. We stick with our plan—get the property in our name. I feel good about this, Holt. I really do.”

Because I’ve micromanaged the shit out of this for the past ten months.

“We’ve thought it over from every angle. Boone already has some bites from investors. We have a dream concept with hotels, retail space, spas. If we need Wade to put on his hippie hat to get this contract, then he’ll put on the hippie hat whether he likes it or not. We have seven days to pull this off. We can do this.”

We have to do this.

I close my eyes to work through the problem, but when I do, the only thing I see are Blaire’s bright blue eyes. I must sigh because Oliver sighs back with a hefty dose of sarcasm.

“You’re going to make me play therapist, aren’t you?” he asks.

“Absolutely not,” I say, opening my eyes. “Why would I need a therapist?”

“I don’t know. I just know since you ran into this girl at the airport, you’ve been all ...”

“What?”

“Pussified.”

I stand and laugh. “I have not.”

“No, *you have*,” he teases. “You remind me a little of Boone when you’re all emotional like this, but that’s okay. The family has me.”

“*Riiight*. It’s a good thing we have you. Where would we be without your expense reports that easily double the rest of ours? Or your penchant for golfing on Fridays? Or the way we had to pay off the secretary because you—”

“Hey,” he interrupts. “First of all, my expense reports are because I actually wine and dine potential clients. Golfing on Fridays is also another work burden that you don’t bother helping me lift. And that secretary thing ... Well, let’s just say that I didn’t expect her to blackmail me for giving it to her doggy style on my desk after hours, okay? Might not have been my best move.”

“That’s what she said.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a response.”

I put the call on speakerphone and begin to get dressed. My clothes smell like Blaire’s perfume—faint and floral with a dose of elegance. As I pull on my shirt, I spot a dab of her red lipstick on the collar.

My stomach twists, sending a coil of energy through my body. It nestles itself deep inside my core, and I can’t deny my desire to see her again.

“Where is Blaire now?” Oliver asks. “Not that I care. I just know that we will end up having this conversation, so we might as well get it over with.”

“I’m not sure,” I admit.

“What do you mean that you’re not sure?”

I slip on my socks. “It means I don’t know where she’s at, dammit.”

Oliver’s laugh is instantaneous. It roars through the speaker and causes me to flinch.

“I didn’t have her pegged to be a one-night stand. But good for her. I like her style,” he says.

My jaw tenses as I shove my wallet and keys into my pocket. Before I head toward the door, I grab the panties and shove them in my pocket too.

“That really bothers you, doesn’t it?” he asks.

“What?”

“That she left. Total power move. She stole your thunder.”

“She didn’t steal my thunder,” I say, rolling my eyes. “And it doesn’t bother me. I kind of like it, actually.”

Even though the words come out of my mouth, I'm not sure I believe them. Not totally, anyway. It might be nice not to have to be the one to enforce a one-night stand for once, but I wouldn't have minded a goodbye.

Hell, I might have even offered breakfast before going our separate ways.

When I think of Blaire, I'm heated. Energized. Itching to have a conversation with the woman who intrigues me mentally as well as physically.

But she's gone. While that might make things less interesting this morning, it keeps it a clean break. There's a beauty in that.

Still ...

"She did leave her credit card," I say. "I need to figure out how to get it back to her."

"Um, call her?"

"Would you believe that I don't have her number?"

It doesn't take long before his laughter fills the phone again.

"You don't have her fucking number? This is gold. She just played you."

"She did not," I fire back, annoyed at his amusement in all this.

"Yeah, she did. Blaire is my fucking hero right now."

"I haven't *needed* her number," I insist. "I ran into her at the Landrys, and we had dinner. I haven't had to call her because she's been with me, asshole."

Oliver's laugh dies down. He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly.

"As the smartest of the Mason family, let me point out one piece of the puzzle that you've not yet put together," he says. "*You* might not have her phone number, but the Landrys do. And I might have told Graham that you would call him today about Wade being a closet hippie."

I shove off the desk. Whether it's my imagination or whether the sun really did choose this moment to shine brightly into the room, I don't know. But the warmth radiating in from its rays is impossible to deny.

Returning her card is the practical thing to do. It's the right, moral thing. And asking the Landrys to contact her for me—she's practically their family—would only make me look good in their eyes too.

It's genius.

I grin. “Ollie, I really hate to say I appreciate you, but I appreciate you, man.”

“Hold on. I’m going to put that on the calendar right next to the words Holt Got Played.”

“You are such a dick,” I say with a laugh.

He chuckles. “So, you’re good then? You’re calling Landry? And you’ll remember to bring up the project and not just your own personal one?”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

“Good.” Papers shuffle in the background. “Are you coming to the office today?”

I slip my hand into my pocket and feel the lace slip across my fingers. My brain tries to imagine the scarlet fabric on Blaire’s smooth skin. My blood heats my flesh, and I’m forcing a swallow as Oliver sighs at my pause.

“Yeah,” I say, “but it might be later.”

“Well, I’ll be here for another hour or so. Told Gramps I’d come over and watch golf with him this afternoon.”

“You have fun with that,” I say.

“I will. You should come too.”

I pull my hand from my pocket. “Gonna have to take a rain check.”

“I bet you are. Let me know what Graham says.”

“Will do.”

“Later.”

“Goodbye.”

I slip my phone in my pocket and take one final look around the suite. If Blaire hadn’t lost her credit card, maybe I could have left whatever we shared last night in this room. But she did. So now I have an obligation to return it.

“It’s the gentlemanly thing to do,” I say to myself.

I snicker as I head toward the door.

Gentlemanly, my ass.

EIGHT

Blaire

“THAT WILL BE sixteen dollars and eighty cents—including the delivery fee,” the voice on the other end of the phone says.

I reach my free hand up to balance the towel wrapped masterfully around my head and sit on the couch. Towel secured, I yank my purse to my side.

Despite the long, hot shower I took immediately after getting back to my room, I can still smell Holt on my skin. A tingle fires through my body every time I move. Every raise of my hand, bend of my neck, stretch of my legs is another reminder both of Holt and of muscles I haven't used in an embarrassingly long time.

“That's perfect,” I say, pulling my mind back to breakfast. “Let me grab my card.”

My abdomen rumbles as I lift my wallet from the depths of my bag and flick it open with my thumb. I tell myself it's from needing nourishment and has nothing to do with the rich, almost tobacco-like scent of Holt that just whispered through the air. The rumble turns into a tumble as the bottom falls out of my stomach.

“Shit,” I mutter as I balance the phone against my shoulder.

My driver's license, building identification, and various other useless cards snap as I pull them forward one by one.

Where is my card?

I only brought one with me since I didn't plan on doing much but working in the room. Each snap of plastic is louder. Every nook that comes up empty adds to the ball of weight forming in the center of my chest.

I toss the wallet to the side and begin sorting through my bag. The phone nearly falls from my shoulder.

Out comes a gummy bear wrapper and earbuds. Next is a backup battery for my phone and a pair of sunglasses. Irritated, I dump the remaining contents onto the sofa.

Still, nothing.

"I'm sorry," I say, getting to my feet. "I've misplaced my card. Can I call you back?"

"Absolutely. Hope you find it."

"Me too. Thank you."

I press the red end button before tossing my phone onto the sofa. My heart strums in my chest as I hurry to my briefcase and pop it open. My credit card isn't there. It's also not in my suitcase, but I check it just in case.

Shit.

"Where did I have it last?" I groan, massaging my temples with my fingertips.

My brain is doused with a fog that somehow hovers over everything after I left the Landry's house. Certain pieces are strikingly clear—Holt's jawline through the candlelight at dinner, the sound of his voice on the balcony, the weight of his body on top of mine.

But that's it.

Me, Blaire Michelle Gibson, the person who prides herself on attention to detail, has not even a shred of an idea where her credit card might be.

"This is mortifying," I say, squeezing my eyes shut.

I can imagine my brothers' reaction to this story. Walker would grin but not say a lot—he'd just let the look in his eye do all the talking. Lance would outright laugh at me, and Machlan would make some asshole comment about getting laid.

Despite the fact that my cheeks heat, I find myself smiling.

I get up and go to the room phone beside the bed. Bringing the receiver to my ear, I press the zero button. The line buzzes a couple of times before a woman's voice greets me ... and asks me to wait. The line goes to on-hold music immediately.

The music does nothing but heighten my anxiety. Each beat amplifies the dread building inside me.

I had the card at the airport in Chicago to purchase a latte.

Did I have it to get the rental car? Yes, I did.

Okay, breathe.

Did I have it at dinner?

The line crackles as the attendant comes back.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” the woman says. “How may I help you?”

I sigh, imploring myself to be patient.

“This is Blaire Gibson in room 1924. Has anyone turned in a credit card with my name on it?”

“Not that I recall. Can you hold, please?”

“Sure.”

The line gets muffled before she returns. “It’s not here. If it gets turned in, we’ll call your room or the number on file.”

“That would be excellent. Thank you.”

She laughs. “I wish all my customers were as pleasant as you this morning.”

“Bad day?” I ask as I rub my forehead.

“No. It’s just that all of America is calling for a hotel room next week, and they aren’t taking nicely to the fact that all hotels in Savannah are booked. But that’s what happens when you have the Seafood Fest and a Kelvin McCoy concert in town the same week.”

She goes on about the concert and how she tried to get tickets, but they were sold out in twenty minutes. All the while she’s telling me this, a phone ring incessantly behind her.

“Well, maybe you’ll get some next time,” I say, raising my voice slightly in hopes it will draw her back to her, our, current predicament. “If you get my card, please call. I need to go cancel it, I guess.”

“Absolutely. Have an excellent day, Miss Gibson.”

“You as well. Goodbye.” I set the phone back on the receiver.

The towel wobbles on the top of my head as I sit on the bed. I remove it and unwind my hair from the bright white material.

I could call the restaurant from last night. And the hotel. *And Holt.*

While there is an undeniable pull toward the last option—and I even find my eyes searching for my phone at the thought—I quickly bring

myself back to reality.

I left him this morning for a reason. It was a calculated, non-emotional rationale that I'm fully confident was the right decision. Nothing good would have happened if I had stayed.

The corners of my lips twitch.

Well, something very good probably would've happened—if I could be so lucky. But then it would get awkward with a walk of shame through a hotel in the morning rush.

"I need to cancel my card and move on," I tell myself as I get to my feet. "It's the logical solution."

I run a hand through my locks as I make my way to my phone. As soon as I reach it, it rings. It's an Illinois area code.

"Hello?" I say.

"Hey, Blaire. It's Sienna."

"Oh, hey. I didn't recognize the number," I say, switching the phone into my other hand so that I can detangle the opposite side of my head.

"I'm borrowing my friend's phone. Mine isn't charging and Walker and Peck are using a ... whatever you use to air up a car tire to try to clean out the port."

I laugh. "Oh, dear lord."

"I know, I know. Anyway," she says, her tone lighter than before. "I come bearing gifts."

My stomach growls. "Of muffins? Please be muffins. I'm starving."

"No. Better than muffins."

"Not sure anything tops muffins right now."

"This will. Promise." She pauses for what I think is effect. "I come bearing ... information. Well, information and a ton of questions, you little minx."

She giggles.

I look at the ceiling as I fill with dread.

There's zero chance she isn't calling about Holt Mason. How that's possible, I'm not sure. The simplest solution would be that her brothers mentioned that I left their house with Holt, but does word travel that fast between siblings?

It doesn't in mine. Not that Lance doesn't keep me in the loop regarding all their shenanigans, but I don't hear about them the next morning unless Machlan, our youngest and rowdiest brother, has done something borderline

illegal like punching someone in the face. That does warrant an early morning call. But this? The behavior I'm uncharacteristically exhibiting is, or was, characteristic for the Gibson boys. It's never gotten me a phone call.

"It appears that Holt Mason has your credit card," she practically singsongs into the phone. "Wanna explain that?"

"I do not."

She laughs. "Blaire! Come on. I want details."

I straighten my shoulders and clear my throat. "There are no details to be shared. I'm sorry to disappoint."

"That's bull, and we both know it. There's only one reason a woman would be with Holt in a situation so ... *intense* that she loses her credit card. Especially a woman like you."

I can't help but laugh. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you don't exactly slum it, Miss High Brow Attorney. You're beautiful, smart, and there's no way you didn't sleep with him, especially after Lincoln called and told me that Holt basically chased you out of there last night."

What?

I get to my feet and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My skin looks bright. My lips are full. There's a slight purple mark on the top of my breast that I can see as my robe dips in the front.

All in all, I don't look as depressed at being on vacation as I thought I would. And maybe I have Holt to thank for that.

But did he chase me out of there last night? Not like she's implying.

Although I don't really mind the sound of it when phrased like that.

I grin. "Lincoln is adorable, by the way."

"Lincoln is gross. He's my brother and has way too much time on his hands at this point in his life. But anyway, Holt *is not* my brother, and he *is* smoking hot. I'll have you know that I had the biggest crush on him my entire life. We used to see the Masons at events, and I'd literally drool over Holt. And Oliver. And Wade. I'd spy on them and drive my brothers crazy."

I sit on the couch again and recline back into the pillows. "When I was little, Walker and Lance used to have their friends over, and they'd chase me with frogs. We had very different childhood experiences."

Sienna laughs. "And look at us now. We're practically sisters."

“That’s ... true.”

“So spill it, *sister*.”

I nestle down into the pillows and try to embrace the odd sensation washing over me. It’s slightly uncomfortable but strangely pleasant to have this kind of girl talk. Either way, it’s definitely new for me.

This kind of mindless chatter never involved me. Girls in high school or college—sometimes even now in the lunchroom at work—giggle over romantic comedies and men they see on social media. I’m always too busy to be drawn into irrelevant conversations. But it feels different with Sienna, and I wonder what life might’ve been like had I had a sister of my own.

“We had dinner,” I say. “He’s very interesting.”

She groans. “You’re so not doing this right.”

I bite my lip before letting it pop free. “That’s not what he said.”

“Blaire!”

I laugh, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

“No! Don’t be sorry. This is what I’m after. This is how it works. Now keep it going and tell me what else he said or didn’t say, did or didn’t do.”

“I just ... We had dinner. We had a nice time. I left early this morning and apparently left my credit card behind. That’s it.”

That is it—more or less.

But when I say it like that, it feels too simple. Too cut-and-dry. Too much like I met some random man in an equally random place and slept with him, and that was that. Because while all that is true, there’s a thread to it that isn’t.

Holt.

Not one single thing about that man is ordinary. He’s not the man you meet in a bar or the acquaintance you agree to hook up with because you’re desperate for a release after a workweek from hell. Those types of guys deliver mediocre, forgettable performances. I’m usually neck-deep in work briefs with a laser focus by ten o’clock the next morning, not having a discussion with my brother’s girlfriend about the events of the night before.

So while that might be it, it also might not be a complete summary of the events of the evening. I still might be figuring that out.

Sienna sucks in a breath. “You’re totally going to call him and go get it, right?”

My stomach rumbles, reminding me that I haven’t eaten. My heartbeat races at the thought of seeing Holt again. My insides twist as I try to

determine what the best course of action is to resolve this predicament.

“He’s the perfect vacation fling, you know,” Sienna says cautiously.

“He was a great one-night stand.” I get to my feet. “I need to go, Sienna, and deal with this card issue. Thank you for calling me and letting me know where it is.”

“I am going to teach you how to be a sister yet.”

I chuckle. “We’ll talk soon.”

“Hopefully with more detail.”

“Goodbye, Sienna,” I say, holding back a laugh.

“Bye, Blaire.”

I end the call but leave the phone in my hand. With my hair wet against my shoulders, I stare at the device and wonder what to do.

NINE

Holt

“And then Wade acted like *I* was crazy,” Boone says. “I told him to go double-check his facts and call me back and *maybe* I’d answer. Can you believe that?”

“Nope.”

I give myself a mental pat on the back for getting the timing right with my response. I have no clue what he’s talking about nor do I care.

Boone is the youngest of my brothers but only eighteen months after Coy. The two of them were buddies growing up while Ollie and I book-ended the other side. That left Wade in the middle. He’s now your proverbial middle child with two older CEOs on one side of him and two heathens on the other. Sometimes, I feel sorry for him ... especially when Boone is on his back.

The late morning sun streams through my office windows as my brother starts in again.

“Anyway,” Boone begins, “Mom called this morning and wants everyone over for brunch next week since Coy will be home. I’m supposed to spread the word.”

I tap the edge of Blaire’s credit card against my desk. Each tap makes it seem like my brain is being split farther in two.

Half of it is here, in my office, processing my conversation with Graham Landry and listening to Boone. The other half is perplexed with a dark-haired woman who I’m now considering might be fucking with me.

I don't really believe that. She's not the game-playing type. I'm positive about that. *Mostly*. But she's also not the leave-your-credit-card-behind kind of woman, yet here I sit, holding it. It makes a man wonder if this is a game or some fucked-up gift from above.

"You're coming, right?" Boone asks.

I sit back in my chair and pull my thoughts back to the present. "Of course."

"Okay. I'll let her know."

"Like Mom's not going to call us all and give us a run-down on her menu and ask if we have any requests."

"She asked for *my* help," he says with a hint of pride. "I'm just doing what I said I would."

I scoff. "Whatever. She's just trying to keep you busy so you keep your dick out of ... what's-her-name."

I can hear Boone's jaw drop. Or maybe it's just the way he gasps and hides a chuckle right after. Either way, his reaction makes me laugh.

"Mom does *not* know who my dick is in," Boone says.

"The hell she doesn't. Mom knows everything, and the sooner you realize that, the better."

"She can't possibly know I'm fucking Daphne Monroe."

The edge of Blaire's card presses into my thigh as I move it back and forth.

"Boone," I deadpan. "You don't think Daphne is running her mouth to everyone who will listen—especially to all the women at the country club? That girl is shooting for the Mason family trifecta or whatever it would be called with five people."

He laughs. "You mean four because Wade isn't gonna fuck her."

I laugh too because he's right. Wade's not going to get a piece of that because Wade doesn't get a piece of anybody. If Oliver and I are workaholics, Wade is whatever the next level of that is because no matter how busy Ollie and I get, we do our own versions of dating. Wade does not.

"I'm not fucking her, either," I say, wrinkling my nose at the thought of banging Daphne Monroe. "I guess trifecta works, after all."

I flip the card into the palm of my hand and rub my thumb across Blaire's name.

Maybe I should just stick it in the mail or have someone run it over to the Landry's.

The raised, gold letters spelling her name prickle against my skin. I can't help but remember how she felt against me last night. But as I think back, I realize the best part wasn't the curve of her waist or the way she fit so perfectly around my cock.

The absolute best part was watching her choose to cede control—to let me have my way. It was a deliberate, calculated decision, and there's something inherently sexier about it than when a woman just rolls over for me.

Fuck.

"What are you doing today, anyway?" Boone asks.

"Going over Wade's plans again. You?"

"Not sure. I'll tell you what I'm not going to do—go watch golf with Oliver and Gramps."

"I'm sure you'll find something to waste your time." I pull the phone away from my face and see an incoming call. "Hey, Boone. I gotta go. I have a call I gotta take."

"Sure, man. Later."

"Bye." I waste no time in clicking over to the other line. "Hello?"

"Hello, Holt."

My heartbeat quickens at the sound of Blaire's smooth, sweet voice.

I sink back into my seat. My shoulders soften against the leather as I take a moment and listen to her breathe.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to call," I say finally.

"To be perfectly honest, I wasn't going to."

A grin plays on my lips. I toss her credit card onto my desk, and it skids into my keyboard before it stops. "May I ask why not?"

"I just thought things would be better if we left things between us in the hotel room."

At the mention of things being left behind, my hand slides into my pants pocket. The lacy fabric slips between my fingers as I imagine her arching a brow in a quiet challenge.

Challenge accepted.

"Like your panties?" I tease.

She coughs in surprise before recovering quickly. "I was thinking more along the lines of not making our encounter awkward or complicated."

“We aren’t wild animals, Miss Gibson. We didn’t have an encounter.”

“You know what I mean.”

I lean forward, my forearms resting against the desktop. My cock twitches as memories of our encounter flash before my eyes.

I grin.

“Yes, I do know what you mean. What you mean is that we fucked.”

My breath halts in my chest as I await her reaction. The phrase hangs in the air between us. It’s a quick recap of our night together, but at the same time, it’s an impossible-to-ignore statement that quietly demands a response.

“We did indeed,” she says carefully.

“I don’t know about you,” I say, my gaze focused on the sky outside the window, “but the word *awkward* isn’t one I would use to describe last night.”

“I’m glad to hear that you have a broad vocabulary, Mr. Mason.”

A grin slips across my lips. “My mother always touted the benefits of a good lexicon.”

“A woman after my heart.”

She takes in a quick breath. The air pulls across the phone, and even though I’m not in the room with her, it feels like I am. I can envision her lips parting, her eyes narrowing with a slight twinkle.

“My mama is the best,” I say. “Hands-down. She raised five boys and most of us are pretty well-behaved.”

“Well, my mother was a gem. She raised me and three boys, and none of us are particularly well-behaved,” she says, ending with a laugh.

“Sounds like we’d get along just fine.”

“I can see you and Lance being friends, actually. He’s a history teacher and wicked smart, but he can drink you under the table. Machlan would poke at you and see if you’d fight—bonus points if you would,” she says. “Walker, though ... he’d side-eye you until he decided whether he liked you. And that decision would really have nothing to do with anything you say and just how you respond.”

“Sounds like a fun guy.”

“Walker is probably my favorite. I’d never tell the others that.”

My laughter is easy as I sit back in my chair again. The springs squeal as I tilt it backward. “Yeah, well, I don’t have a favorite because all my brothers are assholes.”

“Ha. Right. I don’t believe that.”

“You should because it’s true.” I shift in my seat and spot the credit card again. “So what are we going to do about your predicament?”

“What? Oh, the card.”

A smile parts my cheeks. “Yes, the card. Did you forget about that already?”

She balks. “No. Hardly. I have an order pending at a deli near here, and a stomach that’s threatening to swallow my intestines.”

“Sounds like a bigger problem than I realized.”

The sound of plastic being crinkled takes up the silence between us. Finally, she sighs.

“I was just calling to thank you for letting me know you have it,” she says. “I’m going to report it lost and have them overnight me a new one.”

My brow furrows. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s easier.”

I can’t stop the snort that comes out of my mouth. “That’s absolutely *not* easier, and you know it. The easier solution would be to meet me for lunch and get your card back.”

“Holt ...”

There’s a wariness in her voice. She knows I’m right because she’s an intelligent, rational woman. I know she wants to see me again because I’m a smart, logical man. But how do I convince her to follow through?

If one thing is clear from spending time with Blaire last night, it’s that she likes to call the shots. She needs to be in the driver’s seat. I’m going to have to give her a map, hand over the steering wheel, and hope she picks the right exit.

“I’m going to be very frank with you,” I tell her.

“I hope you will.”

“I enjoyed spending time with you last night—both at Picante and after. And I was a little disappointed to wake up and not see you beside me.”

She doesn’t say a word.

“But I get it. Can’t say it’s ever happened to me before, but I kind of dig it,” I admit. “Like you said, it keeps the morning after very uncomplicated.”

“Until I go and lose my credit card.”

I grin. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been telling myself all day that you lost it because I had charmed you and made you lose your mind.”

“You just keep telling yourself that,” she says, making no effort to suppress her amusement.

“Ouch. Wounded ego alert,” I say as I laugh too.

“I’m sorry. Honestly? You were charming. You *are* charming. And I enjoyed my night with you as well.”

She takes a breath, and I use the opportunity to jump in.

“Then why did you leave?” I ask. “I’m usually the one doing the leaving, and now I’m curious.”

“Because you have things to do today and so do I—”

“You’re on vacation,” I interject.

“Don’t remind me.”

Despite the huff in her tone, I can hear her smile—which is a weird thing to be able to hear, but I can. Maybe it’s the subtle, quick breath or the way she ended the phrase with a softened lilt, but I can hear it. That makes *me* smile.

“Last night was a one-night stand,” she says. “They aren’t my favorite encounters—”

“There’s that word again.”

“But I’m not complaining about getting fucked this time.”

Hearing those words come out of her pretty little mouth sends a shot of adrenaline through my body.

“Let’s thank God for that,” I mumble as I adjust myself under my desk.

“As I was saying, they aren’t my favorite *situations*,” she says, emphasizing the word, “but they do serve a purpose. Lingering around makes it less of a one-night stand and more like a date that went on too long, and now both parties are uncomfortable.”

Fair enough.

“I left,” she continues, “to maintain the integrity of our arrangement.”

“I didn’t know we had a particular arrangement.”

“It wasn’t a signed and sealed contract, by any means. But there was definitely an unspoken agreement between us. Don’t you think?”

Do I?

Generally, I’d say yes. That sleeping with a woman you just met constitutes something light and simple. All I’m positive about, though, is that I feel like I’m about to get into a contract dispute. And while I’m a great negotiator, I might be out of my depths with her. So I ignore her point and switch gears.

“How long are you in town? Through tomorrow, right?” I ask.

“How did you know that?”

“You told me in the airport.”

I think she smiles.

“By the time your new card arrives, you’ll be leaving,” I tell her. “There’s even a possibility of it not showing up until after you’re gone, and in that case, you’ll have two cards floating out there.”

“This is true,” she admits.

I have an opening. I just have to pick my way through it—and hand over the steering wheel—carefully.

Taking a deep breath, I choose my next words carefully.

“If you have a good two days—a day and a half at this point—left in Savannah, you’re going to need to eat,” I say, stroking her practical side. “Meet me for lunch. Get your card back. Enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

I tip my chair back farther and await her response. I have her considering my suggestion, which was a step I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to make.

But I have. And now I have to stay quiet before I ruin the progress.

After what feels like an eternity, she sighs.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“I’m thinking that I’m not used to men talking logic.”

I laugh. “I hate to break the news to you, but I’m also well-versed in reasoning.”

“Did your mother teach you that too?”

“I think that was actually my father.”

She laughs, her voice blending with mine. “Fine. You’re right. As much as I want to, I cannot come up with a strong argument as to why meeting you and retrieving my card isn’t the easiest answer.”

My seat squeals as I sit upright and put all four wheels on the floor. “What hotel are you staying at?”

“Have you ever been to the restaurant called Hillary’s House?”

“That wasn’t the question, but yes. All the time.”

“Is it good?”

I get to my feet. “Does this mean you’re letting me buy you lunch?”

“This means I might let you sit with me while I eat. And if you happen to order your own sandwich, I can’t stop you.”

I shake my head as I swipe my keys and Blaire's credit card and put them in my pocket. "I'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

"See you then."

TEN

Blaire

“WELCOME TO HILLARY’S HOUSE.” A woman smiles brightly as she closes the cash register drawer. “Grab a seat and I’ll be with you shortly.”

I grab the strap of my purse on my shoulder and take in the little restaurant pegged as a hidden gem in the touristy pamphlets in my hotel room. It’s bright and filled with sunshine. Instrumental music plays so softly that if there were more than a handful of people inside, I doubt you could hear it at all.

The décor is much fancier than I imagined with dark woods and chairs upholstered with printed cloth instead of the pleather I envisioned when the description included the word diner.

I spot an empty table in the back corner. But before I can take a step in that direction, a low, gravelly voice rakes across my skin.

“Good afternoon, Miss Gibson.”

I hear his voice behind me before I hear the door chime or feel the warm breeze of outside air, which is unfortunate. A few seconds’ warning that I’m about to come face-to-face with Holt Mason would’ve been appreciated.

Instead, I pivot instinctively as if the cells of my body are magnetized to his in some invisible way. My gaze finds his as a slow smirk spreads across his lips.

“Hello,” I say.

He's wearing a pair of dark denim jeans and a crisp white button-up with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. A pair of sunglasses are tucked into the top of his shirt.

His dark hair looks fresh from a shower, and despite the fact that I know he didn't get a lot of sleep last night, he appears rested and energized. It's a look that's both magazine-worthy and effortlessly sexy. It's also slightly irritating.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Did you bring my card?"

He pulls his eyes away from mine and scans the room. "Of course. But lunch first."

I open my mouth to object. In the two seconds it takes to do that, he's already walking across the room to the little table in the corner that I had my eye on.

The purse strap bites into my shoulder as I follow him across the room. My brain sounds an alarm that I need to ensure he knows he's not calling the shots. I have to manually override it and remind myself this isn't a courtroom, and I'm not having lunch with a man who I'll be going head-to-head with at any point in the future. My inner monologue is still working that out when I reach the table and chair that Holt has pulled out for me.

He lifts a brow.

I sit.

He looks pleased, and I sigh at myself for giving in so easily.

"That went easier than I expected," he says as he sits across from me.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know, exactly. You're confounding."

It's my turn to lift a brow as I set my purse on the seat next to me. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I don't know yet," he says before narrowing his eyes.

"Let me know when you figure it out."

The waitress slides up to the table. Her smile is bright until it lands on Holt. It wobbles as she takes in the whole of him—as if he physically knocked her sideways with nothing but a glance—before she mostly recovers.

"I'm Lola," she says, placing two menus on the table. "What can I get you to drink?"

Holt looks at me expectantly.

"Water with lemon, please," I say.

“Make that two. We’ll need a few minutes to decide on our meal,” Holt tells Lola.

She nods. “Sounds great. I’ll be right back.” Her gaze lingers on my dining partner for a moment too long before she scurries into the kitchen.

I look at Holt to catch his reaction. He simply places a menu in front of me before taking one for himself and not bothering to react to Lola’s subtle flirtation.

“That happens to you a lot, doesn’t it?” I say, looking over the menu items.

“What?”

“Waitresses barely able to keep themselves vertical when you walk in.”

His chuckle is warm and full. “She was polite.”

“That she was,” I say, deciding on the grilled chicken sandwich. I set my menu down and look up to see Holt watching me with an amused grin on his face. “What?”

“I’ve decided that your confounding qualities are a good thing.”

“Good to know.”

“Yes. Good to know,” he says as Lola appears again.

She places our drinks in front of us and takes our order. She lingers closer to Holt than is necessary. Her laughter at his not-really-even-a-joke is a little much. Still, he never looks her way. Only at me.

My skin heats under his stare. I can’t help but remember the way it felt to have him watching me as I came undone around him.

I shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asks, fighting a smile.

As if the thoughts running through my mind didn’t make me blush enough, his ridiculous smile amps up the heat in my cheeks another few levels. It’s like he knows what I’m thinking.

“Me? I’m fine,” I say as I move my drink to my right. “What are you up to today?”

He shrugs. “What about you?”

“I’m going to head back to the hotel and pull out my briefcase and get lost in paperwork. I go home late tomorrow, and it will feel really good to be all caught up.”

“You didn’t see any of Savannah at all, did you?”

“Nope. Not a thing. Besides Picante,” I add with a grin.

He grins too. “You know I’m a big fan of work myself, but you should really get out and see some of the city. There’s so much to do here.”

I sit back in my seat and study him. What does someone like him do on the weekends? I can imagine him shirtless on a boat, drinking beer from a bottle. It’s not hard to envision him walking down a cozy street at dusk after seeing a live band and having dinner al fresco. But I can also see him sitting on a balcony overlooking a grassy field with a computer on his lap.

“What is your favorite thing to do on the weekends?” I ask, hoping he doesn’t say that he likes to pick up random women and take them to random hotel rooms.

That would suck.

“I don’t do a lot, but I’m from here,” he says. “so it’s different.”

“Sure, it is,” I tease.

“It is. I’ve done it all.”

“Well, what would you suggest someone do if they were only going to do one thing?”

He taps a finger against his bottom lip. “There are the trolley tours downtown that are fun but kind of touristy. You could kayak or take a riverboat cruise, which would be perfect if you like outdoorsy kinds of things. And you have to see the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Forsyth Park. Bonaventure Cemetery.”

“A cemetery?” I laugh. “Not that I had kayaking in mind, but definitely not a cemetery.”

“And maybe that’s why you need to go.”

I lift a brow. “So I can tell people I saw a cemetery in Savannah?”

“So you can broaden your horizons.”

“Listen, Mr. Tour Guide—I’ve done more things on this vacation that are out of the ordinary for me than I’ve ever done. I think we can skip the cemetery.”

We exchange an easy grin as Lola walks by. She doesn’t stop to check on us, and I wonder if it’s because neither of us looks her way.

“You know what I would do if I was going to be here a while longer?” I ask.

“Not the cemetery.”

“No. Not the cemetery.” I lean forward and pull my glass in front of me. “I’d go see the Kelvin McCoy concert.”

His forehead mars as if he misheard me.

“What?” I ask. “You don’t like his music?”

“I ... No. I like it just fine.”

“Then why are you looking at me like I just grew three heads?”

He sits back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “Are you a fan of his?”

Something about the way he looks at me bothers me. It’s as if I’m wrong to like the country singer that Sienna turned me on to.

“Yes, I guess,” I say. “I don’t know his entire catalogue or anything, but I put a couple of his songs on my cleaning playlist.”

“You have a playlist for cleaning?”

“You don’t?”

“No, I don’t,” he deadpans.

“You don’t what? Listen to Kelvin McCoy or clean?” I narrow my eyes. “You don’t clean, do you? Your house is probably filthy. That’s why you took me to a hotel.”

His jaw falls open in faux-surprise, and it makes me laugh.

“First of all, my house is immaculate, thank you very much,” he says, a chuckle in his tone. “That might be because I pay a very nice woman to come do it, but it’s clean nonetheless.”

“I bet she listens to Kelvin McCoy,” I tease.

He scoots to the edge of his chair, his eyes sparkling. He rests his forearms on the table. I can’t help but notice the way the veins rope around his tanned skin and beneath the heavy watch sitting around one of his wrists.

I say a silent prayer in gratitude that he isn’t an attorney that I have to go up against because staying focused—even for me—would be extremely hard.

He makes a fist and twists his forearm. The muscles flex as he moves it side to side. He clears his throat. I look up.

“Your watch is nice,” I say, picking up my napkin and dabbing the corner of my mouth. It’s a total attempt at distraction ... that does not work.

He grins. “It is, isn’t it?”

I nod, setting the napkin back on my lap.

“I bet Kelvin McCoy doesn’t have one like this,” he says.

“Probably not. His music makes me think he’d have something more ... leathery.”

Holt's laughter is loud. "Leather? That's too badass for him."

"So you aren't a fan. I see the truth now."

"Eh, he's okay. Kind of a pussy but he's all right." He stretches his legs out in front of him. "Maybe Kelvin will come to Chicago, and you can check out his watch. See what you think in person."

I frown. "I'll never get to see him live."

"Why not?"

"I spend all my days and most of my nights in the office." I sigh. "It's impossible to find time to do anything else. And it's been so long since I did that it feels ... overwhelming. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Ticketmaster?" he offers.

I laugh. "That's not what I mean. I mean finding people to hang out with. You don't go to concerts and things alone."

"You don't have one friend to do things with?"

"I have an assistant ..."

Holt laughs as Lola sets our plates in front of us. I thank her, and thankfully, she gets the hint and goes away.

"An assistant is someone you pay," he says, dragging his plate in front of him.

"Maybe I pay her to be my friend."

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "You have no social life? None at all?"

Suddenly, the idea of being a hermit feels abnormal. I bite the bottom of my lip as he studies me like a science experiment.

"I don't have time," I say, fiddling with my napkin and ignoring his gaze. "It's by design."

"Seems to me that you need to rethink your design."

"Why? So I can split my time between work and play and constantly be stressed out? Because right now, there's no split, and it really works for me." I lift my fork and finally look up at him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

His head is tilted to the side. "How do you refill your tank?"

"Coffee."

He laughs.

I start to spear a french fry when my phone rings in my purse. I set the fork down and dig inside my purse. My assistant's name is on the screen along with her personal cell number.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I need to get this."

“Of course.”

I tap the green button. “Hello?”

“Hi, Blaire. It’s Yancy.”

My assistant’s voice is stressed—more so than it was when I left the office last week. It feels like someone threw a rock into my stomach.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, ignoring Holt’s concerned glance.

“The Grimrose Building is closed,” she says. “The contractor redoing the bottom floor found asbestos, and the city came in and shut us down. Everyone had to vacate the premises.”

“Oh, shit.” I switch the phone between my hands. “What does this mean?”

“No one is allowed in until it gets remedied. We had a few minutes to grab any files we needed and were ushered out by the health department.”

I rub my forehead with my hand. “What about my apartment?”

She sighs. “I think you’re locked out, Blaire. Do you have any pets? That’s one thing they’re letting people go back in for.”

“No. No, I don’t have any pets,” I say, my mind racing. “Do they know how long this is going to take?”

“I’ve heard it’s confined to the first floor so far. It’s mass chaos down here right now. No one knows anything for sure, but the office will be closed until at least the start of next week, and I’m not sure when you can get back into your apartment.” She takes a breath. “I’m sorry.”

Me too.

“Yeah. Thanks. I ... Did you get the Lawson files? I have a hearing on that next week. *Shit,*” I say, fidgeting in my seat.

“I didn’t. I literally had five minutes to get things, and I forgot about Lawson. I’ll file an extension with the court now.”

I groan. “Thank you, Yancy.”

“Is there anything else you need me to do immediately that you can think of?”

“No. I just ... Let me get back to my files in a little while and get back to you. I’m supposed to fly home tomorrow, so I might need you to help me find a place to stay until they sort this out.”

“For sure, Blaire. Anything you need.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Absolutely.”

I end the call.

My body ripples with energy. I want to head to the airport immediately and get back to Chicago. But it won't help. It'll probably just make it worse.

"Is everything okay?" Holt asks.

I blow out a breath. "I work and live in the same building. Apparently, asbestos was found and the building's been emptied until it's fixed."

"That's fun."

"Right?" I rub my temples again. "There's nothing I can do. I just need to make a list and look at my calendar and see if I need to push anything back."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

His tone is kind and sincere. I drop my hand and appreciate him sitting across from me.

"I'll be fine," I tell him. "I do probably need to go and see which one of my brothers I'm going to stay with."

"If I was ever homeless, I wouldn't be living with my brothers. That's for sure."

I laugh. "Yeah. It's not the best-sounding solution, but it beats staying in a hotel for God knows how long."

Holt shifts in his seat. He starts to talk but stops. Then slowly, his lips part again. "I have an idea."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Stay here."

I laugh again. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, first of all, even if I wanted to, all the hotels are booked for the weekend. Something about a seafood festival."

He nods. "Yeah. I forgot about that."

"Second of all, I need to work. I need quiet. The people across the hallway this morning had a crying baby while I took a shower. That was irritating enough. I can't imagine how that would go over when I'm actually picking apart witness statements, and someone's freedom is on the line."

His chest rises and falls. With each second that passes, the rhythm grows quicker.

He leans forward again, his eyes searching mine.

Our food is untouched between us. Our drinks have barely a sip removed.

My brain slows down as time seems to stall around our table, and Holt begins to speak.

“Stay with me,” he says.

It’s a simple sentence—three whole words. But it feels like he’s just spoken a complex mathematical equation in Mandarin because he can’t possibly be asking me to stay with him.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“Stay with me,” he says again—this time with more force.

“And you called me confounding.”

He shifts in his seat again. “I’m just going to lay out a few facts as I see them, and then you can make whatever decision works for you.”

I don’t respond. I’m not sure what to say.

“You can’t go home,” he starts carefully. “Staying in a hotel isn’t optimal. Neither is staying with your brothers. But I have a big house, and it’s really quiet. You could work all day unbothered, and I’ll take you out to see Savannah at night.”

“Holt ...” I say, an uneasiness creeping in my gut. It’s not from his offer but because his offer is tempting. *He’s* tempting. I don’t want to be tempted.

I want to go back to my apartment that’s twenty floors above my office and work under shitty halogen lights and do all the things that are what I do. That are predictable. That are safe.

Holt Mason is none of those things.

Yet for some reason, I’m drawn to it. *To him*. And that scares me.

He sits back in a false display of relaxation. “What could it hurt?”

“What could it hurt? I don’t know. The entire idea is crazy.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” I say, exasperated. “I met you yesterday, and you’re offering to let me stay at your house. You don’t even know me.”

The corner of his lip twitches. “I’d say I know you pretty well—inside and out.”

I look at my water glass to avoid his eyes.

“I’m just saying it could be fun,” he says. “And I think you need a little fun.”

“I need something, but I don’t think fun is it.”

He sighs. “What do you need then?”

“I’m not sure.”

He fiddles with the edge of the napkin. I want to knock it out of his hand and make him stop, but I don't want to touch him. Something tells me that if I touch him, things will get cloudier.

"Your problem is that you can't put this in a box," he says.

My gaze flips to his. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you like to have everything labeled. It's work. It's acceptable. It's unacceptable. It's a one-night stand. You can't figure out how to label what it would be for you to stay with me for a few days."

"Yes, I can," I say. "I would label it as crazy."

He bites his bottom lip. "Crazier than sleeping with me last night?"

I look around the room. No one is within earshot, and that relieves me a little. But when I turn my attention back on Holt, I don't think he cares either way.

"You need a label? Fine. Label it *a multi-night stand*," he says, fighting a grin.

A warmth spreads through my middle as his eyes hood. I used to know how to fight this feeling. I don't seem to anymore.

"So you really just want me to sleep with you again?" I ask.

"Yes. But also no." He leans forward in one swift movement. "I'm not going to lie and say that it didn't cross my mind. Imagining you spread out on my bed has me hard as hell right now. But I also think that it might be fun showing you around for a couple of days—even if you don't want to sleep with me."

I blow out a long, tense breath.

My body screams at me to take him up on the offer while my brain begs me to think it through. My heart checks out of the conversation because it knows better, thank God.

I'm just left with a brain full of logic and a body needing a replay of last night. It's a dangerous position to be in.

"I'll think about it," I say.

"Fair enough."

As I watch him slice his fish, I wonder if there's anything at all fair about Holt Mason.

ELEVEN

Blaire

“THAT FEELS GOOD.”

I tidy the papers in front of me into a nice, neat stack and then close the folder. The Lawson case is a mess of epic proportions. I’m lucky I brought some of it with me. Fortunately for me, it was the perfect thing to throw myself into after the whole asbestos bomb was dropped in my lap. But if the asbestos call was a bomb, that makes Holt’s offer to stay with him a nuclear missile.

We let the idea slide during the rest of lunch. Holt didn’t mention his offer again until he paid for my meal and then returned my credit card. I’m not sure if I would’ve brought it up if he hadn’t. Probably not. I’m also unsure if I should take him up on it. Again—probably not.

I get up from the table and stretch my arms overhead. The clock next to the bed shows that I sat down at the desk five hours ago. As I look at the folder stuffed full of notes, I’m relieved at what I was able to accomplish despite the crying baby across the hall again. But, at the same time, I’m not sure how I’m going to find the space to sort through the rest of the evidence and witness statements.

The muscle across the back of my neck tenses as Yancy’s text from a couple of hours ago filters back through my mind.

They’re now saying they expect us to be displaced for five to seven days. Not as bad as originally thought.

“Great,” I mutter to myself.

I walk to the window and peer outside. Groups of people sit on the sand and watch the waves while others kick a ball back and forth. The sky is a brilliant, muted blue. The water shimmers from the sun’s early evening rays.

For the first time in a long time, a heaviness slides into my chest.

Instead of fighting it, I let it sit inside me and burn in its dull yet still piercing way. It’s a pain I know well. It’s an ache I avoid.

I take a deep, shaky breath and close my eyes. The words of the therapist I saw for a few months whisper softly through my brain.

“You have to feel your feelings to heal, Blaire,” she said. “Feel to heal.”

My breathing evens out as I open my eyes again. The weight still sits in the center of my chest—a lump that feels as though it’s tripled in size in seconds. With each bit of growth, it brings back memories, and feelings, that I don’t want to deal with.

The sound of my mother’s laughter. How we would spend all year planning for the long weekends we’d spend in the summer at Lake Michigan and how she’d get so excited about menu planning.

The way my father smelled like engine grease mixed with the Old Spice he’d use to disguise the smell of the cigarettes that he’d hide from my mother. The long talks we’d have while he was under a truck and I was sitting on an overturned bucket. We planned my entire life in the garage.

And then one fucked-up Fourth of July afternoon, everything I’d ever known was gone. It was ripped right out from beneath me with one hysterical call from Lance. Things have never been the same. Things will never be the same either.

I clear my throat as best as I can with a rock resting inside it.

“I have to get my shit together,” I say, turning away from the window.

My brain relies on muscle memory and switches away from all things emotional to all things practical.

“Where the heck am I going to go?”

I perch on the edge of the sofa and consider my options. Going home is out of the equation. Staying in this room is also impossible. I could visit my brothers, but that would equate to me getting zero work done because they equate me coming home to acting like children again. I could stay with Nana or I could get a hotel room in Chicago.

Or I could stay with Holt.

Would it be so awful to stay with him?

I bite my bottom lip and eye the folder on the desk.

He does work a lot, so I'd probably be able to get a lot done. And God knows I need to get a lot done. And would it be that bad to see a little of the city while I'm here?

I grin. *It wouldn't be terrible if I got a little time in his sheets either.*

"What did he call it?" I ask aloud. "A multi-night stand? That's not a bad idea. It's really no different than dating a guy for a few weeks just to get some action even though you know it's not going to go anywhere."

I mull that over. The longer it marinates in my head, the more it makes sense.

And the more I like it.

I grab my phone and call Sienna. She answers on the second ring.

"You've called me more since you've been out of town than you've called me since I've known you," she says with a laugh.

"I've called you twice."

"Exactly."

It's my turn to laugh. "How are things back there?"

"Good," she says sweetly. "Walker and Peck were out late last night working on a tractor in a field somewhere. They're just dolls this morning, if you get what I'm saying."

"Oh, I know how they can be."

"Right. And then they went by Nana's this morning for breakfast, and guess what they found?"

"I have no idea."

"A man," she squeals. "And apparently he'd stayed there all night last night. Your cousin kind of lost his mind a little bit, and Walker just got ... well, grumpier. They said seeing him at Sunday dinner was one thing, but this was another. I'm totally loving it, though!"

"Wow," I say, trying to wrap my mind around that tidbit of information. "Good for her. I'm not sure I'm ready for my grandmother to have sleepovers, but I'm sure I'm dealing with that better than my brothers and Peck."

"I'm so happy for her. She's been glowing lately. She deserves to be happy."

"Absolutely."

I chew on the edge of my fingernail as I rule out the possibility of staying at Nana's. Listening to Sienna and Walker going at it is one thing. Potentially hearing Nana and a guy getting down is a whole other world I'm not ready to process.

That leaves two options—Holt's or a hotel in Chicago.

"Hey, Sienna. I wanted to ask you a question."

"Sure. Shoot."

"How well do you actually know Holt Mason?"

Her giggle is ridiculous. I can't help but roll my eyes.

"I know him pretty well. We grew up around their family. I know his youngest brother, Boone, the best. He's closer to my age. But all the Masons are really familiar to me." She smacks her lips together. "May I ask why you're inquiring about this specific tall, dark, and handsome man?"

I roll my eyes again—this time, at myself. The excitement in her voice has worked its way through the phone and into my veins. I fidget as I try to put together a proper response.

"We had lunch today," I say. "I'm just curious."

"Oooh."

"Sienna."

She sighs. "Let me love this, Blaire. Please? I'm supposed to love this."

"There's nothing to love."

"But there is. You don't know how this works, obviously." She sighs again for effect. "See—when you call a girlfriend and bring up a hot guy, that means you're interested or there's a story there. It's your way of bringing the item to the table. So, my job, as your girlfriend, is to be excited for you. Or to be ready to throttle him, but I don't think that's the direction this conversation is going to go. Is it?"

The end of her question is loaded with innuendo. It's clear she's giddy over the idea of something happening between her childhood crush and me. And by the smile spreading across my cheeks, it would be clear to her—if she could see me—that I am a little bit happy too.

"He is hot, isn't he?" I ask.

She laughs. "Yes. *He so is*. Now tell me all the things."

I pace in a circle and attempt to slow down my thoughts. "My building in Chicago has asbestos, and I can't get back in for a week or so."

"And ..."

"And I could stay with you and Walker."

“Of course.”

“I was thinking about staying with Nana, but if she’s” I wince. “I’m not staying with Nana.”

She pauses, letting the silence work between us before speaking. “No, you’re not. You’re staying with Holt.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Well ...”

“Blaire!” she shrieks. “You are? I mean, I was just throwing shit at the wall and hoping something stuck. You’re going to stay with him?”

“I don’t know,” I say, rushed. “I’m not sure. He offered to let me stay with him, and I’m thinking about it. I just don’t know a lot about him and wanted to at least ... explore the possibility, I guess.”

She giggles. “Say yes.”

“You’re not thinking clearly, Sienna.”

“Oh, but Blaire—I am,” she says with exaggerated sincerity. “He’s from a great family. Smart. Kind. He’s funny and always smells amazing, and I know he’d show you a good time—in any way you might want to take that.”

She drones on and on about Holt’s virtues, but I stop listening. Mostly because my mind starts imagining what it might be like to actually be in his home.

I pretend to say yes and allow that decision to sit in my stomach. I close my eyes as Sienna veers away from Holt and onto the virtues of getaways and try to see what it feels like to take him up on his offer.

And strangely, it feels good. Fun. *Exciting*. Those are three things that are a bit foreign to me but tap pleasantly through my veins.

“Are you listening to me?” Sienna asks.

“Yes. I should agree to his proposal. I hear you.”

“Yes, you should. So ... are you?”

Am I?

While the idea has nested itself in my psyche, I’m still not positive. Rushed judgments tend to lend themselves to trouble, and I know better. I need to think clearly.

“Maybe. I’m going to think about it for a while first. Good decisions come after a lot of thought.”

“Well, good experiences come from impulsive decisions, so don’t think about it too much.”

“You’re crazy,” I say with a chuckle. “I gotta go, Sienna. Talk to you soon.”

“Don’t overthink this!”

“Goodbye, Sienna.”

“Ugh. Fine. Bye.”

I end the call.

TWELVE

Holt

“I CAN MOVE this building here and change the interior concept,” Wade says, moving his finger across the paper on my desk, “but it will be an engineering nightmare.”

My chair squeaks as I rock backward and take in Wade’s point.

“Oliver said Landry won’t agree to sell until we demonstrate our intent with the property,” he continues. “Ollie tried to gloss over it as best as he could, but Landry wanted visuals.”

I tear my eyes away from the design and look at my brother. “With this version, we still have hotel space, two restaurants—”

“Three.”

“Okay. And some office space too, correct?”

“Correct.” Wade takes off his glasses and sighs. “Boone has been working his ass off, believe it or not—”

“Or not,” I mutter.

Wade grins. “I’m confident we have solid interest in all the spaces except for the retail section on the east end. If you can get Landry to sell the land to us, we can start securing merchants and investors. It will make us a motherfucking fortune.”

And if we don’t get him to sell to us, it might cost us everything.

I sigh. “I know.”

I push my chair the rest of the way back and get to my feet. My right hand clasps against the back of my neck where the muscles are rigid. As I work my neck back and forth, my thoughts veer from Wade's monologue on architectural symmetry to Blaire.

Blocking out a woman—especially when a project of this magnitude is on the table—has never been an issue. I've always gotten way more out of a multi-million-dollar deal than a relationship. That's probably why I've never been in a lasting relationship to start with: it can never hold a candle to what I do all day.

So why in the hell am I tuning out Wade and tuning into Blaire?

I know better than this. *Fuck.*

"Where the hell did you just go?" Wade's voice snaps me out of my delirium. "You didn't hear a word of that, did you?"

I rub a hand down my face. "Wade, I think I'm losing my mind."

"Please. No. Don't leave me with Oliver and Boone all on my own."

I can't help but chuckle.

Wade takes in the scene before him—my less-than-stellar attention span, mussed-up hair, and wrinkled forehead—and sighs. He sits on the sofa near the door and looks at me unamused.

I lean against the wall and stare back at him. It's like looking in a mirror. Our hair is the same color. Both of our eyes a green-gold mix. We're built the same too. If he didn't handle his stress better than I do, we could be twins. Unfortunately, I have way more lines on my face than him.

"Can we get this over with?" he asks.

"What?"

"Why are you losing your mind?" he asks as if I'm a baby.

I glare back at him. "You wanna know what I did today?"

"No. But here we are, so tell me so we can get on with it."

"I asked a woman to stay with me," I say, my jaw set in place. "In my house. Willingly. This week of all weeks."

This gets a reaction. He leans up, pressing his hands against his knees, and makes a surprised face.

"I know," I mutter.

"I have to admit that you've stunned me a little bit."

"Hell, I've stunned myself."

He mulls this over. "Do you like her? I mean, you must if you're subverting your whole 'my house is my sanctum' rule."

Do I? Do I like her?

What a stupid question to be asking yourself now, Holt.

I turn toward the glass that overlooks downtown Savannah and consider his question. Of course, I like her. She's intelligent and witty and fucking gorgeous. *But do I like her enough to stay with me?*

My house is off-limits and has been for years. Ever since Kendra Thompson and I ended things—something I apparently thought was a lot less serious than she did—and she destroyed the walls and carpeting while I was at work and then refused to leave. It took weeks to fix the damage and left me without a place to relax after closing one of the biggest deals of my life. That was four years ago. I've held tight for four freaking years.

So why am I breaking that rule now?

I'm cracking under stress.

"This is none of my business," Wade says, running his hands down his thighs. "But you brought it up, so here's what I think—you're lonely in that big old house, and you're stressed out from this whole Landry thing. You're probably not thinking clearly, and she's pressured you into—"

"No." I shake my head. "She didn't. Not in the slightest."

"Wow. Okay. Who is she?"

I force a swallow. "Blaire Gibson. I met her at the airport and then again at the Landrys."

He nods, having heard this story from Oliver, I'm sure.

"Am I?" I ask. "Am I losing my mind? Or does this make as much sense as I think it does? But then again, I say it out loud, and it sounds ridiculous. Like Boone-level ridiculous."

Wade cocks a brow, unfazed by my confusion. "You know what I think about women. Ergo, I think you're losing your mind."

I roll my eyes. "I realize you'd rather eat lead than spend time with a woman, but all of us aren't as self-reliant."

"And y'all aren't as smart, either." He sighs and stands. "Women are a giant pain in the ass. They demand your time and money and attention, and they wreck your truck." A fire flashes through Wade's eyes as the unfortunate night one of Boone's girlfriends wrecked his truck undoubtedly comes to his mind. "None of you are ever happy when you're dating someone, so why do it?"

"Coy looks happy."

He snorts. “Coy is happy he’s getting paid to be America’s Sweetheart’s pretend boyfriend. Coy loves money more than he loves women.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I say before getting irritated at the twist in conversation. “But this isn’t about Coy. This is about me. Should I call Blaire and guide her away from staying with me?”

“Fuck if I know.” He walks across the room and stops in front of my desk. “This isn’t a conversation for me.”

“Then who am I supposed to ask? Boone?”

Wade shrugs and rolls his designs up into a log. “I don’t know. This isn’t in my wheelhouse. Call Mom. Call Larissa,” he says, referring to our cousin. “Call Blaire and tell her you want her to have your babies for all I care. But I have work to do while you’re off wasting time with this bullshit.”

He plops the log onto his shoulder and heads for the door.

“You know what?” I call after him. “You aren’t my favorite brother anymore.”

“Good. You were never mine.”

“Liar.”

He pauses in the doorway and turns to face me. “You’re only my favorite because the others are idiots, and this side of the company would fall on its face without you. You’re the backbone around here—no pressure.” He gives me a fake smile that slowly morphs into a real one. “But as far as the girl goes—I can tell you like her, so go through with it. Let her stay with you. She doesn’t live here anyway, right? What could it hurt? She’ll have to go home eventually.”

I shrug.

“I’ll call you tomorrow about the changes to these,” he says, tapping his free hand against the drawings.

“See ya.”

He disappears around the corner without saying another word.

I drop into my chair again and let out a deep breath. I don’t exactly know how I got into this predicament, but I do think Wade is right.

What could it hurt?

Not much. She’ll be chomping at the bit to go home and get back to work as soon as she can. That much I’ll guarantee. The odds of her going Kendra and becoming a huge problem are really moot when I think about it.

And hanging out with her in the evenings for a few days might be a good way to recharge while we're battling Landry.

Besides, it's a nice thing for me to do. It'll get me good karma.

"She might not even take me up on it," I say, scooting up to my desk. "I'm probably wildly overthinking this."

I grin when I see that Wade left me a copy of his design. I peer over the papers and make a few notes along the side. I'm just about to grab a glass of water when my phone rings.

"Hello?" I ask, sinking back into my chair in anticipation of Blaire's voice.

"Hi, Holt."

"Hi, Blaire."

My internal rhythms change immediately, evening out into a steady pace. The wariness from my conversation with Wade and the uncertainty I felt as I studied the plans are gone. In their place is an excitement that I can't—and don't want to—deny.

"Are you having a good day?" she asks.

"Wade just left my office so ... not really." I laugh. "I'm in the office. What about you?"

"Am I interrupting? Because I can call back or—"

"No," I say, sitting up. "It's just me now. I need a break anyway."

She blows out a light breath.

"What about you?" I ask again. "Are you having a good day?"

"Yes, actually. Well, I was until the baby across the hall started crying again. I'm starting to think it has colic."

I furrow my brow. "What's colic?"

"It's when babies cry for no apparent reason. My youngest brother, Machlan, had it when he was a baby. He would cry every afternoon from four o'clock to seven thirty on the dot. It was the strangest thing."

"Huh. Well, I don't know much about babies other than I'm not sure I'm built for diapers."

She laughs. "Me either. My nana keeps pushing me to have kids before she dies, which is a completely morbid thought in my opinion. I'm hoping my brothers hurry up and have kids so the pressure gets taken off me."

"But you're the only girl, right?"

"Yes."

“That might make a difference,” I counter. “She might want to see her maternal line move another generation.”

“Well, she should’ve had more children and upped her odds.”

“That’s what I tell my mother. She’s always telling us that we need to have daughters since she had five boys. I tell her it’s not my fault.” I laugh. “Then we tell her that Boone will definitely have daughters with all the estrogen in his blood so it’s not a worry.”

Blaire laughs. “So Boone is the one you tease?”

“Nah, we all get teased for different things. Boone’s the baby, so he gets punked a little more just because of birth order ... and the fact that he really embraces the baby-of-the-family role.”

“Machlan is the baby in our family, and he *does* the punking. Except to Walker. I don’t think they’ve ever actually fought, but I’m not sure who would win.”

I fiddle with the top button of my shirt. It takes a few tries before I get it undone.

Rising to my feet, I walk over to the windows. The sun is still warm even though it’s flirting with the horizon. The day whizzed by. This time last night, Blaire and I were on our way to Picante. That seems unreal. It also seems unreal that I might not see her again if she leaves tomorrow.

“Did you give any thought to my offer?” I ask.

She hesitates. “Yes, actually. I did.”

“And ...?”

“I was thinking that it might not be a terrible idea to stay in Savannah for a few more days and see the city.”

My reflection in the glass shows just how big my smile grows.

“I think that’s great,” I say.

“Do you? Because I can always get a hotel room in Chicago. I don’t want to be a charity case. I’ve considered that maybe—”

“Blaire?”

“Yes?”

“You’re rambling,” I tease.

She laughs. “I’m sorry. I just ... I don’t know what to say right now, to be honest. I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

I lean against the window. The tension in the back of my neck is gone, as is the ache in my jaw that developed when Wade walked in the door

earlier. I feel like I could go for a run or turn on the television—both things I never feel energized enough for or peaceful enough to do, depending.

“How about you just say that you need my address?” I offer.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

She sighs. “Okay. Holt, I need your address so that I can come tomorrow after check-out. So probably around noon-ish.”

I shove off the glass. “Why don’t you just come now?”

“Because I just told you I’d come by tomorrow.”

I hear the edge in her voice—the one that serves as a warning not to push her. The strength and fearlessness in her tone makes me fucking hard. It also makes me want to push.

“Fair enough,” I throw back. “Stay in the room with the crying baby instead of coming to my house where I’ll be working in pure silence while ordering takeout. That makes total sense.”

I hold my breath as she analyzes my point. It’s a good one. I’m sure of it. The only way she won’t take me up on it is if she’s proving some other point to herself. Or if she pushes back just because I pushed first.

Which could happen.

“How about this?” I ask, rethinking my tactics. “I’ll text you my address. You are welcome to come at any time. If you get driven crazy by the colic kid tonight, come on by. Or wait until tomorrow. That’s cool too. Totally up to you.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says matter-of-factly.

I want to ask her another question just to keep her on the line, but Wade’s drawings taunt me from across the room, and I feel like maybe I can concentrate on them now.

“I’ll text you in just a minute,” I say.

“Thank you, Holt.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

“Goodbye.”

There’s a hesitation in her tone that makes me think she didn’t expect to get off the phone either. But for both of our goods, I press the red button anyway.

THIRTEEN

Blaire

“VACATIONS ARE SO GOOD FOR YOU,” I say in my best Sienna impression as I pilot my car down Cobblestone Way. *“I just read a study that says you work harder and smarter when you’ve had a chance to relax. And Holt is so cute.”*

I blow out a breath and try to relax back into the driver’s seat.

“This is all that screaming baby’s fault. Not mine,” I tell myself. “I could’ve held on until morning. I know I could’ve.”

The street is lined with giant oak trees. Their curved, drooping branches hang with picturesque Spanish moss flowing nearly to the ground. Houses are tucked back from the road, encompassed by large lots and obscured by the vegetation. With the final rays of daylight streaming through the foliage, it’s almost as though I’m driving through a movie set.

In this particular movie, however, the heroine isn’t a fashion designer coming home to get divorced or a bride-to-be heading to the beauty shop with her mother. This time, the leading lady is a displaced attorney heading to the house of a man she met a whole two days ago—and slept with once—as though it’s a good idea.

Because that’s what people do who graduated J.D. summa cum laude in law school. I’m really putting all my intelligence to good work these days.

As though the universe can sense my wobble, the numbers 1942 appear out of thin air. The numbers are black and pop against the brick mailbox

that sits next to a wide driveway. A lamp sits on either side.

I turn toward the house.

My headlights flicker on as I slip beneath a row of moss-heavy trees. I travel around a little bend before I see the house itself.

“Holy shit,” I whisper.

Sitting in front of me is not just a house but an estate. Tall, white columns stand on the porch and frame a massive wooden door. The roof is slate gray, and the house itself is a warm, almost yellow paint that nearly glows in the sunset.

The driveway, a stamped concrete that makes it feel like you’re driving on stone, forms a y at the front steps. The right arm wraps around the side of the house; the left leads to an oversized four-car garage with doors the same gray as the roof.

It’s immaculate and incredible, and the landscaping adds to the secret garden, magical ambiance.

I park the car just as Holt appears on the porch.

“Dear lord,” I say, turning off the ignition.

He’s wearing the same jeans from this afternoon but has replaced the white button-up with a black T-shirt. And he’s barefooted.

Of course, he is. He knows how to play me like a fiddle.

He hops down the stairs with a spring in his step. “You found it,” he says as he pulls my door open.

“I drove past it five times, it’s so small.”

He makes a face as I climb out of the car.

“That’s something a guy never wants to hear,” he says, shutting the door behind me. He reaches in the back and grabs my bags and briefcase from the back seat. “But I’m glad you made it even if it took you five tries.”

“Six. But it was worth it. I can carry those,” I say.

He silences me with a look. The heat in it makes me shiver. After ensuring his point was made, he starts toward the porch.

“On a serious note, this place is beautiful,” I say as I follow him. “You are now officially never invited to my apartment in Chicago.”

“I didn’t know I was invited before.”

“Well, you weren’t. But you’re really not now.”

He grins as he holds the door open. I try to slip by without tipping him off that his cologne lights me on fire.

I step inside and gasp again. “Oh, my gosh, Holt. This is incredible.”

The foyer is white marble with a subtle yet spectacular chandelier hanging in the center. A few steps farther and the room opens up. Floor-to-ceiling windows with white shutters line the far wall. Pine flooring warms the space that hosts cathedral ceilings. An oversized fireplace constructed from the same marble as the foyer is the centerpiece on one wall, and across from it, nestled against a set of stairs, is a grandfather clock.

I tear my eyes away from the fluffy sofa that begs to be curled up on with a book and look at Holt instead.

He's leaning against a wall, watching me review his home. The playful look that's typically written across his features—or is hiding just beneath the surface—is gone. Instead, a seriousness is painted on his handsome face.

“It still needs some work,” he says.

“What are you talking about? This is ... this is beautiful.”

He almost smiles. “When I was a little boy, I'd ride my bike up and down this road and look at the houses. It was a slight obsession. My father thought I was going to be an architect because of it.”

“Your one brother is an architect, isn't he?”

He rewards me with a grin. “Yes. Wade. That's correct.”

“Did he design this?”

“No. This place was built in the seventies. I've been in the process of overhauling it since I bought it.” He cocks his head to the side. “Do you want a drink or something?”

“A drink would be nice.”

“Follow me.”

He shoves off the wall and leads me down a hallway. A large piece of art hangs between two sconces, and I pause to look at the wild, colorful blasts of color.

Holt pauses a few steps ahead of me.

“Is this meaningful to you?” I ask, taking in the vivid stripes of primary colors. “It feels very personal in an abstract kind of way.”

“Oh, it's personal all right. And it holds a very important meaning. Don't leave your auction paddle anywhere near Coy.”

I giggle. “Sounds like a story there.”

“A story about me almost killing my brother for bidding an exorbitant amount of money on a piece of art that, while very nice, wasn't worth the price of a small country's gross domestic product.”

I bite my lip to hide my amusement as I follow him into the kitchen.

While he makes us a drink, I gaze out the windows. There are no shutters or curtains covering them. It provides a clear, unobstructed view of the pool and, beyond that, what looks like a marsh. It's hard to tell with only the moon giving off light.

"I hope you like iced tea," he says.

I turn around as he approaches. He hands me a glass.

"Tea is great," I say.

"*This* tea is exceptional. My housekeeper makes it for me. It's better than my mother's, but don't ever tell her that, or I'll have to kill you."

I laugh. "I won't. Promise."

He takes a drink, watching me over the brim. I, in turn, watch how his bicep ripples as he lifts his glass. I tell myself it's because attention to detail is what I do best, but in reality, it's probably because not one thing in the room is more attention-worthy than him.

He sets his glass on the black-and-silver granite countertop.

"I was happy to get your text tonight." His deep voice rumbles over my skin. "I was sure you were going to wait until tomorrow."

"I was, but Colic Baby started up again."

"Maybe I should send them a fruit basket."

"I think they'd appreciate a good night's sleep instead."

His eyes twinkle. "I hope I'll be a little sleep deprived too by the time you leave."

My heart leaps to life. Blood pours through my brains at a manic level. Every cell in my body goes into overdrive, hoping to come into contact with the hard body just a few feet away from me.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other as I set my glass on the counter beside his.

"I think we need to communicate a little better about a few things before I get too settled in," I say, my voice steady thanks to years in high-pressure courtrooms.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "What do we need to communicate about?"

"Well, for one, I'm not against having sex with you. I mean, clearly. But I want to be clear that I didn't agree to stay here just to sleep with you."

"I don't think that."

“Good,” I say, forcing a swallow. “Also, let’s be clear that I do expect to stay in a guest room. It’s imperative that we keep this thing between us straightforward, so it’s not problematic when I leave in a few days.”

He lifts a brow, his jaw flexing. “You’re talking like my hospitality is something to be negotiated.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” His arms fall to his sides. “I can forgive you because I suspect that most things in your life are a contract or agreement.”

“Aren’t all things in life?”

He rolls his eyes. “Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

He doesn’t bother with an answer. Instead, he makes his way back down the hall, past the overpriced artwork, and to the foyer. He gathers my bags and briefcase in his large hands.

“Holt,” I say, catching up to him. “What are you doing?”

“Putting things in the guest room.”

He flashes a look my way that makes me think that was his original intent. And that makes me flush with embarrassment as I ascend the staircase next to the grandfather clock.

We stop at the first door on the right. He flips on a light.

“Here you go,” he says, setting my things on an antique four-poster bed. “There’s a bathroom just for this room through that doorway.” He motions to his right. “You can stay here as long as you want. My room is down the hall.”

I suck up my pride. “I apologize if I was rude.”

“You weren’t rude. Just ... presumptuous.”

“Well, I apologize for being presumptuous.”

He studies me. His eyes narrow as he works his bottom lip between his teeth. Finally, it pops free. “I’m going to need you to do one thing for me if you stay.”

“Oh, sure, put conditions on me now,” I say, hoping he takes it as the joke it’s meant to be.

If he does or doesn’t, I’ll never know. He simply continues to watch me carefully.

“I invited you into my home to stay with me as a friend,” he says. “Whether we’ve had sex or not doesn’t matter. I enjoy spending time with you—even when you’re a presumptuous little darling.”

“Hey!”

He chuckles. “You’re going to need to stop talking to me like a business associate and more like a friend. Okay? While I find your prowess insanely attractive and also kind of adorable, I really don’t want to feel like I’m at a business meeting in my own home.”

His words ring through my ears and bury themselves in my heart. *Do I do that?*

I try to think back to the words I use when communicating with my friends—or my family because I don’t really have a lot of friends. I have a way of getting to the point. I’m aware that I have a tendency to take over situations and impose myself in decisions.

But do I talk to people like business associates? *I don’t know.* What I do know is that I need to steer this conversation into easier waters.

“I suppose my problem is that I didn’t know we were friends,” I say, a grin tugging at the corner of my lips.

“You didn’t?”

“I didn’t.”

“That’s interesting. Do you often agree to stay with men you aren’t friends with?”

I bite my bottom lip. “Only when I need fucked.”

His eyes light up as his whole face comes alive. His tongue works around his cheek as his entire body moves with each breath he takes.

Watching him react to me—and forgetting the previous conversation—is a treat. The way his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat and how his thick neck rolls around his shoulders are things I commit to memory for later use.

He closes the distance between us in two seconds flat. His eyes bore into mine. My breathing becomes labored as I imagine his hands roaming across my body the way they did before—cupping my breasts, caressing my cheeks, and guiding me closer by pressing against the small of my back.

“Is that what you want? Do you want to be fucked, Blaire?”

I bat my eyelashes. “I’m afraid to answer you. I might not sound *friendly* enough.”

A growl rumbles from his throat as his hand reaches for my face. I hold my breath as his palm grows closer. It’s nearly to the side of my neck when the door chimes ring.

My breath exhales in one loud whoosh as his hand drops to his side. His eyes are alight with humor.

“Dinner’s here,” he says as his face breaks into a megawatt smile.

“You’re kidding me.”

He turns toward the door. “Hope you like Italian.”

“You’re just ... gonna ...”

I squirm as he walks toward the doorway. My thighs ache with an unsatisfied need. And the only way to sufficiently meet that need is on his way to answer a freaking door.

Holt pauses and turns around in the doorway. “Am I just gonna what? Leave you there? In the guest room? Where you wanted to be?”

My jaw hangs open.

The doorbell chimes again.

“I’m coming!” Holt shouts down the hallway.

“I’m glad one of us is.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “One more thing. In my house, I’m in control, Miss Gibson. Don’t forget that.”

With an aggravating, delicious wink, he disappears into the hallway. And I’m left reeling in the guest room. Just as I asked.

Dammit.

FOURTEEN

Holt

“I’m absolutely stuffed,” Blaire says.

She rests her head against the side of the leather armchair. Her dark hair splays against the material as she closes her eyes and sighs happily.

I finish the rest of my manicotti and then place the empty container on the coffee table between us. The meal was excellent, but the conversation was even better. Who knew that discussing criminal litigation over dinner could be so fun?

I pick up my wine and settle back on the sofa. Blaire looks right at home with her legs curled up under her. There’s a peace on her face—a look of pure contentment—that’s as lovely, or even lovelier, than when she’s smiling or laughing.

The cool, outside air breezes in through the open French doors. It’s offset by the soft warmth of the electric fireplace next to my companion.

“I could fall asleep right here,” she says, opening her eyes again.

“Do it then.”

She smiles a sleepy smile. “I’ve already been rude once today.”

The fireplace crackles next to her as she reaches over and picks up her wine glass. She takes a long sip and gazes around the room filled with some of my favorite items.

“This is my favorite room in your house,” she says. “Well, this is my favorite of the rooms I’ve seen so far. I’m not sure how many others there are.”

“This happens to be my favorite room as well. And I’ve seen all of them.”

She grins at my joke. “What makes it your favorite?”

“I don’t know. I think it just represents all the things I hoped this house would feel like when I bought it.”

“Which is ...?”

I blow out a breath and take a sip of my wine.

Gazing around the room, I try to figure out *why* it’s my favorite part of the property. I’ve wondered this a number of times and never boiled it down to a simple answer.

“It has a good vibe,” I say, figuring that’s a good enough answer. But I should’ve known better.

Blaire presses her lips together. “Good try.”

“What do you mean good try?”

“I mean, that answer is insufficient.”

I laugh. “Remember that whole conversation we had earlier about you not making me feel like I’m at work?”

“Remember that whole conversation when you told me you wanted me to feel like we’re friends?” She cocks a brow. “So answer my question. Why is this room your favorite?”

I set my glass back down and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “This room reminds me of my grandmother’s library when I was a little boy. It had tray ceilings and these grand bookcases that she had stuffed with books. I’d stand in front of them and just revel in the colors of the spines. And she had this yellow birdcage with two finches with little orange faces.”

Blaire’s face softens. “That sounds wonderful.”

“It was. She was such a powerhouse and emitted this energy that just captured you when you got close to her. It was crazy. But then you stepped into her house, and it ... it had this calmness. This tranquility, I guess. As though she left all the craziness of the world at the end of the driveway.”

“What was she like?”

I try to imagine summing up my grandmother in an easy word or phrase. The idea is almost hysterical.

She was a firecracker. The best adventurer. The best homemade pie baker and the dirtiest joke teller I’ve ever met. It’s impossible to condense her life and all that she was into one statement.

“Well, she was a lot of things,” I say slowly. “She owned a bookstore and managed a bank. But then she got into real estate after her father died, and she inherited a lot of money.” I stand and stretch my arms over my head. “She bought houses and sold them. She had a huge rental portfolio. One day, she broke down on the outside of town, and a homeless man changed her tire. It changed something in her. Soon after, she started a charity in town called Shelters for Savannah and donated all of her rentals to the cause.”

“Wow.” Blaire’s eyes go wide. “You meant it when you called her a powerhouse.”

I nod. “She was generous and kind, but make no mistake about it, she wasn’t weak. And when anyone misjudged her, she made them regret it.”

I walk around the sofa to burn some energy that showed up out of nowhere. Blaire watches me but doesn’t move except to pull her legs up under her again.

“What was her name?” she asks.

“Annabelle Hickman. She was my mother’s mother.”

“This room is your ode to Annabelle.”

My heart tugs at the sound of her name. “It is, I guess.”

“May I ask what happened to her?”

“She went in for a routine surgery and died on the table. There was a heart problem that went undetected.” I grip the back of the sofa. “Her husband, my grandfather, died before I was born.”

Blaire grips the armrest. Her lips turn down. “I’m sure she’s very proud of you. You know that, right?”

I give her a shrug in lieu of words because the truth is, I hope she would be proud of me. She always said her grandchildren were her most important contributions to the world. I’d hate to think she’d be disappointed in the life I’ve chosen.

But I don’t say that.

Blaire seems to understand my need not to elaborate beyond the physical gesture.

She takes a long breath. “You still have your dad’s parents, right?”

“We have Gramps. Gramma passed away a few years ago.”

I walk around the sofa and sit down again.

The breeze kicks up and rocks the French doors back and forth. They somehow swing in time with the crackling of the fire.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I just have my nana.”

She shrugs as if it’s no big deal. I’d believe it, too, if there wasn’t a brief shot of pain in her beautiful blue eyes.

“You’ve told me a little about her,” I say. “She sounds like a powerhouse too.”

“Oh, most definitely. She had to be to put up with us like she has—especially Peck and Machlan. She’s practically raised them.”

“Who is Peck?”

“My cousin. His mother is a real gem,” she says in disgust. “But Nana raised Mach too because ...” She takes a deep breath and holds it for a long couple of seconds before blowing it out. “Our parents died in a boating accident many years ago. Machlan was still a teenager.”

My heart breaks at the look on her face. Not because it’s sad, but because it’s trying really hard not to be.

I wonder if she’s always this buttoned up about it, or if she allows herself to display the pain she has to be feeling. *Losing your parents?* Shit. I don’t know how I’d survive. But I do know I’d be unable to hold it together like that.

“I’m sorry, Blaire.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Tell me about them.”

A shadow falls across her face. The vaguest grin touches her lips as she stares out the French doors. “They were amazing,” she says softly. “The backbone of our family. They took care of us—all of us. My brothers and me. Nana. Peck. Any kid we’d drag over to the house who needed a meal or shoes.”

I sit quietly and watch her wrestle with her memories. A softness settles over her face, her posture relaxing too, before she seems to catch herself.

She stands and stretches before bending over to pick up our food containers.

I jump to my feet. “What are you doing?” I take the two white boxes away from her.

“I’m trying to pick up our mess.”

Her eyes plead with me to go along with her redirection. Even though I want to press for more—to see more of her in an unguarded, or less guarded, state—I don’t. But I don’t give her the boxes back either.

“I’ll do that,” I tell her.

“Come on, Holt. Let me help.”

“You’re my guest.”

“It’s not going to hurt to let me pick up my trash, for crying out loud.”

“For crying out loud,” I say, mocking her. “You really have a problem not getting your way, don’t you?”

She starts to object and then stops. A laugh topples past her lips. “Yes. I do.”

“Well, good. That will make this all the more fun.”

I walk a wide berth around her and head to the kitchen. Her feet slap against the hardwood as she chases me through the living room and down the hallway into the kitchen.

“This isn’t how this works,” she says, a laugh in her voice.

I toss the containers into the trash can. “Is it not?”

“No.” She brushes a strand of hair out of her face. “You’re supposed to let me have my way. I’m the guest. That’s how it works.”

“Not here, pretty girl.”

Her cheeks flush the faintest shade of pink as she gazes up at me. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“That I am.” I dip my head toward her as I walk around her again. I’m too close to kissing her already and need to put a bit of distance between us. “What are your plans for tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.” Her frustration at not getting kissed is evident. “What are you doing?”

“Working,” I say as I place our tea glasses from earlier into the dishwasher. “You can hang out by the pool. You can’t see it very well now, but the pool is pretty damn nice.”

“It won’t be weird for you to have me here when you aren’t?”

I grin to myself. “I don’t know. Are you going to rob me?”

“No,” she exclaims.

“Are you going to go through my underwear drawer?”

“Wasn’t on the agenda.”

“Then I guess it won’t be weird.”

She smacks me on the shoulder as she rounds the island. “I might go down and see the cathedral you were telling me about tomorrow afternoon. I looked it up while I was killing time not coming here this evening.”

“You were, were you?”

She nods, leaning her forearms against the countertop. “It looks like one of those places that people will ask you about after they learn you were here. It’ll make me look like a good little tourist.”

I lean my forearms against the countertop too. “You might be the worst tourist in the history of tourism.”

“Is that right?”

“Maybe. I better meet you down there and make sure you do all the right things. Just to be safe.”

Her eyes light up. “I’ll probably be there around one.”

“I can probably be there around one too.”

“Cool.”

“Cool,” I say back, making her laugh.

We watch each other in an easy comfortability. It’s an odd sensation to feel this relaxed around someone I just met. Especially here.

“What?” she asks.

“What, what?”

“What are you thinking?”

I contemplate not telling her or fabricating some bullshit answer to satisfy her curiosity. But I’m fairly certain she’ll call me out on it, and we’ll end up at the truth anyway.

“I was thinking,” I begin, “how unusual it is to be enjoying someone’s company here.”

She looks confused. “Why? I mean, why would you have invited me here if you didn’t expect to somewhat enjoy my company?”

“I’ll be honest ... I didn’t really think you being here all the way through before inviting you.”

The confusion turns to annoyance. “Gee, thanks. I have the warm and fuzzies about this now.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I say adamantly. “What I mean is that I just kind of asked you because it just came out of my mouth. That’s not something I usually do.”

She jams a thumb over her shoulder. “I can leave.”

“And I can chase you down and throw you over my shoulder and bring you back.”

The air between us shifts. And I don’t think it has anything to do with the open French doors on the other side of the house.

She faces me and gives me her very best undeterred look. But hiding just beneath that badassery is a thin layer of excitement that she doesn't want to show.

I take a step toward her. "You like that, don't you?"

"I like what?"

"The idea of being thrown over my shoulder."

She scoffs. "I think we established the fact that I don't love cavemen at our first dinner together."

"I think what we established is that you don't want to like the whole caveman thing because you think it makes you weak."

"No. I think it makes *men* weak."

I stand in front of her and peer down. She lifts her chin to see into my eyes. To offset the imbalance of power, she throws her shoulders back.

It doesn't work.

"I bet," I say, biting my bottom lip, "if I touched you right now, you'd be wet."

Her lips twist as she scrambles for a response.

"And even though you don't want to admit it," I say slowly, "it's because the idea of being dominated turns you the fuck on."

I lay a finger against the side of her cheek. She fights her natural instinct to lean into my touch.

The pad of my finger draws a faint line down her jaw. Her chest rises and falls at a quickened pace, her pupils dilating.

"Would you be wet for me, Blaire?"

Her gaze smolders. "Depends on where you touch me."

"I—" I begin but am interrupted by the sound of two ringing phones.

Blaire's shoulders fall as a giggle escapes her mouth. "There have to be cameras around here. This is so unfair."

I jerk my phone out of my back pocket. I'm not nearly as entertained by the disruption as she is.

Oliver's name is printed across my screen. I'm ready to send him to voicemail when Blaire speaks.

"This is my nana," she says. "I should answer it."

I want to take her phone and throw it into the pool and make her forget it ever rang. But it's her grandmother, so I'm sure I'd go to hell for that.

"Go ahead," I say with as much neutrality as I can muster. "I'll be in the den."

She flashes me a grateful smile as I press the green button and turn on my heel.

“You are such a fucking cock block,” I tell him without saying hello.

He greets me with a full-bellied laugh. “I guess I can forgo asking how you are.”

“Fucker.”

“Nah, I don’t think you are fucking her, actually.”

I run a hand through my hair as I pass through by the foyer. “Did you call for a reason? Or just to piss me off?”

“I called for a reason. Pissing you off is just a bonus.”

“Well, shut up and get to the point. I’m about to shut this phone off for the night.”

I enter the den and stand next to the fireplace. The blanket I keep on the back of the chair that Blaire was sitting in is draped over the armrest. My immediate inclination is to pick it up and put it back where it goes. But before I touch the fabric, I pull back. I kind of like it there.

“I’m taking it Blaire is there,” Oliver says.

“If you wanna gossip, call Wade.”

He tsks me.

“Tell me why you called so I can get back to what I was doing,” I say, my gaze drifting toward the doorway.

“You mean who you were doing? Or about to do?”

“Ollie ...” I warn.

“All right, all right.” He sucks in a breath. “We’re having lunch with Landry tomorrow at eleven thirty. Wade’s new drawings are spectacular. He outdid himself. Have you seen them?”

“Yes. Well, I saw them this afternoon. I don’t know what he changed.”

“They’re awesome. Anyway, we’re meeting Graham and Lincoln Landry at Picante. Keep your schedule open.”

“Will do.” I sigh. “Can I go now?”

“Yes, you can go now. Just get this out of your system so you can concentrate tomorrow. I’m getting tired of being the only one who can think around here today.”

I snort. “Phone is going off. Talk to you in the morning.”

“Goodbye.”

Blaire’s laughter filters through the house. I don’t know if it’s loud or if I’m just in tune with her.

I rub my hands down my face.

She laughs again.

My stomach twists. I tell myself it's a case of blue balls, and I'm sure on some level, it is. *I definitely wanted to fuck*. But as I listen to her faint voice filter my direction, I wonder if it's not something else too. Something less physical.

You just have a few days of this. Enjoy it for what it is, and then everything will go back to normal.

I'm not sure if knowing I have a few days of this left is a good thing or a bad thing. And that's fucking scary.

FIFTEEN

Blaire

A breeze just strong enough to rustle the branches of the massive oak trees in Xavier Park billows around me. The chapel sits on the other side of a lazy street that gives off the impression of being in a cozy village rather than the city of Savannah.

I stroll along a path and take in the space that's more magical than mundane. People pass by, giving me a welcoming smile or a gentle wave. Others lie on blankets with dogs or lovers while some curl up with books beneath the trees.

My rush to finish my work this morning paid off. While I was sorting through Yancy's emails and the new evidence in the Lawson case, I chastised myself for agreeing to this. My butt should be in a chair, in Chicago, with my face in case files. But now, as I breathe in the fresh, clean air, my regret diminishes.

It diminishes even more when I remember Holt is on his way.

I grin.

"He'll be here soon," I say aloud.

The excitement in my stomach bubbles, and I don't try to fight it. It's futile at this point.

Hearing him get ready for work this morning—the soft steps of his feet down the hall, the gravel of his voice answering a call, the clatter of his dishes in the kitchen—made me want to get up too. I fought with myself to stay in bed and not make a fool out of myself.

I escaped the night before and maintained my dignity—mostly. It was not the easiest thing I’ve ever done. Especially when I ended Nana’s call and looked up to see him standing in the doorway with that look in his eye. It was a glimmer of concern, presumably about something to do with his phone call, but also a predatory sheen. And while I was totally on board for being his prey, I knew that he needed to address work. I couldn’t be a distraction, so I took myself to the guest room like an adult and locked the door.

For his own good. And mine.

He didn’t come for me—pun sadly intended.

My phone rings in my hand, and I jump. “Hey, Sienna,” I say.

“Hey! How are you?”

“I’m good. What about you?”

“I’m great. Walker is great. Family is good. Now talk to me.”

I can’t help but laugh at the mischief in her voice. A bench sits at the entry of the park, and I make my way to it.

“What do you want me to say?” I ask, playing coy.

“Oh, my gosh, Blaire. *Holt*. Talk to me about Holt Mason. I know you’re not this dense.”

My cheeks split into a grin. I sit on the bench and feel a warmth spread throughout my body.

As much as I don’t want to admit it—to Sienna or myself, for that matter—being able to talk about this with her is ... nice. I’m not sure how much to say or what I should say or if I’ll regret it in a week when I’m back home and Holt is nothing but a memory, but it’s fun for now.

“I’m still in Savannah,” I say.

“Nana told me. I mean, I guessed as much, but she said she talked to you last night and confirmed it.”

My jaw drops. “You didn’t tell Nana about Holt, did you?”

The idea of my grandmother knowing I was sleeping with a man I just met is horrifying. My sweet little Nana would probably burst into flames.

I slink down on the bench and wince.

Sienna sighs. “I know this girl thing is new to you, but the first rule in the Girl Code is no snitching.”

“That’s also the first rule in prison.”

She scoffs. “See? That’s your problem right there. You know more about prison dynamics than you do having a friend.”

“You might be right,” I say, sitting back up. I shove that idea from my brain and focus on the task at hand. “You didn’t tell Nana, right? I need a straightforward confirmation.”

“No, Blaire, I didn’t tell your grandma that you were seeing a well-to-do, wealthy, kind man while you’re on vacation. The horror.”

“Well, thank you. That was nice of you.”

Her laugh is embedded with disbelief. “Okay. Let me guide you through this process.”

“What process?”

“The process of gossip!” She laughs. “This is the point when you tell me all the sordid details from last night. And don’t leave anything out.”

My face flushes at the idea of Holt doing sordid things to me. Lord, how I wanted him to. But my body settles down at the reminder that he didn’t do anything of the sort.

I sigh.

“Why are you so invested in this, anyway?” I return a nod to a woman and her son as they walk by. “Don’t you have better things to do?”

“You’re being serious?”

“I’m always being serious.”

“Good point.” She blows out a breath. “I ... I like this side of you. I like getting to know you like this. Sure, we’ve chatted about Walker’s broodiness and Nana’s fried chicken, but that’s on a familial level. I like getting to know you like girls get to know girls. We bond over boys.”

“Huh.”

I get to my feet and mull over her words. *We bond over boys*. That sounds tragic. That sounds like quicksand under the foundation of a friendship.

“Surely, you’ve had one friend before,” Sienna says. “You can’t have been on this island your whole life, right?”

“I had a sleepover or two growing up.”

“Or two?”

“The girls I went to school with were ...”

I struggle to find the words to describe them. I’m afraid she’ll take it personally.

The girls were obsessed with boys. They made fun of me for my grades. Then my glasses. Then my boobs.

“I had one good friend in college. It was short-lived,” I say, feeling myself auto-detach from the topic.

“Okay. That’s a starting point. What happened?”

“Jack.”

His name tastes bitter as it rolls off my tongue. The detachment that started to flow through my veins as I mentioned Lacie fully flows at the mention of my ex.

“Jack? Who is Jack?” Sienna asks.

Would it suffice to tell her I don’t think I ever knew?

My heart tugs as I think of Jack Williamson. Therapy taught me that the sensation in my chest isn’t for him, but for the time we spent together and what it represented to me—something it definitely didn’t represent to him. The pain, though, that’s because of him.

And for me.

I’m hit with a tidal wave of emotions. Guilt, shame, anger—it’s all there and so heavy. But it’s the sadness that swamps me, coming in like a tsunami and eroding the strength I’ve summoned since then. It’s a complete and utter devastation for the naïve young lady I once was who was irretrievably broken in the course of ten months. The me who lost both of my parents in a tragic accident. Who became the head of her family despite not having one iota how to do that. The woman who then lost her boyfriend due to her dejection. The girl who just needed a friend but lost her best friend too.

Then nearly, her own life.

Tears wet the corner of my eyes. I blink them back.

“Jack was an old boyfriend,” I say. “We broke up, and he took my best friend, my only friend, with him.”

“He sounds like an asshole.”

“He is. Or was,” I say with a shrug. “I like to think that he grew up and did better. That he and Lacie had a good life, and I was worth the trade-off.”

But there could’ve been room in there for me too.

I shake my head. “But it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” Sienna takes a long breath. “It’s not okay that people you thought were friends did that to you.”

“Clearly, I didn’t need them. I did just fine in life without them.”

“It’s not about you needing them. It’s about knowing that you deserve to have good people around you and acknowledging that they didn’t deserve

you.”

Her words make me smile.

“I’m going to teach you all about friends,” she says. “I’m your friend. The Douchebag and Douchebag Follower weren’t your friends. Welcome to your first friendship, Blaire.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Is this just to extract things about Holt? Because you don’t have to pretend to be my friend for that.”

“No. That’s just a benefit in this particular instance.” She laughs too. “But I would like you to know I’m available, day or night, to talk. About Holt or anything else.”

The sun shines brightly. My steps into the front of the park feel light. The smile on my face doesn’t feel too bad either.

It must be the salt in the air that gets to me because I find myself talking before I even realize it.

“Nothing has happened with Holt since the first night I got here,” I say. “We almost kissed last night, but Nana called.”

Sienna’s giddiness rolls through the phone.

“I slept in the guest room,” I say, trying to control the bubble of excitement in my belly just from talking about him. “It just felt more ... practical.”

“Practical? I would go with saintly, but you’re the intellect. Not me.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t want him to think I’m just a piece of ass. Not that he’s ever treated me like that,” I add. “Not even close. But I just want to maintain a little class.”

“Of course. I get it.”

I pick a piece of invisible lint off my shirt. “He’s supposed to be meeting me shortly for a little touristy adventure. I mean, it’s to a church, but that’s more adventurous than I usually get.”

“I love this,” she says, ecstatic. “I so love this. Have fun. Be excited. This is an exciting thing.”

The ball of excitement in my gut that I’ve been trying to control begins to unwind. I can feel it slip through my veins and make my heart beat faster, my palms start to sweat. It is exciting whether I like it or not.

I scrunch up my face and laugh. “I hate that I’m excited about this but ...”

“But it’s Holt. I get it. And it’s new for you. It’s vacation. You’re doing what my sister Camilla and I did—well, sort of—in high school and

college. It's normal."

"I'm just late to the party."

"You're just late to the party," she repeats. "So go have fun. Take all of that man you can while you can."

I stick my tongue in my cheek. "Pun intended?"

"In every way." She laughs. "Call me later. Remember, we're friends now. Okay?"

"Okay, Sienna."

"Bye, Blaire."

"Goodbye."

I end the call and check the time. My spirits are still soaring as I scan the street between the park and the chapel. There is a woman pushing a stroller and a man on the phone but no Holt.

The breeze kicks up again. The moss dangles from the trees and sways in the air. I close my eyes and sway along with it.

I should do this more often. I need to make it a habit to get outside and have non-working human interaction. Maybe it's not so bad after all.

If I limit it to ten-minute conversations.

I laugh out loud.

Scanning the area, I notice a small ice-cream parlor tucked between two buildings on the other side of the street. I try to figure out if the building closer to me is a bookstore or a museum when my phone goes off again.

I look down.

And frown.

My heartbeat picks up in my chest as I read Holt's text.

Holt: Got stuck in meetings.

Disappointment hits me full-on. My shoulders slump as I bite my bottom lip and fire a text back.

Me: No worries. I get it.

I wait. And wait. And after four minutes of watching the screen for a reply, I kick myself for still standing on the sidewalk and waiting on a response that clearly isn't coming.

Dammit.

I suck in a breath and slip my phone into my pocket.

“You can’t blame him,” I tell myself. “He has a lot of work to do, and it’s not like he was planning on you being here this week. His life goes on.”

I eye the ice-cream parlor again.

“And mine too.”

I lift my chin and march across the street.

Dessert over dick.

Every time.

SIXTEEN

Holt

No worries. I get it.

Blaire's text sits on my phone. The words are clear. Concise. She understands that a meeting changed my plans because it happens to her all the time too.

Right?

I blow out a breath and grip the back of my neck. The muscles are taut and in need of a deep massage—something more than my also-tense palm can provide.

Oliver rattles on across my office, going into depth about the Landry deal and things I should be considering. He's done his homework, thank God. It makes me a little less worried about my failure to listen.

I should've called her.

As I glance up at my brother, I realize that opportunity has passed. I can't call her. Not now. Not with Rosie walking in any second to tell us that Graham Landry is in the conference room for our second meeting today.

Why didn't I call her?

I cringe.

The answer to this question isn't as clear as her response to me. I don't know why I didn't call her. Maybe I didn't think it would matter. I definitely didn't think her response would bother me a half hour later.

That's the problem with texts. You can't read someone's tone.

And this is why I don't do this kind of thing with women. It takes up too much damn time—time I need to be spending on other shit.

But before I can sort through it, Oliver's gaze meets mine. He lifts a brow, silently chastising me but also throwing a bit of concern my way.

I get it. For sure. I don't mentally check out—especially when the topic at hand is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. He must think I've lost my fucking mind.

But I haven't. I'm still here. Just ... distracted.

Really fucking distracted.

Is Blaire pissed? Does she think I'm blowing her off? Does she think my whole let-me-show-you-around-Savannah line was a lie to get her to stay with me?

Fuck.

"I know," I tell my brother, dropping my hand. "I'm sorry. Go on."

He furrows his brow like our father does when he's trying to decide whether to ask Coy about something he allegedly has done or not.

"I'm fine," I insist. "Everything is fine."

"I hope so. We've been working on this deal for months. I'd hate to blow it now."

"We are *not* going to blow it." I narrow my eyes as I tap the side button on my phone to turn off my screen. "Now, what were you saying?"

He lets his eyes linger on me a second too long before he looks back down. It's a subtle warning to shape up or ship out—something Gramps used to say. I wish I could tell him to mind his own business.

But this *is* his business. It's the Mason family's business. We all depend on it, and we all depend on me to steer the ship in the first place.

And steer it I will because the only other option is failure. And if there is one thing in my life I can never do, it's look my father in the face and tell him I let him down. I won't lose everything our family has worked for over generations.

I refuse.

I clear my throat and adjust my tie. "You were saying that you were talking to Boone ..."

"Right." He clears his throat and settles back in. "So Boone brought up the potential that Landry will want a future stake in the project. What if he wants first right of refusal for occupancy?"

"The Landrys aren't into retail. Or hotels."

“No, but they like money. And there’s a lot of money to be made here.”

I look at the ceiling and absorb his point. Because, again, the fucker is right. Or Boone is right. And that’s even more confusing.

“Boone thought of this?” I ask.

Oliver laughs. “Yup.”

“Huh. Maybe he’s decided to be a grown-up, after all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Mom found out that he’s been charging her credit card for his video game subscriptions for a year.”

My head levels, and I look at my brother. “Are you kidding me?”

“Could I make that up?”

I shake my head. “Well, the gamer has a point, I guess. Landry could counter us with that. How do you feel about it?”

“Well, I—”

A buzz from my desk phone cuts off Oliver.

“Holten?” Rosie calls.

“Yes.”

“Larissa is here to see you.”

I head to my desk. “Send her in.”

Our cousin knocks once before opening the door. Her blond curls bounce as she enters. It’s one of the only traits she got from her mother. The rest of her is Mason through and through with her green eyes and tan skin that she inherited from my uncle Howard.

She gives Oliver a one-armed hug from behind before setting her sights on me.

“Hey, Holtie,” she sing-songs.

“When did you start having Rosie buzz you in?”

She comes to the front of my desk and plops down in one of the leather chairs. “Since you guys almost fired her and now she acts like she has to treat this place like Fort Knox.”

“We didn’t almost fire her,” I say, looking over her head at Oliver. “We were ...”

“Moving her,” Oliver says.

I nod. “We were moving her to Wade’s office.”

“Well, news alert—Rosie doesn’t want to work for Wade. She wants to work for you guys.”

“She’d love Wade. Eventually,” Oliver jokes.

I laugh again. “What brought you here? Don’t you have class today?”

“You do know I have a father who’s perfectly capable of interrogating me, don’t you?”

“I do. But I thought I’d ask in case he’s slipping.”

It’s her smile that makes my stomach twist. Her lips part, foreshadowing mischief.

She scoots around in her chair before finally sitting on the edge and gripping her armrest with both hands. Her nose wrinkles.

“I’m glad we’re asking questions today,” she pokes. “Because I have one for you.”

“Don’t. Please don’t,” Oliver whines. “We have a ... thing to do ... and ...” He sighs, falling back in his chair. “Please just let me keep him focused.”

Larissa looks satisfied. “Well, even though that didn’t come from you, and I didn’t ask my question, I think it answers it.”

Ignoring the glare from Oliver is harder than it should be.

I tuck my tie into my jacket and sit across from Larissa. I ignore her eyes too.

“So ...” She prods. “The fam is saying a real live woman is at your house.”

“Thanks, Oliver,” I say, blowing out a breath.

“Oliver?” Larissa looks over her shoulder at my brother before turning back to me. “Wade told me.”

“Wade?” I must look surprised because Larissa laughs. “Wade told you?”

“I mean, he wasn’t celebrating it or anything. Actually, he said you were a ... fool, I think was the word he chose. I’m just excited that it’s true.”

I dig around in my desk and find the envelope Larissa came for. Hopefully, she’ll take it and leave.

“Well, you need to settle down a little bit because it isn’t nearly as exciting as you’re making it out to be,” I say, giving her the package.

Her eyes light up as she takes it from me.

“I think the fact that Wade, of all people, brought it up means that it’s a little more exciting than just some ditz you’re bringing to an event,” she says.

I rock back in my chair. “I bring those ditzes, as you so affectionately call them, with me to places oftentimes as a favor. Someone needed a ticket

to something or wanted to network a little bit. I'm not bringing them for me."

"He picks the ones for him up at airports these days," Oliver chimes in.

"That's enough from the back of the room," I say.

He laughs. "He met this girl at an airport, Riss."

Larissa's face breaks into a wide smile. "It's like a movie!"

"It's not," I say with just as much gusto. "It's a woman I met who can't go home for a few days because her apartment is being renovated. And I offered my home out of kindness."

She gets to her feet and tucks the envelope in her pocket. Half of it sticks out the top.

"That's all well and good," Larissa says, "but she's staying at *your house*, Holtie. You're practically marrying this girl in my book."

"Oh, please," I hiss, my stomach twisting tighter. "This is nothing more than ... a business arrangement. She's family of the Landrys, and this helps our situation—something Oliver has also forgotten about." I look at him pointedly.

He rolls his eyes.

Larissa says nothing but doesn't have to. Her smug little grin says it all.

I sigh.

"This is *not* a business arrangement," Larissa says.

"How do you know?" I ask. "You just found out about this—from Wade, no less."

"I know," Larissa says, heading toward the door, "because I found out from Wade. If it wasn't a big deal, Wade of all people wouldn't have told me."

She throws me a wink as if her point has been made.

"Riss, you need to be going. Oliver needs my help," I say.

"Yeah, but I've needed your help all morning, and you've been as worthless as tits on a boar."

"Gee, thanks," I say.

He shrugs. "I think Riss needs to stay, and you need to ... get this out of your system. Do it with her so I can get the Holt I know and need back, and we can go make money today."

Larissa pats Oliver's shoulder again. "I love your support of my nosiness."

“It’s really just self-preservation,” he tells her. “I’ll see you at the concert?”

She taps the envelope in her pocket. “Yup. Are you bringing your new babe, Holt?”

I clear my throat.

The room gets hotter as I war mentally with her very, very simple question. The answer should be no. It should be a quick response that doesn’t require stumbling or thought.

I don’t bring random women to family events. My family isn’t a normal family, and they can overwhelm people. They can attract the wrong people. They can become a pass to all the glamorous events in the South—and elsewhere—and that doesn’t bode well for relationships.

In any case, Larissa’s question shouldn’t still be lingering in the room.

And Oliver, Larissa, and I all know it.

Oliver shakes his head.

“What?” I ask, my question bordering on hostile.

“Just answer the damn question,” he says.

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t.” Oliver stands. “And I don’t actually care, but now I’m curious. And I like watching you squirm.”

Larissa leans against the door, her head resting on the wood panels. “I think he answered it, Oliver.”

“I’m not bringing Blaire to the concert,” I say. But as soon as I do, I regret it.

It’s none of their business.

Fuck them for putting me in this position.

“Suit yourself,” Larissa says, exchanging a grin with my brother. “But may I remind you that you’re getting old. You might wanna settle down and have kids while you still can.”

“What?” I ask, my jaw dropping for her benefit.

She laughs. “Thanks for the tickets. I’ll see you two later.”

“Bye,” Oliver calls after her.

I give her a wave before heading back to my desk.

My heart pounds in my chest as I sit back at my seat and overtly ignore my phone. I rifle through my drawer as if I’m searching for the meaning to life when, in reality, I’m just searching for my fucking sense.

This situation shouldn’t screw with my head like this.

But my whole family shouldn't know about Blaire, either.

It's not a big deal, and even if I wanted to bring her to the concert, what would it matter? Would it really be that different than if I'd bring Daphne Monroe or some other debutante?

I pull out a peppermint, then slip the wrapper off and pop it into my mouth. My mind tries to rationalize the last few minutes when I lift my head and my eyes meet Oliver's.

He's staring at me with a smug smile on his face.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing." He shrugs and looks back down at his papers. "You're just so full of shit."

Before I can respond—before I can get my head wrapped around what he's insinuating I'm full of shit about, exactly—Rosie knocks on the door. Her head pokes around the corner.

"Boys, Graham Landry is in the conference room," she says.

"We'll be right there," I tell her.

She nods and disappears, pulling the door softly behind her.

Oliver shuffles his papers into a neat stack. "I need to get one more file from my office before we go in."

"You go ahead," I tell him. "I'll meet you there in five."

He nods and disappears out the door too.

I tuck my tie in my jacket once again before pulling at the knot around my neck. I'm not sure if it's too tight today or if my office is unusually warm. Either way, it's uncomfortable.

My lungs fill with air as I step around my desk. But before I can get all the way to the other side, my gaze falls on my phone.

I stop.

No worries. I get it.

"No worries, huh?" I mutter.

Shaking my head, I pick up the phone and glance at the clock. After a quick mental calculation, my fingers fly across the keypad.

Me: I apologize for bailing on you today. I should've called. Meet me at The Carriage House tonight at six. It's on Harrison Street. I'll make it up to you.

Before she can respond, I turn my phone off and toss it on my desk.
“Now, let’s go make some money,” I say as I march out of my office.

SEVENTEEN

Blaire

The evening air is crisp and smells faintly of rain.

When rain is on the horizon in Chicago, the city takes on the odor of a rich stew saturated with gasoline. But here, in a cozy section of Savannah, it's different. The air hints of the earth and sea. It's evocative.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep lungful of air and am whisked back to summers on Lake Michigan with my family. I can almost hear my family's laughter and smell the barbecue pit that Dad tended with the care of a surgeon.

"I'm glad you're still here."

I whirl around at the sound of Holt's voice.

He tugs at his tie, his forehead wrinkled as he approaches me on the sidewalk in front of The Carriage House. He looks divinely handsome in his tailored suit and freshly shaven face. The air of sophistication mixed with the razor-cut jaw and wide, strong shoulders make me forget about everything but him.

"A horse-drawn carriage?" I lift a brow. "I wasn't about to miss my chance at being a princess."

He grins. "You being a princess is an interesting concept."

"And why is that?"

Holt stops in front of me. His tie is slightly askew, and it's all I can do not to reach out and straighten it. I grip my sweater harder to keep myself from running my fingers through his ruffled hair.

“Which princess would you be?” he asks. “The one who waits for a knight in shining armor to rescue her from a tower? Or the one who needs a kiss from a prince to awaken?”

I half-laugh. “How about the one who rescues herself?”

“My point.”

He narrows his eyes, and I can see the stress he’s trying to hide with his slow smile. It’s the aftermath of a day of battling at work. I’d imagine his body aches and his brain feels like a pan of scrambled eggs too. And suddenly, I wish he wouldn’t have offered to bring me here and would’ve gone home instead.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” I say. “I was about to leave.”

“Of course, I was coming,” he says, his eyes searching mine. “I’m sorry about earlier and for making you wait now. Things got a bit hectic at the office.”

“You don’t have to entertain me, you know. You didn’t have to do this.”

His grin is beautiful if tired. “I never do anything I don’t want to do.”

He allows his smile to speak for him. It lingers my way for a few long seconds. The hesitation I felt before melts away, and I realize how happy and relieved I am that he showed up.

And how even happier I am that I believe he wants to be here too.

“Hello, Cassius,” Holt says, dragging his eyes away from me. “Thank you for helping me out tonight.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Mason. It’s my pleasure.”

Cassius, the man who introduced himself to me when I arrived, shakes Holt’s hand. He leads us to a shiny black carriage with oversized, white-walled wheels. The grandest horse I’ve ever laid eyes on stands in command in the front.

Holt’s hand presses lightly against the small of my back as he guides me toward the carriage. I ignore the zip of his touch and climb inside.

The interior is lined with a pristine red velvet. The seats are covered with a matte black material, and when I sit, I feel like royalty.

Holt exchanges a few quiet words with Cassius before climbing in next to me.

Our shoulders brush together as he gets situated. His knee bumps mine in the slightest way. Even so, it feels like a fire is lit in the bottom of my core.

Rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, he exposes his thick, muscled forearms.

I look away.

“If you have any questions as we continue, please don’t hesitate to ask,” Cassius says over his shoulder. “Otherwise, I will leave the two of you to enjoy your own company.”

“Thank you,” Holt says.

The carriage pulls forward and the *clip-clop* of the horse’s shoes against the street soothes the nugget of nerves building in my stomach. It’s an odd anxiety—one not from uncertainty or an unwelcome advance. It’s from anticipation.

As I look at Holt sitting next to me, watching me with dark, inquisitive eyes, I wonder if he knows this and is doing it on purpose.

I clear my throat and look at the sky. “It’s so beautiful here. Everything from the painted sunset to the foliage. I wish it were more peaceful like this in Chicago.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“It’s nothing like this,” I say, taking in a small building with stained glass windows. “It’s all skyscrapers and people and hustle.”

“Do you like it there?”

The question catches me off guard for some reason. I look at him.

“I like that I’m close to my family. I like that I can walk to most places, but I can have a car too. And our pizza is the best,” I say, adding the last bit on but internally cringing as soon as it’s out of my mouth.

He fights a smile. “Pizza, huh?”

“What? I like pizza.”

He stretches his arm out behind me and rests it along the back of the seat. Every cell in my body is hyper-aware of his proximity, and it takes all my strength to ignore it.

“I miss Savannah when I’m not here,” he says.

“I can see why.”

The horse neighs as our procession slows. Holt and I are bumped toward each other. Our eyes snap together but neither one of us mentions it with anything more than a grin.

He twists his lips together and readjusts in his seat.

“Do you see that building over there?” He motions to his right with his index finger toward a brick building. A blue-and-white striped awning

hangs overhead and advertises a discount store. “That is where my great-grandfather started the first Mason company.”

“Really?”

He nods triumphantly. “It was a landscape company, to be exact.” He looks at me as we slip past the storefront. “He met my great-grandmother at a potluck dinner. She made the best oatmeal pie he’d ever eaten, and he asked her to marry him on the spot.”

“He did not,” I say with a laugh.

“That’s how the story goes.” His eyes sparkle. “He said he actually knew he was going to propose as soon as she walked in, but he needed an excuse to seem sane.”

“Well, if he thought that marrying someone because they baked a great pie is sane, then okay.”

Holt’s chuckle is low and deep. “I know. It’s crazy to me too.”

The horse marches along the street in a leisurely yet steady pace. The rhythm steadies my heartbeat, and I relax for the first time since Holt left for work this morning.

I turn my head to see him. “Have you ever been married?”

“Me? No. What kind of question is that?”

“A completely logical one. Most people our age have been married once or twice by now.”

“Well, okay. No, I haven’t been married. I’ve never been engaged either.”

“That surprises me.”

He chuckles. “It surprises my mother too.”

I return his smile. “Do you think you’ll get married someday? I can see you sitting in your living room by the fireplace with a horde of children at your feet.”

“Oh ...” He winces. “I don’t know. Does it make me a terrible person to admit I’m not sure I want kids?”

“No, not at all.”

“With my office hours and travel schedule, it would be impossible to have a life like that. And I think, to do either well, you have to choose. I’m already pretty good at one, and it’s important to me. So why take a chance by adding the other?”

I nod. “Makes perfect sense.”

He angles his body so that he can face me more head-on. “Have you been married?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What kind of question is that?” I force a swallow as I repeat his question. “I got ice cream from there today,” I say, pointing at the parlor across from Xavier Park. “It was really good.”

When I look back at him, he’s still looking at me. The intensity and curiosity make me squirm.

“Why not?” he repeats.

Because I thought I was going to get married once, and I’ll never go through that again.

The *clip-clop* of the horse’s hooves doesn’t even begin to drown out the sound of blood pouring across my ears. I mentally smack myself for bringing this up in the first place.

I feel pressured to tell him the truth—mostly because I know he would be open with me. But if I do that, if I spill my guts all over this beautiful velvet carriage, the picture that I paint won’t match the Blaire he thinks he knows. And I’ll have a hell of a time getting out of that mental space.

Jack is intrinsically tied to that time in my life. I cannot uncouple the two. I’ve tried for years.

I clear my throat and avoid his piercing gaze.

What would Holt say if I told him that Jack left me because I almost got kicked out of law school? Would he think less of me, of my family, that I was going to Linton to bail Machlan out of jail at least once a month after our parents died? Would he think I’m an irresponsible disaster if he knew all of the financial holes I found myself in back then? Some of which I’m still digging myself out of now?

“Blaire ...”

“I’ve not found the right person, I suppose.”

“Are you looking for him?”

My laugh is silent, but my body moves with the force of holding it back.

Holt’s brows furrow. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means I’m not looking for him.”

My response is clipped and to the point, and I hope Holt takes it at face value. But when I glance at him across my shoulder, I see that he doesn’t.

His gaze challenges me. The look he wields my way tries to worm its way inside me and extract all the ugly things I don't want him to know.

I do my best mirror of his expression—a trick I learned in law school, but he doesn't bite.

“Why do you do this?” he asks.

“What am I doing?”

He fights a grin. “You're trying to redirect this conversation.”

“I answered your question.”

A breeze shoots through the carriage and ruffles the end of my sweater. I pull it tighter to my body as we take a slow, wide turn next to a stately fountain. Kids stand around it and toss coins into the water.

When I look back at Holt, he's still watching me.

“I heard from Yancy today—my assistant,” I clarify. “She said that we should be back in the building this week.”

“Oh.”

“I'll be out of your hair soon.”

He reaches forward and brushes a strand of hair out of my face. The tenderness of his gesture makes my heart swell.

“I'm more concerned about something else,” he says.

“What's that?”

He pulls his hand back and relaxes back against the velvet. His tongue swipes across his bottom lip as he eyes me carefully.

“Why do you have such a hard time opening up?” he asks.

“I didn't know I do.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Yes, you do.”

“No, I don't,” I insist. “I just choose not to spill all the details about my life to anyone who will listen.”

“I'm not just anyone who will listen, Blaire. I want to get to know you.”

“You do know me.”

He's not impressed.

“I'm not as interesting as most people,” I say. “I spent my time in the office, in a courtroom, or at home. I don't have a lot of hobbies. I don't have a lot of friends. There's no time for it in my life. I told you this already.”

“You did. You told me all of that—all of that superficial, first-date bullshit that doesn't say anything about *you*. You know this. You aren't

stupid.”

His tone cuts through me.

My chin lifts, my heart beating in a well-practiced rhythm. It’s my go-to, my auto-response when I’m at work and being haggled by a judge or attorney. I don’t let them see me sweat.

I won’t let him either.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’m not stupid. What I am, however, is intentional.”

“So you’re intentionally choosing not to share anything about yourself with me?”

“In a way, yes.”

He sighs and shakes his head.

“What does it matter?” I ask. “I will be gone in five days, tops. Does it matter how I feel about marriage? Or what flavor ice cream I like best? Or ... anything? No, Holt. It doesn’t.”

“Someone really burned you, didn’t they?”

I roll my eyes and look at the back of Cassius’s gray-haired head.

“Look, I don’t want to press you,” Holt says. “I don’t want you sharing anything with me that you’re uncomfortable sharing. But is it totally absurd to want to be friendly? If I’m in Chicago, we could meet for drinks. If you’re back down here, we could have dinner. Is it so wrong?”

A sigh leaves my lips well before I intend. “Why does everyone keep saying this to me?”

“Who is everyone?”

“Okay, two people,” I say with a slight smile. “You and Sienna Landry.”

“She’s a nice girl.”

“She’s nosy like you,” I say, elbowing him in the side. “Must be the Savannah in you.”

He laughs. “I won’t point out that you’re changing the topic again.”

The carriage comes to a stop beneath the sign that reads The Carriage House. I glance up and smile.

“Saved by the bell,” he says.

He stands and straightens his tie before stepping down the steps. Cassius greets him, and they chatter about the ride. Holt keeps a side-eye on me as he extends a hand my way.

I place my palm in his.

The warmth and familiarity of his grip trickles across my skin. His fingertips press against the small of my back as my feet hit the pavement.

“I hope you enjoyed your ride,” Cassius says to me.

“I did. It was lovely. Thank you.”

“Anything for Mr. Mason.” He looks at Holt and nods. “Give me a call if you need anything else.”

“Will do, sir. Have a good evening,” Holt says.

“Good night.” Cassius turns and tends to his horse.

The air is much cooler than it was when we began. The overhead clouds are a dark, menacing navy blue as we head to our cars.

We walk silently down the tree-lined sidewalk, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

Raindrops begin to fall from the sky as we make it to my car. He tugs the door open and holds it as I climb in.

“That was really nice,” I say. “Thank you for taking me.”

He studies me. Water droplets fall on his hair, making the locks appear darker and silkier. They drip onto his face and shoulders as he stands with one hand on the car door and the other on the roof.

My heartbeat thunders in my chest. The uncertainty of what he’s about to say eats at me. With each second that passes, my anxiety grows.

Is he going to tell me I’m too much trouble and that I should go? Is he going to say that my refusal to answer his questions is rude? Is he going to go back to the office and send me to his home alone?

I open my mouth to say something, anything when he speaks.

“I’m sorry if I made you uneasy by asking questions,” he says. “I find it too easy to open up to you, and it never occurred to me that maybe that doesn’t work both ways.”

I sigh. “No, Holt—”

He cuts me off with the crook of his brow. “You are absolutely right. Never compromise yourself because someone pushes.” He begins to close the door. “I’ll see you at home. Drive carefully.”

Before I can even open my mouth this time, he closes the door.

I watch him jog across the street and back to his car in the rain. Water presses against the white linen, and it molds to his frame. I see his rear lights flip on a few cars down and watch him pull away.

Still, I sit and let the events of the evening settle into my soul. After a few long minutes, I start my car and pull onto the street.

“And I thought the hardest thing would be not having sex with him,” I say aloud. “I had no idea it would be this.”

I take a right at the end of the park and head back to Holt’s.

EIGHTEEN

Holt

The lamp on my desktop shines a warm, yellow light onto the papers spread out in front of me.

My back aches from sitting for four hours and delving deep into the Landry offer. I always work at night but never at my desk for hours on end.

I sit back and stretch my arms overhead. My muscles scream at the sudden movement. My brain, though, cherishes the opportunity to stop analyzing numbers.

The reprieve doesn't last long. It just changes topics.

Blaire arrived a few minutes after me. I made us a drink while she went upstairs and retrieved her briefcase. Then we sat in the living room—her with her briefcase and me with a book.

It wasn't as awkward as I thought it might be, but I do think I pissed her off. She shied away from making eye contact and pulled away when I reached across her to take her empty glass. It wasn't our usual flirty interaction. It wasn't nearly as easy either.

And I hate it.

It's because I walked away from her on the street. I know that. But I had to.

It was clear she didn't want to talk. Even though I was curious and wanted her to open up, I was exhausted. I'd pushed all day. I've pushed people and things and schedules for weeks. I don't want to have to push with Blaire, too.

My stomach tightened as she snapped her briefcase shut and announced she was going to bed. I absorbed her grin and little wave good night—neither cold, exactly, but also not filled with the warmth I’ve come to expect—and told her good night. But after a quick workout, a long shower, and too much time to think, I ended up in my office. The place I should’ve been for longer today anyway.

What makes this woman tick?

The question has rolled around my mind all damn night. Hell, since the moment I met her I’ve wondered this very thing. But the more time I spend with her, the more I should know about her and the less I do.

I’m getting tripped up. I’m caring. I’m giving a fuck on a plethora of levels.

Her refusal to open up to me is irritating. The fact that I want her to is downright infuriating. Me pushing her makes me a dick, but if I don’t, that feels wrong too.

How did I get myself into this position?

I bend my neck side to side to relieve some of the tension before turning back to Wade’s plans. I pick up my pencil when I hear something behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I see her. Blaire is standing in the doorway in an oversized T-shirt. Her hair is messy, spilling all over her shoulders, and her eyes are heavy yet clear.

“Everything all right?” I ask.

She walks across the room and stops a few feet away from my desk. Her features are sober.

I turn in my chair to face her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice just above a whisper.

It’s soft and delicate and void of the confidence she usually oozes into everything. While it’s beautiful to see her stripped of the mask she wears, it’s painful too. Because I’m convinced this isn’t easy for her.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “What are you sorry for?”

I want to reach for her, but I don’t. After tonight, I’m not sure what she’ll do.

I wish she’d fall into my arms and bury her head in my chest. My hands want to squeeze her body and reassure her of my presence and my ability to protect her from whatever is troubling her.

Because I can. I can help her with anything. But I'm not sure she'll let me.

She's a strong, gorgeous woman on an island by herself by her own choice.

But why?

She lifts her chin. "You've been so kind to me. You've opened your home and given me your time, and I've ... I've not reciprocated any of that."

"You don't have to reciprocate anything. I offer what I want to offer you. It's not predicated on anything else."

Her nod is subtle.

She blows out a deep, haggard breath. "I know. But—"

"But do you? Because it's important to me that you know that."

The chair squeaks as I move to the edge. It's the only sound besides her wispy breaths that gives away how nervous she is.

I hold up a hand when she starts to speak again.

"I'm sorry if I pressed today. I just want to get to know you. You're smart and funny and observant. It feels natural to want to learn more about what makes a woman like you tick. But maybe I shouldn't. I ..."

I don't know. If she doesn't want to go there with me, then that's her choice. It's one that I will, without a doubt, honor.

But it doesn't feel wrong to want to get to know her more deeply. And that's what's worrisome.

She forces a swallow. "This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me."

I stay quiet. I can see a hundred different things sitting on her tongue and how hard it is for her to choose which thing to say.

"You aren't wrong to ask questions, Holt. It's a nice thing to want to get to know someone."

"I'd love it if you wanted to get to know me."

She smiles but it falters quickly. "I ... I do. You know that I do."

"I hope so."

She takes another deep breath. "I've been lying in bed tonight thinking about you and what you said and what Sienna has been saying. And ... I know I have vulnerability issues."

I lock my hands together in front of me and rest my elbows on my knees.

“Letting people inside my world ... scares me.” She looks at the ceiling. “I feel like such an idiot for saying that. But it does. You aren’t even asking me anything deep, and I still ... shut down.”

“You know what? It scares me too. It scares me to let people into my inner circle, and it scares me to be inside someone else’s.”

She drops her head and levels her eyes with mine. “Really?”

I get to my feet. My hands find my hair. My fingernails drag across my scalp, the bite feeling good despite the pain.

It’s my turn to take a deep breath as I try to decide if going into all of this is worth it. I’m two seconds away from telling her it’s okay and that I see her point about keeping things superficial between us, but then I look at her face.

The pain there is unmistakable. The fear, too, is obvious.

That’s when I know: I have no choice.

If this walled-off woman is opening up to me of all people, it’s my responsibility to help her.

I want to.

“I had a girlfriend a few years ago,” I say. “It started out innocent enough. She stayed here a few nights here and there, and eventually, she lived here. I didn’t even realize it at the time. I guess, in retrospect, I wasn’t around a lot and didn’t really question why she was here when I got home. I figured she just wanted to see me.”

“Makes sense.”

“But she didn’t. She’d pretty much just moved in. And when it got to be too much for me—when things settled down a bit at work, and I was home more and kind of put two-and-two together, it got bad.”

“How do you mean?” she asks.

“Well, we weren’t compatible. Not to be living together twenty-four seven. But I knew that. She was never that kind of person for me, and my lackadaisical approach with her was the wrong and irresponsible way to handle it.”

“Surely, she knew that, though,” Blaire says.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t know if it matters because even if she did, it doesn’t change what happened.” My lip hurts as I bite down to brace myself for the flood of memories. “Kendra was really big into the social aspect of Savannah. Her parents are deeply embedded in the clubs and charities and all that shit that goes down behind the scenes.”

“Are you? I mean, are you a part of that scene?”

I try hard not to roll my eyes. “Yes. I am. Mostly because I grew up in it and operate a business here. It’s good for networking and for giving back to our community. But I don’t care about the rest of it—the balls and cocktail hours and all that shit.”

“But Kendra did.”

“She did. And because she assumed, I guess, that we were a permanent thing, she positioned herself as such. I had no idea.”

I run a hand down my face as I remember the night I realized what happened.

“I got an invitation in the mail addressed to a Mr. and Mrs. Holt Mason. Needless to say, I was confused. And I was downright shocked when she sort of offhandedly mentioned that it was from one of her friends in New York. I started putting different pieces together.”

My chest squeezes as I recall the events of the next twenty-four hours.

The black stains that marred her face. My utter confusion. The ugliness of the words thrown back and forth.

“Unbeknownst to me, she had moved in. Let her apartment go. Started getting mail at my house. I’d never saw us like that, but she obviously did.” I blow out a breath. “I tried to rationalize with her, but she wasn’t having it. And it just ... devolved from there.”

My heartbeat quickens as freeze-frame images flash before my eyes.

I force a swallow down my throat. The passage is constricted as a wash of emotions reminiscent of that day flow through me.

A chill rips down my spine.

“When I got home from work the next day, she was gone,” I say, the words tinged with an anger I choke back. “And my house was a disaster. Paint in the bed. Broken windows. My clothes and belongings strewn around the house and in the pool. It was ... it took weeks to clean it up.”

And even longer for me to trust anyone again.

“I sat in the bed, in the middle of the paint and broken glass, completely numb. It felt surreal. A complete violation of my trust. I questioned everyone and everyone’s motives for a long time after.”

Maybe I still do.

My eyes find Blaire’s again. She’s watching me carefully.

“Wow,” she says. “I’m sorry. For you both, really.”

“She didn’t come around for a long time. She didn’t show up at the events that she never missed even before all of this. No one heard from her, and her parents wouldn’t talk to me when I tried to check on her. They still won’t speak to me when I see them around.”

“That’s not your fault, though,” she says. “You didn’t make a commitment to her.”

“But I didn’t take care of her as I should’ve. I should’ve been clear from the start. I guess I assumed too many things too.” I sigh. “My life goes a million miles per hour sometimes. I’m responsible for so many people, so many families. It’s all I can do to keep my head above water most days—but that’s my choice. I love it. Kendra got sucked in and spit out, and I blame myself for that. Even if I didn’t mean to do it.”

I push my chair under my desk and then lean against it.

Blaire stands in front of me, her hands wrapped around her middle. She’s less rigid than she was when she first entered but still too tense to make me relax.

“I have a hard time letting people in because of that,” I say softly. “I generally don’t like being too incorporated into someone else’s life, either, because then I have a responsibility that I don’t have time to take seriously. I miss stuff. I miss signs. I can’t do things the right way, and the right way is the only way I want to do everything.”

She leans against the bookshelf and watches me out of the corner of her eye. I think she’s mulling what I just said over and trying to make sense of it.

I know I sound pretentious—as though I have some crazy pull on women—but that’s not at all what I mean. I hope she understands that.

“Can I ask you something?” she whispers.

“Sure.”

“Why did you ask me to stay?”

Her eyes shine with some unnamed emotion. Whatever it is staring back at me is raw and unfiltered. This moment, beneath the harsh yellow light and in a plain white T-shirt that hangs mid-thigh—Blaire Gibson is the most beautiful I’ve ever seen her.

“Honestly? I don’t know,” I say. “You’re strong. You hold your own. You’re gorgeous and intelligent, and I enjoy talking to you. And it probably didn’t hurt that you live a thousand miles away.”

She almost smiles. “I figured that helped.”

“At least I’m honest.”

She blows out a breath and paces a little circle. Her fingers tug at the fabric of her shirt—clenching and unclenching it on repeat. Finally, she stops and looks at me with a resolution that makes me hold my breath.

“I have trust issues,” she says.

“I’m aware.”

She cracks a grin. “I’m serious. I really do. I don’t think I even understood the depths of it until I got here.”

“Why here?”

“I’m out of my wheelhouse,” she says, looking around. “I’m out of my routine. The people in my life know what to expect, and none of them pushes the agenda. But then I come here and meet you, and you don’t know the lines I’ve established. And then Sienna, bless her heart, somehow feels like I’m on her turf down here, and now we’re going to be best friends.”

“She’s a good friend to have.”

Blaire’s shoulders fall. “I don’t ... I don’t know *how* to be a friend, Holt. I don’t know how to tell you things about me and know you won’t ridicule me for them.”

I push off my desk. “Do you think I’d do that? Because, if you do, I’ve done something wrong.”

“No,” she rushes, sticking a hand in front of her. “That’s not what I mean.”

“I would never ridicule you for anything you say or choose to share with me. Unless you think Boone is a genius. In that case, prepare yourself.”

This gets a little laugh out of her.

She’s gathering her courage as I watch her from a safe distance.

“When my parents died, I was a wreck,” she says, her tone monotone and as if she just needs to get the words out. “They were my lifeline. My safety net. Having them pass away like they did just pulled the rug out from under me.”

I nod.

“I had a boyfriend. Jack was his name. And a friend named Lacie. And, at first, they were supportive.”

My jaw clenches. *I don’t think I like where this is going.*

She ignores me. “I couldn’t pull myself together. It was ... months before I could even function for a whole day. I had their estate to settle. I

had to keep my youngest brother from landing himself in prison. Walker ... I don't even want to go there, and Lance had a health crisis that I had to get him through because if I didn't, it would fall on our nana."

She paces back and forth across my office. The words tumble past her lips in quick succession. It's as though she's afraid that if she stops, she'll never restart.

"That's a lot," I say softly, wanting to offer support but not interrupt.

She stops walking and looks at me. "It was so much." Her voice cracks. "And, like you, I looked up one day and realized that decisions had been made without me being asked. Only, Jack and Lacie had decided to move on together, and I was left holding a bunch of broken pieces of a life I had just a few weeks before."

I was right. I don't like where this is going.

"I remember asking him why he did that to me. How could he do this to me? And he said I was so self-absorbed with my own shit and that I wasn't there for him. That he needed my support to get through law school, and if I wasn't going to give him that, then he didn't see why he should waste any time on me."

A single, solitary tear slips down her cheek.

My heart breaks for her. Watching her cry feels like someone kicked me in the gut.

I reach for her, but she backs away.

"He told me I was weak and too emotional, and I would never make a good attorney. He threw all the things I'd confided in him back in my face and made me sound like an impulsive train wreck." She wipes her eyes with the back of her hands. "Maybe I was."

"You just lost your parents, Blaire. You're entitled to be a mess. But you're also entitled to have the support of your friends when you're going through things like that."

It takes everything I have to be kind and patient. What I really want to do is give in to the burst of adrenaline shooting through my veins and demand to know who this guy is and where I can find him.

But that won't help her. And, for what might be the first time in a long time, she needs someone to put her first.

She snuffles. "I was staying in his apartment. I was on his phone plan. I had everything of mine tied up with his, and when he kicked me out, I had

nothing. I controlled nothing in my life. I had to threaten to have the police come and let me get my things because he wouldn't let me in."

I take her hand in mine and pull her closer.

We stand with a few feet between us. The fear in her eyes from before is faded. A strand of hair is stuck to the side of her face with a tear. I use my free hand to brush it away.

The contact breaks an invisible wall. Her eyes fill with unshed tears.

"I broke down, Holt," she says through a lump in her throat. "I sat one night in the bathroom of this shitty apartment that I found for next to nothing and told Machlan how he had to straighten up. How his future depended on it. How I expected him to make good choices. I hung up the phone and just cried."

Tears flow down both cheeks. She tries to slip her hand from mine, but I hold it tight.

"I sat there that night with a piece of glass in one hand and a bottle of tequila in the other and a letter from the university that said if I didn't get my shit together, I was out. I probably cried enough in that one sitting to fill the bottle up with tears."

She lowers her eyes from mine.

"And I thought about just ending it all." She hiccups through her tears. "I figured I could drink enough and then just do it and never wake up or feel anything again. I was so tired of feeling like I was drowning and that no one fucking cared."

I pull her to me. She resists at first, but then melts in my arms.

My hands clasp at the small of her back as I rest my chin on top of her head. I squeeze my eyes shut and feel the sting of her words in my chest.

Her body goes limp in my arms as she succumbs to the emotions she's been holding in for God knows how long. Her cries are quiet—her fists balling my shirt up and holding it tight.

I try to imagine her pain. I attempt to piece together a life without my parents, without my work, without my brothers who are my best friends.

The thought alone is enough to make me want to lose my mind.

We stand in the middle of my office for a long time, swaying back and forth. I hold her tight until her cries soften and then stop. My body doesn't separate from hers until her fists let go of my shirt and her body stops shaking. Only then do I look down.

She peers up at me with a timid look on her face.

“I’m sorry I spewed all of that out like that,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry you held it in for so long.”

She grins. “Thanks for listening.”

“Thanks for trusting me.”

She steps back.

I let her go because I have to, but I hate that I do. I miss her in my arms almost immediately.

We watch each other with a heavy dose of hesitation.

I want to tell her how strong she is and that I’m honored she shared all of that with me. I also want to tell her that I want to take her to bed and kiss her and show her how amazing she is until the sun comes up.

But none of that feels right.

I look over my shoulder at the work I still need to do. It only takes a second to realize it can wait—or *it will wait*, even if it can’t.

I’ll figure it out tomorrow.

“Come on,” I say, taking her hand and tugging her behind me.

“Where are we going?”

“You said you like pizza, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I have some pizza in the freezer with our name on it.”

She laughs. “This one time in college, we ordered this pizza ...”

As we round the corner into the hallway, I mentally check out. I don’t hear her words, just her voice and the way it’s less bogged down. It’s airier and freer ... and music to my ears.

NINETEEN

Blaire

“I feel like food is your love language,” I say, stretching my toes out in front of me.

Holt sits on a wicker chair across the little round table between us and smiles over the rim of his glass.

“There have been worse things said about me,” he says.

I close my eyes and listen to the crickets chirp all around us.

The screened-in porch off the kitchen feels like a cocoon. A fire burns in the large stone fireplace along the far wall. From our perch, you can see the pool and spa to the left and to the right, a vast field of green that I gazed at while eating my breakfast this morning.

Man, how that feels like more than almost a day ago.

I’m not sure if it was the bourbon or if opening up to Holt relaxed me so much, but something did. I could close my eyes and drift to a peaceful sleep. Instead, I let my eyelids fall, and I remember the safety of his arms as I cried.

It’s been a long time since I felt that—the support. And just that someone gives a damn.

“If you don’t want any more of this, I’m going to take it inside,” Holt says with a yawn.

I open my eyes. “I had two pieces. It’s two in the morning. If I eat any more, I’m going to be sick.”

He chuckles as he gets to his feet. “Then I’ll take it inside.”

“Here, I’ll help you.”

We gather our plates and napkins and the rest of the pizza and head inside.

“So, honest opinion—was that better than Chicago pizza?” he asks.

“Close but no. It’s the crust.” I shrug. “It’s just not the same.”

He holds a paper plate over the recycling container. “You just ate two pieces.”

“What is your point?”

“That you must’ve liked it a little bit.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t. I just said Chicago pizza is better.”

“You’re wrong,” he teases as he deposits the plate in the bin.

I walk behind him and ignore the way my body is pulled in his direction. It’s like a magnet—tugging me toward him no matter where I am.

I’ve noticed it all night. We might start on opposite sides of the kitchen, but we end up side by side. Even when we moved to the porch to eat, our chairs drifted closer and closer.

It’s a weird occurrence, but one I don’t mind.

I don’t think he minds, either.

“At least I don’t have thirty frozen pizzas in my freezer,” I point out as I wipe the counter off. “That’s overkill, don’t you think?”

“Rosie’s granddaughter was selling them for her softball team.”

I shake my head.

“What?” He laughs. “They were ten bucks for a large one-topping. It was a good deal, and it supported a good cause. What’s not to love about that?”

I can’t help but laugh too. It doesn’t take long before it turns into a long, sleepy yawn.

“Tired?” Holt asks.

“Yeah.”

“It’s been a long day. Let’s head to bed.”

“I hope I can sleep,” I say as he flips off the overhead lights.

He nudges my elbow toward the doorway. “I thought you said you were tired.”

“I am. Terribly. But sometimes being this tired makes me toss and turn. It’s counter-intuitive, I know.”

We enter the hallway. It’s lit only by a small light hanging above the artwork I noticed on my first day here. The house is entirely quiet; the

floorboards don't even creak as we transverse the area.

There's a peace about this house that I feel in my bones. It might be the darkness, and it might be the solitude, but something about being here lets my mind reset. I can think. I work more efficiently. The bubble inside my stomach that always feels like it's ready to pop and spur a thousand things to come racing my way is less powerful here.

"I'll tell you what," Holt says as we ascend the stairs. "I have a sauna that will relax every muscle in your body. Ten minutes will knock you out. Guaranteed."

"Ooh, sign me up."

I follow him up the stairs, past my bedroom door, and down the hallway. We take a left at the end and into a cozy master bedroom.

"Oh, wow," I say, turning in a full circle to take it all in.

The walls are painted the softest of grays, and the trim is bright white. Gold curtains frame floor-to-ceiling windows that face the back of the property.

A large, king-sized bed with a gold and black bedspread sits against one wall. The furniture is grand but not overdone and complements the large yet quaint space perfectly.

"This is exactly what I would've pictured for you," I tell him as I come to a stop in front of him.

He grins. "You've been thinking about my bedroom?"

"No. I said *would've*. Listen when I speak."

I turn away so he doesn't see my smile.

"Lies," he whispers from a position close to my back.

I shiver at the proximity and the heat of his breath on the back of my neck. But before I can anticipate anything else, he speaks again from a more distant range.

"What's your bedroom like?" he asks.

"What do you think it's like?"

I turn to face him. He presses his lips together in thought.

The soft glow of the bedroom lights blur the sharpness of his features. His eyes are mossier and less jade, his jaw blunt and less defined. Still, he's beautiful in every way.

"I'd say your bedroom is black and white with pink details here and there. But not too much," he adds. "Can't let anyone think you have girlish whims or anything."

I shove his shoulder as I laugh, knocking him off balance.

“But am I right?” he asks.

“Yes,” I mock, rolling my eyes.

He rewards me with a bright smile. “There’s a difference between you and me, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll admit that I’ve been thinking about your bedroom.”

My stomach clenches. Fire rockets from my core down my thighs. Holt watches me as if he can see my inner workings and just what he does to me.

His eyes darken, his lids hood, as he takes in my reaction to him. My breathing becomes uneven as our proximity and location come together in one fluid, perfect moment.

I wait for any sign that he’s finally going to touch me. The longer I watch him, the more I want him. *I need him*. I’m dying for him to break the barrier between us.

He shifts his weight, and my breath catches in my throat. My body tingles with expectancy at his next move.

He runs a hand down his jaw and over his chin as he watches me from just a few feet away.

“The sauna is in here,” he says and turns away.

My insides scream as the pent-up desire I’ve had building for days now threatens to spill out. I force myself not to shout at him, not to reach for him, not to make any mention of how irritating he is when he does this.

It takes a full two seconds to get my feet to move to follow him.

I consider that maybe he didn’t feel the same way after the night at Picante. But then I remind myself that he pursued me. He wanted to see me. He wanted to meet for brunch.

But that was before I snotted all over his shirt tonight.

We step inside a brightly lit bathroom that’s as beautiful as the rest of his house. The cabinets and built-ins are white, as is the claw foot bathtub. The only pops of color come from the wooden sauna door tucked into a corner and the turquoise-colored tile in the shower.

He ignores me and heads straight for the sauna. Dials are adjusted, and buttons are pressed.

I bite my lip as I watch him focus on everything except me. Each second that passes and he’s still ignoring me makes me more anxious.

The thought of his naked, sweaty body being in a small enclosure next to mine makes every muscle in my body twitch. My nerves are heightened as he turns to face me.

“Have you used one of these before?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“You can get inside ...” He looks me up and down. “In any state you want. Dressed, undressed—it’s all fine. The timer will go off in ten minutes.”

I try not to look shocked.

“A bucket of water and a ladle are inside as well as a few essential oils. Just add some water to the rocks in the basket beside it to increase the moisture. And add the oils if you want.”

“Oh, okay,” I say, taking my eyes from him and to the sauna. “I got it.”

“You can stick the ladle through the door handle inside to lock it if you want. Just ... saying,” he adds.

My hackles are raised.

Even if he doesn’t want me now that I’ve cried like a baby in front of him, he could be a gentleman and not lead me on.

Dressed, undressed—it’s all fine.

Damn you.

“Will do.” I press my lips together. “Anything else I need to know?”

He presses his lips together too. I think his is to hide a smile and not from annoyance. It only irritates me further.

“Nope. I think that’s it,” he says. “Enjoy.”

And with that, he slides out of the room.

I wait until I see him leave the bedroom before I turn back toward the sauna.

The tension in my body proves my need for the tool in front of me. But it’s the same tension that almost has me walking out and into the guest bedroom and locking the door behind me.

“How can one man be so frustrating?” I whisper as I slip out of my T-shirt.

I take off my panties and leave them lying on top of my shirt on the floor. If he comes back inside and sees them—oh, well. It’s not like it’s a new threshold for us.

It’s more like one I’d like to revisit.

The sauna is already hot when I enter. It smells faintly of a distinct type of wood. I locate the rocks in the corner and the little bucket Holt mentioned. I ladle a bit of water over them before sticking the oversized spoon through the door handle.

I take a towel off a rack by the door and place it on the lower of the two benches. I'm thankful I didn't drink anything but water at our little pizza party because the heat of the room is enough to make me lightheaded on its own.

I sit on the towel and breathe in the thick air. My skin is damp. Beads of sweat dot my body.

Next to the rack of towels is a thin, rectangular window. Through it, I can see the vanity in the bathroom and the mirrors hanging above it.

I imagine Holt lying on the bed in the other room. He's probably grinning smugly, knowing I'm in here hot and naked and wishing he was with me.

He wants me too. I'm certain. I can see it when he looks at me. I can feel it in the zing of his touch and how his gaze flips to mine as if to ask if I felt it too.

I can hear it in his voice when he speaks and see it, too, in his actions.

Except that he hasn't tried to sleep with me since the night at Picante.

I sigh.

I appreciate the conversations we've had and the simplicity of being with him. And how he was so kind and gentle with me tonight as I told him about the night with the glass—something I've never told anyone except my therapist. I love all of that. I do.

But I'd also like to be touched.

"I guess I'll have to do that myself," I say out loud.

My body already hums from the events of the night—from being in Holt's midst and getting slight touches here and there. It's maddening that he works me up with only the vaguest brush of his hand, but here I am.

I stretch my legs out in front of me. Droplets of sweat roll down my torso. Some course off my back and land on the towel; others travel all the way down my legs.

My core burns and not just from the heat.

The timer reads that I have seven more minutes to go. I could wait and take care of myself when I get back to my bedroom ... or I could do it now.

My heart thunders in my chest at the prospect of getting myself off inside Holt's sauna.

I bite my lip and bring my hands to my stomach. I part my legs. My hands slide down my abdomen, my brain conjuring up memories of what Holt's hands felt like on my skin on the balcony.

I pant as my fingers hit the apex of my thighs, and my head falls back.

My back arches as my fingers hit the swollen bud that's begged for relief all evening. I gasp as I rub it with my fingertip and feel my body respond.

"Dammit," I whisper.

I take a deep breath and raise my head to check the timer again.

I freeze.

Despite the raging inferno both inside the sauna and my body, a flood of shock hits my veins in a quick, unanticipated dump.

Holt is standing in front of the window. He's watching me with hooded eyes and a grin that I'm not sure how to read.

He jiggles the door handle.

I don't move my body ... nor do I move my hand.

The temperature increases swiftly, but I think it's more from his heated gaze than the thermostat.

I'm not sure what to do.

He jiggles the handle again. This time, though, it's quicker. More frantic. And I realize I have him in the position he's had me in for days.

A knowing look flickers across his face. I smile at him.

Busted.

I touch myself again. My jaw falls open as I gasp a quick breath that's not as dramatic as it is necessary. Every fiber of my being is screaming a different warning, a different plea as Holt's eyes are glued to my hand.

He jiggles the handle again.

I press harder into myself, urged on by the pure desire in his eyes. The contact makes my body pulse, and his gaze is snapped up to meet mine.

"Open the door," he says. His tone is my favorite of his. It's confident and strong. But I've heard it enough to be able to pick out the underlying thread of exasperation, and that's what I choose to act on.

I grin, biting my bottom lip. My fingertips slip across my clit. They're aided by my sweat and how turned on I am by the intensity of Holt's gaze.

"Open up, Blaire."

My legs fall to the sides. “Open like that? Is that better, Holt?”

“Be sure you know what you’re doing.”

I refuse to break eye contact. If I do, he’ll know that I don’t, in fact, know exactly what I’m doing, and if I pause to think about it, I might stop.

“Don’t you have something else to do?” I ask.

He remains perfectly still. “This isn’t funny.”

“Nope. It’s not,” I say, flicking the bud again. “Ah!”

“I will take this door off the motherfucking hinges.”

“Not before I come.”

He disappears.

I want to go to the window and see if he’s still here—not that I want to know if he is or isn’t. This is a twist in the scenario I didn’t think through. I’m not even sure who I am right now. I don’t act like this.

Before I can convince myself to slide out of the sauna and run to the guest room, I hear the sound of a motor. The door vibrates. The ladle shakes against the metal handle.

I realize what he’s doing.

“*Oh, shit.*”

I sit upright and wait with bated breath.

It takes thirty seconds. The sauna fills with cool air. The doorway, though, fills with Holt Mason.

He. Took. The. Door. Off. The. Hinges.

Shit.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Coming after you.”

“You most certainly will come after me,” I say with a raised brow. “Because I’m *this close* to getting there myself.”

He lunges forward and scoops me up. My legs are over one arm, and my back is supported by the other. He carries me into the bedroom and tosses me onto the bed.

“Holt,” I squeal. “I’m sweaty. Don’t put me on your bed.”

He pins me in place with his gaze as he strips out of his clothes. “I’m not worried about the fucking bed.”

Before I know what’s happening, he’s crawling over the bed and hovering on top of me.

My breathing is shallow. I can feel the blotchiness in my skin and the stickiness of my perspiration. But, more so, I can feel Holt’s energy rippling

off him.

I'm so fucked.

I hope.

TWENTY

Blaire

“You are a damn conundrum. Do you know that?” he asks from above me.

“I don’t know. I think I’m pretty easy to figure out.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I’ve tried to give you space. I’ve gone out of my fucking way to make sure you don’t think I asked you here so that I can have sex with you.”

“I noticed.”

He almost grins. *Almost*. “And then I catch you in my sauna thinking you’re going to touch yourself with me right here.”

I lift my head off the blankets. “Because you won’t.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I most definitely will.”

My head hits the blanket as he shows me the tie he had on earlier clenched in one of his large fists.

“Give me your hands,” he demands.

“What for?”

He sits beside me. Women would pay big money to watch his muscles flex like this.

He takes my hands and jerks them above my head. The silk slips across my wrists. In a moment, they’re pulled together and bound.

My blood pressure spikes as my heart pounds inside my body. I’m not sure if I like this or if I don’t.

But I am sure of one thing: *I trust him*.

The realization takes me out of the moment as I process it.

Only one person has ever tried to do something like this to me, and I laughed in his face. But with Holt, it's hot. It's safe. And as he springs off the bed and rustles around a drawer, I don't have any reservations at all except I wish he'd hurry.

I squirm. "What are you doing now?"

"Finding a condom."

"Good plan, good plan."

He grins at me over his shoulder. "One of us has to think."

"Hey, I'm thinking. I've been thinking. I thought out an entire plan."

Kind of.

If he tries to keep me from hearing his chuckle, he fails.

He turns toward the bed and makes his way to me. He climbs on the mattress and stops between my legs.

I pant as he intentionally doesn't touch me. "Holt, come on."

I try to reach him with my foot, but he pulls away with the dirtiest, sexiest grin.

"Your hands are up there for a reason," he says. "So you can't touch me. Or yourself."

"Holt ..."

"I mean it," he says, his eyes smoldering. "If you touch me, I'll stop."

"You can't stop if you don't start," I say, wiggling around again.

He places a hand on my stomach to hold me in place. "Bend your knees."

I do as instructed.

His hand comes around my waist and dips beneath me. He cups my ass cheeks in his palms and raises my hips.

I tremble without being touched.

He holds my gaze as he presses kisses up the inside of my right leg. Each touch of his lips feels like it's being imprinted on my skin forever. As he nears my opening, he stops.

"Holt, I'm going to kill you," I groan.

His eyes twinkle with mischief. "Paybacks are a bitch."

He blows across my vagina. The air is cool against my wet, amped-up flesh, and I squirm again. I start to bring my hands down to help guide him along but then remember his command.

The side of his face is roughed against the inside of my thigh. His stubble bites into my over-sensitized body, and I moan in pleasure.

My head feels like it's going to explode. I've never been this turned on and in need—need—of getting off. I can't take the little bits he's giving me.

I need it all. *I need him.*

He pulls his hands from beneath me and uses them to spread my knees wider. I'm totally exposed in every way, and I don't give a damn.

It's the wildest, most freeing sensation. It's one I never thought I'd experience.

He whisks his fingers across the outside of my slit. I hold my breath. But instead of making any kind of contact that would give me relief, he instead runs his fingers along the crease where my leg meets my body.

It's so good, so intimate, but totally screws with my head.

"You could've just asked me to fuck you," he says like he has all the time in the world.

I lift my head off the bed. "If my being displayed like this in front of you isn't asking you to fuck me, then I don't know what to do."

He grins devilishly. "This is me telling you I'm going to fuck you. This isn't you asking."

I smile as sweetly as I can manage through gritted teeth. "Holt, *please fuck me.*"

"In due time. Patience, sweetheart."

My head falls back to the blankets again. "You can take your sweetheart and—oh!"

He places a kiss on the outside of my pussy. Then another on the other side. Then another, casually, as if there's no hurry whatsoever.

I start to reach for him again but stop myself.

He's in control.

And like a lightbulb went off inside my head, I realize what he's doing.

He's showing me I can trust him.

I look down at his head between my legs. He's watching me, framed by my thighs, and holds my gaze as he licks a deliberate path up the center of my body.

"Fuck," I hiss, my knees falling apart even more.

He sticks a finger into my opening and uses his thumb to rub the exterior. But what he does not do is go anywhere near my clit. And the harder I try to move to make contact, the farther away he stays.

“Does this feel good?” he asks with a cocky lilt to his voice. “Better than when you were touching yourself?”

“At least I knew where to touch myself.”

He laughs, working his fingers deeper inside my body.

I raise my hips to make it easier for him.

“I know where to touch you too,” he says. “I’m just choosing not to yet.”

“Why? Tell me why,” I whine.

“Because that’s what you’re trying to get me to do, and you don’t need to be in control all the time.”

“Yes, I do.”

His thumb gets close to my swollen bud but doesn’t make contact.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I think I might cry.

“It’s good to let someone else take over things sometimes,” he says. “Even I give up power on occasion.”

“I’d like to see that.”

“I do it all the time with you.”

My eyes fly open.

He’s watching me in that crazy way of his. It makes me feel like the only person in the universe who matters at this moment.

His irises are a mixture of greens and almost blues, and I can’t see clear enough to make sense of what’s happening in there.

He dips his head, his eyes still lasered in on mine, and licks my pussy. Sparks shoot through me like a live wire. I shake as bursts of energy fire through my veins.

He cups my ass again as his tongue finally finds my clit.

“Oh, my God ...” I say, each word punctuated with a groan.

My legs stiffen. I can feel the stickiness of my juices on the inside of my thighs. My breasts swell as I press my body against Holt’s face.

He licks and sucks and gives one hundred percent of his attention to my engorged pleasure point. He treats it like an oasis in the middle of the desert—as though he can’t get enough.

I can’t think anymore. I can’t give him hell, or tell him how amazing it feels, or beg him to keep going. My teeth clench together as the pent-up sexual tension builds and builds and ...

I explode all over his face.

I shriek at the almost pain of the orgasm. He responds to my cues and continues to suckle my body. I feel full, *so full*, and so very wet.

My body hums with total satisfaction. Completely spent, my head falls to the side.

Holt places a final kiss against the inside of my thigh before pulling away.

I shudder as the intensity takes a few moments longer to wane.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

I look down. He’s standing at the edge of the bed, wiping his face with his discarded shirt.

“It was worth the wait,” I say.

He grins. “Good to hear. Now come here.”

“I’m too tired.”

He grabs me by my ankles and pulls me to the edge of the bed. He makes quick work of putting on a condom.

“I could fuck you all night,” he says, “but I think you’ve had enough.”

“I don’t want to have had enough.”

He chuckles. “You sure? Because I can put you to bed and call it a night.”

“Not yet,” I say. “Just a little more.”

He flips me over onto my stomach and gets behind me. I’m so wet that he slides into me with ease.

My body spasms around his rock-hard length. “Holt ... *Shit!*”

“Damn, baby,” he groans as he presses into my body.

He fills me, taking a moment to let me adjust to his size. It’s deliriously wonderful and the feeling of his hands gripping my waist is inherently sexy.

He wants me as bad as I wanted him. I can feel it in the way he moves me and the way he watches me. There’s something so heady about it that I can’t help but feel a bit seductive.

My hands are extended in front of me. My ass is up in the air. My brain is, for the first time in a long time, unable to overthink anything. It’s in a muted state of bliss as Holt fucks me from behind.

“Do you want to come again?” he asks through gritted teeth. “Because, if not, this is going to be over soon.”

“I can’t.”

I’ve basically never stopped.

“Okay then.”

It takes just a few more strokes before I hear him growl. He grips me for dear life as his cock swells inside me. I keep my ass tilted up for him.

Finally, he pulls out. I fall to the mattress immediately, my body and mind depleted from the day. The clock beside the bed shows that it's well after three in the morning.

I hear the rustle of the trash can and the sound of running water. I'm nearly asleep when Holt comes back in again.

He picks me up and lays me properly on the bed. The mattress dips as he climbs on beside me.

I jump as a warm washrag touches my still-sensitive slit, and my eyes dart open.

He grins. “I can't let you go to sleep all dirty.”

“I need a shower,” I say, my eyes filling with sleep again.

He tosses the rag onto the floor and curls up behind me. Through my haze, I think he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“Sleep, sweetheart,” he whispers in my ear.

And that's the last thing I remember as I doze off.

TWENTY-ONE

Holt

Moonlight drifts through the drapes that didn't get closed.

I've told myself for the past hour that I'm going to get up. I need to clear my head and get myself together. That won't happen as long as I lay next to Blaire and continue to run my fingers through her long, silky locks.

But I don't. I can't quite force myself to leave her in my bed.

Her hair is tangled from sweat and sex. Every time my fingers find a new little knot, I gently work it out ... and wonder what the fuck is happening.

What am I doing?

I sigh, letting my head sink farther into the pillows.

Blaire rustles next to me. Her cheek moves against my chest, her arm rubbing against my abs as she rearranges her position. I hold my breath and hope she doesn't pull away. Because while I know this isn't where I need to be, it's where I am.

It's where I want to be. And I don't know how I feel about that.

What is it really hurting? I'll have plenty of time in the morning with Oliver to make up for lost time.

My head is murky. My thoughts are a complicated web of logic and emotion—the latter clouding the first. This is precisely why I don't do this. It leads to disaster.

So why am I doing this with Blaire? Why am I pointedly not following my own rules?

Not only that, but why am I instigating it?

It's usually a woman's behavior that confuses me. *This time, it's my own.*

My motivations are typically social or sexual. *This time, it's not.*

I want it to be. Damn, do I want it to be. And maybe I even thought it was when I invited her to stay with me. But it's beyond that now.

Now, wanting her to stay here isn't just about sex. I want to talk to her just as much as I want to fuck her. I want to see her various smiles, hear her laugh, and smell her perfume in the mornings. It's fucked up. But I don't know what to do about it.

My fingers slip through her hair. The weight of her body against mine feels like an anchor. But instead of presenting like a ball-and-chain, it feels more like a reprieve. It gives me a moment to breathe.

There were definitely ideas that we'd work, then fuck, then go to bed. It was supposed to be an easy few days with a woman who lived a thousand miles from here—a woman who had class and her own sense of detachment.

It was perfect.

Blaire wouldn't show up at my house once our time together was done. She wouldn't call me to come over when I was working. There would be no assumptions that we were attending any event together.

It was a week cut-and-dry. It sounded like heaven.

Now I find myself counting the days until she goes home. And not because I'm looking forward to it.

"Fuck," I whisper angrily into the night.

I slip out of bed. The air is cold and almost assaulting. Blaire stirs but settles again with her head on my pillow.

The sight leaves me with a knot in my stomach as I tuck the blankets around her naked body. She smiles in her sleep—a lazy, unguarded gesture that twists the knot inside me harder.

I turn away and pluck my robe off a hook on the bathroom door.

The house is quiet as I make my way through the hallways. I wander aimlessly through the rooms until I wind up in the den.

I flip on the fireplace and take a seat on the sofa. The flames flicker, giving both heat and the illusion of company.

"What are you doing?" I ask myself.

I rest my head on the back of the sofa and fill my lungs with oxygen. It's an attempt to clear my mind.

What's surprising is that I'm not thinking about her body, or how hard I got off, or that she's still in my bed and I could, theoretically, go back up there for another round. Those thoughts are there—I'm a hot-blooded man, after all—but they're a definite back seat to other matters.

I blow out the breath. The hiss of air leaving my body is the only noise in the room.

This is going to end badly if you don't stop it.

I groan, knowing it's true. I also know that if I don't get my head out of my ass and finalize the Landry deal, more things than my situation with Blaire are going to end in destruction.

Our current projects are wrapping up, and we have nothing else on the table. We have to get this property. I have to get it. Everyone put their faith in me, and I can't let them down.

I can't fuck this up.

Yet here I am. Sitting in the den and not at my desk. Not getting ready to go to the office early like I should be.

Shit.

My brain feels like a room with a bunch of open boxes. The contents of which are spewed around my mind. The harder I try to sort them back neatly, the more they fall apart.

What is Blaire going to think in the morning?

This is not like Picante. This isn't a spur-of-the-moment fling that neither of us thinks much about.

She's in my home.

We've shared intimate things about ourselves.

She's in my damn bed.

She has every right to wonder if I'm pursuing her for a reason.

Am I?

I grimace. "No, why would I be? She's leaving in a few days. She doesn't want something serious any more than I do."

But as my words settle in the air, hanging around like they're taunting me, I realize how bitter they taste.

I look at the chair she sat in this evening. She was still annoyed with me for pushing her on the carriage—something I shouldn't have done. Yet her opening up to me and sharing things about her life is something I'll never forget.

It was real. Raw. Profound, in a way.

I've never experienced that kind of intimacy before.

So why her? Why now? Why at the worst possible time in my life?

Still, I watch the fire crackle softly and have half of a notion to wake Blaire. I think she'd like the peace of this moment.

"Maybe that's precisely why it's her and now," I whisper into the night. "I'm only feeling these things for her because it's what we both need right now. It works. There's a freedom for both of us because she's going to leave. And neither of us will be worse for the wear."

I hope.

Blaire

The coffee maker hisses as the final drips of java flow into my cup. I take it from the tray and inhale the decadent aroma.

Holt's robe is soft and warm. I found it draped across the bottom of the bed when I woke up and couldn't help myself from putting it on. It smells like him.

I tug the tie together at my middle before leaning against the kitchen island and gazing across the backyard. The peaceful view helps to settle the wildness that's still present from last night.

"What am I doing?" I ask the empty house.

It's almost lunchtime, and I'm just having coffee. There are three missed calls from Yancy on my phone that I intentionally left in the guest bathroom. I haven't bothered to check my work emails yet.

It's irresponsible despite the fact that I know everything at the office is taken care of. Yancy is handling everything because that's what she does even though I'm usually too anal to let her. But I should be checking in. I need to ensure that all my court dates are extended due to the asbestos and that nothing has fallen through the cracks.

Instead, I'm standing in Holt's kitchen drinking coffee.

Maybe this is what it looks like when someone just throws in the towel.

Is this how lives begin to spiral out of control?

I take a tentative sip of my drink and give that a thought.

Today looks so different than my life did this day a week ago. Then I was sitting at my desk in my business suit, probably lecturing someone about the ins and outs of the law. I'm certain I was irritated and probably ready to have a heart attack—that and wondering why I picked a career that keeps me surrounded by overbearing men.

Then I took a vacation.

Now I stand in a business mogul's luxury kitchen after a night of delicious sex in his multi-million-dollar house near the beach.

I pace around the kitchen, taking in the insane attention to detail in every element of the house. The handcrafted molding around the doorways. The rounded edges of the marble countertops. The way the windows bring in so much light, yet the sun never shines directly in.

It's not surprising, though. That's Holt, and it's one of the things I love so much about him.

My feet stop moving as the last sentence flows through my brain.

I hold my mug with both hands and smile.

I do enjoy so many things about him.

He's so kind and thoughtful. No detail gets by him. We can talk about anything, and his ideas are so thought-provoking. And he cares.

I lean against the counter and think back to last night. How he pushed me on the carriage to open up about myself. Even then, it was as if he was prodding me gently for my own good. As though he knew I needed to get that stuff off my chest.

What's funny is that I didn't even know I needed to share all of that. But waking up this morning felt ... different. Lighter. Less weighed down by the world.

It's probably all the sex.

I laugh at myself.

I grab a seat next to the windows that look across the pool and let my mind float back to Holt's office. My intention wasn't to spill my life's story. All I wanted to do was to admit that he was right—that I do hold things in—and acknowledge that I might need to work on it.

Yet when I experienced the tenderness in his eyes, the attentiveness, my guard slipped.

For once, talking about Jack and the night I started to lose control didn't feel like a shameful blemish on my soul.

I take another sip of coffee and remember how safe I felt in his arms. It was such a relief to tell someone my secrets and not be judged. His arms help put the pieces of me back together.

I sort back through various men I've had semi-relationships with over the years. Never once did I come close to telling any of them.

Why?

Why Holt?

The coffee burns my stomach as the acid sloshes around. I tug the robe even tighter.

My throat cinches, and I take a deep, calming breath.

"It's because you're leaving," I tell myself. "It doesn't matter what he knows about me. He's safe."

He's safe.

My heart sinks as I realize the truth in that.

Holt is safe. He makes me feel protected.

And it's a shame I'll only have this one time in my life.

I put my cup in the dishwasher and head upstairs to check my emails.

TWENTY-TWO

Holt

“We have four days to figure this out,” Oliver says.

I sink into my office chair and look at him.

Wade’s plans are displayed between us. A binder sits open with calculations from the accounting department. A file full of legal paperwork from our attorneys—things to consider, things to incorporate in the final contracts that might affect our negotiations—is bursting at its seams. Next to that mess is a stack of papers Boone dropped off with information regarding potential occupants of the retail space.

It’s a lot. In every way.

“This is a nightmare,” I tell him.

“As if I don’t already know.”

“What did Landry say in the voicemail again?” I ask.

“Which one?”

“About the ballpark offer I threw their way.”

Oliver snorts. “*You are out of your fucking minds.* That’s verbatim.”

“Shit.”

My brother leans forward. The plans crunch beneath his arms. His face shows signs of sleepless nights and an abundance of stress. It makes me feel guilty.

Very fucking guilty.

“Okay,” I say, pointing at a spot on the plans near the beach. “This is wasted area. Could we go higher here? Use this space better? I mean, if we do, we could double, maybe even triple the storefront. I know that’s adding

a ton of shit on Wade and on Boone to sell later, but that makes me feel a whole hell of a lot better offering Landry what we're gonna have to offer."

"I keep looking at that space too. It's the only one with the ability to return more revenue. But if we go higher, are we blocking the view from the tower in the back? That will make it less desirable."

I sigh. "I don't know. That's why we have Wade. I'll call him and see what he thinks."

Oliver nods. "Yeah. Let's try it. We've spent so much time and money on this thing already. If we wind up not making this deal ..."

We exchange a look.

I know what he's thinking. It's the same thing that I realized might be an actual possibility on my way here this morning.

The numbers aren't quite adding up to justify offering what we will have to in order to get Landry to sell. It's absolutely worth it, though. It will trigger a tourism boon to that part of the city, and we'll already have our foot in the door. We just need the final puzzle piece to make it all gel. I just have to find it.

I will. I know I will. I have to.

I just didn't expect to be distracted right in the middle of this.

My mind goes to Blaire—the best distraction I've ever had. It occurred to me on the way here that I'm so distracted for the same reason I shouldn't be: she's leaving.

I can't win.

Focusing on work should be easy because things with Blaire don't matter. She'll be out of here soon. But focusing on anything but her is impossible when I know she'll be gone in a handful of days. It's a double-edged sword.

"Are you okay?" Oliver asks.

"I'm fine." I ignore the burn in my throat. "Let's see what Wade thinks and reconvene this afternoon."

Oliver blows out a breath and sits back. He watches me with the skilled eye of a little brother—one whose job is to pick up on bullshit and call you out on it.

"I can't decide if I liked you better then or now," he says, amused.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He smirks. "I just mean that you're a different guy since Airport Girl came to town."

“*Blaire*,” I say, emphasizing her name, “will be leaving soon. So no worries.”

Even I can hear the irritation in my voice at having to say that.

Oliver nods, obviously enjoying my predicament.

“She’s leaving, huh?” he asks.

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“You did. I was just repeating it.”

I make a show of sighing. I don’t know why. He’s not going to let this go.

He rocks his chair back on two legs and grins. “No. I definitely like you better now.”

“I don’t really want to do this with ya, Ollie.”

“Yeah. I bet you don’t.” He laughs. “And it’s for all the reasons I like you better.”

I get up from the table by the window and head to my desk. His eyes are trained on my back. I can feel them boring into me.

Whatever he’s talking about, I don’t want to hear. It’s probably just a button he thinks he can push and get a few minutes of amusement at my expense.

“I’m not a fucking monkey here for your entertainment, you know,” I say, sitting in my chair.

He laughs. “Nope. You’re a mortal like the rest of us.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I try to wait him out in hopes he’ll give up and leave.

He doesn’t.

“If today was last week, you would’ve already figured out this Landry shit,” he says. “I would’ve been sitting here, twiddling my thumbs, wondering what I’m supposed to do since you do everything.”

“Are you admitting you’re lazy?”

“Ha.”

I look at him and wink. Oliver is the farthest thing from lazy, and we all know it. We also know that I’m ignoring where he’s going with this.

He taps the end of his pen against the table. “I’m just saying that it’s nice to see you doing something other than work for once.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still working, and I will until I get it all figured out.”

He smiles smugly. “Which thing? *Blaire* or the project?”

I'm about to tell him that he's walking a fine line and better watch his step when the door opens. The room fills with the scent of lilies as our mother waltzes in the room.

Sigourney Mason has the grace of a ballerina and the smile of a queen. My father said he was scared of her the first time he met her. She was so beautiful and quietly powerful that he never dreamed a girl like Siggy would talk to a man like him.

Her eyes light up as she takes in Oliver and me.

"Well, I didn't expect to see you both this morning," she says. "What a treat!"

"Hi, Mom," Oliver says.

"Hello, Mom."

Oliver and I get to our feet. She hugs my brother before making her way to me. She wraps her arms around me and kisses my cheek.

"Oops, I left a lipstick mark," she says, wiping the side of my face with her hand. "What are my boys doing today?"

"Going over this Landry project," Oliver says.

"Still?" Mom turns around to face him. "Want me to take his mother out for lunch? I just love Vivian Landry."

I laugh. "No, Mother, we don't need you to take Vivian Landry out to lunch on our behalf."

"And why not?" She puts a hand on her hip. "You do know who holds the power, right?"

Oliver chuckles. I fire him a warning glare.

If he segues this conversation into something about Blaire ...

"Holt has been demonstrating that point lately," Oliver cracks.

"Ollie, I'm gonna kill ya."

All he does is laugh.

My eyes flip to my mother. A knowing look is painted on her face.

"I actually have a lot of work to do today, you two. So if you don't mind ..." I say, sitting back down in my chair.

Mom scoffs. "Don't think you're going to throw me out of your office because your brother is irritating you." She looks at Oliver. "Stop annoying Holt. Be nice."

"Sorry, Mom," Oliver says, trying his best to hide his smile. "I forget he's sensitive now."

"Oliver ..." I warn.

“It’s not a bad thing to be sensitive, sweetie,” Mom says. “You don’t have to be hard as nails all the time.”

Oliver watches me over Mom’s shoulder and taunts me. I can see the words sitting on his lips and the joy he’d get out of projecting them into the world.

And to my mother’s ears.

Please don’t.

“Also,” Mom says, spinning around to face Oliver, “I know what you’re insinuating. I heard all about Blaire.”

My jaw drops to the floor just as Oliver’s brows rise to the ceiling.

The clicks of Mom’s heels clamor through my office as I try to figure out what this means. She stops next to my brother and faces me.

“Boone told me,” she says proudly.

“What the fuck?”

She gives me a look. “He and Larissa were talking about it at dinner last night. I gave them a bottle of wine, and the next thing I know, they’re telling me all about her.”

I rub a hand down my face and wonder how this happened. Why it happened. Why my family thinks my life is fair game.

Because it’s not.

They are so ready to love people and bring them into our world that it makes for uncomfortable situations when *you* aren’t ready for any of that.

“Were you going to tell me?” Mom asks.

I drop my hand to my side. “You know what? I wasn’t.”

“Holton!”

“Well, I wasn’t. Because it’s just a temporary thing, Mom. I’m not marrying her.”

Oliver sits up. “You know, if you—”

“Shut up.” I glare at him before turning back to my mom. “She’s a friend of the Landrys. We’re just ...”

We’re just what?

Fucking? Talking? Eating pizza in the middle of the night?

I don’t even know anymore.

Mom grins. “You are bringing her tonight, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Oliver says. “You totally should.”

I ignore them both and mess with my tie instead.

I'd forgotten that tonight was our family outing. It must've slipped my mind. Now that Boone has told my mother all about Blaire, it's no surprise Mom wants me to bring her. But if I do that, this whole thing between Blaire and me gets trickier.

I think.

Actually, fuck if I know.

"I'm not bringing her," I say even though I'm not sure. Better to not get her hopes up. "Why do we keep having this conversation?"

"We haven't had this conversion before, Holton."

"No, but I've had it with everyone else, it seems."

Mom looks offended. "Well, pardon me. I only want to get to know her. If she's a friend of the Landrys ... Wait. Which Landry?"

I sigh. "Does it matter?"

"Yes. If it's Camilla or Sienna, that's wonderful news. If it's Lincoln, then I have reservations."

"It's Sienna," Oliver chimes in.

"Great. Bring her. That's an order, dear." She flashes me one final, epic smile and heads to the door. "See you boys later. Love you tons."

And with that, she's gone.

Oliver gathers his things from the table. He keeps the corner of his eye trained on me as if he thinks I might bolt across the room and tackle him.

It's not a terrible idea, really. It would definitely expend some of this energy that's making it hard to stand still.

"Don't forget to call Wade, okay?" Oliver asks, heading for the door.

"I'll call him now."

Oliver nods. He takes a breath and starts to speak but doesn't. Instead, he blows the air out.

The moment reminds me of when we were kids. It was always Oliver and me. We'd fight. We'd get into stupid trouble that never amounted to anything serious. We'd skip school, sneak liquor from Dad's cabinet, and blackmail Wade into doing our homework. But no matter what we did or who got caught, we always had each other's backs. Without fail.

"Thanks," I tell him.

"What for?"

"For picking up the slack around here."

He shifts the papers from one hand to another. "I was giving you hell earlier, but I honestly am glad that you're ... doing whatever it is you're

doing.” He grins. “Does that work better? Does it make you more comfortable that I didn’t define it?”

“Yes.”

He laughs. “I don’t know what you’re doing in your private life, and I don’t really give a shit, either. I’m just happy to see you relaxing a little.” He opens the door. “But it’s totally self-centered on my behalf. If you relax, that means you won’t die of a heart attack anytime soon, and I don’t have to worry about running this place.”

I throw a pad of sticky notes at him as he ducks out the door. They hit the spot where his head was.

Chuckling, I sit down in my chair again and lean back.

I’m really lucky to have my family. As nosy and maddening as they are, they’re also generous and loving and loyal.

They’d love Blaire.

The thought comes easily. The idea of having Blaire around my siblings feels like the most natural thing in the world. I can imagine her conversing with Wade and blushing at Boone’s jokes. Oliver would adore her. Coy would try to charm her.

A ripple of uncertainty flows through my veins.

Great. Bring her. That’s an order, dear.

Do I? What would be the point?

“There wouldn’t be one,” I mumble and get back to work.

TWENTY-THREE

Blaire

“So that’s it?” I type out a few final notes from my conversation with Yancy. “There are no more loose ends?”

“No. Just the hearing for the Lawson case next week. If you aren’t back, Mr. Jameson said he would show up on your behalf.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be back even if I have to get a hotel room. Please send the updated files to my email.”

“I will do that as soon as we get off this call,” Yancy says. “They’re saying they’re on track for reopening the building by the end of the week. Fingers crossed.”

I start to say it back to her but stop. I’m afraid she’ll hear the reservation in my tone.

“Let’s hope they reopen when it’s safe,” I say instead.

“Oh, absolutely.” Computer keys click in the background. “That does it for me. I’ve rearranged everything else in order of precedence. You’ll be slammed for the first week back, but if I know you, that makes you happy.”

I close my computer and relax against my chair. The late afternoon sun warms my face. The rays are amplified by the pool rippling in front of me.

The fresh air helped clear my head. After I worked outside all day with my computer on my lap, I felt like I was in high school again. All I needed was a boom box.

“I appreciate your help in moving all this around,” I tell Yancy.

“Of course, Miss Gibson.”

“We’ll talk soon.”

“Goodbye.”

I end the call.

My eyes fall closed in the bliss of a workday well done. There’s nothing like it.

I grin.

Except for the bliss of a night well done with Holt.

A laugh escapes my throat as I think about how stupid that is. Yet it’s true.

My phone rings from beside me. I pick it up and look at the caller ID.

Sienna.

“Hey,” I say, shielding my eyes from the sun.

“Well, don’t you sound chipper.”

I shrug. “I’ve had a good day.”

“And ...?” she prods.

“Well, I slept in. Had a great cup of coffee followed by a long, hot shower.” I hold back a laugh about how much I needed said shower. “Then I worked all day by a gorgeous pool and listened to the birds chirp, and I got a ton of stuff done. It’s been a good day.”

“Better,” she says. “But you left out all the Holt stuff.”

I shift in my chair. “I actually haven’t seen him since about three this morning. I’m guessing he’s been at work.”

“So this happiness is residual. This is a good sign, Blaire.”

Is it?

Of course being happy is a good thing. It’s much better than the alternative. But is being happy in this situation truly a good thing?

I don’t know.

“I don’t know about it being a good sign,” I say. “But it feels nice not to feel like the world is sitting on my shoulders for once.”

“That’s how I feel with Walker.”

I snort. “He could barely write checks to pay his bills before you came along.”

“Well, I do it for him now, so he still can’t do that,” she admits with a laugh. “But being around him makes me feel safe. I can mess up—you do remember how I met him, right?”

I laugh as I remember Lance explaining how Sienna damaged Walker’s truck. “I do.”

“So, yeah, you get it. You know what I mean.”

I think about my time with Holt, and I do kind of get what she means. If I feel anything around Holt, it’s ... that. Confident enough to be myself. To speak my mind. To share my wounds.

To be me.

Still, I don’t know if it’s a good thing.

“When are you coming home?” she asks.

“I just got off the phone with Yancy. She said my building should be opened by the end of the week.”

“What’s the plan?”

I wiggle my toes.

“Blaire?”

“I ... don’t know. I mean, I’ll go back to Chicago. He’ll be here running his empire.”

The words hang in the air. It’s not a new concept. It’s been the plan from the beginning. It’s life. Even so, it feels different today. It feels ... sad.

How did I get myself into this mess?

Because it’s a mess. Or it will be if I don’t get a hold on things now.

“Maybe a long-distance relationship will work,” Sienna offers. “Have you thought about that?”

“No. And I think you’re thinking too seriously about this.”

“Tell me this—do you want to do a long-distance relationship with him? Would you if he wanted to?”

I bite my lip.

I don’t want to answer her. I want to avoid this topic and move on to something less intrusive. But last night’s events roll back through my mind. Holt’s words about Sienna do too.

She’s a good friend to have.

As nervous as I am to admit—I want to have a friendship with Sienna. I’m not sure what that looks like, really, but it’s been fun talking to her without any pressure. It makes me feel more connected to my family too.

It would be fun to have a girlfriend to talk to about things like men too. Maybe we could grab lunch sometimes. We could even make Christmas cookies like my mom used to do with her friends.

Right?

If I want to have that type of rapport with her, I’m going to have to share things about my life.

Things like this.

I take a deep breath. It feels like my chest has been cracked open, and I'm just waiting on someone to check out my insides and decide if it's worthy or not. All of a sudden, I'm transplanted back into elementary school and wondering if the girls will like me.

It's ridiculous. I know that. But I can't help it.

"Would you?" she asks again.

Would I?

Despite the impracticality of making a long-distance relationship work with Holt, I know I would try. I'd at least commit to giving it a trial period to see what would happen.

The idea makes me squirm.

"If he wanted to have that sort of a relationship with me, I would," I say slowly.

My cheeks heat as I look up at the sun and wonder if I just jinxed myself. Even if I didn't, I'll probably recall this moment later in a rush of humiliation when it becomes apparent that he wants nothing of the sort or doesn't want to work it out.

"I would try," I say hurriedly, building in an out for later. "I don't know if it would work. It doesn't seem feasible."

"You never know until you try."

"True," I admit. "Which is why I said I'd give it a shot. But this whole conversation is pointless to begin with because we aren't in a relationship now. We're just ..."

My voice drifts off as I fail to come up with the proper term.

What are we doing?

Saying that we are having a multi-night stand doesn't seem accurate anymore. I don't recall having that kind of pillow talk we shared last night with other men I slept with.

But I don't know what to call it.

"It's okay not to know," Sienna says. "Sometimes things get super messy before they get cleaned up. I mean, Walker practically hated me at first."

I laugh. "I don't think he hated you."

"Eh, I think he did." She laughs too. "And then we had the whole thing that had to get taken care of—which we don't need to talk about."

I wince at the bitterness in her tone.

“Anyway,” she continues, “I think you’re in a good spot with him. It’ll work out if it’s supposed to.”

“Yeah.”

She sighs. “Listen—unless you’re fucking like rabbits and not doing anything else together, he must like something about you, or he would’ve asked you to leave.”

“I ... Well, we’ve only slept together once since I started staying here. While that feels like a travesty, maybe it’s a good thing.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I don’t know what that wow means, exactly,” I say, wincing.

She laughs. “It’s a good thing. It means that he’s not just using you for a booty call.”

“If he is, he doesn’t need a lot of booty.”

She laughs harder. “Now that would be a travesty. If you can hook up with a man like that, he better want *all the sex*. Otherwise, it would almost be rude.”

I shake my head and grin. “You’re right. But you know what? I like him more because he doesn’t want all the sex despite going to bed every night completely frustrated sexually.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine.”

“But that’s why I’m in this predicament,” I say. “I can walk away from sexual encounters like nothing. There are no strings, no attachments. If they cop an attitude the next day or never want to see me again—what do I care? They’ve served their purpose. But with Holt ...”

Sienna sighs softly. “You like him, don’t you? As in, really like him?”

My heart thunders in my chest.

I know the answer to this question. There are many things I like about Holt. The fact that I’m still here, at his house, was my first clue. I couldn’t stand most men this long.

But if I admit it out loud, would it change things? Would I look at him and think about confessing it to Sienna? Would he notice something different and back away?

“I just ...” I clear my throat. “He’s pretty great.”

“I’ll say it for you. *Yes, Sienna. I like Holt.*”

I roll my eyes. “You’re such a brat.”

She giggles.

“Look,” I say, moving around in my seat again, “I don’t know what he’s thinking. We had an interesting night last night. We talked. We talked about a lot of really personal things, and I think it’s warped my brain a little bit. I’ll get it all situated inside my head today, and everything will be fine.”

“You don’t have to rationalize yourself out of this, Blaire. It’s okay to like him.”

“I know. It’s just not ... feasible. And I think he thinks the same thing. I mean ...”

I think back to the things he said about Kendra. And how his work always comes first and he doesn’t have room in his life for a relationship.

“Why did you ask me to stay?”

“Honestly? I don’t know,” he says. “You’re strong. You hold your own. You’re gorgeous and intelligent, and I enjoy talking to you. And it probably didn’t hurt that you live a thousand miles away.”

Yet here I am, like a stupid girl, pining for him in my own quiet way. So foolish.

“I need to go, Sienna,” I say quickly.

She must read my tone because she sighs. “I’m here if you need me.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to say it once more—I’m here if you need me. You can call me at any time. You can text me. Or email. Or send a smoke signal, but I don’t really know how to read those.”

I grin. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“It’s what friends do.” She pauses to see if I’ll respond, but I don’t. “Bye, Blaire.”

“Goodbye.”

I hold the phone in my hand and look at the water. It ripples back and forth with a levity that I wish I could absorb.

“Don’t get yourself all messed up,” I whisper. “You’re a grown woman. You’re capable of enjoying this week and going home and resuming your life in Chicago. You are in control.”

Saying it aloud helps.

I turn to pick up my computer to go inside when my phone buzzes in my hand. I look down.

Holt: Want to do something fun tonight?

Holt's words are printed across the screen.
My heartbeat quickens as I type out a response.

Me: Depends on how you define fun.

Holt: I might have tickets to the Kelvin McCoy concert.

I gasp.

Me: You do not.

Holt: I might.

Me: I might be jealous!

Holt: I won't be out of the office in time to see the opening acts. But if you want to see the headliner, I'd love to take you.

Me: Are you sure?

Holt: Yes or no, Blaire.

Me: YES

I dance around the chair in a very un-me-like move. I've never been to a concert before, and if there is one band I'd like to see, it's Kelvin McCoy.

Holt: Great. I will pick you up around eight. If you want to see the openers, my cousin Larissa would be happy to let you go with her and I could meet you at the stadium later.

Me: I'm happy just to see Kelvin McCoy!

Holt: ... with me. You're happy to see Kelvin McCoy with me. Right?

Me: Yes, with you. But Kelvin McCoy!

Holt: I heard he's a dick in real life.

Me: Don't ruin my vision.

Holt: Be ready at eight.

Me: I will. Thank you!

Holt: You're very welcome.

I grab my computer and race to the shower.

TWENTY-FOUR

Blaire

Berridge Stadium is boisterous.

Throngs of people are packed into the baseball stadium. Chords of music play intermittently over the speakers set up on either side of the stage in the outfield. A giant screen, black for the time being, is stretched out behind the platform that Kelvin McCoy will take in a matter of minutes.

Holt leads me down the aisle toward a baseball field that's been turned into a country music concert. I dodge elbows from inebriated attendees and dirty looks from women who see Holt first, only to realize that I'm right behind him.

He looks and smells incredible. How a man can look this good after working for twelve hours—or more—is beyond me.

His ass fills out the back of his tan dress pants. Broad shoulders stretch the fabric of his blue and white striped shirt. The collar is undone, and his tie is missing, and I can't imagine how women get any work done around him all day.

I'm watching him and not where I'm going when a foot juts out in front of me from the side. The edge of my heel catches on it, and I plummet forward.

"Ah," I squeak as I slam into Holt's back.

He turns, surprised, and quickly wraps one arm around me.

I look up to find him searching the area around me.

"What happened?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

His eyes find mine, and he grins. “Well, pay attention before I get into a fight.”

My skin burns with the intensity of his gaze. It’s almost electric tonight.

Our conversation on the way over was friendly and fun. He gave me crap about my love for Kelvin McCoy and Beau McCrae, a country music singer who’d just finished his set. I teased him about being jealous. Despite the airy banter, something was different.

I felt it. I think Holt did too.

My brain told me it was because I put it into the universe that I would consider something more serious with him. I’m seeing things I want to see. But then he brushes his hand against mine or dips his fingers into the small of my back, and I swear I feel an intimacy to his touch that I haven’t felt before.

“Don’t get into a fight until after we watch Kelvin McCoy,” I tell him. “I don’t want to be thrown out of here too soon.”

His grin turns mischievous. “What do you like about him so much?”

It’s a simple question that has an easy answer. But it’s hard to think about anyone else while my body is pressed into Holt’s. Despite being in a stadium full of people, it feels like just the two of us.

I bite my lip. “His voice is dreamy.”

Holt rolls his eyes. “He sounds like a cocky teenager.”

I slap his chest and ignore the way it doesn’t give. It only makes it worse that I know how spectacular it is undressed.

“Let’s get to our seats before you miss the show,” he says.

He sets me back on both of my feet. But before he turns around, he grabs my hand.

My eyes flip to his. He looks as surprised as I feel.

“Just so you don’t fall again,” he mumbles.

“Right.”

His hand is large and warm. His grip is sturdy and reliable, just like I know him to be.

Don’t get swept up in this.

I ignore the legions of music fans on either side of the walkway. I block out the way my hand tingles from being tucked into Holt’s. I do my best to activate my guard and not read too much into anything—but it’s difficult.

It feels so natural.

Holt shows a uniformed man our tickets before we descend the last few steps. The man nods as I pass.

We stop at the bottom row. The only people closer to the stage are the people standing on the field.

“Oh, wow,” I say. “How did you get these tickets? They’re fantastic.”

He drops my hand and runs his through his hair. “Connections, I guess.”

“You must have some good connections.”

“You could say that.” He looks over my shoulder. “Whatever is said tonight, please understand I have no control over them.”

I furrow my brow. “What? Who? What are you talking about?”

I’m not sure if he’s going to laugh or wince. Either way, he slips by me and into the row of seats. I follow along and sit in the empty seat next to him.

“We didn’t think you were coming,” a familiar voice says from the other side of him.

I peer down the aisle.

The man I met at the Landrys’ the first night I met Holt—Oliver, I think it was, sits beside Holt. A young woman with gorgeous blond hair is seated next to him. Two men who are variations of Holt and Oliver smile back at me from the other side of the girl. An older man and woman sit at the end. The woman looks regal in an approachable way with her large pieces of jewelry and plain black T-shirt. The man is dressed like Holt and has the same warm smile.

“You brought her,” the woman says, clearly thrilled to see me.

My cheeks heat as I take in this ... situation.

These people are his family.

My attention shifts away from the curious faces to the man who brought me here.

Holt looks at me and forces a swallow. His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. The look on his face is half-smile, half-wince as he tries to read the look on mine.

I lift a brow and try not to look as shocked as I feel.

“I should’ve warned you, huh?” he asks.

“Maybe a word or two would’ve been kind.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Sorry?”

That does it. I can't be irritated with him when he looks at me with a mixture of adorableness and heat. It dissolves my anxiety and confusion and leaves me laughing.

He turns to his family. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet Blaire Gibson. Blaire, this is Oliver, Larissa—our cousin—Boone, and Wade. At the end is our mother and father, Siggy and Rodney."

"Darling, it is such a pleasure to meet you," Siggy coos. "I'm sorry I'm so far away. I'd love to welcome you with a big hug!"

"Oh, a wave will do," I say, giving her my best smile and thanking the heavens I don't have to hug her.

Hugs are awkward and not all that enjoyable if you're meeting a stranger for the first time. They're reserved for people you know and like. And while I'm sure she's lovely, a hug seems a little overkill.

Holt chuckles beside me.

"We're glad you could make it, Blaire," Rodney says.

"I'm happy to be here."

"We're happy you're here too." Larissa sticks a hand across Oliver. "You can call me Riss."

I give her hand a gentle shake. "It's nice to meet you."

My shoulders relax as I take in Larissa's genuine friendliness. I wasn't expecting it, but maybe I should have.

She's about Sienna's age and is as cute as a button. She has the same disarming way about her as Sienna too.

I instantly like her, which is weird for me.

"I'd shake your hand, Blaire, but—" Boone begins, but Holt cuts him off.

"But I'd kick your ass."

"Oh, the hell you would."

The entire family laughs except for their parents. They're engrossed in a conversation with a couple sitting behind them.

I try to ignore the way my heart hiccups as Holt takes my hand again. I'm not even sure he realizes that he's done it, but I'm sure as heck not going to pull it away.

"I think Holt would take you, Boone," Wade says. He takes off his black-rimmed glasses and looks at his younger brother. "You don't have a whole lot going for you besides a lot of mouth."

“What?” Boone’s jaw drops. “You’re supposed to be on my side here, fucker.”

“Everyone’s money is on Holt,” Oliver says. “Shut up, Boone.”

Boone looks at me with the biggest puppy dog eyes I’ve ever seen. It’s ridiculously adorable.

“You know what?” I say with a laugh. “It doesn’t matter because we can’t reach each other to shake hands anyway.”

“They’re always like this,” Larissa says. “They’re a lot to deal with.”

“I have three brothers and two boy cousins that are a lot to deal with too,” I say. “This doesn’t bother me.”

“You should see it when Coy is around. It gets ridiculous,” she says.

“He must be like my cousin Peck. The instigator.”

“Totally.” She laughs. “He threatened to have me come on stage tonight and dance. I told him I will flat-out refuse and ruin his show.”

Ruin his show?

I don’t know exactly what my face does, but Larissa balks.

“Oops,” she groans.

“I ...” I look at Holt, who is pointedly not looking at me. “Do you want to explain why your brother would ask your cousin to come on stage?”

Holt bites his bottom lip. The lines around his eyes crinkle, making him look more like his father.

My heartbeat quickens.

He doesn’t say a word. Just works hard not to smile.

“Fine.” I peer around him again. “Larissa, why would your cousin Coy ask you to come on stage tonight?”

She looks at Holt. Then at me. Then at Holt again.

“Hey, kids,” Siggy calls from the other end of the aisle. “I forgot to tell you. Coy has to leave town earlier than expected tomorrow. Can you all come at ten for brunch instead? I know you all have lives and things, but it would mean a lot to have you all at home for a quick meal.”

Oh my God.

They all turn to their mother except Holt. I think he’s too afraid to look away from me.

“So, Kelvin McCoy is my brother,” Holt tells me.

“What?”

I put it all together before this, but to hear it out of his mouth is insane. My brain chooses this exact moment to replay all the things I’ve said about

the band and the music and ...

Shit.

“You jerk,” I say, my brain still processing all this.

I’m not mad about this, just shocked. It’s kind of funny that I didn’t know because everyone probably does.

Everyone but me.

Damn him.

Holt grins like the cat that caught the canary.

“His name is Coy Kelvin Mason,” he says. “He goes by Kelvin McCoy, which is also the name of the band—which is weird to me, but I’m not in charge.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I’m so embarrassed.”

Holt’s body rumbles beside me.

“I mean it,” I tell him. “Why did you let me go on and on about him?”

“It was funny.”

“It’s totally not funny at all,” I say with a laugh.

He lifts my chin with his finger, and I open my eyes. He’s peering into my face with a sweet sincerity that makes my stomach flip-flop.

“Maybe I should’ve told you,” he says softly. “But it was adorable that you didn’t know. Besides, if I told you, I wouldn’t have anything to tease you about.”

I study him. His eyes are sweet and concerned yet have the hint of trouble that I love so much. His thumb brushes over my knuckles.

“It’s fine,” I tell him. “Just know that I might’ve chosen my words differently had I known he was your brother.”

“I know. Which is why I didn’t tell you. I wanted the truth.”

I grin. “I would’ve given you the truth either way. I just might’ve selected different details to share.”

He turns his body so that he’s only facing me. “Is that so?”

I nod. “I might’ve told you that his voice is sweet like honey and puts me in the mood to ...” I lean closer. “Do things to you when we’re not surrounded by his adoring fans.”

Holt’s eyes sparkle. “Keep it up, sweetheart, and you’ll miss the show.”

“Only if you can put on a better one.”

His lips part to say something when Oliver elbows him in the side.

“Don’t worry about calling Wade—” Oliver says.

“Shit.” Holt whirls around to face his brothers. “I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“Oliver called me anyway, and we worked it out,” Wade says. “I have a solution. Never fear ...”

His voice drifts off as the lights fade, and music begins to play.

The crowd roars to life. The giant black screen behind the stage turns on, and the words Kelvin McCoy flash in green.

I settle back in my seat, but not before Holt leans over the armrest. With his mouth hovering over the shell of my ear, he whispers, “I will give you a show tonight that you won’t forget.”

My skin erupts in goose bumps as I look at him. His eyes are hooded. His lips damp. His cologne chooses this moment to trickle through the air and attack my senses.

“Promise?” I ask.

It’s all I can say. One word is my max.

Holt’s grin turns devilish before the lights fade to black, and Kelvin McCoy comes on stage. Anything either of us would say would be deadened by the noise filling Barridge Stadium.

Instead of talking, I rest my shoulder against Holt’s. He rests our locked hands on my thigh. And as I listen to the opening lines of Kelvin McCoy’s hit song, “Backroads,” I wonder if maybe it’s not wrong to have a little hope that things might work out.

Crazier things have happened in life.

Right?

TWENTY-FIVE

Holt

The sound of the shower is soothing.

I sit on the edge of my bed, a towel wrapped around my waist, and listen to water cascade off Blaire's body in the other room.

I'm so tired.

The concert was entertaining. Coy put on a hell of a show. It was fun being in the middle of the chaos and watching Mom cheer on her son as he danced and sang his way across the stage. It was more exciting to sit next to Blaire.

She watched every piece of the performance with rapt attention. A smile sat permanently on her face. She cheered, sang along to a few of the songs, and looked the part of a happy concert-goer. And then, after the show, we raced back home.

My heartbeat picks up as I remember the sound of her back hitting the foyer wall. The way she moaned into my mouth as I pushed into her tight body. The feeling of her smile against my neck before I put her feet back on the floor.

"Fuck," I whisper.

Tonight was too much—too much of *everything*.

Mom and Blaire had a conversation I couldn't follow about dishes. Apparently, Blaire's grandmother collects the same type as my mother. Wade fell into a conversation with my date about bridges. She talked whiskey with Boone and chatted away with Larissa about country music all the way back to the car.

It was surreal—not because Blaire could hold an effortless conversation with everyone in my family, but because it seemed right.

She fit in. She blended right in with the familial dynamics, even going as far as to silence Boone with a look when he started to get out of hand with a story about a woman named Gia. She acted the part of a member of the Mason family, and I liked it.

“You’re getting in so deep,” I warn myself.

I know she’s leaving and going back to her career. It’s more than a job to her. It matters. She has a fucking degree to practice law. She’s not going to throw all that into the wind and stay here.

I don’t even necessarily want her to stay.

Do I?

I don’t know what I want.

I know that having her in my home makes me want to come home. I know that seeing her hanging out with my brothers settles me. I know that the idea of curling up in my bed next to her in a few minutes is something that I’ve looked forward to since I left this morning.

But I also know that all of this shit has caused my work to slip. And I can’t have that.

“And that brings me right back to reality.”

I tug on my wet hair and feel the burn in my scalp.

There are a million things I need to be doing tonight instead of going to bed with Blaire. I need to go over our proposal to Landry. I need to call Wade and see what he decided to do today. I need to pore over the dollars and cents and make sure I’m investing my family’s wealth in the right way.

No woman is worth losing millions of dollars over.

Period.

I can’t risk it.

My heart sinks as the water shuts off.

Just enjoy it while you can.

Blaire comes around the corner with a white towel wrapped around her body. Her hair is still wet, but towel-dried enough that it’s not dripping. Her skin is flushed from the heat of the shower, and I want nothing more than to pause time.

“Hey,” she says softly. “I figured you’d be asleep by now.”

“I have to go downstairs and work a little bit first.”

“I get that.”

She walks across the room and stands in front of me. Her lips twist around as if she's trying to figure out what to say. It's only when she glances over her shoulder and then back at my bed that I realize what she's thinking.

She doesn't know where to go.

"Come up here," I tell her as I scoot back toward the headboard.

A few seconds later, she's crawling across the mattress. I stretch out and open my arms so she can curl up next to me.

She doesn't hesitate. Her body molds to mine as her head rests on my shoulder. My fingertips trickle down the length of her arm, taking in the softness of her skin.

The room is quiet. The air is humid from the shower but cool. I kick the blanket folded on the edge of the bed up and tuck it around us.

Blaire yawns. It's a quiet, sweet sound that lulls me into a state of relaxation too.

"Thank you for taking me tonight," she whispers. "It was a lot of fun."

"It was, wasn't it?"

"I'd forgotten what it was like to have fun."

Her body moves as I chuckle.

"How can you forget how to have fun?" I ask.

"I don't know. I remember doing fun things a long time ago. I guess it's been so long that I forgot how."

"That's sad, Blaire."

"I know." She burrows closer. "But tonight was fun. That's what matters."

I bend my face toward her hair and breathe her in.

I know she has to leave, but I'm going to miss this.

"Your brothers remind me of mine," she says. "Yours are better mannered. Aside from that, they're really cut from the same cloth."

"You mean they're all heathens?"

She laughs. "Yes. Except Wade. I like him a lot."

"You don't like the others? Wait until Boone hears this."

"That's not what I meant. I just mean that Wade is really interesting. We had a nice conversation."

She traces the lines on my stomach. Each stroke makes me shiver.

"I had a thought while I was in the shower," she says cautiously.

"What's that?"

She leans back and looks at me. “I don’t know anything about what you guys do. I want to make that clear.”

“Go on ...”

“Well, Wade was talking to me a little bit about your Landry project and how you need to maximize the revenue to justify the cost.”

I pull my brows together.

Is she actually going to talk shop with me?

“I read an article on the flight here,” she says. “It was saying how the Observation Decks create more revenue for the Empire State Building than the office space. I understand that the views won’t be the same. I mean, the Empire State Building has views of New York City. But, Wade mentioned needing an environmentally-friendly design, and I just thought that maybe you could implement something like this ...”

I stare at her. My jaw is probably dropped.

Holy shit.

“Do you think that could work?” she asks.

“Oh, absolutely.” I twist in bed so I can see her better. “You might be on to something. Depending on how we position the buildings ...” I imagine Wade’s latest set of plans. “If we move the one structure to the other side, there would be a clear view of the ocean. If we raise the building a few more stories ...”

We could use the roof space like an observation deck. Maybe even turn it into a venue for events. There’s nothing like it in Savannah.

Wow. Why didn’t I think of this?

Blaire lays her palm flat on my chest as she watches me think. Thoughts pour through my brain like an open faucet, and all I see are dollar signs in our pockets and my father’s smile at a job well done.

“You might have just fixed our problem, sweetheart,” I tell her.

She grins. “I hate to tell you, but it wasn’t that hard.”

I take her hand off my stomach and press it against my cock.

“Say it isn’t hard again,” I tease.

Her eyes grow wide as she palms me. “I stand corrected.”

I brush a strand of hair out of her face. “You, Miss Gibson, are the total package.”

She tries to look away, but I don’t let her. Instead, I take her chin and tug it gently toward me.

When I look into her eyes, the strangest feeling comes over me. I want to make her feel good, to know how amazing she is. I want to protect her from the assholes of the world that might try to make her feel less because *they* have low self-esteem.

I can see all kinds of things hidden in the depths of her gorgeous blue eyes. Summers in the sea. Winters in Aspen beneath the giant Christmas tree my mother sources and has decorated before we ever show up to the ski lodge. Falls walking through the city, drinking apple cider and handing out candy on the front steps at Halloween.

I can see so much by looking in her eyes that it terrifies me.

How all of that would ever fit into my life, I don't know.

To do something well, you have to focus on it. Dedicate yourself to it. You can't expect something to have a one hundred percent result when you put in only a partial effort. Life doesn't work that way.

What would happen if Blaire and I extended this arrangement?

Would she come and go from my house freely? Would it interrupt my schedule? Would she read too much into it and end up broken?

And knowing how hurt she's been in the past by not being heard and supported, do I have the faculties to supply her with what she needs?

I don't know.

Blaire pulls away from my hand and places her cheek against my chest again. I pull her as close to me as I can.

"Are you sleepy?" I ask.

She nods.

"I do have to go downstairs for a little bit." I bend down and kiss the top of her head. "I need to call Wade and give him your ideas."

"Make sure you give me credit," she jokes.

"Of course."

She yawns. "How is your project going besides the part you needed my help with?"

I chuckle. "It's going pretty good. It's been a family affair, for sure. We've all had to put our heads together."

"If my brothers had to put their heads together, there would be bloodshed."

"Well, Coy isn't involved, so that helps."

I can feel her smile against me.

“I like it when we all work together,” I admit. “The camaraderie is nice.”

“When will you know if it all works out?”

“We’re waiting on confirmation, but in two or three days. Graham was going out of town this week and wasn’t sure when he was coming back.”

She swallows hard. “So about the same time as I go home?”

The words hang in the air. It’s a simple question with a simple answer. But saying it out loud feels like I’m shoving a boulder off the side of a cliff.

“I need to check with Yancy and see if she’s bought me a ticket,” she says softly.

Instead of replying, I snuggle her tighter.

Moonlight floods my room. Shadows cast across the walls and dance as the tree branches move in the breeze outside my window.

Imagining Blaire not being here in a couple of days already feels lonely.

I’m not ready for that yet.

“Hey,” I whisper, unsure if she’s asleep or awake.

“Yeah?”

I force a swallow. “I’m meeting my family at my mom’s tomorrow for brunch. Would you like to go with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

She moves one of her legs across mine, locking her heel around my ankle.

“Then yes,” she says.

I kiss her head again.

I hold her in my arms and imagine the conversation I’ll have with Wade. But instead of getting up and giving him a call, I fall into a deep, blissful sleep.

TWENTY-SIX

Blaire

Holt needs a ceiling fan.

The air feels stagnant inside the bedroom. He cracked a window sometime during the night but closed it before he left for work this morning.

Watching him prepare for a day in the office was a treat.

If I thought watching him undress was a sight to behold, I didn't anticipate how sexy it would be to watch him dress. The way his legs and ass fill out a pair of pants is on display when he's not wearing anything else. I love the next layer—a shirt unbuttoned, hanging open. And watching him put on a tie is basically foreplay.

Goodbye kisses are now my favorite thing.

Except for the one I'll be getting in the next day or two. That one is going to suck.

"What am I going to do?" I ask Holt's bedroom.

It doesn't answer.

I pick up my phone and scroll through social media, hoping something will pop up and take my mind off Holt. Not surprisingly, nothing can hold a candle to him.

I'm in trouble. I know it. I just don't know what to do about it.

My contacts list opens with the press of a finger. I hover over Sienna's name.

"I shouldn't do this," I tell myself as I contemplate doing it anyway.
"Ugh."

My head falls back against the pillows as I war with what to do.

The first step in this ridiculous process is admitting outright that I like Holt. *Check.*

The next step is figuring out if I can, and if I should, pursue it. *Not check.*

I groan, holding my phone in front of my face. I don't want to ask for help with this. It's stupid. Women are supposed to know how to do these things and, besides, I'm certain that not sharing my business with others is the way to go.

But still ...

I want to talk to Sienna. I'm partially embarrassed by this little fact and fight the urge to hide beneath the covers. Regardless, the idea of hearing her take on what's happening with Holt and me and hearing her opinion seems helpful.

And maybe even fun.

"Who am I these days?"

I give in and scroll to her name in my text app.

I need your help.

It takes a whole three seconds for my phone to ring. When I answer, I'm laughing.

"Were you just sitting around waiting on my call?" I ask.

"Would it be weird to say yes?"

"It would absolutely be weird."

She laughs too. "Then no. I wasn't. I was sitting in Crank watching Walker fix a tractor through the window and hoping that a friend who's sleeping with a super-hot millionaire would call me for advice. Better?"

"Not really."

"Figures. So, what's up?"

I chew on my nail. Because if I'm completely reinventing myself on this trip, why not add being a nail-biter to it?

"Sienna ..." I take a deep, shaky breath. "I like Holt."

"I know."

I scramble to a more upright position in the bed. "No, I mean, I really think I like him. I think I'm in trouble."

"You aren't in trouble. You're in love."

“What? I am not.”

I slow blink at her loose use of the l-word.

The only man I’ve ever told I loved was Jack, and I’m not sure I ever really loved him. I think we were both struggling to make it in college, and we leaned on each other. It became a co-dependent relationship. I relied on him for my identity and for approval, not for love.

Certainly not for love.

“Blaire, calm down,” Sienna says gently. “I can feel you spiraling from here.”

“I am not.”

She laughs. “You’ve said that now twice.”

“I said I liked him. Not loved him.”

“Okay. Pardon me. I shouldn’t have tossed that weapon out there like that.”

“Exactly.”

“I was kidding,” she snorts. “It’s not a weapon. It’s a positive thing.”

I roll my eyes and go back to the nail-biting again.

This isn’t helpful. I just needed to know what to do about leaving here and potentially never seeing him again.

But do I tell him that? Or do I just let things go and see what happens?

What’s a girl to do in these cases?

“You like him,” Sienna says. “This is a good start. Now, what do you need help with?”

I drop my hand. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“Oh, Blaire ...”

I sigh. “I know I sound like a child, but I’m really confused.”

“You don’t sound like a child. You just sound like a woman who hasn’t been here before. And, you know what? I’m glad you called me.”

“You are?”

“Yes! Of course. This is what friends do. This is such good progress.”

“Before you know it, we’ll be shopping together on the weekends,” I say, my tone full of sarcasm.

“Really? That would be amazing.”

“I was kidding.”

“Oh.”

I sigh again—louder this time. “Maybe I should just forget this.”

“You absolutely should *not* forget this.” A chair squeaks in the background. “So, what changed? What made you know that you want to try something with Holt?”

I consider her question. *How do I know?*

How do I put how I feel into words?

Maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s the fact that I have feelings for Holt that’s the answer to her question.

A part of me has opened up since I got to Savannah. There’s a layer to me that I never explored. Maybe I was too scared to open up to someone after Jack. It could be that I didn’t want to access the vulnerability it takes to connect with another human while eating pizza at two in the morning. And I’ve gotten away with it.

Until now.

Holt challenges me. He makes me think about who I am and how I want to be. He pushes me and asks questions, and I like this version of myself better than the Blaire I was when I ran into him at the airport.

Being with him doesn’t feel weak. Or dangerous. I don’t feel like I’m carrying a shield around all day to fend off the enemy.

I can breathe. *But how do I say that to Sienna?*

I don’t know.

I don’t even know what all of this means. I’m just not ready to go back to Chicago and think of this whole thing in the past tense.

“We talk like friends and kiss like lovers,” I say wistfully. “It’s usually one or the other.”

“I understand.”

“I can see myself differently around him. I see my strengths but also my weaknesses without feeling judged. I’m a better version of me.” I smile to myself. “He walked into my life as if he belonged here. Imagining him not being here hurts.”

Sienna sucks in a breath. “Blair ...”

“Does that sound ridiculous?”

“No, friend. It doesn’t. Not at all.”

I tug the blankets back over me and nestle down in them. If I lay in Holt’s bed and imagine him coming home, to me, everything feels right.

But it’s trickery. And I know it.

“You need to tell him,” Sienna coaxes.

It sounds so easy.

My heart constricts as I think about doing that—telling Holt that I want to explore something more with him.

“My life is in Chicago,” I remind her. “I have a career there. His world is here.”

“So?”

“So, isn’t it practically impossible even if he agrees?”

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to lov—things like this.”

I grin at her slip-up. “I love your romanticism, but I’m still pragmatic. It’s not that easy.”

“Maybe not, but you’ll never know if you don’t try.”

What if I try ...

He could say he’s thinking the same thing and we could attempt to make a long-distance relationship work.

Or he could say it’s not in the cards for him, and he thinks it’s a disaster in the making.

The second option sends a chill ripping down my spine.

“What are you thinking?” Sienna asks.

“Just that I’m not sure what he’ll say. You know, he could say he’s not interested in trying something like this with me, and then what happens?”

“I don’t know. What do you think happens?”

I mull it over.

We’re still operating on an extended one-night stand. But it doesn’t feel like that anymore.

Not with us holding hands. And kisses to the top of my head. With me sleeping in his bed and accompanying him to family events. That’s especially true when I know he doesn’t bring random women to things like that—both his bed and events.

Surely, that means something.

I chew on my bottom lip.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Sienna asks.

“That he laughs in my face.”

“Do you really think he’d do that?”

“I hope not.”

She sighs. “You know that’s not going to happen. Take that option off the table.”

I shrug. “I guess he could just tell me I’ve seen something between us that he didn’t, and I should just go home.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

I don’t. I really don’t.

Even with my overthinking brain and paranoia, I don’t think I’m seeing something that’s not there.

His touch is too tender. His actions too considerate. His kisses too sweet.

“I’m confident that he feels the same way that I do,” I say. “There’s just too much evidence to support it.”

“We aren’t in a courtroom.” She laughs. “But go on.”

I twist my lips into a thin line as I think this through.

“He asked me to brunch this morning with his family at his parents’ house,” I say. “And I got to know his family last night at the concert.”

“Oh, my gosh! You went to Kelvin McCoy, didn’t you? Did you see Beau McCrae too?”

I laugh. “No, we missed Beau. But we did see Kelvin ... who is Holt’s brother? Did you know that?”

“Um, yeah. Everyone in Savannah knows that.”

“Well, I didn’t. Imagine my surprise when I’d gone on and on about him to Holt. I was so embarrassed.”

Sienna giggles. “That’s hilarious.”

I sit up in bed again and feel the sunlight on my shoulders. It warms the air and makes it possible to consider climbing out of bed.

“You need to lay your cards out with Holt,” Sienna says. “You can’t come back here and not know where things stand. And I think—and you do, too, that he probably feels the same way.”

I close my eyes and fight the urge to put my feelings into the universe. It’s too risky.

“You guys can take it slow,” Sienna says. “It’s not like either of you are looking to get married next month or something.”

“True ...”

Her voice softens. “Just believe in yourself and the possibility of love. I believe in you.”

“You know what?” I get out of bed. “This whole being friends thing was working out pretty well. But now you’re acting like we’re in a sappy movie, and I’m rethinking my decision to call you about this stuff.”

She laughs. “You love me.”

“Stop with the l-word. Geesh.”

Her laughter grows louder. Eventually, mine mixes with it.

The sound makes me feel full in a way I've never experienced. I feel supported in a way that's new to me. Sienna likes me for who I am—my difficulties and all.

Maybe this friendship thing isn't too bad. And maybe she's right. Maybe I do love her.

I stretch my arms overhead and feel my muscles pull. The knots in the back of my neck from being bent onto Holt's shoulder all night scream for me to take a hot shower.

I glance at the clock. I have time before Holt comes to pick me up for brunch.

"I gotta go," I tell Sienna. "I need to get a shower and then get ready."

"You go and have fun. And Blaire?"

"Yeah?"

"You can do this. Trust me."

I grin. "Thanks ... friend."

I know she's smiling on the other side. It makes my grin grow wider.

"You're welcome ... friend."

I end the call and head to the shower.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Holt

“After you,” I say, holding the door open for Blaire.

The chaos from my parents’ house slams into us as soon as we enter. It’s the sound of home to me—family and food and fun all blended together into one crazy cacophony of the life that I love.

I watch Blaire out of the corner of my eye. This scene can be a lot to absorb, but she looks unfazed.

Larissa is in the kitchen with my mother. Steam rises from the sink as they put together a “quick brunch,” as my mom called it. It’ll be a full meal. It always is. My father and brothers sit at the dining room table off the kitchen with cups of coffee in their hands.

They greet us with waves and hellos.

Except Coy. He gets to his feet.

“Hey, Lover Boy,” Coy calls as he walks toward us. His cocky smile is tinted with just enough kindness to keep me from punching him in the face. “I thought Boone was lying when he said you brought a woman to my show last night.”

Blaire reaches for my hand. I let her take it and hope that it’s a show of solidarity between us and not to keep herself steady because of Coy.

He stops in front of us. His hair has been lightened and sticks up in a complete mess that I think is intentional. His jeans are ripped. I know Mom doesn’t understand the phrase on his shirt because she’d never allow it in her house.

It's Coy, pure and simple. The ornery one of the bunch. The rule-bender and boundary-pusher that he's always been.

Despite his don't-give-a-fuck vibe and history of bad decisions, I still have a ton of respect for him. He has an innate business sense like Oliver and me. He just uses it in a different way.

He slips his hands in his pockets and fires Blaire a grin. "I hope you liked my show."

"It was very entertaining," she replies. "Your fans certainly got their money's worth."

"Two of them did." He wiggles his eyebrows. "Anyway, it's nice to meet you. Good to see you, too, big brother."

"Nice to see you too. How's tour life?"

"Not bad. I have one more stop in Miami, and then we're done." He runs a hand through his hair. "It'll be nice not to live out of a suitcase for a while."

"Ah, rock star problems," I joke.

His grin is cheeky. "What can I say? It's a hard life, man."

"When do we get to meet Willa Welch?" I ask.

Blaire looks at me. "The actress?"

"My brother somehow landed the biggest upcoming actress in Hollywood," I tell Blaire. "Can you imagine that?"

Her cheeks flush. "Well ..."

Coy bursts out laughing. "Of course, she can. Have you seen me?"

"Yeah. I have. And I've also seen you put a Sparkler in your ass and light it on the Fourth of July. So, color me surprised that someone with class might want to hook up with you," I say, much to both of their entertainment.

"I remember that!" Boone calls from the table. "I think I have it on video somewhere."

Blaire's giggles beside me are all I hear.

"Nah, that shit with Willa is fake," Coy says. "She's really dating the drummer from Wrecked. My label wanted me to clean up my image a little bit. And her agent wanted to dirty up hers. So they tell us where to be together and when. We show up, follow the script, and go on our merry way."

"Contractual relationships. Makes a lot of sense," Blaire says, side-eyeing me with a grin.

Coy shrugs. "I just try to keep everyone happy."

"That's what you said on Christmas the morning you tried to start breakfast before Mom woke up," Wade says.

"And you about caught the kitchen on fire," Boone says, laughing.

My brothers discuss the tales of holidays gone wrong while I just look at the woman holding my hand.

She glances up at me, ignoring the craziness around her, and smiles. It's an easy, sweet, supportive gesture that silences any concern I had for bringing her here. I wasn't going to ask her. Why bother introducing her to everyone when they'll never see her again? But it didn't feel right coming without her either.

Now that we're here, I know I made the right call.

I don't know what that means exactly. But I'm not going to overthink it.

"I'm sorry. I had to get that mess cleaned up, or it would've sat there all day." My mother comes rushing toward us—meaning Blaire. "How rude, I know."

"Mrs. Mason, really, it's fine," Blaire says, accepting a hug from my mom. "Thank you for inviting me over this afternoon."

My mom runs a hand through the air. "First, it's Siggie, darling. Second, you have no idea how excited I am to have you here. I'm thrilled."

"Are you thrilled to see me too?" I ask.

Mom laughs. "You know I always love to see your sweet face."

Blaire looks at me and makes a face. I laugh.

"Okay," Mom says. "Come. Sit. Let's eat." She turns toward the dining room table. "Come make your plate, boys. I'm your mother, not your servant."

Chairs push back against the tile as my family makes their way into the kitchen. Coy and Boone tease Larissa about something that earns them a smack from Mom.

"Holton, how is the Landry project coming along?" Dad asks, joining Blaire and me near the sofa. "Oliver was just saying that you had an epiphany last night."

I look down at Blaire and smile. "I didn't. She did."

Dad's brows shoot toward the ceiling. "Is that right?"

"It was nothing," Blaire says, beaming. "I had just read an article that gave me an idea. I'm glad it worked out."

“Worked out? It’s fucking brilliant!” Oliver shouts from the kitchen. “And Holt didn’t tell me it was your idea.”

Blaire gasps in faux shock.

“I did too,” I fire back.

Oliver just chuckles and goes back to making his plate.

The ice cubes in my father’s drink clink together as he examines Blaire. “Do you have any other brilliant insights to share on easements? Because I’m having a legal dispute with my neighbor to the right.”

Blaire’s eyes light up. “I don’t know. Try me.”

“Holt! Can you help me with this?” My mom shouts from the kitchen.

I look down at Blaire. I don’t want to leave her here if she’s uncomfortable, considering she’s spent exactly thirty seconds with my father. But the shine in her eye and the wide grin on her face tell me she’s perfectly happy talking legal bullshit with Dad.

“Go on,” she says. “This is my wheelhouse.”

“Good luck to you. Dad will talk your ear off,” I say, earning a clap on the back from my father.

I make my way into the kitchen, slipping in a quick hug from Larissa as I walk by. She jabs me in the ribs in an apparent ode to Blaire coming to a family event again, but I ignore it.

My mother points at a box on the top shelf. “Can you grab that?”

“You couldn’t have one of these assholes get it?”

“They’re filling their plates,” she says. “Besides, I wanted to talk to you.”

I know. I knew it when she pretended to need my help.

The cereal box that has nothing to do with brunch is retrieved from its spot next to the crackers. I hand it to my mom.

“She’s lovely,” Mom whispers. “She’s so, so lovely, Holton.”

“*She’s lovely*,” Boone whispers sarcastically as he walks by.

I glare at him. He laughs.

“Should I get used to seeing her around?” Mom asks. “We’re having the Champagne and Crudites event at the Country Club next week, and I’d love to invite her.”

I glance at Blaire over my shoulder. She’s engaged in a conversation with my father, who looks captivated by her.

I get it, Dad. Me too.

“She’s going back to Chicago in a couple of days,” I say before turning around to face my mother again.

She looks confused. “To get her things? To see her family?”

“To work.” I blow out a breath “She’s ... She doesn’t live here. And she’s not going to. Her life is in Illinois.”

“But I thought ...”

Oliver approaches us from the table. He looks between my mom and me.

“Hey, I need to talk to you for a second,” he tells me, motioning toward the hallway.

“We *will* reconvene this conversation later,” Mom warns.

I roll my eyes and follow Oliver into the hallway next to the dining room.

My back hits the wall as I exhale all the stress that was just heaped on my shoulders.

“I figured you needed a reprieve from that bullshit,” Oliver says.

“Thanks.”

I run my hand through my hair as I hear my mother calling Dad and Blaire to the kitchen. It sounds so normal and something I could totally get used to ... in a perfect world.

One we don’t live in.

“You’ve gotten yourself in deep with all of this Blaire stuff,” Oliver says quietly. “I know it. But you’re going to have to block out Mom and Dad and whatever else and focus. I need you, bud.”

I blow out another breath.

“I know. I’m here. I promise,” I tell him.

He leans against the wall next to me. We stare out the windows and into the front yard. The ferns my mother hangs off the porch every year sway in the breeze.

“You can do both things, you know,” Oliver says.

“What two things?”

“You can work and have a relationship.”

My head hits the drywall.

I can’t have both. I can’t have both for so many reasons.

“She’s going home soon, right?” he asks.

I nod.

“Do you know where you stand with her?” he asks.

“Yeah. She’s going home.”

The words fall flat into the air.

Oliver sighs. “Is she going home because she wants to? Or because you didn’t give her the choice?”

I roll my head to the side and look at my brother. “Are you a relationship expert now?”

“No, but I don’t have my head clouded by Blaire’s pussy either.”

I groan.

He’s right. Of course. And I hate that he’s right this time more than ever.

My head *is* clouded. I do feel pulled. Two things I hate even more than Ollie being right.

“Listen, I—” I begin, but Oliver’s chuckle stops me. “What?”

“You’re getting ready to talk in a circle and give me a bunch of excuses as to why you can’t do what you want.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m not fucking you when she leaves.” He turns his body so we’re facing head-on. “Because she’s gonna leave you, Holt. Are you ready for that? If you think you’re distracted now, think about what that’s gonna be like.”

My blood boils from the tone of his voice and the words spilling from his mouth.

“She has to leave me.”

“Oh, wise one. Please explain.”

“You know how our lives work,” I tell him. “I need to be in the office for twelve fucking hours a day. Sometimes, fourteen. Fuck, isn’t that why you just pulled me in here? Your first words were that you need me to focus.”

“Yes, but—”

“Then fuck you, Ollie.”

I blow out a breath that’s red-hot. My brother’s features darken as he takes the start of my wrath.

“I have to be ready for her to leave because she’s going to,” I say. “And she should.”

“How can you say that?”

“How can you say anything differently? You don’t know the ins and outs of our relationship.”

“But you’re admitting you have a relationship, right?”

I roll my head around my neck. The bones pop from stress.

He doesn’t understand that being with me will kill her. It will ruin her life. If she thought Jack didn’t have time for her, she’d end up hating me.

I’d rather have her and the sweet memories from this week than have her loathe me in the future. And there’s no way at all that I will risk causing her pain by not being the man she needs—the available, present, considerate one.

Not even if it’s what I want to do.

My chest heaves a breath to keep from cracking apart.

“Look,” Oliver says, “I’m letting you know what I see. And I’ve seen you walk around with this frivolity that’s nice to see. You’ve eased up. You came today without a fight.”

“Because Coy is here.”

Oliver looks unconvinced. “Do you realize you had a ten-minute conversation with Boone last night about Christmas in Aspen?” He grins. “You refuse to discuss the holidays until at least Halloween.”

He’s right. A-fucking-gain. But it doesn’t change anything.

How I feel doesn’t change what I know to be true—I cannot be what Blaire needs. She’s already been let down by one guy who couldn’t be there for her. I don’t want to be the same.

I won’t.

It’s as simple as that.

It’s as frustratingly, heartbreakingly simple as that.

I sigh. “Where do you think I’ll find the time to take care of someone’s emotional needs?”

“She’s not a fucking dog, Holt.”

“No. She’s a human being who needs support and time and energy. She deserves that. And unfortunately for all of us, I don’t have that to spare.”

He sighs, seemingly as frustrated as I am. “I get it. I do. I just ... I like what she’s done to you. And she seems like a pretty great girl.”

“Yeah, well, she is.”

He frowns.

Doesn’t he understand that I want to make things work? Doesn’t he realize how hard it’s going to be to watch her pack her things and pull out of my driveway?

Doesn't he know I'll think of her every evening when I come home from work and miss the fuck out of her? Doesn't he know that I'll never be able to see a horse and carriage and not be reminded of the beautiful woman who gave me a piece of her life?

But that's all I get. A piece of her life. Because if I ask for more, I'll ruin her.

"Holton! Oliver! Let's eat," Mom calls from the dining room.

Oliver watches me, giving me one final chance to correct myself.

But I don't.

"Coming," I say, walking around him.

Blaire is standing next to the wall with her hands on the back of a chair. Two plates of food sit in front of her.

She turns to face me, and I stop in my tracks.

There's a hurricane building in her blue eyes.

What's this all about? Who said something to cause this?

"Take your seats, kids," Dad orders.

I pull out Blaire's chair, and she sits. I take mine beside her.

Before I can ask her what's wrong, Dad has us bowing our heads to pray.

I take her hand beneath the table and give it a squeeze. I also add a little line to the prayer for God to help Blaire and me figure this out.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Blaire

Trees whip by the windows as Holt flies down the highway.

I sit, buckled in, and try to summon the shield I use in court when things get emotional. It's never too far away, and I can always find it when I need it. Yancy says it's probably an indicator that I'm emotionally detached, but I quite like the ability.

When it works.

It turns out, it's easier to do when Holt isn't involved.

He pilots the car onto an exit ramp and winds us through town. It's a quiet ride, just like brunch.

The absence of communication between us probably wasn't evident to anyone but us. The stories and laughter from the family made up for the silence between Holt and me.

The tires hit Cobblestone Way, and our speed slows. I remember coming down this street for the first time a few days ago. I was so confident that I could control this situation.

What was I thinking?

Now I'm going to pay the price, and it's my own damn fault.

A lump settles in my throat as Holt's words filter through my mind.

"She's a human being who needs support and time and energy. She deserves that. And unfortunately for all of us, I don't have that to spare."

I didn't mean to hear it. I was just going to tell him and Oliver to come to eat at their mother's request. But his voice hit my ears before my feet could hit the doorway, and I backed away.

My lips part as I try to drag more oxygen into my lungs.

I need to calm down.

Naturally, as if he knows I need consoling, he chooses this moment to place a hand on my knee. I want to push it away. I want to tell him that despite what he said to Oliver, I'm not needy.

His hand remains on my leg because I don't have the strength to remove it.

"You're awfully quiet," he says.

I hum in agreement instead of using words.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod, tearing my eyes away from his hand and staring out the window instead.

"I'm fine. Just a bit overwhelmed," I say.

It's not a lie. I am overwhelmed. Just not like he'll assume I am.

The sound of our voices stirs up my emotions again, and I feel the unwanted sting of tears. So many emotions flood through me.

I'm embarrassed that I was going to talk to him tonight about meeting up in a few weeks. There's anger with myself for not sticking to my guns when I told him I didn't want to go to dinner that first night. And there's so much freaking pain from knowing that I told Holt about my ugliest moments and now he's decided he's walking away.

Even though that was always the plan—for me to leave—it still feels like he urged me to open up, to be vulnerable, and then he assessed my emotions and bailed.

Like Jack.

He took my greatest weakness and turned it against me.

I laugh quietly at the irony. The sound surprises me. I feel Holt move around in his seat, but I don't look at him.

We pull through the gate at the end of his driveway. The sun is high in the sky, welcoming us with its full rays. It feels good on my skin and helps dissolve the water droplets gathering in the corners of my eyes.

The car rolls to a stop in front of his house. I grip the door handle.

"I have to head to the office," he says.

"I know."

Please want to talk to me. Please care.

"I have a meeting in a couple of hours with an investor that Boone set up. I don't know how long it will last," he says.

I turn and look at him over my shoulder. He's so handsome despite the lines around the corners of his eyes and the bags beneath them. And I realize the truth of the situation: there's no room for me in his life.

My heart cracks in my chest.

"I understand," I tell him.

He bites his lip. "I'll be home late."

And I'll be gone.

I have to leave. I have to do it now before my emotions get any more volatile. I was a fool to have let it get this far. Letting it continue would be insanity.

My lips tremble as I lean over and press a kiss to his cheek. This will be the last time I feel his skin against mine and smell the warmth of his cologne. I want to cling to this moment and relish every bit of comfort I can find because as soon as this moment is over, I'll never have it back.

It will be as close as I'll ever get to love.

It hurts too damn much.

"Good luck," I say, hoping he doesn't hear the frog in my throat. I open the door and hurry out of the car. By the time the door shuts, I'm already on the steps.

I don't look back. Whether it's my subconscious telling me to keep going forward or simply because I don't want to torture myself anymore—and that's what I'd be doing if I look back—I'm not sure. But I press on and open the door using the code on the keypad and slip inside the house.

Cool air kisses my cheeks, making the drips of my tears cold.

I slide my back against the wall of the foyer—the same wall Holt held me against after the concert.

I was different then. Full of hope. Teased with the taste of having someone who thought I was worth their most valuable commodity: time.

I was fucking stupid.

Tears fall steadily down my face as I look around Holt's home.

"I'll be honest—I didn't really think you being here all the way through before inviting you."

My hands are smeared black from mascara as I wipe my face. It's a physical show of what a mess I am. I turn to go up the stairs when the front door opens.

My head spins to the right, and my breath catches in my throat.

Holt stands in the doorway.

He slides his sunglasses off his face and takes in the sight before him.

Shit.

“Blaire ...”

I lift my chin and straighten my shoulders. I give him my best unaffected smile.

Clearly, my cheeks are stained with mascara, and my lips are swollen like they always are when I’m upset. But I pretend none of that exists.

“What’s going on?” he asks carefully, silencing his phone as it rings in his hand.

“I’m just getting ready to take a bath.”

He furrows his brow. “That wasn’t what I was asking, and you know it.”

“Did you forget something?”

My heart pounds in my chest as I feel my way through this conversation. I thought I’d have a better handle on myself before I had to speak about this whole mess.

Who am I kidding? I’d hoped to be gone and never have to talk about it at all.

Concern sweeps across his features.

“Cut the crap, Blaire. What’s going on?”

“I’m fine. Things just got the best of me today.”

He steps farther inside the house and closes the door behind him. The latch is loud and crisp.

I start up the steps as though I didn’t just get caught on the cusp of breaking down.

“Blaire. Stop.”

His tone is rough; the edges of his words bristling with irritation. It’s not at all the tenderness I’d hoped to hear. But what it does do is confirm what I overheard at his parents’ house.

He has no intention of giving me any piece of his life.

I’m a distraction to his work, a needy woman who demands too much of his time. And now, after seeing me cry, he’ll think I’m an emotional train wreck just like Jack said too.

I will never, ever share my emotions with a man again.

I place a hand on the rail but don’t move again. Instead, I stand there and gaze up at the landing and wish I’d have gone straight to pack my suitcase instead of stopping in the foyer.

“I need you to go to the office,” I tell him. My words are muddled through the constriction in my throat.

Speaking is hard. My chest burns. A bubble of emotions sits at the base of my throat, and I don’t know what to do with them.

“I don’t want to go to the office,” he says slowly. “I want to talk to you.”

“You shouldn’t have come back.”

“I never left.”

Against my best interests, I turn my head. He’s standing in the middle of the room, framed by the elaborate door behind him. There’s a war happening in his bright green eyes.

“I don’t have time to do this with you right now and get to the office before the investors show up,” he says, blowing out a breath. He looks down as his phone rings again. The lines in his forehead deepen. “I’m worried about you. Will you just talk to me?”

“There’s not a lot to talk about. I got a text from Yancy, and the building is open again,” I tell him. “I’m going to catch a flight tonight.”

He runs a hand down his face. “I have a ton of shit on my plate right now. But I want to talk to you, and I don’t want to leave if you’re upset.”

“I’m fine, Holt.”

It’s a lie. Maybe the biggest lie I’ve ever told because I’m not all right.

My heart is broken. My confidence is wounded. My soul hurts from having been led to paradise but being forbidden to enter.

His phone breaks the silence with its shrill ring. Again. He looks down at the screen and glares as he silences it.

“You better go,” I tell him. *So I can go.*

He sighs. “I can’t do this right now, Blaire. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t ask you to do anything. As a matter of fact, I asked you to leave. Multiple times.”

“No, but you’re a guest in my house, and I want to make sure you’re okay.”

The way he says *guest in my house* sends a rush of cold water through my veins.

What does that even mean? Does it mean while I thought we were forging an emotional connection that he was just toying with me in his free time?

What the fuck?

My jaw sets. “Well, on that note, I’m sorry for being such a distraction and taking up so much of your energy. I’m aware you don’t have any to spare.”

His eyes light up as he puts two-and-two together.

There’s no need to confirm his suspicions. He knows I heard him and Oliver.

“Fuck,” he says under his breath.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “I’m leaving anyway.”

“Don’t say it like that,” he says.

“Like what?” I swallow hard. “Like you said it?”

I bite my lip as a form of self-protection. I don’t want to cry in front of him any more than I already have. I don’t want to get angry. I want to remain as calm as I can and then extricate myself from this situation.

Hopefully, in one piece.

“That was all ...” He looks at the ceiling. His nostrils flare as he pushes out a hasty breath. “That wasn’t for you to hear.”

“Trust me. I didn’t want to hear it.”

His shoulders fall. “Let me explain.”

“You have explained enough.” I fight the tickle in my nose that comes before tears. “I know I’m a time suck and—”

“Blaire.”

“And my emotions are such a burden. It’s been said before,” I say through the rivers streaming down my face.

He starts toward me, but I hold up a hand.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks, holding his arms out the sides. His phone rings again in his right hand.

“I don’t want you to do anything.”

“No. Clearly, you do. What is it? Do you want me to cancel this meeting? It’s for a project I’ve worked on for months. My family and multitudes of other families who work for us all depend on me. Do you have any idea what that pressure is like?”

“Nope. I just keep people from going to prison for their entire lives when they’re innocent. I have no idea about pressure. Talk to me about it.”

He stares at me as though he’s unsure what to say.

I raise a brow. “Okay. I’ll be honest. You know what I wanted from you? I wanted you to want me, okay?”

My words crack. I grab the railing with all my might.

Holt's phone rings *again*. "We don't have time for this conversation."

"Of course, we don't."

"Dammit, Blaire. I'm trying here. I can't be everything to everyone. I've been telling you that all along. It's why I don't bring people here. It's why I don't have relationships because this shit happens, and I have to let someone down."

I get it. He's right. He has to let someone down. But I would've been happy to wait for him to come home later and have a conversation about our future.

Except he doesn't want one.

"It's clear that you're not going to be anything to me and my emotional baggage," I say.

"Can we just do this later? Please," he asks as his phone buzzes in his hand. His nostrils flare as he presses the button to silence the noise. "I cannot manage all of this right now."

"Again, I didn't ask you to stay. As a matter of fact," I say, feeling a surge of energy pass through my body, "I didn't ask for any of this. *Any of it*. You asked for my number. You pressed me into dinner. You invited me to your home, and you took me to meet your family. And you asked me, implored me to share my feelings with you. That's all on you, Holt. Every bit of it."

The words strengthen my resolve. The pain turns to anger as I peer down at him from my perch.

"If you didn't want me to fall in love with you, then you shouldn't have ..." My voice trails off as I realize what I've said.

Holt's eyes go wide.

"I didn't realize ..." He starts toward me but stops. "I didn't ... *Oh, fuck.*"

"Yeah. Well, now you know."

He glances so quickly at his watch that I would've missed it if I wasn't paying acute attention.

"Just go on," I tell him.

"This conversation isn't over."

Tears sting my eyes again. "I think it is."

He throws his hands up and growls into the air.

I can feel his frustration rippling through the room. I want to tell him we'll talk about this later.

But we won't. Because there's nothing left to be said.

Even if there was, I wouldn't begin to share it with him now.

"It's fine," I tell him, my voice softer. "And if it makes you feel any better, I don't think you ever lied to me. I just ... hoped."

His body stills in the doorway. He worries his bottom lip between his teeth as he watches me with an expression I can't name.

"I'm sorry, Blaire. Just ... tell me you'll be here when I get back. *Please.*"

He backs away slowly. My heart breaks as I accept his final answer. Whether he wants to admit it or not, this is over.

Maybe it never started.

I've never felt smaller. I've never felt as vulnerable and raw as I do standing in front of this man.

It won't happen again.

"Please be here when I get back," he repeats.

I know he needs to go, and that his decision has already been made, so I nod.

I only hold back the tears long enough for the door to close behind him.

TWENTY-NINE

Holt

Every muscle in my whole fucking body hurts.

I loosen my tie as I speed too fast down Cobblestone Way.

Blaire hasn't answered my calls or texts all day. It's unusual for her, and despite knowing that she's pissed at me—rightfully so—I'm surprised. I almost sent Larissa to my house to make sure she didn't leave, but I don't really think she would've.

She said she loves me. She couldn't leave after that. *Could she?*

I shiver as a chill blasts through my body.

I step harder on the gas pedal.

I'd hoped some time apart could give us some space to figure this shit out. How it got so convoluted, I'll never know.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

It got convoluted the moment I saw her.

I slow down for a man on a bike. He gives me a wave, and I wave back. He seems so carefree as he pedals down our street and enjoys the evening sun, and it pisses a part of me off.

Why does he get to enjoy his night when I don't?

"Because you're a fucking idiot," I say aloud.

I don't know how our conversation will go when I get home. I also don't know how much of my chat with Oliver she heard. But what I do know is that I need her to understand the context. I need her to know why I said those things—because I don't want to hurt her.

Which I inadvertently already did.

I slam my palm against the steering wheel.

My stomach twists as I think about her overhearing any of what I said to my brother. I can't even remember all of what was verbalized in the hallway. I only know that I made it clear that I can't be what Blaire needs.

And that remains true.

"If you didn't want me to fall in love with you ..."

Surely, she didn't mean that. She couldn't have. Blaire Gibson wouldn't fall in love with a guy like me—a man so busy in his own life that he can't take care of hers.

She has to know she deserves better. *How could she not realize how special she is? How could she not demand more for herself?* She needs someone who won't walk out on her like Jack.

And like me.

A bubble of rage fills my stomach as I acknowledge what I've done.

I left her when she needed me. And whether I had something else to do or not, I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what my options were, but I should've figured something out. There were too many irons in the fire, too many people calling. Too much to handle all at the same time.

I grip the steering wheel.

My phone rings through my car, and I answer it without looking to see who it is.

"Hello?" I say.

"Just heard from Graham Landry," Oliver says. "Tomorrow morning at ten. We're heading to their offices. He wants our final offer."

I've waited for this day for weeks. It should feel like a milestone getting to the finish line.

I sigh.

Oliver, Wade, Boone, and I killed it today. Even though I was distracted as fuck, I was able to promise myself I'd have time to make things right with Blaire later and focus. We filled every potential hole, came up with a viable solution to every argument Landry could make, and secured an investor who will make things much smoother.

Every time my brain flipped to her, I told myself to set it to the side until I got home. Then she gets my undivided attention, and we can figure this out.

“We’re ready,” I say to Oliver, removing my tie altogether and tossing it onto the passenger’s seat. “I feel really good about this.”

“The deck area Wade added in from Blaire’s suggestion is the feather in our cap.”

“Yeah.”

“Landry will love that. And so will we in the long run.”

“For sure.” I work my neck back and forth. “I’ll be in the office early. Around four thirty in the morning. Maybe five. If you want to come in and do a last-minute run-through, I’ll be there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

My house approaches. With every inch I get closer, the harder my heart pounds.

“I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, Ollie.”

“Hey, real quick.” Ollie takes a deep breath. “I’ve not brought up the whole thing at Mom’s because I can tell you’re dealing with something else. But I want you to know that I always have your back. And I’m sorry if I pissed you off. I just want what’s best for you, Holt.”

I slump in my seat. I didn’t know I needed to hear that today, but I did. It’s apparent.

“Thanks, Ollie. I ... It’s been a day.”

“And we can hash it out whenever you’re ready. Or not.”

I grin. “Thanks, brother.”

“Anytime.”

“Bye.”

I end the call and turn sharply into my driveway. As I fly toward the house, I scan the area for Blaire’s rental car.

It’s gone.

Shit.

My car barely comes to a stop before I jump out. I leave the door wide open as I jog up the stairs, punch the keycode in, and step inside the foyer.

I can still see Blaire standing on the stairs with those tragic black streaks running down her face.

My heart squeezes so tight that I brace my chest with my hand.

She’s gone.

I don’t have to go to the guest room to see if her suitcase is there to know it isn’t.

It's as if the house itself knows she's left and is mourning. The sun fails to stream in the windows and is instead disturbed by a host of clouds. The usual warmth of the space has faded into a tempered blur.

I walk the hallway to the kitchen. Her laughter fills my mind as I pass by Coy's painting that hangs on the wall.

I pour myself a drink and sit at the kitchen island. The room feels bigger than I've ever noticed before. I wonder why I ever wanted a house this big just for me. There was a reason. I just can't remember it.

There's a hollowness in my chest that I can't escape. No rationalization or excuses will make the void disappear.

I fucked her over, even if I didn't mean to.

Just like I did Kendra.

And just like Jack did her.

The bourbon bites at my throat as I drink. I welcome the burn.

"If you didn't want me to fall in love with you ..."

Her words keep coming back to me. It hurts a little more each time.

Many women have told me they loved me over the course of my life, but I never felt like any of them actually did. They might have been infatuated with me or in lust with me, but none of them loved me. Not really.

But none of them said it like Blaire, either.

It wasn't moaned in the heat of passion. It wasn't armed as a weapon. It wasn't used in an attempt to manipulate me into doing something.

She said it from a place deep inside her. It didn't give her joy to say it. It caused her pain.

It caused her pain because I didn't say it back.

I tip up my glass and take another long swallow.

My phone rings on the counter. I plan to let it go to voicemail, but my curiosity gets the best of me, and I glance at the screen.

"Hey, Riss," I say, my voice slower and heavier than usual.

She sighs. "It's as bad as he said, huh?"

"Who?"

"Ollie."

I take another drink. The ice cubes clink in the glass.

"Are you drinking?" she asks.

"Yup."

"Oh. Grand. This should be fun."

I chuckle. “What do you want, you little pain in my ass?”

“I want to offer my services.”

“Um ...”

“Oh, no! Not like that. Ew. Gross. No. Forget I said that.” She gags on the other end for my amusement. “What I meant was that I’m calling to see if you need a female brain to help make your man brain work.”

“My man brain works just fine, thank you very much.”

“Eh,” she says. “I’m voting no on that.”

I stand and head to the counter. The bourbon is still sitting next to the ticket stubs from Coy’s concert and the gummy bear wrapper Blaire finished off last night.

I pick up the tickets and hold them in my hands.

I’m taken back to that night with Blaire and my family. I was so nervous about taking her around my brothers. Every time I pictured it in my head, they’d say something stupid, and she’d be offended. Or she’d realize my mother has been trying to marry me off for the past ten years and bail. But then I realized I didn’t want to go without her.

I was so damn proud to be there with her, to show her off to my parents and brothers. And not because she was some kind of physical trophy, although she was a knockout in that tight black shirt, but because she was classy and smart. And just for that night, she was mine.

She was there with me as a man she met in the airport. She didn’t give a shit about my money or what my last name means here or that Coy was my brother—hell, she didn’t even know. She was just attending an event with a guy who she deemed worthy of being with.

Me.

My spirits fall.

“Okay, so, Oliver said that you’re all messed up today. Wanna talk about it?” Riss asks.

“No, I don’t wanna talk about it. I want to go drink some more and try to forget it.”

“Big mistake, buddy.”

“It was a big mistake to answer your call.”

I pour myself a drink and wonder if I can hang up on her. I don’t because she’d just show up at my house and let herself in.

She’s done it before.

“Blaire left,” I say.

It comes out harsh and cold, but I don't know how to make it sound less blunt.

Riss sucks in a deep breath that doesn't go unnoticed by me. "Well, this puts things in perspective."

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

It's a lie. I'm not fine. But I don't know what else to say. Do I admit I'm the fucking disaster I feel like I am? That won't help anyone.

"Sometimes, it's easier to pretend that you don't care than to admit that you're dying inside," she says.

"That's poetic."

She sighs. "Well, I guess I see why Blaire left now."

"Oh, do you?"

"Yes. You're an asshole."

"True enough." I take a long drink before smacking my lips together. "Is that all you called for?"

"Sure. That's it. Good luck recovering from this one."

I lean against the counter and shake my head. "This will go away. I just need to put some time and distance between Blaire and me."

"Sorry to break it to you, but real feelings don't go away."

"You're on fire tonight with the inspirational bullshit."

"Just here to help."

"Well, you're not."

I walk to the window and look out at the pool. Blaire's favorite chair sits empty. All that remains from her time sitting out there is a bright red hair elastic on the deck.

It takes everything I have not to go get it.

I turn away. I can't look at it.

"Let me ask you something," I say to my cousin. "What is love?"

She laughs.

"Forget it," I say.

"No! No, no, no. I just didn't expect that."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Maybe that you were going to ask me why you should go get her? I was totally ready to convince you. I had a speech queued up and ready to go."

I grin. "I'm not going after her."

"May I ask why not?"

I down the rest of my drink before answering her.

"I don't have the energy to fight at work and fight when I get home, Riss. I can't afford to chase her down—especially when I have so much shit happening right now." I set the glass on the counter. "And you know what? She needs someone who can spend the weekends walking around town with her and not feel guilty. She deserves someone who can have a fucking conversation without their phone going off fourteen times. That someone is not me."

"But you asked her to stay, right?"

My silence speaks for itself.

"Holt ..."

"She has a full life in Chicago. I have a full life here. We both are so busy that it would never work anyway, even if it were a good idea."

"I'm assuming you got her opinion on the matter. Right?"

"She'll agree once she gets home and thinks about it."

She groans. "I could kill you right now."

"For being kind? Thoughtful? Mature? Okay."

"For being a fucking idiot. How can someone so brilliant be so dense at the same time?"

The alcohol begins to do its job. My veins pulse with an unnatural warmth. My head fogs with a welcomed haze. I'm still well aware that Blaire is gone and that I'm a well-intentioned asshole, but the sharpness of the pain is muted.

Thank God.

"Tell you what," I tell her. "I'll try to call her again. If she doesn't answer, I'll assume that's her way of telling me to go fuck myself. And if that's the case, I'll agree with her methodology."

"Please, Holt—please think about this before you make it worse."

I laugh sadly. "How worse could it get? She's gone."

"Because you let her go."

"Because I had to."

I eye the bottle of bourbon again.

"I gotta go, Riss. Thanks for calling and checking on me."

She sighs. "You're welcome. Just ... remember that it's okay to be happy. It's not a character flaw."

“Sure. Talk to you later.”

“Goodbye.”

I end the call and pour myself another drink.

THIRTY

Blaire

My apartment is so cold.

I shiver as I pull the shades down over the windows. The thermostat says that it's not as frigid as it feels, so I wonder if the chill is somehow coming from me.

By a stroke of luck, Yancy texted me as soon as my plane landed. The Grimrose Building was open again, and I could go back home. It was like the universe took pity on my poor self and couldn't stand to watch me struggle anymore.

My face is swollen from crying for the past three hours. As soon as I walked through the door, I started crying and couldn't stop.

I'm sure Sienna thinks I'm a complete lunatic because she called in the middle of it. It was all I could do to reassure her that I was fine.

I just wish that I felt reassured too.

My stomach growls, but the idea of food makes me want to hurl. I want to crawl in Holt's bed, under one of his strong arms, and listen to him tell me about his day.

I wince as the fibers in my heart rip even further apart.

"It was never meant to be," I tell myself.

Maybe not, but it feels like it was.

No matter what affirmation or sentence of strength I say aloud, it doesn't resonate inside my brain. My inner monologue is much different and just as insistent.

I flop down on the couch and look at my phone. He's called me three times tonight.

I close my eyes and hear his sweet, Southern voice saying my name. His smile is imprinted in my mind for the rest of time. My skin tingles as I remember the heat of his touch.

Even if it was all in my imagination, I liked it. And I'll treasure it for the rest of time because I'm not answering his calls. I'm not listening to his voice messages. There's no need for him to try to explain why he doesn't want me.

A knock raps on my door.

My heartbeat quickens as I get to my feet. I'm too nervous to ask who it is.

Before I can get across the room, I hear Sienna's voice from the other side.

"Blaire? It's Sienna. Open up."

I flip the lock and open the door. My brother's girlfriend is standing on the other side with a bag in each hand. Her eyes are filled with concern.

"Hey," she says softly.

I try to speak but end up opening my mouth and making a sound that's half-laugh and half-sigh.

Sienna steps into my apartment and places the bags on the floor. She then pulls me into the biggest hug.

I'm taken aback at first. Sienna and I have never hugged. But as she holds me tight and fills me with good energy, I find myself hugging her back.

Finally, she pulls away.

"It took all of this to get me an invitation to your apartment," she jokes.

"I would've invited you without having to endure all of this." I walk toward the living room. "Come on in."

"I brought things."

"What kind of things?" I ask, sitting on the sofa again.

She sits next to me and places the bags on the coffee table. She reaches inside and pulls out a bottle of wine, a giant bar of chocolate, and a bag of microwave popcorn.

"If I failed to be clear, this isn't a slumber party," I tell her, laughing. "I have to wallow tonight. I must *feel to heal*."

"What the heck is that? *Feel to heal*."

“It’s a thing I learned in therapy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, no worries about this being a slumber party. If I tried to stay here, Walker would come and get me. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up anyway.”

I fall back into the pillows and fake cry. “Does he know about Holt?”

“I tried super hard not to tell him anything. I told him it was your business and your story to tell—or not. But you know how he can be.”

I stick out my bottom lip. “Is he on a plane to Savannah right now?”

“He probably would’ve been if I hadn’t taken his credit card.” She winks. “But no, really, he’s worried about you. He wants you to call him.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

She laughs. “Do you want some wine?”

“Only if you’re going to pour it.”

She looks around my apartment. “Is the kitchen through there?”

I nod, and she gets up and disappears around the corner.

My chest feels like there’s a hole where my heart used to be. It’s like someone used a spoon to scoop out my organ and throw it away.

I close my eyes and imagine how long it might take me to feel better again. *Days? Weeks? Months?*

Ever?

Sienna reappears with two coffee mugs. She shrugs. “It was all I could find.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I actually have wine glasses.”

She sits down and looks at me like I’m crazy.

“What?” I ask, watching her open the bottle. “I don’t drink a ton. I have to stay sober to keep people out of prison.”

She hands me a glass of a deep, burgundy-colored drink. “That’s so noble of you.”

“I’ll be able to tell my nieces and nephews one day that I was an honorable, noble woman until I met this guy on vacation, and he ruined my life.”

She shakes her head. “You know, you’re much more dramatic than I would’ve guessed.”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised. I am Lance’s sister.”

We both laugh.

I take a sip of my wine and then rest my head on the pillows again. It feels good to have some distance between Holt and me. It’s easier to

process.

It's easier, too, having Sienna here.

I look at her and smile. "Thanks."

"For what?" She curls her legs up under her. "For the wine? Don't thank me. Thank Machlan. I took it from his bar."

It feels good to smile. I was afraid I wouldn't smile again for a long time.

"Thank you for coming all the way up here," I tell her. "You didn't have to do that."

"No. I did."

"You could've called me from home. Or met me for lunch tomorrow."

She sets her glass down. "You still don't get it."

"Get what?"

"Blaire, *we're friends*. If you need me, I'm going to be there. I would've flown to Savannah if you needed me ... although Walker probably would've come, and I'm one hundred percent sure that he could take Holt with one punch."

She makes a face that makes me laugh.

"I was this close to sending my sister, Camilla, over to check on you," Sienna says. "I was afraid that would freak you out, though."

"Yeah. That might've been awkward."

Sienna smiles. "You'd love Cam."

I start to say that maybe I'll meet her one day, but I stop myself.

I'm never setting foot in Savannah again.

Sienna stretches her arms over her head and sighs. I know she's giving me space and avoiding the elephant in the room, but the longer we go without addressing it, the more my anxiety about the whole thing increases.

I take a deep breath. "I'm proud of myself."

It's an odd thing to blurt out, and it catches Sienna off guard. She drops her hands to the sofa slowly.

"Today was awful and, at times, humiliating. But I didn't crumple. I chose to leave because it was the best choice for me—and what he really wanted, anyway. But I made that decision, and it's not something I've always been able to do in my personal life. I'm proud of that."

"I'm happy for you," she says carefully.

"I mean it." I scoot to a more upright position. "Today was a really hard day."

I feel my throat tighten again as if it's begging me not to talk anymore. But Sienna has been with me through the whole thing, and I want her to know how it ended.

We're friends, after all.

"I went with Holt to his parents for brunch this morning." I shake my head. "I can't believe that was this morning."

"How'd it go?"

"Really good and really terrible."

My breathing stays even as I mentally replay walking into the Mason's home.

"His family is wonderful," I say. "I met Coy in person. He's a train wreck."

"But so hot."

"He's pretty cute," I say with a grin. "Then I had the best chat with Rodney about a legal issue. And Siggie is just ... she reminds me of my mom. Well, if my mom wore pearls."

Sienna grins but doesn't say anything.

"But, um ..." I force a swallow. "Siggie asked me to get Holt and Oliver from the other room. And when I went to do that, I overheard them talking. I wasn't eavesdropping," I hurry to add. "I just heard it before I could not hear it, if that makes any sense."

"It does. Especially if there are all kinds of noise floating around, and you're hyper-focused on one person's voice."

I nod. "Anyway, Holt was telling Oliver that he didn't have the energy or time to really deal with me. That's not what he said verbatim but close enough. That was the point."

My voice dips at the end as my spirits fall. Even though I've thought about that a hundred times since then, it still stings.

Sienna smiles sadly. "I know that wasn't a good feeling."

I shake my head.

She shifts in her seat as she sips her wine. Her eyes stay trained on me over the rim of her glass. Finally, she sets the glass back down.

"I'll never forget the night when Walker's truth hit me in the face. I was surrounded by his family—*your* family. Do you remember that?"

I nod.

"It was terrible. Humiliating. And I had to sit there and absorb this ... bullshit and try to act like my world wasn't crashing down."

“I remember Machlan calling me that night,” I tell her. “I was so pissed at Walker.”

“That makes two of us.” She smiles. “But the reason I bring this up now is because it took Walker a hot minute to realize how he felt about me. And then it took another hot minute for him to work through his shit. Sometimes, it’s not as easy for guys who are used to being independent to realize they need a woman in their lives.”

“I guess. But you know what? That used to be me too. It’s not easy for anyone. It’s not a good excuse.”

She places her hand on top of mine and gives it a squeeze. “If Holt doesn’t come around, you’re gonna be fine. You’ll find a stud in a suit in Chicago, and we’ll be so glad that Holt screwed up. And if you want me to get plane tickets to Savannah for the morning, we can fly down and put a can of clams in his car.”

I laugh. “Why would we do that?”

“Ha. You’ve never met a can of clams in the hot Southern sun, have you?”

I can only imagine what she’s getting at. And even though it sounds utterly disgusting and juvenile and something I’d never do, I’m happy she said it. It just feels good to have someone on my side.

Sienna stands up. “I’m gonna pop this popcorn, and then we’re gonna watch a romantic comedy and go through all the emotions.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because it’s cathartic. You can feel your pain or whatever your snappy little mantra is.”

I cock my head to the side. “I’m not sure you’re right about this methodology.”

“And how many times have you been in this position?” She winks. “Trust me, girl. I got you.”

As she walks into the kitchen with the popcorn in her hand, I lay back and close my eyes.

And I trust her.

Because what do I have to lose?

THIRTY-ONE

Holt

“You look like shit.”

I ignore Wade’s remark and go back to the papers on my desk. He makes himself at home across from me, casually propping one ankle on the opposite knee.

If I look like shit, then I feel like hell.

I should’ve gotten some sleep last night. I should’ve tried, at least. But just going into my room makes me think of Blaire, and that wasn’t going to bring sweet dreams.

So I worked instead. All. Night. Long. I switched my shirt at four this morning and drove to the office. Rosie brought me coffee and a donut at six.

“You could’ve at least combed your hair,” Wade says. “Fuck, Holt. We have this under control, you know. You don’t have to turn into a troll.”

“You know what?” I say, looking up. “Fuck off.”

“Wow. Okay.”

I let my hands fall to my desktop. The sound echoes around the room.

My body sags, and I feel my energy plummet. I’ve been running on fumes for hours. I was afraid that if I stopped, I’d never gear back up.

“Good morning, boys,” Oliver booms as he walks into my office. But one look at Wade quells his spunk. “Well, fuck.”

“Same thing I said,” Wade chimes in.

“No. You said I look like shit.”

Oliver sits down next to Wade. “Well, he was right. Damn, man. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me rephrase—are you going to be okay? I’m asking in a totally serious way,” Oliver says.

My brothers watch me with total seriousness. Gone are their jokes and jabs, and in their place is a concern for my well-being.

It’s not misplaced.

Nothing feels right today. My house feels too big and my office too quiet. My shirt is too tight, and my stomach, despite being empty except for Rosie’s donut, threatens to spill its contents all over the floor.

I keep telling myself this will get easier. I just need to get absorbed back into this project and forget all about Blaire.

My head hangs in front of me.

“Of course, I’m going to be okay,” I say without any gumption behind it.

Oliver and Wade sit quietly—something that’s unusual for them. It makes a strange day even stranger having my brothers in a room with silence.

The truth is, I don’t even care. I lost all my fucks to give somewhere around two this morning.

I just don’t care.

I should. I want to care. I cared so much yesterday. I cared so fucking much that I left a woman who’s a damn unicorn—a woman unlike any other I’ll ever meet in my entire life—in my house crying.

I don’t know who I am anymore. I’ve lost touch with reality.

How did I get here? Why do I feel defeated?

Especially when I’m on the precipice of the biggest victory in Mason Ltd. history.

Wade checks his watch. “Look, we have a few minutes before we have to leave. You are going to have to pull your head out of your ass.”

Oliver sighs. “Come on, Wade. Have a little heart.”

“I have a heart,” he says. “I just don’t have room in it for someone to fuck up my future.”

“He’s our brother. He’s heartbroken.”

“I’m right fucking here,” I tell them both. “Damn.”

Wade places both feet on the floor. “I’m trying really hard here to have some empathy for your situation. However, I’m coming up shorthanded.”

“Shocker,” Oliver mutters.

Wade doesn’t look bothered. “I’m going to be quick about this and very cut-and-dry.”

“You just keep bringing the shockers, don’t ya?” Oliver asks.

Wade ignores him again. “This whole thing you have going on today is because of Blaire. Correct?”

“Well,” I say, “it is. But really, it’s more about—”

“A simple yes or no will suffice,” Wade deadpans.

I sit up, making myself appear as tall as I can.

“You know what? Maybe it doesn’t suffice,” I counter. “Maybe life isn’t black and white and yes and no and up and down and left and right. Maybe it’s fucking gray. Maybe it’s a decimal point. Maybe it’s a ... tie game, and there is no overtime.”

That last bit doesn’t make a lot of sense. I just keep going so Wade doesn’t start picking at my analogies.

“The point is,” I continue, “that I can’t give you a simple yes or no because it’s not just because of Blaire. It’s because of ... me.”

I don’t think I realized this until I said it.

But I’m right. It *is* about me.

In so many ways.

And not just that I caused the detonation of my relationship with Blaire or that I subconsciously pushed her away to save myself from having to face my truths.

This whole thing is about me and my fear of failure.

I know it. And as soon as I realize it, a weight lifts off my shoulders.

I’m afraid of failing my family and hurting our business. I’m terrified of failing a woman and being a shit companion. And I’m absolutely petrified of committing to Blaire and losing her.

Because out of all the things I’m most scared of, that’s the one I don’t think I’d survive.

“Why’d you let her go?” Wade asks. “And, yes, I know she left because Boone told me.”

“How the fuck did Boone know?”

“Larissa,” Wade says. “You can’t keep a secret in this family.”

Oliver leans forward. “I’d like to circle back to the reason you let her go. Because if she was staying at my house, she’d still be there. I guarantee you that.”

I glare at him. He laughs.

Fucker.

I ignore Oliver and turn to Wade.

“I don’t know how to balance it all,” I tell him. “I don’t know how to perform here and be what she needs too.”

Wade grins. “How very arrogant of you.”

“What? What do you mean?” I ask. “How can you even say that? I pushed her away to save her, Wade. Not out of arrogance.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that she doesn’t need you to *be* anything. She’s a grown, successful woman who’s managed to obtain a law degree, be an upstanding member of society, and have very little debt all without you,” Wade says.

“How do you know that?” Oliver asks.

“Background check,” Wade says without looking at Oliver. “But the point here is, Holt, that you just let a woman go because you think she needs you. I happen to think she doesn’t need you for shit. She just *wants you*. Those are two totally different things.”

I stare at the stapler on my desk and let his words filter through my brain.

The more I think about it, the more I think he’s right.

Blaire doesn’t need me. She doesn’t need me to fill a role in her life or to fix her problems. What Wade said is true—she chose me to be a part of her life because she wants me.

And I made her think I didn’t want her.

Dammit.

The door cracks open, and Rosie pushes her head around the corner.

“If you boys are going to make it to the Landry offices, you need to get going,” she says. “You don’t want to be late.”

“Thank you, Rosie,” Oliver calls.

“Of course. And Boone called and said that none of you are answering your phones and that he will meet you there.” She rolls her eyes. “He gave me an excuse, but it was garbage. So lord knows what he was doing.”

“Thanks, Rosie,” Wade says.

She gives us a little wave and disappears behind the door.

We all take a deep breath and look at one another.

“You guys ready to do this?” Oliver asks.

“Yup,” Wade says.

“I am,” I say.

We stand and grab our briefcases and keys.

I glance at my watch as we take the elevator to the parking lot. I calculate how long it will take to seal this deal. If we can get it done within a few hours, I can still make a flight out of Savannah and be in Chicago tonight.

I need to go to her, but I need to be here for my family too. I have a responsibility to them. They’re counting on me. If it wasn’t for them—if it were for anyone else or anything else—I’d be gone.

As soon as this is over, I’m going straight to the airport.

My brain spins as we exit the elevator and head to our cars.

I have no idea what Blaire will say if I just show up at her apartment. Maybe she won’t even entertain a conversation with me. If she does, I still don’t know how any of this will work out between us.

We still live a thousand miles apart.

All I know is that I have to try. Because she’s the one—the only one I’ve ever wanted to fight for. The only woman who makes my life more uncomplicated by being a part of it.

I stop at my driver’s side door and wait for my brothers to catch up.

“Do you guys want to ride with me?” I ask.

They look at each other. I know something is amiss when Oliver smiles and Wade shakes his head as if he’s in disbelief.

“Go on,” Oliver says. “We got this.”

I furrow my brow. “Go on where? You got what?”

Wade rests his hand on my shoulder. “I think this is ridiculous, and that you’d be much better off in life being alone. But I can see that you think otherwise. So, in your best interest and probably not ours, I think you should go to Chicago now.”

“What? You’re crazy. We have a meeting with Graham in thirty minutes.”

Oliver winks. “We know. Trust me. But I’m going to have to fight myself from punching you in the face every time you do that little exasperated sigh that you’ve been doing for the past two days.”

I look at my brothers to see if they're serious. "We're in this together. I'm not going to bail on you guys."

"We know you're not," Wade says, opening my door for me. "You've killed yourself for months to get this thing in order. You've gone above and beyond and are the only person I know who could've pulled this off. Because we *are* going to pull this off. I have no doubts. You've done your job. Now let us do ours."

"But ..." I stammer.

"Trust us like we trust you," Wade says.

"Can I just point out how nice it would be if we had a jet? Because you could get to Chicago so much faster." Oliver looks back and forth between us. "What? I thought it was a good point."

I don't know what to say. Sure, I'd rather skirt off to Chicago—in a private jet if I had one—and find Blaire and put an end to my personal misery. Or try to. But they can't really expect me to leave them high and dry.

"Go," Oliver insists. "I like being in charge anyway."

"Fuck you," Wade says. "I'll be the one calling the shots today."

Oliver groans. "I'm the joint CEO of this company. You are the head of the architectural division. I outrank you."

"Then do it without my drawings, genius."

Oliver looks at me and rolls his eyes. "We'll figure it out. But you need to go. I heard there's a ticket for you for the twelve thirty flight."

"I don't know what to say," I tell them.

"Say that I'm in charge," Wade says as he turns toward his car.

Oliver follows. "You're so full of shit. You *are not* in charge."

I laugh as I slip into my driver's seat and close the door.

A part of me wishes I was going with them. But a bigger, more important part of me needs to find its other half.

And that half is in Chicago.

THIRTY-TWO

Blaire

“And this is why I don’t drink wine,” I groan, holding my temples.

The sun is too bright outside my office windows. The staff is too noisy. The sandwich that someone made in the break room is too stinky for me this afternoon.

“Can two glasses of wine in the evening cause this much pain this many hours later?” I ask Yancy as she enters my office. “Because I swear my head is going to split open.”

Yancy sets a cup of coffee on the edge of my desk. “Maybe this will help.”

I don’t have the heart to tell her that the smell makes me want to gag.

My blood pulses in my temple. It’s almost blinding. The pain is unrelenting despite the migraine medicine I took this morning.

It’s unbearable.

“You look really bad—in a sick, not a rude kind of way,” Yancy says.

“I don’t even have the energy to be offended by that.”

“Good.” She leans against the wall and crosses her arms over his chest. “You have a pretty tan.”

“Thanks.”

She’s trying to cheer me up, and I’m grateful for that. But the truth is that I don’t want to be cheered up. I want to wallow in my misery for a day or two, get it over with, and then move on with my life.

After Sienna left, I looked up heartbreak. Everything I read said that you really have to own your feelings before you can proceed with life. It

matches what I know from my experience with Jack. So I'm going to feel this pain unless it kills me.

And it might.

"Yancy," I say, standing up from behind my desk, "I'm going to go outside for some fresh air for a few minutes. I just need to clear my head. That sandwich that Barnard is eating is making me sick."

"It's tuna fish." She curls her nose. "I saw it in the fridge this morning. I almost threw it out so we didn't have to endure this, but I thought that was improper."

"You work for an attorney. I can get you out of trouble." I look at her and laugh. "Throw it away next time."

"You got it."

She steps to the side as I pass.

"I'll be back up shortly. I won't be gone long," I tell her.

I keep my eyes focused on the wall ahead of me as I make my way to the elevators.

The office is bustling with people catching up from the shut-down and gossiping about whether they really found a dead body or if it really was asbestos.

It's only when I'm in the elevator that I can put my guard down.

I punch the number for the ground floor and lean against the metal rail along the back wall. It's cool under the thin fabric of my dress. I close my eyes and wish I was at home.

Or at Holt's.

The pain that the website swore I had to endure comes roaring back like it knows it has a free pass. I can't help but wonder if I had found another website that instructed me to ignore any discomfort if this hurt would go away.

I doubt it.

This bullshit is very, very real.

The doors swing open, and I'm met with a barrage of bodies. People scramble through the lobby like ants looking for a picnic blanket.

I step outside the elevator cart and freeze.

My entire body tenses as the leathery scent of Holt's cologne billows my way. I allow myself three seconds to close my eyes and breathe it in. Then I lift my chin and march myself around the corner.

I have to stop this.

It will get easier.

I just need to— “Whoa!”

Something, or someone, hits me from the side. I go flying across the foyer, into a mailman, and onto the cold tile floor.

The impact breaks my spirit. All of the confidence I’d managed to muster this morning drains into the floor.

I try not to cry.

I sit on my knees on the floor and let my hair hang in my face. People scurry all around me, no one giving a second thought to the girl on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I should stand and just go to my apartment. I’m not cut out for this. Not today.

“Let me help you up.”

I still at the words coming from behind me.

And at the voice.

I tell myself it’s a case of *déjà vu* and that Holt really isn’t standing behind me. It’s like his cologne a few moments ago and the car I thought was his that was parked on the street by the coffee shop this morning.

It’s wishful thinking.

I press my palm against the floor and stand. Dusting my hands off, I turn and gasp.

“What the ...?” I stammer.

I think I’m seeing things. But at least I’m seeing good things.

Holt is standing in the middle of the crowd. He’s dressed in a black suit with a black-and-white-checkered shirt. His tie is my favorite. It’s the one he bound my hands with.

My eyes fill with tears. I’m afraid to blink. If I do, he might vanish.

But instead of disappearing into thin air, he moves closer.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper.

“Well, it turns out I have a very important matter to take care of today,” he says gently.

He stands tall and peers down at me. His eyes are so beautiful, so clear as they search mine.

I want to pull away from him. I don’t want him to read me because I know he can. With one look, he’ll know I’m a mess, and he’ll have the upper hand. But even though I want to do this, I want to hide from him, I don’t.

Being vulnerable is a strength, and I'm just figuring out its magic. But allowing myself to be open to feelings and experiences—both good and bad—is the only way to discover the powers that lie within me.

I used to think that hiding behind a cold façade made me strong. Untouchable. Impenetrable.

I was wrong. I only knew true strength when I gave myself a chance to love and be loved.

If Holt wants to see my pain, I'll let him.

“Good luck with that,” I tell him.

My voice stays strong, and I'm glad for it. I'm all for him seeing how much he hurt me, but he needs to know he's not going to walk all over me either.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?” he asks.

“Nope.”

His face falls.

“Aren't you supposed to be meeting with Landry?” I ask.

He looks at his watch. “It's probably just getting over right about now.”

My brows pull together as I try to make sense of what he's saying. But as his gaze finds mine again, something tugs on my heart.

“Why aren't you there?”

“I told you. I had an important matter to take care of today.”

I don't want to ask. I don't want to do this. And if I have to do it, I don't want it to be here in the lobby of my building around people I'll have to see every day.

I turn on my heel. “I have to go.”

“Blaire. Wait.”

I turn my back and march toward the doors. My lashes barely hold back tears.

I don't think I can do this—not here. I don't think I'm equipped enough to feel all of this kind of pain right now.

The website said to feel it all but not to let it overwhelm you. This might be overwhelming.

I blow out a breath.

My palms hit the door because I don't wait for the revolving one as I shove my way outside. Holt is behind me. I feel his energy, but I don't look back.

I don't stop until I'm a half a block away and the crowd has thinned out a little. Only then can I press my back against a building and try to gather myself.

It takes all of two seconds for Holt to be standing in front of me.

"I was so fucking wrong, sweetheart," he whispers. "I am so, so sorry."

He's standing so close to me that I can feel his energy rippling off his body. I shiver at the contact, wanting so badly to dive into his arms.

But I don't. Because I don't need to. I'm stronger than that.

"You could've called me about this," I told him. "Your apology didn't warrant an in-person exchange."

He shrugs sheepishly. "I tried. You sent me to voicemail."

"You could've left one."

"I don't really do voicemails. So much gets lost in the mix."

"Well, I don't really do men who think that they can just pop up in my life when it's convenient for them. So if you'll excuse me." I give him a pointed look and head down the sidewalk again.

It kills me to walk away. It's like a knife in my heartless cavity. Each step is like the blade is getting dug deeper and deeper into my soul.

I walk to the edge of the block and stop beneath a tree in an oversized box planter. It provides a little shade from the sun and acts like a blocker from the throngs of people.

Everyone except Holt.

"Stop running from me," Holt says, standing in front of me again.

I refuse to look at him.

"I know I fucked up," he begins but stops when I fire him a hard glare.

I put a hand on my hip. "I know you fucked up. I know that I could've been the best thing to ever happen to you. But you are too busy for that. So please, leave me alone."

His face falls. "I deserve all of that. And I'll stand here and listen to you berate me until you've said everything you need to say."

"I don't need to say anything to you."

"Good. Then listen." He shifts his weight. "I'm sorry, Blaire. This whole thing is my fault—all of it. I pursued you. I spoke to Oliver about you. I walked out and didn't come back." His voice breaks. "I left you when you needed me, and that's the biggest mistake I've ever made."

His face is riddled with pain. There are bags under his eyes, and his skin is pale.

I hate it. I hate that we have come to this.

“You hurt me,” I admit. “You broke my heart.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what it felt like to hear you tell Oliver that I required too much energy?”

His eyes light up. “That’s not what I said. That’s not what I meant.”

“Holt ...”

“Hear me out.” He licks his lips. “I was telling him that you deserved so much more than I could give you. I didn’t know how ... I didn’t know how to incorporate you into my life and guarantee you wouldn’t get hurt.”

“So you just hurt me outright instead? Genius move.”

“I didn’t know you were listening, or I would’ve been more careful.”

“But you walked out, and I was standing right in front of you.”

He takes a deep breath. His chest shakes as he inhales. “I promise you that I will never walk out on you again.”

“I know you won’t. Because I’m not there.”

He reaches for my hand, and I let him take it.

“Give me another chance,” he says. “Give me *a* chance because I don’t think we’ve ever had a real one.”

My heart pounds as I take in the sincerity in his face. I want to believe him. I want to go to concerts and have late night pizza and talk about law and contracts and construction projects at breakfast.

I want that. And I want him to want it too.

He rubs my knuckle with this thumb.

I look into his eyes.

My anger fades because I believe him. I don’t think he meant to hurt me. And while he walked out on me, I walked out on him too.

I sigh.

“You said something yesterday that has bothered me. Well, you said a lot of things that bothered me, but one thing more than the others,” he says.

“What?” I yell as a bus honks its horn as it goes by.

He closes the small distance between us. He allows his face to grow serious—totally sober—before he speaks.

My skin prickles with anticipation of what he’s about to say. It could be so many things.

“You told me you loved me,” he says quietly.

I hold my breath as I try to read him.

Those words did pass through my lips on accident. But that doesn't mean I didn't mean it. Because out of all the things I said yesterday, that's the one I meant the most.

I love Holt Mason. That's why it hurts so bad.

I might've said it yesterday in a fit of emotions, but I didn't realize I truly meant it. It wasn't until I was on that website last night and researching pain did I understand that what I felt for Holt was love.

That's why I trusted him enough to open up to him. It's why I was willing to put myself out there and ask him to be a part of my life—because I couldn't imagine mine without him. It's also why his rejection was pure devastation.

But love is more than an emotion that makes you feel like your head is spinning. It's respect. It's support. It's wanting both of you to be victorious in all you do.

All of those things are why I didn't fall into an abyss like I did with Jack. Because you can't be in love without loving yourself first. And Holt helped me love me before I loved him.

“Do you?” he asks. “Do you love me, Blaire?”

An ambulance whizzes by, its sirens blaring. I don't give them a second thought. I just watch the man in front of me.

“Yeah. I do,” I tell him.

Before I know what's happening, my face is cupped in his hands, and his lips are on mine.

The kiss is tender but rough, gentle but aggressive. It earns him a round of applause from the people on the sidewalk.

He breaks the kiss and rests his forehead on mine.

“You know, just because I said I love you doesn't mean you can just kiss me like that,” I joke.

He chuckles. “What will it take to get your permission to kiss you like that then?”

“Tickets to every Kelvin McCoy concert in the area would help,” I say begrudgingly because I can't resist the joke, even if I am still not sure what's going to happen between us.

Holt drops my face and sighs dramatically. It makes me giggle.

“I'm serious, Blaire. This is it for me. *You* are it for me.” He smiles. “I love you. *I love you*. And it ate me up all night that I let you leave without telling you. I sat in my house, alone, and for the first time, I hated it.”

My bottom lip quivers as I take in the honesty of both his gaze and his words.

“I realized something else last night,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“Remember how I told you that my grandfather knew he was going to marry my grandmother the first time they met?”

I nod.

He grins. “I knew you were the one for me the first time I ran into you.”

I can’t help but grin back at him.

My heart fills again, my body coming alive at his words.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll fight for you, fight to convince you to love me back every day of my life if that’s what it takes to win you over.”

He’s already won me over. He just doesn’t know it yet.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I look down to see a text from Yancy.

“I have to get back to work,” I tell him.

He groans.

“I’m sorry. We all don’t run our own companies,” I tell him.

He closes the gap between us again as though he can’t stand for anything but inches to be between us. I don’t mind. I’ve never minded.

He takes my hand in his and locks our fingers together.

“I have two questions before you go save lives,” he says. “First, do you forgive me? And if you don’t, will you give me a chance to earn back your trust?”

I contemplate his question, but I already know the answer.

I messed up too. I should’ve communicated better. I shouldn’t have left and given him the chance to explain.

But I didn’t.

“I forgive you. Do you forgive me for leaving?”

“I never held it against you, sweetheart.”

I smile.

“My second question is this: what do you want, Blaire?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes. Honestly.”

I feel a bubble of energy spread through me as I look up into his handsome face.

The only thing I’ve wanted was him.

“I want what I’ve wanted since you asked for my phone number. *I want you.* I want you just like you are.”

His cheeks split into a big grin.

He sweeps me around into his arms. My hands go around his neck, and my gaze meets his.

“I don’t have all the answers,” he says, “but Wade told me I didn’t have to have them.”

“We can find them together.”

He presses a simple, sweet kiss to my lips.

“Can I take you to dinner?” he asks.

I grin. “Maybe.”

“Do I have to play that game where I name three things about you? Because I think I’ll be even better at it now.”

I laugh as his lips find mine again.

THIRTY-THREE

Blaire

“Will you stop it?” I swat Holt’s hands away from me. “Give me a freaking minute.”

“I don’t want to give you a minute.”

“Clearly.”

He pouts beside me. I know that because I can see him out of the corner of my eye. But I don’t dare look over and take in the whole image because I’ll never finish typing out my email.

“Why do you have to work so much?” he whines.

“Funny how the tables have turned.”

The setting sun paints the prettiest picture outside of my apartment. The sky is ablaze in purples and pinks and bright oranges. It’s my favorite time of day. I love it even more tonight with Holt.

I didn’t make it the whole two hours I had left at work. Luckily, Yancy is a rock star and happens to be a total romantic. When I told her what happened on my break, she insisted that I leave early. Since she refused to send back calls or copy files or find data, what was I supposed to do?

Holt’s head rests on my shoulder. “I love you.”

I can’t help but laugh. “How many times are you going to tell me that today?”

“I don’t know. As many as I want.”

“Okay.”

He looks up at me like a puppy that’s waiting for a treat.

“I love you too,” I say.

This earns me a grin.

Knock! Knock!

Holt's head lifts up. "Who is here?"

"I don't know."

I hop off the sofa and make my way to the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Sienna and Walker."

I unlatch the door and pop it open. "Hey. How are you guys?"

Sienna makes a face. "You sound better today."

I grin, letting the door swing wide open. I know the exact moment Sienna's eyes rest on Holt because they flip immediately to mine.

"What is this?" she squeals.

Walker fills the doorway with his wide shoulders and linebacker body. "Who the fuck is that?"

I swat my brother's chest. "Be nice."

I step to the side so they can come in, keeping my eyes trained on Walker. The door shuts softly behind them.

Sienna nearly bounces with excitement as she takes in Holt's arm wrapped around my waist. My brother, on the other hand, isn't quite as excited. As a matter of fact, he looks pissed.

I gulp.

"Holt, this is my brother Walker, and of course, you know Sienna. Walker, this is Holt Mason," I say.

Holt extends a hand. Walker lets it hang there for a long second before shaking it.

I roll my eyes.

"I heard that you struck a deal with Graham and Lincoln today," Sienna says. "Congratulations!"

Holt half-laughs. "My family struck a deal with them, yes. I can't take credit for it all. Sadly."

They go into some of the details, but I tune them out. Not because I'm disinterested but because it's hard to concentrate with Holt by my side ... and Walker scowling at him in front of me.

Sienna laces her fingers through my brother's and peers up at him. She has to see the look on his face because she pokes him with her finger.

"Are you okay over there?" she asks him.

He doesn't look at her. He just keeps pinning Holt to the wall with his stare.

“Walker, stop,” I warn.

“So you’re the guy who Blaire was staying with in Savannah, right?” Walker asks, raising a brow at Holt.

Holt nods. “Yeah. She stayed with me for a few days.”

“And you made her cry.”

“Walker ...” I say. It’s more of a plea than a demand because no one tells Walker Gibson what to do. “Please don’t.”

Holt’s fingers curl into my waist. “I’m a big enough man to admit that I wasn’t on my best behavior. I did say and do some things that I wish, in retrospect, I hadn’t done. But I never set out to make Blaire cry.”

“But you did,” Walker says.

“Enough,” I hiss. “I’m a big girl.”

He looks down at me. He reminds me so much of my father that it’s scary.

“I’m a little pissed at you too, come to think of it,” he tells me.

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t even know who I was when I walked in,” Walker says. “That means that you didn’t warn him about the hellfire he’ll be walking into if he fucks with you.”

Walker’s eyes slide over me and land squarely on Holt.

Holt doesn’t budge. He doesn’t flinch. He squares his shoulders to my brother.

“That’s my sister,” Walker tells him. “She’s the only one I have. If you do anything stupid—even a little bit, I will take your body apart piece by piece. Got it?”

“Walker!” I say as Sienna shoves her elbow into his ribs.

He doesn’t flinch.

I look up at Holt to see his reaction. He takes a long, deep breath and blows it out slowly.

“I absolutely understand,” Holt says as if this mountain of a man didn’t just threaten to murder him. “My brothers and I say the same thing to the guys our little cousin, Riss, dates. Better to put them on notice early on. It might stop stupidity down the line.”

Walker nods. “You get it then.”

“Oh, yes. I get it. We’re on the same page.” Holt looks at Sienna, still cool as a cucumber. “Do you guys want to come in and sit down?”

Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.

“We’re actually heading to pick up some fabric from the fabric shop downtown,” Sienna says. “We just wanted to swing by and check on you, Blaire.”

“I’m fine.”

She smiles. “Okay. Well, Walker, let’s get out of here so Blaire and Holt can—.”

“All right. I got it,” he says before she can complete her line of thought. It makes me laugh. “I love you, Walk.”

“Love ya, too.”

“And thanks for coming by, Sienna. And for ... everything,” I say, pulling her into a quick hug. Because apparently, I’m a hugger now.

“You know it. That’s why I’m here.” She releases me. “Holt, it was good to see you.”

“Likewise, Sienna. Be safe, you guys.”

“Call me,” Walker says to me before firing one last warning glance at Holt.

They slip out the door, and Holt wastes no time locking it behind them. He spins around to face me.

“That was fun,” he deadpans.

“He will ease up. I’m his only sister.”

“I hope he never eases up.”

“Really? Why? Because he’s a little much.”

Holt grins. “Well, for one, he’s a very large man. I’m certain that no one will fuck with you if he’s around.”

My laugh is loud and free. It fills my apartment in a way my laughter never has in the four years I’ve lived in this building.

Holt pulls me onto the couch and across his lap. His hands lock together at my hip. He holds me tight as if I might get up and dart out the door.

Again.

I reach up and touch the side of his face.

“We need to talk about what this looks like,” he says. “There are a lot of moving parts that we don’t know.”

“I know.”

Fear flickers in my gut. I don’t know what he’s expecting.

I think about my life and what it is and what I want it to be. I’ve worked really hard to get to where I am in my firm, and I’m not ready to give that up. Not even for him. Not yet.

His stubble is rough and bites against my fingers. I wonder if he forgot to shave this morning or didn't bother. Did he stay awake all night like me? Or was he able to find sleep despite the circumstances?

I'll never know. And I don't want to ask because it just reminds me of the pain of not being with him.

He grins at me softly.

It's good to remember your sources of pain. I know that from my life experiences. It's just as important to give yourself grace and allow yourself the peace to move on. And right now, moving on is just as much about me and my growth independent of Holt as it is about our life together.

"My life is here," I tell him.

"And my life is in Savannah."

"What does that mean for us?"

I look around my cramped apartment and think about the stinky office twenty floors above. The city smells like sewage in the summer and is bitterly cold in the winters.

But my family lives not too far away in the sleepy town of Linton. And Yancy, someone who has tried to be my friend for two years comes in the office despite my cantankerous attitude, shows up for me every day.

There are things here that I'm not ready to part with. Maybe someday, but not yet. I have to finish this chapter of my life before I start a new one. The end has not been written.

"I'm not ready to leave Chicago," I admit.

He doesn't miss a beat. He bends forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Okay. We will figure it out."

"You don't expect me to move to Savannah?"

"I mean, at some point in our lives, I hope you do," he says. "Or I'll have to move to Illinois, but it's fucking cold here. We need to consider that."

I grin.

"But, yeah, we will have to live in the same place to grow old together," he says. "And if we want to make babies."

His smile fills with mischief and promises of lots of sex. My ovaries combust.

"But we have time," he assures me. "We don't have to rush anything. We won't rush anything. This is our life. We'll build it the way we want."

I rest my head against his shoulder and feel his arms around my body. Never once in my wildest dreams did I expect to be talking about having babies with a man who I met on vacation, let alone with a man who I had a one-night stand with.

The world is a weird place.

I close my eyes, and my thoughts drift to Nana. She'll be so happy to meet Holt. She'll be thrilled to hear him talking about babies.

I smile softly.

She always tells me not to block my blessings. She might be right. The first time I allowed the universe to work for me—look what happened. It gave me Holt. The biggest blessing of my life. So far, anyway. Who knows what could happen in the future?

“What are you thinking?” Holt asks.

I bite back a grin. “Just about all the blessings coming my way.”

“So many are coming your way, sweetheart.”

“I mean, think of all the Kelvin McCoy tickets.”

“Fuck,” Holt says, his body shaking with his suppressed chuckle.

I curl up against him even more and laugh. “I’m just kidding.”

“You probably aren’t, is the thing.”

“You know what I heard?” I ask.

“What’s that?”

“I heard he has an older brother who’s hotter and way sexier than he ever thought about being.”

Holt brushes a strand of hair out of my face. “Is that so?”

I nod. “And I also heard he closed a major deal today, and that warrants a celebration.”

“That’s all true. But did you hear that the brother’s girlfriend is the person who brought the deal home? She needs celebrated too.”

Pride fills my body and mixes with the heat pulsing through my veins.

We make such a good team.

I can feel Holt’s cock thickening beneath my hip. His gaze heats.

My body whimpers.

“In any case,” I tell him, “I think we definitely need to celebrate.”

He slips his hand up my shirt and cups my breast. “I like the way you think.”

I stare up at him and take in every inch of his gorgeous face.

I hope he likes the way I think. Because I have tons of ideas for the next fifty years.

EPILOGUE

Holt

Six months later ...

“Good morning, gorgeous,” I say to Blaire as I enter the den.

She looks up at me from her seat on the chair and smiles. The glasses she got over the winter make her look so studious and so fucking sexy.

“Good morning to you.” She places the binder she’s looking at onto the coffee table. Her arms stretch overhead. The edge of my T-shirt she slept in rises and gives me a peek at a swath of skin at her hip.

Mornings are my favorite time of day. Waking up to the sun rising and reminding me that my life includes Blaire is like a little gift that just keeps on giving.

My life before her was busy. It was filled with motions and things and places and to-do lists. It was filled with people too—people I cared about. People I loved.

I enjoyed my life before Blaire. It was all I knew.

Now that I have her, I don’t know how I made it through a day without her.

We’ve been figuring it out for the past six months, traveling back and forth between Illinois and Georgia. We’ve met up for weekends in Nashville and Cincinnati, and she accompanied me to Portland for a trip too.

It’s been fun, and it’s worked out well. So far.

“What are you doing today?” she asks.

I take a sip of my coffee. “Not sure. Gramps wants to watch golf, and I promised him I’d come by and do something. I didn’t commit to watching golf, though.”

Blaire laughs. “It won’t kill you to watch a little bit of golf.”

“It might. It really might.” I take another sip. “What are you doing today?”

“I’m meeting your mother at her house this afternoon.”

I quirk a brow. “Again?”

“Your mother met a lady last week who said her son got an unfair trial. He’s been in jail for a year already, and the man’s mother claims he’s innocent. It’s really been on your mom’s heart. I’m sure you can imagine.”

I sit back and listen. It’s not hard to do. She’s so beautiful and so damn smart. But she also has a huge heart that makes me love her even more.

“I can imagine,” I say. “And I’d also bet that it’s been driving you crazy too.”

She blushes. “I told her I’d meet with them today and take a look at his case.”

“You’re amazing. Do you know that?”

“Hardly,” she scoffs. “I just try to use the tools I have to ... do the right thing. It’s what everyone should do.”

I sit my coffee down and start to pick up my computer. But something in the way she’s looking at me stops me in my tracks.

“Holt,” she begins. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure.”

She tucks her legs under her. “I’ve been thinking and ... would it freak you out if I moved to Savannah? I wouldn’t have to move in with you—”

“The hell you wouldn’t.”

My heartbeat begins to thunder inside me. My breathing gets rapid. All I can think about is taking the next step with Blaire and making sure I don’t scare her.

Because if I had my way, I’d marry her tomorrow. Today, even.

I love her.

Her eyes grow wide. “I’m not implying that I don’t want to live here. I just—”

“Good. Because if you step foot inside Georgia, it better be in this house.” I scoot to the edge of the sofa to be closer to her. “I’ve waited as patiently as a man can fucking wait for you to want to move in with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Can I order a moving truck today? I’ll have people at your door in Chicago in an hour.”

“Holt ...”

“Try me.”

“Easy there, tiger,” she says with a laugh.

“I’m being as easy as I can.”

She picks up the binder again and finds the page she was on. “Your mom wants to start a nonprofit to provide legal resources to underprivileged people around Savannah. She asked me to help.”

“And you said yes.”

“Of course, I said yes.” She looks up at me. “This is my passion in life. Besides you, naturally.”

I grin.

I pick up my coffee again and then take another drink.

The den, my favorite room in the house, is filled with the bright morning light. I take in its warmth and imagine little kids running around it and having Saturday morning cartoons blaring from the television. And I realize that this is why I bought this house. A part of me always knew I’d meet Blaire.

This time last year, my idea of a good Saturday morning meant being in the office before noon and maybe playing a round of golf with Dad. Now it’s daydreaming about having children.

Who would’ve thought?

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Your mom said that Coy is coming home. I guess he and Willa ‘*broke up*,’” she says, using air quotes. “There was a big photo spread about it in all the celebrity magazines.”

I chuckle. “It’s so weird to me that my little brother is considered a celebrity.”

“Yeah. Well, your celebrity little brother is trying to flee the paparazzi, so he’ll be hiding out around here. She told me to tell you, so this is me telling you.”

“What she’s really doing is asking me to help babysit his dumb ass,” I groan. “She doesn’t want him having too much time on his hands or he’ll end up in the magazines all by himself.”

Blaire hums in agreement, but I don’t think she heard what I said. She’s too engrossed in the paperwork in her hands.

I kick back and let my coffee warm my hands. My mind goes back to my life before Blaire.

I thought I had it figured out. I thought I had to show restraint in all things, or my life would spiral out of control.

But Blaire proves that's not true.

Sometimes you have to release the reins and let the world guide you. You have to trust that the universe knows what's best.

I didn't know that when I raced through the airport that day. I had no idea that I'd meet a woman who would change the course of my life.

I could've helped her up and went on about my day, too concerned with the fact that Oliver was calling me incessantly. But I took a minute and looked around and was present in the moment.

Maybe not for all the right reasons, but that's not the point.

The point is, I now know that the world will drop little cookie crumbs in your life here and there. We just get too busy to take a moment and follow the trail. Thank God I didn't miss the trail that day.

Because it led me to my forever.

"Hey, Blaire," I say.

She looks up from her binder. "Yeah?"

"I love you, sweetheart."

She grins. "I love you too."

The End.

(Turn the page to see what to read next!)

WHAT'S NEXT?

If you've finished *Restraint* and want to know more about the cast of characters in this book, I have good news!

Coy's book, *REHEARSE*, is coming out on November 6th. You can add it to your TBR by [clicking here](#).

If you'd like to meet the Landry Family, you can jump over to [Sway](#). (See Chapter One on the next page.)

If you'd like to see more of Sienna and Walker, hop on over to [Crank](#).

Thank you for reading *Restraint*. I would love it if you would leave an honest review.

With love,
Adriana Locke

MEET THE LANDRY'S

Sway

Landry Family Series Book #1

Chapter One

Alison

“This is a single girl’s paradise.”

“No,” I grimace, blotting the spilled cheese sauce from my shirt. “Paradise would be a tropical island with a hot cabana boy at my beck and call ... and an endless supply of mojitos.”

Lola laughs, the sound barely heard over the chaos of the kitchen. Chefs shouting instructions, event planners panicking, plates being dropped—the world of catering is a noisy endeavor.

I step to the side to allow Isaac, a fellow server and Lola’s gorgeous friend with benefits, to scamper to the ballroom a few feet away. He’s tall with a head full of dark curls and a laugh that makes you involuntarily smile. Lola is crazy for keeping him at arm’s length, but that’s how she operates. He has little money; she has limited interest.

“Cabana boys may have hot bodies and virility, Alison, but they lack two very important qualities: fame and fortune.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’d take a limp dick over a hard one? Interesting,” I say, rolling my eyes and tossing the sauce-soaked rag into the linen bin.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, smart ass. I’m saying I’d take a solid bank account over a solid cock. Think about it—with all that money, he could never fuck me at all and I wouldn’t care.”

“If that’s the case,” I retort, grabbing another tray of drinks, “there are tons of opportunities out there to *not* get fucked.”

I laugh at the dreamy look on her face, partly because it’s hilarious and partly because I know she’s not kidding.

Lola and I are a lot alike. We both come from meager backgrounds and Luxor Foods is our second job. There’s no doubt we both would rather not be here because serving rich bitches can be a very humbling experience. But they are also the best parties to work because they tip. Very well. Of course it’s so they can feel above us most times, but we’ll take it. It’s money in our pockets, and if they get off on it in the process, good for them.

That being said, Lo took this job to afford her manicures, pedicures, and eyelash extensions. I do it to take care of my son, Huxley. Lola’s first job is working at a salon and her career goals include marrying up in the world. I, on the other hand, work at Hillary’s House restaurant during the day and go to school for journalism in hopes to one day write pieces that might inspire someone.

“Speaking of fucking,” she says, her eyes aglow, “did you see Mayor Landry?”

“I love how you segued into that,” I laugh.

“It’s a linear comparison. Tell me that fucking isn’t the first thing that comes to mind when you think of him, and I’ll call you a liar.”

Of course it’s the truth. It’s the first thing that comes to mind ... and maybe the second and third too.

Thoughts of the recently crowned Most Eligible Bachelor make me a swoony mess. Barrett Landry’s thick, sandy brown hair that always looks perfectly coiffed, his broad, friendly smile that makes you feel like you could tell him your darkest secrets without judgment, his tanned skin, tight body, wide shoulders—the list goes on. But it all leads, as Lo so candidly pointed out, to thoughts of him stripped down and wearing only his charismatic grin.

I shiver at the thought.

“See?” she grins, wagging her finger in my face. “Linear comparison.”

“I’ll give you that. He’s so seriously fine.”

“Have you had a chance to get close to him? To breathe him in?”

“Breathe him in?” My laughter catches the attention of our boss, Mr. Pickner. He twists his burly body our way, letting us know we’d better get to work.

“I haven’t,” I say, turning back to Lola. “Even though I’ve been around men like Landry before—well, not quite like him, but as close as a mortal can be—I don’t think I could handle it, Lo. He scrambles my brain. I’d probably fall face first into him and dump the drinks in his lap. Then we’d *both* be wet.”

She swipes a tray off the table and shoots a wink at Isaac as he walks back in. “It would so be worth it if you played your cards right. You could probably get away with running your hands through his hair and maybe even licking his stubbled jaw. A kiss would probably be over the top, but his Southern roots would keep him from causing a scene and asking for security.”

“You’ve thought this through, haven’t you?” I ask in mock horror.

“Of course I have and every other woman in here has too. Hell, half the men probably have,” she giggles. “In my fantasy, he gazes at me with those emerald green eyes and leans in and—”

“Ladies! Back to work!”

We sigh as Mr. Pickner barrels by. He’s an overweight, balding, temperamental asshole of a man, but he owns the premiere catering company in all of Georgia. So we deal. Barely.

Lola bumps me with her hip. “Seriously. Stop being so goody-two-shoes and go out there and snag you a man and a retirement plan.”

I bite my tongue. We’ve had this conversation a number of times before and she just doesn’t get it. I don’t fault her though. Most people don’t. They see the glitz and glamour, the designer labels and fine wine and get drawn in like a Siren’s call. That life looks too good to resist, too good to be true.

The thing is—they’re exactly right. It is.

She reads the look on my face and we start towards the door. “I know, I know. You lived like that once. It’s a fantasy, smoke and mirrors ...”

“Yup.”

“Well, I say I’ll play in the smoke as long as the mirrors make me pretty.”

I snort, pushing open the door to the ballroom. “You go right ahead and dig that gold all the way down the aisle.”

“I’ve got my shovel right here.” She shimmies her backside in my direction. “See that one over there?”

Following her gaze across the room, I see a man I know is one of the Landry brothers. There are four of them and two sisters, twins, if I’m not mistaken. I don’t really follow that kind of thing much, but they’re basically Georgia royalty, and even avoiding current events as I do, you can’t help but pick up on some of their lives. Every newscast, it seems, has something Landry-related even when it’s not election season.

“I’m going to check him out,” Lola says and takes off, leaving me standing with my tray of ridiculously overpriced champagne.

I roam the outer edges of the elegant ballroom, giving a practiced smile to each person that plucks a drink off the tray. Some smile widely, some try to chit-chat, some completely ignore me like they probably do the paid staff at home. It’s fine by me.

A few years ago, I attended events like this. Married to my college sweetheart, a newly minted judge in Albuquerque, we went to balls and galas and swearing-in ceremonies often. It was a magical time in my life, before the magic wore off and everything exploded right in my face.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing?”

I spin to my right to see an older gentleman grinning at me like a snake ready to strike.

“Would you like a drink?” I offer, knowing good and well by the color in his cheeks that he’s already had more than enough.

“No, no, that’s fine. I was actually just admiring you.”

Pasting on a smile and tossing my shoulders back, I try to keep my voice even. “Thank you, sir. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“I was thinking,” he says, cutting me off, “how about you and I take a little stroll? Do you get my drift?”

“With all due respect,” I say through clenched teeth, glancing at the wedding ring sparkling on his finger, “how about you take a stroll with your wife?”

I swivel on my heels and head off as calmly as possible, blood roaring in my ears. I can hear his cackle behind me and I really want to turn around and slam my fist into his beefy face. It’s behavior that’s typical of people like this, thinking they can get away with whatever they want with the bourgeoisie. I just so happen to have an overdeveloped sensitivity to it,

being that my husband did the same thing to me as soon as he got a little power.

Lola catches my attention as I pause to settle down. She points discreetly to the other end of the room and mouths, "Over there." The gleam in her eye tells me she's spotted the mayor, but I can't see him.

I shuffle through the crowd and finally spy the man of the hour walking out, his arm around the waist of a woman that's been acting crazy all night. Her head is leaned on his shoulder, her hand resting on his backside. Laughing, I catch Lola's eye and nod to the exit.

"Bitch," she mouths as she approaches the same man that approached me earlier. I want to warn her, but don't. For one, I know it won't do any good, and for two, I can't take my eyes off Landry.

People literally part for him to walk through. It's like he's Moses. They're more than willing to be led through the Red Sea, divided by his power and influence, and into the Promised Land.

I'm off in space about what precisely that land might entail, when my shoulder is bumped, rustling me out of my Landry-induced haze.

"Excuse me," I say. When I realize who I've just ignored, my cheeks heat in embarrassment. "I'm so sorry," I stutter, handing Camilla Landry, one of the Landry sisters, a glass of champagne.

She's even more beautiful in person, a textbook example of poise and sophistication. In the media a lot for charity work with her mother, her face is easily identifiable with her high cheekbones and sparkling smile.

"Don't worry about it," she breathes, waving me off. "I can't take my brothers anywhere without women getting all mesmerized. Especially that one," she laughs, nodding to the doorway Barrett just went through. "Although, between me and you, I don't get it."

Her grin is infectious, and I can't help but return it.

"I'm Camilla," she says, extending her long, well-manicured hand like I don't already know.

I balance the tray on one side and take her hand in mine. "I'm Alison. Alison Baker."

"You helped clean up a sauce spill earlier. You put the lady that had the accident at ease when you took the blame and kept the attention off her. I wanted you to know I saw and respected that."

"It really was no big deal."

"In this world, *everything* can be a big deal. Trust me. You probably just saved my brother a couple of votes."

"Just doing my part," I laugh.

She smiles again, her chic sky-blue dress matching her eyes and heels. "Well, on behalf of the mayor, thank you. He seems ... occupied, at the moment."

I wink. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't see a thing."

She nods, looking a touch relieved, and thanks me again before turning away and greeting the older lady from earlier, the one that spilled her dinner all over me. Camilla takes her hand and helps her into a chair.

Her elegance is breathtaking and she has a charm about her, an easiness even though she's clearly blue-blood, that I've never seen before. It's exactly what the kitchen is buzzing about with Barrett—a charisma you can't quite put your finger on.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Adriana Locke lives and breathes books. After years of slightly obsessive relationships with the flawed bad boys created by other authors, Adriana created her own.

She resides in the Midwest with her husband, sons, two dogs, two cats, and a bird. She spends a large amount of time playing with her kids, drinking coffee, and cooking. You can find her outside if the weather's nice and there's always a piece of candy in her pocket.

Besides cinnamon gummy bears, boxing, and random quotes, her next favorite thing is chatting with readers. She'd love to hear from you!

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