

LAUREL ULEN CURTIS

# SECRET *Alpha*

*a novel*



AN "A IS FOR ALPHA MALE" COMPANION NOVEL

# SECRET *Alpha*

A IS FOR ALPHA MALE, BOOK 2

by LAUREL ULEN CURTIS

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**About the Author**

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# *Dedication*

This book goes out to my husband. Tough, manly, rugged, and sexy on the outside, complimented by an unparalleled ability to love. Your affection is the reality I translate into fiction in all of my heroes. You put up with my quirks and faults, and I do the same for you.

I love you.

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***“There are no facts, only interpretations.”***

— Friedrich Nietzsche

***“One person's craziness is another person's reality.”***

— Tim Burton

***“What we see depends mainly on what we look for.”***

— John Lubbock

***She said. He said.***

**Kano**, is short for "Amerikano" which is a Filipino term for an American man.

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# Prologue

The weight of his tanned, callused hand on my shoulder was the only thing anchoring me to that moment.

A police station. Fluorescent lights humming in time with my heartbeat. The pulsing weight of my grief pounding in my ears. A feeling of complete abandonment—other than the single palm on my shoulder.

Noticing these details was second nature, but they only manifested themselves with the intensity of background information.

Insignificant. Inconsequential. White noise overpowered by a completely unrecognized, grief-sodden heart.

A more substantial, if only ethereal, part of me was back in my family home, reliving the cowardice I displayed while my family suffered.

I was young, only eight years old, but not so young that I didn't know mere moments could make a lifetime of difference. Old enough to know that my hiding had no effect on my family. I was only eight. I couldn't have saved them.

But the implications of my actions for myself were vast. I saved myself from immediate suffering, but I had also guaranteed myself a lifetime of torment and loneliness.

Several people, all officials of some capacity, had asked me what happened. Despite having all the answers they sought, I kept my lips pressed firmly together and my voice box stagnant.

"Wade," I heard a man wearing an FBI jacket call as he addressed the man connected to me. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

I was pretty sure I was the "this".

"He doesn't have any family, Ray," Wade answered, confirming me as the topic of conversation, but gave my shoulder a squeeze in an attempt to comfort.

As of yesterday night, I no longer had any family. Both of my parents were only children, somewhat of a rarity for their generation, and then both lost their parents to disease at too early of an age.

"Doesn't mean you have to fill the void," Ray countered, his face sympathetic but his words self serving.

I felt my body swing around as Wade dropped into a relaxed squat in front of me. He met my eyes with his, brown and shiny with an unknown

emotion. Both of his hands settled into the crease of my neck, and it seemed as though we were the only two people in existence, Ray all but gone and forgotten despite his position a few feet away.

Speaking directly to me, his eyes never once flitting away or questioning, he said, “I don’t have any family either, Ryan. But today, that’s going to change. You and me are going to take care of each other.” Pausing just briefly he let me digest his words, swallowing them right along with the lump in my throat. “Deal?”

I didn’t say anything in either agreement or denial, but I held his eyes like I thought a man would. Like my father would have wanted me to. Like he was holding mine.

Wade was an unknown, but the lesser of two evils. I knew the stories that followed orphans around like shadows. I knew that my life *could* be bad with Wade, but it *would* be bad if I chose the alternative.

I didn’t think I could take care of anyone, even myself, but with one short nod, I agreed to try.



From that moment forward, Wade did nothing short of jump through hoops. Evaluations and visits, background checks and personal questionnaires.

As nice as it is for someone to offer to take in a recently orphaned kid, the process of getting it approved, especially for a single male like Wade, really takes some doing.

But he never faltered, meeting every evaluation head on and doing his best to fast track the cutting of every last ribbon of red tape. Thankfully, as the investigation of my family’s murders was ongoing and my safety was considered a liability, I was relegated to police custody rather than pushed off to a group home.

I wouldn’t say it was an experience worth repeating, but again, I felt strongly that I had been dealt the better of two crappy hands.

Six months later, a birthday had passed, turning my eight years into nine, and the State of Tennessee had finally decided to write me off, granting full custody to Wade Reddington. I was a tough case, a victim of a trauma with a need for anonymity, so after extensive research into his background, the necessary authorities finally decided to hand me over to the man who’d been fighting so hard for me.

And he had fought. To this day, I'm not entirely certain why, but I'm endlessly thankful. Sometimes it just takes one person. One person to fight for you, try for you— be the filler to every last void in your life. One person to make you want to keep living.

Wade was that for me.

And I had a sneaking suspicion, that I was that person for him.



Two years later, I started to feel the full weight of everything Wade had done for me. I was a very manly eleven years old, and no longer a Parker. Instead, I was Dan Smith.

At first, the name change had felt like a betrayal to my family. Another layer of unworthiness as far as I was concerned. But now, I saw it as something different. Something that nourished both myself and Wade, giving us both a connection we had been missing. Because not only did my name change, but Wade's did as well. We assumed the roles of Uncle and nephew, both with the family name of Smith.

Until then, I hadn't bothered to ask Wade anything about himself. I didn't socialize, I didn't thank him for what he had done, and I didn't do anything to pull my weight. But Wade had the patience of a saint, letting me soak in my pond of despondence and self-centeredness.

But when I realized the error of my ways, it only took one question to understand the depth of Wade's own sadness.

I had approached him in the living room in our house in Southern California as he perused through one of his case files. He had looked up briefly, and then quickly reverted his eyes to the file, no doubt expecting my normal silence.

*"Wade," I murmured tentatively, wringing my hands behind my back in the hopes that he wouldn't see how nervous I was.*

*He immediately looked up and met my eyes, dropping the file to the coffee table in front of him and questioning, "Yeah, buddy?" with genuine interest.*

*I cleared my throat and chewed on my lip briefly before diving in. "I was wondering about your family. Where they are, I mean."*

*He paused long enough that I began to question myself, stammering, "It's okay. You don't have to answer."*

*Just as I turned to leave the room, Wade stopped me in my tracks. “I didn’t have any, buddy. At least, not until you.”*

*“But everybody’s got to have parents,” I argued using my knowledge of minimal biology.*

*“Come take a seat,” he instructed.*

*I did as I was told, parking myself on the worn-in cushion of the love seat that sat catty cornered from Wade’s spot on the couch.*

*“Biologically, I have parents, yes. But I grew up without any family. My parents gave me up for adoption about six months in, and from what I’m told, it’s good that they did. I was malnourished,” he explained, and then paused, checking to see if I understood. “Do you know what malnourished means?”*

*“They weren’t feeding you?” I answered with the inflection of a question.*

*“Yep,” he confirmed on a nod. “They weren’t feeding me enough. But I went into the system, and unfortunately, never found a home in any of my foster families or through permanent adoption.”*

*Wade had fought both sides of the system. Both from the inside, while he lived it, and from the outside, while he worked to give me a different outcome than his own.*

*“What about when you grew up?” I questioned. “You didn’t wanna start your own family with some lady?”*

*Wade’s light chuckle echoed through the mostly empty space, and my eyes flitted down to my jean covered legs thanks to my anxiety.*

*“Yeah, Danny. I did want to start a family with some lady,” he said through his still present laugh. “And I did. For a few wonderful years, Melly and I had a family in each other.”*

*I looked up at him then, curious as to what had happened to the woman, Melly. Lifting his weight slowly off the of the sofa, he moved effortlessly to the love seat and settled right next to me, resting his elbows on his knees and letting the weight of his head hang forward from the support of his shoulders.*

*“Melly passed away just three short years before you and I met, buddy. Cancer.”*

*I felt the heavy comfort of his palm settle onto the back of my neck just before he continued, “See? That’s why I need you just as much as you need*

*me, Danny.” With a squeeze of his long fingers, he finished, “You’re my family too.”*

*“I haven’t been a very good family, have I?” I asked as I tossed my longish hair out of my eyes, bringing his hand up with the motion of my head.*

*The sheen of his eyes met mine, and one corner of his mouth curved upwards just slightly. “You’ve been perfect, Danny. With me, all you ever have to be is you.”*

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# Chapter 1

“I’m no fool. I know you can have me dead by tonight,” I told Sergio calmly, the dimple on the right side of my face slowly deepening as I curved my lips into my most sinister of smirks.

“At least, you think you can.”

Crimson tinted his cheeks as anger surged through his veins, raising his blood pressure. He didn’t like to be talked to with any insolence whatsoever. I could practically see him ordering my hit in his head. But I wasn’t one of his fucking minions. I was his equal, or at least, I was pretending to be, and guys like him take the first crack of weakness and turn it into a chasm.

“I have a different proposal for you,” I continued, picking an imaginary piece of lint off of the denim encasing my knee. My posture was relaxed, my face at ease---the portrait of smart and confident. Maybe even a little bit cocky.

Kind of ironic for a guy who might be dead in an hour.

Interest flashed like lightning in his eyes. Intense and foreboding for the most intimidating of instants, and then gone. Just like that.

“And what’s that, Kano?” he asked derisively, the edge of his voice as sharp as the knife he was twirling in his hand. “What’s more appealing than killing you and taking your business?”

An evil smile transformed his face from semi-handsome to the cold of a killer.

*Fucking scum.* I could not believe I grew up thousands of miles from my life, thousands of miles from my true identity, only to spend my time with the kind of people I hated most in this world. The kind of people everyone had worked to keep me distanced from.

“Working with me,” I declared.

“Ha!” he bellowed loudly, his eyes traveling from man to man at his side, sharing a look and laugh at my expense. Turning back to me, his face settled back into malevolence. “And why would I do that?” he spat. “I could have your business without the headache of you.”

*By killing you.* That part was unspoken but clear nonetheless.

Leaving his question unanswered, I held the black of his eyes tightly in the clutches of my hazel as I stated, “The decision is yours. But I’m harder

to kill than you think. And I'm an asset you don't have."

The chair scraped the ground as I lifted my weight out of it, careful to look each and every man in the eye, my awareness and perception running full steam.

Most people would say I was "blessed" with the gift of an overactive memory, details of life's events, conversations, and details cataloging themselves neatly in my brain like a virtual filing cabinet. But only I, the man burdened with vivid memories, too gruesome for any imagination, while only a boy, would understand that this gift could often be a curse.

With a nod from Sergio, his men moved to the door blocking my exit until I either gave him the answer he wanted or he killed me. Which one he really wanted, I wasn't sure.

"Again, how are you an asset?" he asked acidly.

Chuckling softly, I lifted my eyes from the ground and once again locked onto his. Holding my arms out to my sides, I asked, "Do I look like I run guns, Sergio?"

Dropping my arms and then crossing them over my chest, I continued, "Do I look like I have an extensive illegal operation, only slightly smaller than yours?"

"No. I don't," I answered quickly. "I look like the All-American, guy next door. A Kano, just like you say. But you. You don't look like any guy I would want to live next door to."

Taking an extremely big risk, one that could have ended my fucking life right in that instant, I turned my back on Sergio casually, strolled right up to his men at the door, bowled right through them, and walked right out the door.

The truth is that I wouldn't have made it out the door if Sergio hadn't given his guys the signal. In fact, I probably wouldn't have even made it *to* the door.

Walking straight to my Challenger, throwing open the door, and climbing in with efficiency and speed, I cranked it up and made my way slowly out of the middle class neighborhood, checking my six at every turn.

I watched carefully for a tail for twenty miles, weaving my way in and out of the city and taking the longest route possible before heading back in the direction of my house. I pulled into the gravel driveway and made my way around the house to the garage in the back. Once again surveying my

surroundings, I checked the gun at the small of my back, and then slowly got out of the still-running car to open the manual garage door.

I got my baby pulled inside and the ignition switched off, slowly letting my forehead rest on the stitched leather at the top of my steering wheel. Only then did I smile.

I was alive.

And that could only mean one thing.

The bastard wanted to play.

Protocol was ingrained in me after years in the field, two of which had been on this operation. My cell phone felt slimy in my hand as I pulled it out of the console, a result of my clammy palms produced by crashing adrenaline. I dialed number one on the speed dial, waited two seconds, and then hung up. By doing a dial check in, my superiors knew I was alive, but no actual words had to be spoken.

We didn't wear wires because the illegal arms industry is so far advanced at security, and an outed agent is a dead agent. No check in from me would be the first indication that I had been eliminated, but even then, it wouldn't make much difference. For me anyway. My body would probably never be recovered.

As cold as it sounds, the US government is not going to scrap an entire operation over one casualty. If at all possible, cover is upheld and the operation goes on. As you can imagine, that's why people with personal connections, like Wade and I, don't often work the same cases. We're just cogs in a much larger wheel, and things like emotions and vengeance don't have a place in a case this large.

I'm not really sure why they allow us to work together. Maybe because we work so well as a team, or maybe because we've been doing it for years without allowing our personal relationship to infiltrate our work relationship. Or maybe, it's because our already established ties allow for deeper, more impenetrable cover.

I didn't know, and it wasn't worth questioning. It would be the way that was until it wasn't, and when it changed, we would be expected to flow with it effortlessly.

That was just the way of the business.

Hefting myself off of the supple leather of my Challenger's seat, I turned, closed the door gently behind me, and made my way out of the dark dampness of our old garage.

On a day like today, I usually had two very simple objectives. Do my debriefing with Wade, and then go get laid.

Hey, when you're knocking on death's door, you have to take every opportunity to live the opportunities life presents. And for a man, getting laid was one of the most important of all of those opportunities.

The gravel crunched under my feet as I crossed the driveway at the back of our house, entered the screen door on the back of our porch, and trudged my way into the cool air conditioning of the indoors.

Wade sat on the couch, poised with a case file in his lap, just like he had done time and time again during the twenty plus years we had spent together. If someone were to paint a portrait of Wade to hang over the fireplace, this was exactly the position that would have been pictured.

The creak of the door gave me away, and Wade's head whipped up, his eyes flooding with visible relief before he managed to mask it.

"You're back," he stated simply, his elementary words veiling a much deeper meaning.

"Indeed," I answered, and then made my way to sit down next to Wade on the couch, shuffling his files out of the way when necessary.

"How'd it go?" he asked, settling his upper body back into the softness of the cushions and studying his file nonchalantly.

Good try, Wade.

"Well, I'm free of bullet holes for the moment, so I'm calling it a win. Not sure if he's gonna take the bait on the merger, but only time will tell. Until then, we keep it up, business as usual, and keep a hawk-eye to our backs."

Wade's wise brown eyes just studied me, the knowledge that I was downplaying my whole meeting permeating them and taking on a life of their own. I could almost feel them moving over my face, but he didn't say a word. We both played our cards close to our chests, but in all the ways that counted, we knew where the other stood.

With that, I eased off of the couch, tossing a file I'd been holding down into the spot I vacated.

"I'm gonna shower and then head to work," I told him as I turned to leave the room.

"I'll see you tonight?" he questioned quietly.

"Yeah," I affirmed. "But I might be late." I turned back toward him and added a wink for good measure. It was a little slimy, but I was desperate to

lighten the mood, for both of our sakes.

Anxiety didn't clarify decision making skills; it muddled them. And with the intensity of this case, neither of us needed the distraction of the fog.



“Oh my God! Danny! Harder!”

Harder. They always wanted it fucking harder. And faster. I guess savoring a slow romp wasn't what was in style these days. Fifty Shades of Grey kinky fucking was the in thing.

That, and offering to forego the use of a condom because they were on the pill. Three of the last four women I had been with had suggested going bare, and fuck if that wasn't disappointing. Did none of these women take responsibility for protecting themselves against STDs these days?

I had the urge to give them a speech, but I refrained. I wasn't their camp counselor. I was their one night stand.

I never did repeats. That sounds horrible, and I guess, in a way, it is. But for me, it wasn't about the excitement going stale. If I'm honest, the excitement was a few days old from the beginning. I made sure we both got our pleasure, but after that it was done. A revolving door of women was the only way to go when there's a potential price on your head. No one is special to you. Therefore, no one is special enough to use *against* you. Not to mention, a reputation as a playboy only boosted the legitimacy of my alter ego as an international crime boss.

So instead of launching a soap box fueled campaign, I donned a condom from my own supply, protecting us both. I couldn't protect all these faceless women during their other dalliances, but with me, I would protect them the best I could.

I thrust my hips harder, as requested, and swiped my thumb roughly across the pebble of her dusky red nipple. She moaned overzealously, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes.

Porn noises. Another trend.

Luckily, her body was hot and my dick was liking it just fine, despite the clash in our personalities.

“Oh, Danny...yes! Ah! Oh God! Oh, yes! Baby! It's so good,” she spouted out as she clenched around me, like a thesaurus trying to come up with all the different ways to say she was enjoying it.

I was enjoying it too, at least physically, a low grunt ruminating out of my throat as my climax tickled its way up my spine. Mentally and emotionally, I had never felt more empty.

For the time being, I would keep up the routine of casual sex, but I knew it wouldn't be long before I was seriously questioning if I was actually getting more good out of it than bad. In fact, I was already questioning it.

Despite the carnal gratification, my feelings of loneliness and lack of focus settled deeper into my gut with each romp.

I was already on my way off of the bed, the condom was disposed of, I was settling my jeans around my hips, and slipping the button through the hole when she gushed, "Danny, baby, that was so good."

Before she could ask for a repeat or start into any sort of conversation, I gave her the gratification of saying, "It was good for me too. Thanks," before hauling ass out the door, my jeans still ruffled up over my boots with my haste.

She may have been upset, or maybe she wasn't. The truth is, I wouldn't know.

Because I never looked back.

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## Chapter 2

*Two days later...*

“It’s not so bad.”

Swinging my head toward Wade slowly, I made sure my eyes held just the right amount of incredulity.

A boat load.

“How is this ‘not so bad’?” I asked while thumbing unhurriedly through the newest round of surveillance photos and contemplating the ridiculous direction my superiors wanted to take this case.

“She’s not that bad looking,” Wade insisted before continuing, “Plus, I’m starting to worry your going to be a crazy cat lady. Or dude, as the case may be.”

Ignoring my scathing look of contempt with ease, he elaborated, “You know, the one that’s on the episode of *Hoarding: Buried Alive* where some of her cats are, quote, missing, but they’re really a squashed skeleton at the bottom of one of her piles of clothes. She doesn’t know because she can’t make it anywhere in her house quickly enough to look for them all, and she’s all alone. No friends, no lovers, no anything.”

“One, I have no cats, and two, I don’t hoard anything. Our house is minimalistic at best,” I countered, still flipping through the photos as I spoke. “And three, you need to stop fucking watching shows about hoarding.”

“There may be no cats or insane amount of stuff, but you are a lonely asshole.”

Wade knew I kept the company of women, but he knew the *kind* of company I kept.

He was right. I was lonely. And most definitely an asshole.

Ignoring those endearingly sweet, but unfortunately true, words from the only “family” I had, I kept focused on the task at hand. Wade mumbled almost incoherently to himself in the background as I did. “What’s so wrong with *Hoarding: Buried Alive*? It’s a learning show. It’s on The Learning Channel.”

*Christ Almighty.*

As I looked down at the photo of the FBI's vote for my new girlfriend, turned away from the camera with her head down, I could barely believe what the zoom lens had captured.

"For fucks sake, Wade. I am *not* sleeping with this woman," I declared as I shoved the photo straight into his chest with a little more force than necessary. Before he had a chance to see the abomination for himself, I enlightened him. "She has a fucking tattoo on her neck that says 'Daddy's Girl'. That's not normal! Be it pervy father or kinky lover, I personally have no desire to read the word 'Daddy' anywhere on her body while I'm taking her from behind. Not happening. And I know it's not a memorial tattoo because her father is still fucking alive."

"Just keep an open mind, Danny. Maybe you don't have to have sex with her, but closing off the possibility of getting close to her may just fuck us completely."

God, he was annoying. I hated nothing more than when Wade was right, and his "right" was unequivocally my "wrong".

"Fine. I'll keep an open mind. But I am *not* putting my dick in her box," I swore vehemently.

"What?" Wade questioned, completely dumbfounded by my Justin Timberlake reference.

"Don't worry about it," I said brushing it off rather than spending the next five minutes of my life explaining useless information. Besides, Wade was right on target. Outside of my job, I was living the life of a spinster, so saying things to him that he didn't have a prayer of understanding had become one of my only forms of entertainment.

Ah, cheap thrills.

I left Wade to lock the surveillance photos in the safe and strolled out of our office toward the living room. My motorcycle was calling me, the rides I took with it between my legs some of the best thinking sessions I had ever had, but I knew I wasn't supposed to be drawing attention to myself by openly engaging in my real habits.

My work alter ego, Dan Smith, International Arms Dealer, wouldn't make a habit of opening himself up to ambush so easily. Especially since he had pretty much invited a known killer to try to kill him.

Obviously, my alter ego was a cocky bastard.

But I was tired. We needed to make moves, finagle our way in, take Villanuevo down, and then, finally, be able to move on.

We had been undercover for almost two years now, and physical and mental fatigue were starting to wear on me. I knew the importance of what we were doing, how much crime we were preventing by not only making moves to take down a top arms trafficker like Sergio Villanuevo, but also using our own cover operation to filter hundreds of guns out of the mainstream black market.

However, sometimes, goodwill and positive intent can't overcome the body's visceral reaction—human nature's directive of wanting to have a life of your own. Someone to share with and, furthermore, to be able to do it with complete honesty. I was on a precipice of deciding that while I wanted all the wrongs of the world to be converted to rights, I might not want to actually be the person to do it.

Maybe that's not very heroic. Maybe it's selfish and the complete antithesis of world changing. But international crime and the players involved in it had been taking from me from a very young age—my family, my identity, my life's path, and in large part, my happiness.

I wasn't going to make any rash decisions, and I certainly wouldn't leave our current operation, or Wade, in a lurch, but I was starting to think on how I could transition when it was over.

I knew Wade was behind me by the squeak of the floorboard, and the lack of time between leaving him in the office and sensing him behind me suggested he took just enough time to put the photos back in the safe and then came after me.

He clearly wasn't done talking.

"I still have more to say."

Bingo.

Turning to face him out of respect, because honestly, I owed the guy more than I gave him credit for, I met his eyes and opened my ears, ready to listen.

"I know insinuating yourself with Isla isn't your favorite idea," he said cautiously, accepting my eye roll and basking in the depth of his understatement. "But we haven't heard anything from Sergio in two days. Two days since you offered yourself up and made a huge move in trying to infiltrate his operation. Getting close with Isla is just another way to put yourself in his vicinity. It also might protect you if she ends up developing a soft spot for you."

Or it might be another reason to kill me.

I didn't tell him that.

Instead, I took a deep breath and rubbed my forehead with a squeeze of my thumb and forefinger before answering. "I hear you," I told him earnestly, meeting his eyes to make sure he didn't doubt my sincerity. "And I'll consider it. But I honestly don't think it's time to move on Sergio's sister yet. Grasping at familial straws looks desperate, and desperate is the opposite of what we want to be. I think he just wants me to sweat it, which if I have any arms dealing balls at all, I won't, and in due time, he's going to make contact. If he didn't want to deal, he would have just killed me."

His faced blanched infinitesimally, his reactions schooled and measured from years in the field, but I knew he hated when I talked about my life so cavalierly. Frankly, I wasn't so hot on it either, but he needed to get the picture.

In an attempt to bring things back down an emotional notch or two and tread into fairly safer waters, I told him about the news I had just gotten word on.

"I put out a bid this morning looking for some anomalies. We have a regular shipment of AK's with accessories coming in, but I also think I got a bead on those sixteen Stinger Missiles that when missing in Afghanistan last year."

"Really?" he asked, impressed. No one had heard one word about that missing hardware since it disappeared.

"Yeah, I just got a vibe off of Olin when I was making our order. He seemed like he might have some unusual items. When I asked him if he had any toys from the sandbox his excitement went through the roof."

"Could be anything from over there. It might not be those stinger missiles, so don't get your hopes up."

Typical Wade, never trusting in fantasy or hope, always favoring practicality and a wait and see approach.

I had to admit that his life hadn't been puppy dogs and rainbows, but neither had mine and, for me, hope still sprang eternal. Hope that I would have everything I'd ever dreamed of one day. Hope that the world could change, acclimate, and at very least, become a *less* violent place.

Which one of us was more foolhardy was anyone's guess.

## Chapter 3

The telltale squeak of the front door's hinge brought my head up reflexively. Being undercover, half of your subconscious is always watching your ass, just in case you forget to do it deliberately. Plus, I think people-watching tends to be one of those activities almost all humans participate in, and I am most definitely a Homo Sapien.

I was once again working my bartending job at The Cabin, trying to keep up with business as usual. I had a real gut feeling that Sergio was going to take the bait soon, but like I told Wade that afternoon, the best approach was to wait it out.

Copper strands of hair glinted subtly off of two separate, female heads, both of their faces pointed at each other, a quiet conversation in full swing. They moved slowly and spoke softly, maybe hoping to keep the attention off of themselves, but I could practically feel all of the Y-chromosomes in the room standing up and taking notice.

So cliché, but they were already an anomaly for this small town in Alabama based on looks alone, and they also had a vibe. A seemingly physical magnetism judging by the way people leaned toward them as they passed by.

And I definitely felt the pull.

As they got within a distance that offered a clear view, I gave them a once over, my eyes lingering over the younger one, devouring her long exposed, legs. The outfit was appropriate, not high maintenance, and I could tell she was country despite not being local.

Her face shimmered under the lights, no doubt thanks to some kind of glitter shit in her makeup, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

She was *beautiful*. Fresh and young, with a real, natural, womanly beauty. But it was genuine, not forced. She looked like a woman, a little chubbiness in her cheeks giving her age a slight shaving, but I could tell she was just who she was. Take it or leave it.

Fucking hell, I wanted to take it.

I hadn't gotten this worked up over a woman in a long time, and I had yet to talk to her. If some other guy had said something like that I would have told him it was total bullshit, but there I was, full of shit. And happy about it.

They were both excited to be here, that much was obvious, but the older one, and she was definitely older, albeit super hot regardless of her age, had a nervous edge to her.

I was fucking thrilled when they wasted no time plopping right down on a couple of stools at my bar and starting up a conversation, oblivious to listening ears or wandering eyes.

Something I had never, ever done. I always watched my back. From eight years old, I was trained to observe first, act second. I envied their freedom.

“Okay, Mom,” the younger one said, confirming my notion that there was a difference in their age. Though, I wouldn’t have guessed there was that big of a difference.

Talk about good fucking genes.

“Let’s go through the list one more time. We need to be on our game, so the list needs to be second nature.”

A list? Oh boy, this should be interesting.

“Good idea,” her mom agreed, her shoulders releasing a little bit of tension.

I grabbed a glass and moved toward the tap, filling the beer for my regular, Steve, keeping my ears attuned in their direction.

“Alpha male,” my newest fantasy stated confidently, never even glancing away from her mom. I think I could have been right on top of her, and she wouldn’t have noticed me.

“Badass,” her mom added, a slight timidity in her voice.

Back and forth they went each listing a quality that started with the next letter in the alphabet. All the while I listened, busying myself with menial tasks in order to cover my eavesdropping.

“Cool name.”

“Dangerous.”

“Experienced.”

“Funny.”

“Gorgeous.”

“Hard body!”

“Intelligent.”

I bit back my laugh as the mom whispered, “Junk,” a choice that was very obviously chosen by my girl.

*My girl?* What the fuck?

“Kissing expert.”

“Loving.”

“Manly with a motorcycle!”

“Nickname giver.”

“One woman man.”

“Protective.”

“Quiet until there’s something good to say,” the daughter decreed before her mother added, “That’s right, let us do the talking!”

She found her mom amusing, biting gently into her plump lip and shaking her head, but wearing a huge smile before adding the next quality to the list. “Romantic.”

“Sexy.”

“Tattooed.”

“Understands the quirkiness that is us.”

“Virile,” my girl purred seductively, adding, “Oh, yeah. Virile for sure.”

Holy shit.

Immediately, I shifted my thoughts.

Baseball. Wade. Sergio Villanuevo. International Arms deals. Paint drying. God, *anything* to make my blood stop flowing south.

Of course, my traitorous ears were now fully interested and continued to listen.

“X-rated skills and Young at heart.”

“Zealous about us.”

“Excellent. Good thing we remember he needs to be zealous. Wouldn’t want to forget that,” my little smartass teased her mother.

I found myself smiling and staring at her for a few seconds before I realized and pulled my shit together.

I had to at least pretend to work.

“Hey, Z was a hard letter,” her mom defended.

She nodded her agreement and said, “Yeah, I know. We wouldn’t want him to be a zebra. Or maybe have a zebra striped tattoo on his penis or something. *That* would be really bad.”

I had never heard a woman say the word penis in front of her mother before, let alone used it while talking directly to her. God, this girl was funny. And ballsy. Surprisingly, I liked that in a girl.

Always had.

“Now that we’ve refreshed our memories, let’s loosen up a little bit,” she declared.

Yes! Maybe she was going to want alcohol, and I could go look at her close up and not be a creeper.

Well, at least she wouldn’t know I was a creeper.

“What do you want to do? Stretch? I think I’m confused. Are we working out or trying to pick up men?” her mom asked.

“Well, first of all, to answer your question...neither. We’re here to have a good time. That is always the number one goal of Allison and Haley’s Great Adventure. Got me?”

Names. Score. Allison and Haley. Now I just needed to know who was who.

“Yeah, yeah. I “got” you. What are you turning into an Alpha male yourself?”

“I don’t appreciate the attitude, Allison,” she fake huffed, solving the name mystery.

Thank God. I was getting tired of referring to her anonymously. I much preferred pretending like I knew her.

“If guys are interested, that’s just a bonus. I am woman. I am strong. Or in this case, we are women. Though, it really doesn’t convey the same emotion in the plural.”

Allison waited with the patience of a seasoned professional, expecting Haley to come off of her tangent on her own. She must have done it a lot.

“Alright, alright. I got off target again. How do you say so much with that one little eyebrow, Woman?”

Once again, Allison had no answer, but that didn’t get Haley down at all.

I could feel my feet start to walk in their direction, straight down the bar and stopping right in front of them, as though I was having an out of body experience.

“As far as loosening up, I meant alcohol.....Shot time!”

Perfect. Cue me.

She looked away from her mom right at that moment, honing in like a laser beam on my exact location, her fearless, brilliant turquoise eyes piercing right through my defenses.

And then, looked right through me.

*Burn.*

“Two shots of fireball, please,” Haley requested sweetly, but I could tell she didn’t notice me at all.

If anything, that made her even cuter. She was completely there, in that moment, with her mom. Clearly, they had a strong, close, vibrant relationship, and a respect that I hardly ever saw between people anymore.

Living in such a technologically driven era, people rarely interacted with one another without an outside distraction like a cell phone going at the same time.

Don’t worry, I’m not anti-technology, but I am pro-personal connection. The kind of camaraderie that’s strong enough to hold a person’s entire interest. It’s probably a lifetime lacking in close connections that drives my philosophical approach to conversational engagement, but I couldn’t tell you for sure because I’m not a psychologist.

“You got it, sweetheart,” I said, and then began thoroughly kicking my own ass for adding on a term of endearment. I seriously didn’t know what the fuck was wrong with me. I didn’t know what it was about this girl that had me tied in knots, and I didn’t know why in the fuck I kept letting myself forget I was in the middle of a very serious, extremely dangerous investigation.

There was probably a price on my head at that exact moment, for fuck’s sake.

I pulled my lips back over my teeth immediately, putting away the dimples and effectively putting the kabash on my smile. But it didn’t even matter because she still hadn’t even really looked at me. In fact, another man, someone I wasn’t familiar with, had just approached her and started flirting.

He was a cocksucking dork, I could tell, but she flirted back, tossing her hair and subconsciously straightening her back in a way that made her tits stick out. It wasn’t on purpose, it was a byproduct of her confidence.

And it was sexy.

The really disgusting part is that I felt an immediate flare of fire in my belly, the edges of my flaming jealousy licking the lining of my stomach and burning me alive.

Placing the shots on the bar in front of them, I redirected my mind and energy and moved to the other end of the bar, keen to do any other work I could come up with.

But as I left, I allowed myself one last look, startling noticeably when Allison's keen blue eyes found mine and a knowing smile crept sweetly onto her face.

Fuck. Me.



Five men had come and gone, and I was watching the sixth stupid victim walk stuntedly toward the bathroom, undoubtedly trying to adjust his uncooperative, semi-hard, docker-incased cock with every step he took.

This girl could turn you on in a instant.

And she had no idea.

After keeping to myself and anonymously bringing drinks throughout the entire dumbass parade, I was done. I needed her interaction. In fact, I fucking craved it.

Leaning into her back and gulping in a huge swallow of her citrusy scent infused air, I teased, "Tsk, ts. Only one night in and you're already lowering your standards and straying from the list? I expected more backbone from you."

I knew it was cruel to mock the list that she probably didn't want anyone to know about, and probably not a good idea to make her doubt her decisions, but I couldn't help it. I just had a feeling the more innocently argumentative I was, the more engaged she would be with me.

She had spunk, and she needed someone who could give it right back.

"How do you know we've only been at this for a night?" she asked as she turned around, her shining hair fanning out over her shoulder in a sweeping wave as she went.

"Touché," I agreed easily, letting one side of my mouth just barely creep into a smile. "I guess I don't, but it sure seems like it. You've still got that wholly optimistic glow."

And she did. Her exuberance practically screamed its way off of her lithe body.

"So I guess you heard the list, huh?" she asked with a smile, a small blush tinting the apples of her cheeks.

I gave her a small nod.

"And you remember it?"

"Oh yeah," I confirmed, knowing I was going to have to give her some kind of explanation. "You know how they say an elephant never forgets?"

She nodded, her turquoise eyes wide with curiosity until I delivered the punch line.

“Well, I never ever fucking forget.”

Her eyes roamed my face, lingering on the details and categorizing every emotion I displayed. At least, that’s what it felt like. Intimate and intrusive, but not completely unwelcome.

I resisted the urge to tug at the collar of my t-shirt, feeling the cotton of it tightening with every word I spoke. “I have one of those hyperactive memories. Literally remember everything. Day, time, location, event. If I was there or I paid witness to it, I remember it.”

I looked down at the bar, hesitant to hear her reaction. In my experience people didn’t understand.

“A blessing and a curse,” she murmured softly, the velvet in her voice smoothing the rough edges of my uncertainty.

“Most people only see the blessings,” I told her as our eyes met and held.

“I have plenty of memories I’m happy to have the ability to scrub. It must suck balls to have to hold onto every shitty memory in vivid detail.”

Now, I knew this wasn’t the time to be a guy. We were having a meaningful conversation, I was enjoying it, and she had a really soft, empathetic look on her face. But I think testosterone affects a man’s listening skills because all I heard were the words “suck balls”.

I really wanted her to suck on my balls. Maybe even squeeze and lick them a little.

What? I guarantee if you surveyed the men in the surrounding area, they would tell you their brains took a similar journey. Okay, maybe they wouldn’t tell you that, but trust me, it’s the truth.

“So, what’s your name?” she asked as I continued to run my eyes over every beautiful contour of her face and body.

Right. The blue-eyed beauty had no idea that I wasn’t following her at all. She was completely unaware that I had some unbelievably carnal images in my head and my dick was responding accordingly.

Thank God I had a poker face and a strategically placed bar.

What had she asked? Oh yeah. “*What’s your name?*”

Given my circumstances, I always hated that question. Simple and innocent in it’s purest form, sure. But thrown into the mix of my history, it was just a lie.

But if you don't answer when someone asks for something as accessible as your name, it tends to look kind of suspicious. Or like you're missing several points on your IQ.

"Dan Smith."

Who knew why we chose something so elementary. Though, it probably had something to do with including an unfocused, emotionally scarred eight year old in the decision making process.

I figured I would have a few moments of silence to contemplate the state of my life and maybe even lay on a thin layer of self-pity. Of course, instead, something totally unexpected happened.

Hysterical laughter literally jumped out of her throat and beat me over the head. Of course, when I say literally, I don't *actually* mean literally. It was just that forceful.

Apparently, for some reason, I was funny.

No one had laughed at something I said in a very long time. Wade didn't get my jokes, and I really didn't hang out with anyone else. I might go home with a girl for the night, bang the hell out of her for a few hours, and then go home to my bed, but that didn't often lead to laughter. At least, I tried to avoid it.

And now, interestingly enough, I didn't even think I had said something that deserved a laugh.

Nonetheless, it still felt good. She had a great laugh. Bubbly and deep, really sincere like it came all the way from her belly, but still feminine and not the least bit off-putting. I was intrigued by how it could be so many different things all at the same time, and I wanted to hear more of it. Dissect it over and over again.

"You're joking, right?"

After finishing my brief mental exploration of her laugh, quality and characteristics, I came back to reality in time to hear her follow up question. My first reaction was to panic.

Warm, tingly feeling gone.

*Why would she think I was joking? Did she know who I was?*

I kept my hysteria on the inside, though. My outside was as cool as a fucking igloo. Wait...the purpose of an igloo is to be warm on the inside, right?

Hmm.

Actually, that was perfect. I was exactly like an igloo. Cool on the outside, all hot and bothered on the inside.

“Danny! I’d love another drink!”

Thank the Jesus. Normally, Stevie Norman was one of my most annoying customers. Right now, I was considering full on making out with him. With tongues.

With one command he managed to confirm my name, distract me from my panic, and give me something to do other than falling all over my normally composed self in front of the pretty girl.

With one last cursory glance, I moved to the other end of the bar, served drunk, obnoxious Stevie another drink, took a really fucking deep breath, and then moved myself back down to my spot in front of her.

She wasted no time once I arrived, immediately diving back into the conversation and surprising me with more off the wall comments.

“Am I on Candid Camera?” she asked somewhat seriously, her eyes scanning the surrounding area for cameras.

“Well, that show ended about a decade ago,” I counseled easily, both dimples sinking flirtatiously into my cheeks. “So, I’d say no.”

After a brief moment of self-reflection, she seemed to recenter herself.

“Well, Dan Smith, my name is Haley Whitfield. It’s nice to meet you.”

Hmm, Haley Whitfield. Pretty name.

*Wait...Haley Whitfield? Haley...Fucking...Whitfield?!*

So that’s what it feels like when your lungs seize up. Interesting.

*Shit.* I knew she looked familiar. But Christ, she looked a little different without the Keds, and now, she had a couple of balloons attached to her chest. Though, her personality was starting to make a lot more sense.

Man, the Whitfields were like my second family. Her brother Hunter had been my very best friend. And I had always had a little crush on Haley. If possible, I think I spent just as much time at their house as I did at my own. I honestly can’t even explain how paradoxically thrilling and terrifying it was to see someone from all those years ago. After all, I had spent almost my entire life trying *not* to see these very people. I wasn’t allowed to. It wasn’t safe.

But, God, her smile. It was even better than I remembered it. I *missed* these people.

I know what you’re thinking. With a memory like mine and a bond that had been thicker than most, how could I not have recognized them

immediately?

It's something to do with taking people out of their natural habitat. Had I seen them in Knoxville, or hell, just been in a town that was actually on the map, I might have suspected. But the odds were so slim, and the time had acted as a good eraser. As much as I loved them, I hadn't thought of them often. It was too painful to spend your time thinking about people you weren't allowed to have.

The burn of my nose was intense, my throat insanely thick with emotion. But I knew what I had to do.

*Speak. Play along. Must continue functioning like a normal human being.*

"Haley, huh?" I managed to squeak out, clearing my throat before continuing, "I like it. What brings Haley Whitfield and her lovely mother..."

"Allison," she responded, her eyes quickly flickering to the corner of the room where she knew Allison was.

She was checking on her.

Okay, I was a smitten kitten.

I was also using phrases like smitten fucking kitten. *Shit.*

"Right. What brings you and your lovely mother, Allison, here?" I asked eagerly, trying desperately to keep any signs of recognition from registering on my face. But I really wanted to know what they were doing here.

"The beach of course. Can't you tell by my freshly tanned, healthy glow?" she explained with a jaunty wiggle of her arm.

"Tan?" I asked teasingly. She looked like she'd overexposed herself to the sun just a little, but she was still gorgeous.

"Okay, so it's a little on the pink side, but I'm far enough away from being confused with a lobster that it counts as tan. It's always a little pink the first day. Everyone knows that," she argued.

I could not stop my smile from lighting my face up like a Christmas display, and I figured it was useless to try. All I could do was keep digging for information while I did.

"So the list is obviously being used to weed through copious amounts of useless men until you find a good one."

"Yep, it's a slow process, but we're hoping the statistics will come out in our favor," she said, the light in her eyes dancing. Unfortunately, I didn't get to watch the show as long as I wanted because I was distracted by the arrival of "Tom, the pleat-wearing Dickweed".

“So, Haley, you think maybe you might want to go somewhere else with me, have a late dinner?” Tom asked, rubbing his smarmy hand all over her fucking back.

Man, I was feeling some serious rage about the consent-less touching.

*Dial it back, Danny.*

Her eyes jumped to mine just briefly, and at witnessing the twinge of disinterest in them, I started to get excited at the possibility that she was about to blow this guy off.

“Gee, thanks Tom. But I’m going to have to pass and stay here. It was nice talking to you though.”

Fuck yes! Adrenaline surged through my body as I did a full on victory dance in my head.

When Tom didn’t immediately get the message, his hand still fucking lingering on the soft cotton of her tank top, she finished him off. “Have a nice night.”

I swear, it felt so good to see her squash him that my dick actually hardened. Just a little bit.

I really wanted to say something, but I knew, at that moment, the best thing I could do would be to keep my mouth shut. I would definitely end up saying something offensive or completely outside the bounds of what I should.

So instead, I just smiled. I knew my dimples were fully engaged, and by the way she smiled back, I knew I made the right move.

Dimples are a good weapon when you’re at war with a woman.

The bar needed clearing, and a few customers were beginning to look pretty peeved by my delay in getting them drinks or cashing out their tabs, so I left her sitting there for a while and caught back up on all of my responsibilities.

She seemed happy to sit there on her own, not dependent on my company or the least bit out of her skin because she was flying solo. And I even caught her watching me a couple of times.

Score.

When I finally took care of all of the customers I had aggravated, restocked everything that needed restocking, and tidied the necessary amount, she was sitting on her stool backwards, watching her mom as she wooed yet another bachelor in the corner. I approached her slowly, leaning

in to whisper directly in her ear. “You know he’s checking out her tits, right?”

She stayed facing away from me, but let out a huge, good-natured sigh. “Yep. I’m always trying to tell her that. Allison likes to see the good in people though. Chooses to believe these guys are *really* looking at her necklaces. It’s kind of sweet in an utterly naive way.”

She assessed Allison and her suitor one more time, and then turned to face me.

Before I could stop myself, I was flashing my sexiest smirk and telling her, “I like your necklaces.”

She looked at me with wide eyes for two quick beats and then burst out laughing. And then, her eyes lit with unveiled interest.

I was glad I hadn’t offended her, but my brain was too busy sounding the alarm on how much I was fucking up to really notice. I was flirting. And I mean, full on, balls out, twirling them in my hand like some sort of fucking carnival roadie flirting.

Not. Good.

I was fucking undercover, and not the least bit available to start or carry out any sort of meaningful relationship. And Haley was in no way going to be a one time fuck.

Heat engulfed my chest, and I could feel my lungs disintegrating. I didn’t want to backpedal. But I fucking had to.

She had even leaned into the bar, and her breasts were so obvious, I wouldn’t have been surprised if they reached out and slapped me across the face.

Oh God, mental picture.

I stuttered a little trying to get started saying the exact thing that I didn’t want to say, and then shifted my eyes to the bar, unable to man up and look directly into her turquoise beauties. “Too bad I don’t fit your list at all. Not to worry though, now that I know what you’re looking for, I’ll help you find him.”

It was probably presumptuous to assume I’d be hurting her feelings by turning her down. She had plenty of other options. Fucking six other options *tonight*, to be exact. But I still couldn’t bring myself to witness the moment in which I changed my tune completely and shut her out.

Waiting a minute to let an immediate reaction pass, I finally looked up and slid myself right into the friend role.

“Where did you come up with these qualities?”

Rose tinted her cheeks ever so slightly, and that made me even more interested to hear the answer.

“Well, Allison and I are both big Contemporary Romance readers. Our favorite author creates *the best* guys, so we decided to take a page out of her book...ha...and find some guys for ourselves using her guidelines.”

I tried really hard. I did. But no matter my efforts, I could not get my voice box to cooperate.

Did women really do stuff like that? Make a checklist for their men based on books?

“Are you suddenly a mute or something?” she questioned nervously, shifting on her stool. “Because you were a regular Chatty Cathy about two minutes ago.”

Okay, having known Haley as a kid, I knew there had to be more to this, so I had to get my act together.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t tease her just a little.

“So you’re serious? That’s something you’re actually doing? I didn’t stroke out and imagine it?”

She took it just as it was intended, smiling back at me and launching into a one of the cutest short-winded rants I’d ever seen. “Listen, nobody out smartass-es me, so you’re going to have to turn it down a few fucking notches.”

“Man, I love your dirty mouth,” I responded without thinking, remembering what a shit talker she was even at six years old.

“Oh my God. Are we on 100,000 Dollar Pyramid?” Allison interrupted, clearly surprising Haley with her appearance. I had seen her coming from across the room, and it still hadn’t stopped me from saying what was likely one of the most inappropriate things possible.

“Because I know the answer,” she continued despite our lack of response, pausing momentarily for dramatic effect. “It’s ‘Things You Should Never Hear a Man Say To Your Daughter’, in case you were wondering.”

Allison, or Mrs. Whitfield as I had known her, had always been the coolest of moms, and it was clear that time hadn’t changed her a bit.

“Why do both of you only reference really old shows?” I mused, knowing there probably wouldn’t be an answer from either of them.

“Jesus, shut up, Danny,” Haley chided, plopping her hand down on the bar and exposing two very important things. A small hint of vulnerability and a purple hair tie on her wrist.

“Trust me, we don’t need another room tonight, Madre,” Haley argued, trying to ignore my completely unhelpful commentary.

“Yeah, I’m all about a three way.”

Holy shit. I meant to *think* that, not say it.

Oh well, it was out there. Time to smile and play it off.

“Jesus, Danny! What is wrong with you?! Shut. Up,” Haley scolded, her hint of vulnerability turning into a full blown blush of embarrassment.

“I like you, Danny,” Allison cut in, freaking Haley way the hell out.

“What?!”

“Not for a three way, Haley. Relax.” She huffed a deep breath, rolled her eyes comically at me, looked back at Haley, and then informed her, “He just seems like he handles your crazy well is all.”

“Yeah, he’s totes adorable,” Haley muttered sarcastically, her back now facing me as she confronted Allison head on. “My new Bestie for life.”

She was too much. Even funnier than I could have imagined. It felt so good to be around her again, so even though I knew I shouldn’t, I made sure this wouldn’t be our last rendezvous.

While she was distracted, I snagged her phone off of the bar and entered my digits quickly, thankful that she had an extremely user friendly iPhone to expedite the process.

“Allison, do you have any important plans for tomorrow that you can’t break?” I asked as I slid Haley’s phone back to its place on the counter. “Because I’d really love if you and Haley could come over and hang out.”

Man, I was a real fucking idiot. For several reasons. But at the moment, I was thinking it was because I wasn’t being as sly as I thought. Allison’s keen eyes had followed my hand while I was repositioning the phone.

But she didn’t throw up any red flags, so I didn’t either, continuing my speech as planned.

“We’ll grill some stuff, get to know one another, that kind of thing. My uncle will be there too,” I planned aloud. Fuck, Wade was going to kill me.

“That sounds like fun, Danny,” Allison agreed easily, heightening both my anticipation and my anxiety.

“Excuse me, didn’t you forget to ask me about this, Danny?” Haley cut in, the cloud of her attitude engulfing all of us.

“Just come over, Hales,” I said with a playful roll of my eyes, just barely resisting the urge to chuck her under the chin. And then stick my hands in her shirt.

Oh yeah! Speaking of shirts.

“Oh, and bring a long sleeve shirt.”

I really wanted to take her to do something she had always wanted to be a part of, and I just happened to love.

“Long sleeves!” she protested loudly. “It’s hot as balls outside! What are you crazy? How am I going to build on my tan in long sleeves?”

“You know what, never mind. I’ll just loan you one of mine,” I conceded, knowing that I’d rather have her wrapped up in one of my shirts anyway.

That got her thinking. I didn’t know what was running through her mind, but she was quiet, so I knew I had to use the escape opportunity while it was presented.

I flashed them a quick smile and stepped away, only to realize there was something I was still really curious about that was unresolved.

I took two steps back, inserting myself way into her space, and then whispered, “By the way, bring your books, or e-reader, or whatever the hell you call it, because I’m going to have to hear more about this tomorrow, and I’m going to need specifics.”

Meanwhile, while her body was distracted by my presence, I used a little slight of hand to steal her hair tie. I already had one at home, and seeing her out of the blue like this, I just couldn’t resist the impulse to add to my collection.

I smiled big for both her and her mom, and then got back to work, working hard to shut down my mind and libido for the night.

Succeeding in keeping my eyes trained on the job for several minutes, cleaning the bar, serving customers, and diligently organizing alcohol and glasses, I was surprised when she once again demanded my attention.

“Um, little problem, Dan-o. We never got your address. I don’t have one effing clue where you live or how to get there.”

“Call me in the morning.”

“Wait, I don’t have your number either,” she said, reminding me that my operation had been covert and bringing a sneaky smirk to Allison’s lips.

There was something there with Allison, something I would have to keep an eye on, but for the moment, all I could do was tease Haley one last

time. “Gosh, Hales. You shouldn’t lie. It’s too much fun when you’re brutally honest.”

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## Chapter 4

As I pulled up at home that night, I prepared myself to be knee deep in shit.

Wade was not going to be thrilled with my family picnic tomorrow, and I really couldn't blame him. It was stupid on a lot of really shit-tastic levels.

Still, I couldn't stop a goofy grin from permanently overwhelming my face.

Two of the most important women of my early life had made a reappearance, and in the span of a couple of hours, made me feel happier than I had in years.

For tonight, I was going to relish it. I was going to live in the moment and let the light of the night stay lit. Wade would be asleep now anyway, since it was three AM, and I could pretend there weren't all of the negatives that there definitely *were* until I let him in on my dealings in the morning.

I didn't bother flipping on the light as I entered the house from the back porch. Normally, I would have stayed up another couple of hours, going over case files, trying to find any kind of missing piece to Sergio's puzzle.

But not tonight. I headed straight for my room, my knees thankful that my body had all of the furniture layout well memorized.

Closing the door behind me first, I searched the wall for the light switch, feeling my way until my fingers met the cool plastic and engaged it upward.

Curling my fingers into the cotton of my black t-shirt resting between my shoulder blades, I pulled it off over my head, unbuckled my belt, and shoved my jeans to the floor, stepping free and kicking them to the side as I went.

Taking a seat sideways on my bed, I pulled open the top drawer of my bedside table as quietly as possible, cognizant of the fact that Wade's room shared a wall with mine, and moved aside the meaningless items blocking the Ninja Turtles tin lunchbox at the bottom.

With shaky hands, I pulled it out for the first time in fifteen years and placed it gently on the comforter in front of my cocked knee.

I flipped open the metal latch on front with a snap of my fingers and eased the top forcefully off of the corresponding ledge of the bottom.

My very first reaction was to close my eyes and take a deep breath, readying myself for memories long suppressed, so I did.

After two deep breaths, I was ready to open them.

Right on top sat a picture of Hunter Whitfield and I, arms around one another's shoulders, toothy grins on full display. Haley could be seen in the background, scuffing the loose dirt with the toe of her shoe—something she did often.

Reaching out cautiously, I touched the glossy finish with just one long finger and let the memories of that day settle into my mind.

We hadn't been doing anything special, just playing spontaneously and excluding sweet little Haley like we always did. But Allison had insisted we take a picture, instigating our bro-hug and no doubt surreptitiously sliding Haley into the background. I think she knew I had a soft spot for her little girl back then.

Two days later—these were the days of film—Allison had handed me that picture with a hug and a kiss to the top of my forehead.

*“Keep this somewhere special,” she said. “Friendships like this are once in a lifetime.”*

Three weeks later, I saw them for the last time.

Until tonight.

Purple peeked its way out of the corner of the box, and I knew exactly what it was. The original purple hair tie, abandoned accidentally by an angry little girl when her brother refused to let her ride a four-wheeler.

Tucking the one from tonight right in next to it, I closed the box, latched the front, and slid it back into its place inside of my nightstand.

I laid back on the bed and linked my hands behind my head, staring mindlessly at the ceiling and foregoing my usual shower.

The aroma of putrid beer and stale cigarettes was ripe, but somewhere under there was the smell of Haley.

Tomorrow I would make her four-wheeler riding dreams come true.

Tomorrow I would see her again.

Tomorrow.



“What are you up to?” Wade asked as I came walking into the living room running a towel over my still damp hair.

“I was just cleaning up some trails for when we ride later,” I answered nonchalantly, trying to slide in the facts without having to go into the details.

It was a failed effort. Wade was far too clever for juvenile avoidance.

“Who’s we?”

“I kind of have someone coming over in a little while,” I said vaguely, looking away from him and scratching the back of my head with my fingertips.

“Someone related to the case?” he questioned quickly. “We’re always prepared for them to find this place, but you know we don’t invite these people-”

“Not related to the case,” I cut him off, reaching across my body with my left hand and rubbing my bicep.

“Then who?” he investigated, his brows scrunching together infinitesimally.

For the most part, if it wasn’t about the case, it didn’t exist. The thought of something completely independent from that line of thinking had his mind boggled.

“A woman,” I responded simply, knowing I was being a difficult pain in the ass.

I could tell Wade was really gearing up to lead into a full interrogation, but with timing I couldn’t have planned better myself, my phone started to ring and vibrate in my back pocket.

Turning away from a certain person’s prying brown eyes, I answered quickly, both to avoid a confrontation and because I was eager to talk to Haley and I recognized the 865 area code.

“Hey, Hales.”

“Hey Danny,” she greeted me back, bringing the corners of my mouth up like a puppet. “You sound too chipper for someone who has a late night job this early in the morning.”

“Chipper?” I protested. Maybe I needed to tone it down a little if she was calling me fucking chipper.

“Okay, maybe not chipper. But awake. Yeah, you definitely sound awake,” she backpedaled nonsensically.

I honestly couldn’t think of a way to respond. So I didn’t.

“Right. Listen, I wasn’t sure when you wanted us to come over so I figured I’d get a plan going early so that we know what the day is going to bring.”

Now that I knew the answer to. I couldn’t wait to see her. “Come over now.”

“That sounded an awful lot like an order, Dan-o. Do you think I’m the kind of girl that does what she’s told?”

Haley? Someone who does what she’s told? No way in hell.

Still.

“It was an order, you’re not even remotely that kind of girl, but you’re still going to come over now.”

Her light giggle floated into my ear as though she was right there. “Well, at least you’re honest. Fair enough. Just tell me how to get there.”

It was hard to stay on my feet, the presence of Wade’s eyes all over me was so heavy. But I didn’t let that affect me as I started to give Haley directions. “Okay, which hotel are you staying in again?” I asked, even though I was fairly certain she hadn’t told me to begin with.

“The Beach Club.”

“Okay, cool. So when you come out of the hotel you’re going to turn right onto Ocean Avenue. Follow that until you come to Highway 60, and turn left just like you would have to come to The Cabin. Stay on that for about four and half miles, and then turn left onto Millhouse Road. Follow that for another three miles or so, crossing over the inner-waterway bridge, and then turn right onto Kennedy Road. Just follow that for a mile and a half, turn left onto Carver Road, and we’ll be the third place on the left.”

As my instructions came to a close, I was met with a beat of silence followed by a statement so annoying that if she wasn’t so cute, she would have been dead.

“Yeah, um, I didn’t get any of that Dan-o. You’re gonna have to repeat everything so I can write it down, m’kay?”

The thing was, she *was* cute. Incredibly cute. So instead of committing murder, I laughed my ass off, practically chortling in her ear and causing Wade to drop whatever had been in his hand.

Thankfully, it seemed as though it wasn’t breakable.

I ignored Wade for the time being though because men may be good at accomplishing tasks, but we don’t have the multitask-centered mind that women do.

One thing at a time tends to work best for me.

This time I waited patiently to make sure she was fully prepared before running through the directions one more time, adding a few colorful elaborations for her benefit.

“Okay, ready this time?”

“Yepper.”

“When you’re leaving the hotel, turn right onto Ocean Avenue. Follow that down to Highway 60 and turn left. You can’t turn right unless you have one of those amphibious vehicles and you wanna take the really long way around through the ocean.”

She chuckled at that, and then confirmed, “Got it.”

“Drive on Highway 60 for four and a half miles, and turn left on Millhouse Road. There will be a giant ice cream cone shaped building across the street. Stop and lick it if you must. Stay on Millhouse for three miles and turn right onto Kennedy Road. You will cross over a bridge, and if you get to the bush that looks like a set of balls with elephantiasis, you’ve gone too far.”

“What kind of gardeners do you have around here?” she teased easily, the sound of her pen scratching on paper resonating softly in the background.

I could just picture her not only writing down the directions, but also drawing a sketch of the bushes.

“A mile and a half on Kennedy,” I continued, “and then one final left on Carver Road. We’re the third place on the left.”

“Okay, I think I can handle it. If not, I’ll pick up the hooker you had there last night, and I’m sure she’ll give me directions.”

“What?!” I coughed out, spitting all over myself in surprise.

“Gotcha! See you soon, Danny.”

Click.

I pulled the phone away from my ear, wiped my nerve induced sweat off of the screen, and turned slowly to face Wade.

I wasn’t normally the type of guy who let nerves get to me, but I had a lot going on.

His brown eyes were on me, but not in the way I expected. They were assessing and introspective, and his face was much more relaxed than that of a man in a full blown panic.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” he remarked quietly, settling into a stance matching mine with his muscular arms crossed on his chest.

“You’ll see why when you meet them,” I explained, leading into another round of questions.

“Them?”

“Yeah, her and her mom. Her mom’s gorgeous by the way.”

“Jesus, Danny. This is worse than I thought. You’re not trying to set me up, are you?” he complained, dipping his head downward and rubbing the outside corners of his eyes by spanning one hand across them.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at that, which brought Wade’s head up with curiosity.

“Trust me, Uncle dearest, you’ll be lucky if she gives you the time of day.”

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## Chapter 5

Okay, so I hadn't told Wade that they were people I knew as Ryan Parker. But, hey, they didn't *know* I was Ryan, and Wade was already pissed enough.

Sue me. I was saving the fireworks for later. That's the kind of decision I get to make as a grown man. You know, putting off dealing with unavoidable consequences until the very last minute. If you can't be a procrastinator when you grow up, you can't really be anything like everyone says you can.

"We really need to talk about the case. It's been three days since you were there," Wade piped up from his place leaned against one of the porch pillars, his entire face cast in shadow.

"I know," I snapped shortly. I didn't need another fucking reminder of how long it had been. "We'll talk everything over in detail tonight when they're gone." I crossed my right boot over my left and leaned into the pillar opposite him, my position exposing me to the full morning sun. Tilting my face up into the warmth, I sighed. "But not before then. Today will play out like any normal day."

Wade chose silence as his means of concession which was just fine with me. For today, I just wanted to relax and enjoy myself like any ordinary guy.

The melodic tweeting from a duo of bluebirds skimmed over my skin and settled into my ears, mingling with the warmth of the sun to create the perfect feel of an Alabama summer morning.

Our rural location was quiet, which only added to the refrain of nature's making, and as I leaned into the white, slightly weather-worn support on the porch of our little country dwelling, I found happiness in one aspect of my current circumstances. A peaceful, inviting morning like this was the perfect precursor to a day of anticipated activities. A day twenty plus years in the making.

A day I honestly never expected to come.

The buzz of the day's heat changed subtly, taking on a rhythm and vibrating the wood planks beneath our feet.

The gravel crunching at the end of our drive wasn't loud, but it was noticeable, and as a result, I knew a music enamored Haley and Allison duo

would be joining us soon.

Small waves rolled gently through my stomach, lapping at the lining and manifesting my physical reaction set off by anticipation.

Haley was behind the wheel of a 2013 Blue Mustang GT Convertible, and she didn't drive with any of the usual respect paid to a gravel driveway. She wheeled it in fast, skidding to a stop in front of the porch and causing a small cloud of gravel dust to permeate the surrounding area.

Both sets of their uniquely turquoise eyes were under the veil of their shades, and the music echoed vivaciously throughout the surrounding silence, both of their upper bodies swaying and grooving to the beat of "Radioactive" by Imagine Dragons.

My vision tunneled as Haley turned off the engine, flicked her sunglasses off of her face, tossed them up on the dash of the car, popped open her door, and stretched out the supple, toned length of her left leg.

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw even stone-cold Wade take notice, straightening from his position in the shadows and stepping into the glaring July sun next to me.

As she pulled herself from the car and stepped free of the door, I took in the curve hugging white cutoffs on her bottom half and the light blue tank top just barely containing everything on the top. Her outfit wasn't slutty, she just had a body that made sexual suggestions even when she wasn't.

At the same time, Allison was exiting her side of the car and making her way around the hood to join Haley on the side closest to us.

The blinding sun was right in my eyes, but I squinted just enough to see Allison smile at Haley, shift her eyes to us on the porch, and then go down like a sack of bricks.

She fainted. Just like that.

Wade was in motion before me, cresting the last step and landing on gravel just as I pulled myself away from the post.

Haley was doing her best to soften Allison's fall but was struggling under the weight, which resulted in a pretty puddle of women in my driveway.

Wade did his best to extricate a limp Allison from the tangle of Haley's limbs gently, and I got there just in time to aid in the process.

Laying her flat out on the gravel, careful to protect her skin from abrasion, we fell into an easy trauma assessment flow, working together with the ease our years of on the job training provided.

As we checked Allison over for injuries, Wade focusing on her abdomen and core vital organs while I focused on her head, I started to thank Jesus for the powerful distraction. The more I looked at her, the more I realized how much she looked just like she used to.

Wade was a smart guy, and he had studied all of my files just like he studied each and every case we worked on together—tirelessly. It wouldn't be long before he recognized her, and consequently, truly understood the depth of my piss poor decision making.

"Guys, she's fine, seriously," Haley assured us from somewhere in the background.

I ignored her, of course, trusting my professional opinion much more than her assurances. Carefully opening the lid of Allison's eye, I used my hand to moderate the amount of sunlight and checked to make sure the dilation of her eyes was normal.

Her sensory light reaction was excellent, so I let her lid fall back into place and settled back onto my heels, perplexed as to what could be causing her unconsciousness.

The most reasonable explanation would be heat sensitivity, but she wasn't flushed and her skin was cool to the touch.

While I was wracking my brain for an answer, Haley started in on a hysterical tirade only she could pull off.

"You think you could have warned me that your uncle is the walking, talking, normal person version of the new, improved, and ripped Tim McGraw?!" she shrieked from her position, sprawled out on the gravel two feet away.

I knew enough to keep myself from putting any amount of stock in her hysteria, but I still took a look at Wade to see what she was talking about.

Shockingly, she was right. Wade did look like Tim McGraw. Like, a surprisingly perfect doppelganger, alike. I guess I'd never noticed because he was just Wade. Straight-laced, fairly predictable, and the stable guy I had relied on for most of my life.

"Jesus! It was too much for her system to handle with no warning!" Haley continued to shout, upping the flailing of her arms in an attempt to garner more attention.

I ignored her.

Watching her continually increase her ridiculousness in an attempt to pull my attention was half the fun. I was curious to see how far she would

go, how much of a show she would put on.

Maybe if I was really lucky, she would take off her top. Jump around a little bit.

About that time, just as Haley was really gearing up to give me hell, Allison's eyes fluttered and opened, and then looked right at Wade. When she took him in, a breathy, "Tim?" fluttered helplessly from her lips.

Score one for Haley. Apparently Allison did think she was in the presence of a country superstar.

Wade popped up to his feet with an agility befitting a man half his age, scooped up Allison in his arms, straightened to his full six feet, two inches, and muttered to the group at large, "You two certainly make an entrance."

I couldn't help but chuckle. The Whitfields had always had a unique charisma, and it didn't take anyone long to figure out you were in the presence of two very different women.

He turned and headed for our house, and as he walked, shaking his head slightly the whole time, he continued to mutter under his breath, "Nope, most certainly don't ease people into meeting the two of you, that's for sure."

As they cleared the steps and entered the darkness of the indoors, I turned my attention back to the younger of the drama queens, her beautiful ass still acting as a pin cushion for the rocks of our driveway. "Well, that was interesting. Did the drive at least go uneventfully?"

As she moved to pick herself up, I grabbed onto her elbow to ease her journey and, at the same time, not squander the opportunity to touch her.

"Yeah, no problems at all," she answered casually, dusting her butt off with a few swipes of her hand and a little wiggle that women tended to use anytime they were coming off of any surface less pristine than a settee in a mansion.

Then, as if it had completely slipped her mind, she added, "Oh, actually we almost hit a deer, though."

"Jesus, seriously?" I asked out of concern. Obviously they had arrived safely, but after the small display of Haley's driving I had seen, any kind of added danger was something she didn't need.

"Well, yeah. Except it had a John in front of it, an "e" on the end, and the guy was still on it," she said on a nod, her face conveying a seriousness that made me concerned for my taste in women.

“Jesus, Hales. You scare me, you know that?” I remarked, shaking my head in a mixture of wonder and disbelief.

She nodded, completely confident in her craziness. Now that—that breathed a little confidence back into my vagina picking device.

Confidence and sense of self in a woman are always sexy.

“Yeah, well. We missed him. It’s all good,” she said, brushing it off like an everyday run in.

My head shook again in an involuntary reaction to my incredulity, but I could feel the smile settle onto my face despite all of the signs of absurdity.

“Yeah, it’s all good. No lawsuit or prison sentence today,” I quipped.

All of a sudden her eyes widened, and I could hear her sharp intake of breath despite its subtlety. “Your uncle’s not a serial killer or anything, right?”

When I stared back at her in silence, she rambled on, “Sorry. Just felt like I should check. Since I let him carry my mother into the house and all, and have thus far made no moves to follow him.”

Ushering her toward the house, I placed the palm of my hand at the small of her back, the heat from her body noticeable through the cotton of her tank top even in the face of the sauna-like conditions of a July morning in southern Alabama. “No worries. He’s not a serial killer,” I told her, my fight with my smirk bringing an ache to my cheek.

“Well, that’s good,” she exhaled in relief, the swells of her breasts rising and falling noticeably, my eyes drawn to them like magnets.

“He hasn’t killed anybody in at least fifteen years, and even then, it was just the one person,” I deadpanned, letting the tips of my fingers flex against the fibers of her shirt.

“You ask a stupid question...” she conceded, her flip flop wearing feet stepping carefully in time with mine in order to avoid picking up a rock inside of one.

My hand flexed at her back again as I smiled down at her, just barely resisting the urge to pick her up in my arms and carry her to the porch. She was a little bitty thing, and it only encouraged my desire to manhandle her. Maybe even store her in my pocket for a little while. The location was certainly ideal.

“Why is your hair wet?” she asked randomly as we ascended the steps of my porch.

It was a weird question, but I was beginning to realize that if I just waited, an explanation would be forthcoming. So I didn't even try to answer.

"Because if you sweat that much all the time, it could be a problem for me," she said just before leaning in and taking a noticeable whiff of me. "Good news is you don't smell bad. So if it is sweat, at least your sweat smells good."

Was this woman real? Because I really didn't think this level of randomly frank questioning was widely acceptable among women. Especially southern women. They usually were the type to pelt you with compliments whether they were true or not.

Shaking my head slightly and letting my sheer amusement settle deep into my chest, I smiled, pulled her to a stop, and turned to face her before explaining, "It's wet because I just showered."

She wanted to retort, but she wasn't the only one who could keep someone from fitting a response in.

"And before you ask, no, I don't sleep this late in the morning. And no, I don't have some kind of fetish that only allows me to shower four hours after I wake up."

Her face scrunched up adorably at my exaggerated preempting. Her cheeks were pink, but not so much that I thought she was truly embarrassed. Just chagrined a little.

She had never apologized for the way she was when she was little, and I was proud as fuck to see that she hadn't lost that in the last twenty-two years or so.

"I want to take you out on the four-wheeler, so I did a little trail maintenance. Unfortunately, that did get me pretty sweaty, so I took a shower."

"Oh my God! We're going to ride four-wheelers?! I get to drive my own, right? Please say I get to drive my own!" she squealed, practically running in place.

Talk about garnering exactly the intended reaction. I remembered how bad she wanted to do this when she was little, having always been thwarted by Hunter's protective streak, and even though I had no idea if she'd fulfilled her four-wheeler riding dreams during our lengthy separation, I knew it was something I wanted to experience with her.

I wrapped an arm around her trim shoulders and guided her the rest of the way inside the house, giving her a playful shove once she cleared the door for good measure. After I closed the door behind us, I gave her the answer I knew she was dying to hear.

“Sure, babe. I’ll teach you how to drive one, and then you can ride one all by yourself.”

And she gave me attitude as my reward.

“What makes you think I don’t already know how to ride one?”

I gave her a faux-stern look that said, “Really?” and she conceded immediately.

“Okay, fine. You’ll teach me, and then I’ll ride one by myself.” And then added, “Really fast.” I studied her face as her eyes lit up with child-like wonder. “I’m going to be the female, four-wheeler riding version of Speed Racer.”

As I took in her excitement and the familiar warmth of her features, I knew I was dangerously close to giving her everything she wanted. Thank God she wasn’t the opposing force on one of my cases. I would be fucked.

“Okay, Speed Racer. Let’s go check on Allison.”

With that, the light went on as she clearly realized she had abandoned her unconscious mother—something that was pretty good for expanding my ego.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” she agreed, turning to move down the hall and doing it quickly. I had no idea how she was powering her small stature forward so quickly, but I moved my lengthy legs a little faster so that I wouldn’t miss the opportunity to touch her again. Placing my hand in the small of her back, I directed her to turn right into the living room, where Allison was laid out on the couch but back in the land of the living.

I was happy to see her pretty blue eyes open again, and she looked equally happy to see Wade.

He was standing over her, keeping watch like I knew he would, but he had positioned himself behind the couch, his discomfort at being in the company of a beautiful woman he wasn’t bedding fairly obvious. At least to me.

I crossed the room and rounded the plush sofa, coming to a stop right next to Wade and settling into an observatory position, crossing my arms over my chest. Haley would be the best person to handle the situation, and I needed a minute to distance myself from her smell. It was starting to addle

my brain, and I could sense I was right on the cusp of moving from stupid to completely fucking whacked in the head. It was a really fine line, and I was fucking tap dancing right along the edge.

Yet, even knowing this, I still couldn't take my eyes off of her.

She stood unmoving on the other side of the room for several seconds, the fact that she was up to bat taking some time to sink in.

Finally she moved, her body acting as though she were being reeled in by a rope around her waist, and came to a stop in a squat at her mom's side.

I'd like to tell you that I knew what was going on with Allison, if she was coming around easily and if her eyes seemed alert.

But I couldn't. Like a fool, I kept my eyes on Haley's profile, the corner of my lips curving up automatically when hers did.

Her face was expressive, and I knew the minute Allison's eyes met hers because love clouded her every feature, highlighting her cheek bones and enhancing every beautiful contour.

I wanted that. I wanted it from her, but I really just wanted it from anyone. I hadn't seen someone's face be overcome with love for me in a long, long time. Wade loved me, I knew that. He showed it with his actions. But he wasn't the most demonstrative guy, and I missed the high of ostentatious love.

"This isn't Tim McGraw, Mamalicious. He bears a striking resemblance, yes, but his name is--"

It took a couple of seconds for us meatheads to realize she was looking for our participation.

"Wade," Wade finally said, his normally self-assured voice coming out a little rusty.

How interesting. Wade was a take charge kind of guy, not a wallflower. So a waver in his voice was something I was not accustomed to. But, if I thought about it, I had never been around him and women in a close personal setting before. He went out and took care of his needs, I knew that, but our home life had been lacking in estrogen for as long as I had been with him.

"Right. This is Wade, Mama," Haley continued, her voice soft and cajoling in the way a parent would talk to their child.

"The good news is, since it's not Tim, but someone who looks a hell of a lot like him, this one isn't married," she continued, upping Wade's discomfort significantly. I could practically feel the waves rolling off him,

the grief he felt for Melly still potent even after doubling his years. I side-eyed him as inconspicuously as possible, but kept my main focus on the pretty girl in front of me.

“Right?” Haley questioned when her prompting was once again met with silence. When he didn’t answer immediately, her mouth opened to continue, and I knew things were about to get interesting.

“Because you aren’t wearing a ring. And I have to tell you, if you *are* married and you’re not wearing a ring, that’s skeevy. It suggests you’re looking to pick up chicks despite your taken status.”

Wade took on a defensive stance, uncrossing his arms, raising both of his hands, and putting them palm out in a placating gesture. “I’m not married. And I’m not “skeevy”,” he added with a frown-like crease in his brow, cushioning the word ‘skeevy’ with air quotes.

Seeing Haley let Wade have it, and in turn, watching him get all worked up was hilarious. I couldn’t contain my chuckle, and if I was honest, I didn’t even try.

“See, like I said, not married and not skeevy,” Haley continued, doing a pretty good job of ignoring my laughter.

Out of nowhere Allison was back, conscious and smiling. “And he doesn’t have man boobs either. I could feel a nice hard chest when he carried me in here.”

My chuckle had started to wane, but after that completely random fun fact, I completely lost it, gut-tightening belly laughs wracking my body in a way I wasn’t familiar with.

Haley just smiled brightly and confirmed, “Yep. Perfectly man-boob-less. Good news.”

## Chapter 6

It didn't take long for Allison to come back into herself and start casually flirting with Wade.

Don't get me wrong, I could tell he would have to seriously work for it if he wanted to actually get in there, but she didn't mind partaking in the harmless exercise of small-talk-flirting.

Haley was completely disinterested and looked like she was being attacked by a colony of ants in her pants. She was fidgety and spastic and just like I remembered her.

She wanted the adventure and adrenaline of four-wheeler riding, and that's what I was going to give her.

Besides, Wade was starting to give me looks I didn't like, so the sooner I got out of the hot seat, the better. He wasn't the bad guy; I deserved the frosty looks, but that didn't mean I liked receiving them.

Once she got done squealing with excitement at my announcement that we were going to go ride right at that moment, she stood up quickly and cleared her chair just in time for me to grab her petite hand with my much larger one and lead her down the hall to my bedroom and into my closet to suit her up.

"I tried to trim the trails up, but this way your arms shouldn't get cut up if I missed anything," I explained as I tossed the first long sleeve t-shirt I came to straight into her delectable chest. I herded her into the bathroom with my body and was about to shut the door with me on the outside (unfortunately) when she requested I go get her tote bag out of the car.

"Oh, Dan-o? Could you be a cute little errand boy, work those muscular legs like they were intended, and go out to my car for my hot pink tote bag? Thanks!"

The door slammed in my face, and I knew I had been dismissed. I didn't waste any time, picking up my pace to a slow jog and shaking my head in wonder as I went. Man, she was something else.

It wasn't hard to find the bag once I got to the car, the hot pink canvas fabric glowing like a flare in the backseat.

I kept about my business, grabbing the bag, and slinging it over my shoulder, but I slowed my pace and did a perfunctory check of the surroundings just in case.

To my knowledge, neither Sergio nor any of my other illegal dealings had located this place yet, but that was only to my knowledge. I knew they didn't have any sophisticated surveillance in place because I did regular sweeps, but that was all I could be sure of.

Nothing jumped out at me as irregular, and the only sounds were those of nature's creation.

So, with my purse on my shoulder, I turned and jogged my way back to the house, closing the door gently behind me and making quick work of the hallway to my bedroom.

Once I arrived back at the bathroom door, I knocked like a gentleman and waited for her to open it.

I knew the picture I was creating by having the bag on my shoulder, but I found myself wanting to make her laugh just as much and as often as she made me.

She contained her outburst to a small snicker, but I could have sworn I heard her say, "You look smashing, Danielle. Hot pink really works with your skin tone," as she was closing the door.

Waiting patiently as she changed, I laid back on the bed and twiddled my thumbs, and when I got tired of that, I got up, leaned in the doorway to my bedroom, and crossed both my arms and ankles.

The door creaked slightly as it opened, and when it no longer prevented my view of Haley, the sight I was presented with was almost too much to handle.

She looked utterly ridiculous in my much too big shirt, but I could have sworn I felt the excitement like an electrical charge in my chest.

There's something about a woman wearing your shirt that triggers a chemical in the brain. I swear.

But I hid my reaction like a pro, adjusting my erection with a shift of my legs as I uncrossed them.

"Good. Now that I can't tell you're a girl anymore, I think you're ready," I teased.

"A girl? I'll have you know I'm all fucking woman," she protested violently, even flicking me in the chest to make sure she really had my attention.

"Are you this full of drama all the time?" I asked, stepping back and bringing my hands to my chest for protection.

“A solid 95 percent of the time,” she stated pragmatically, her copper-highlighted hair swaying languidly as her head tilted to the side. “Is that a problem?”

“I can’t believe this behavior gets me hard. And she’s like this all the time. You better get it under control, little buddy,” I muttered inaudibly to my below the belt counterpart and turned to leave the room. Before long she was going to start to notice that I was walking around with a hard on every waking second.

As a huge smile broke out across her face, I smiled back, big and broad, but I couldn’t help but hope she hadn’t heard my mumbling to my penis. It’s not something you mean to share with someone else.

Not giving myself time to process it any further, I reached out for her hand, engulfed it in mine, and then made my way out of the house, down the hallway and out the front door. I pulled her behind me, down the steps, across the driveway, through the four-rail fence, across the front pasture, and up to my shed where I kept all of my toys.

When I looked down at her she was breathing roughly, and I could see the sweat starting to drip down her neck. The motion of the droplet was enticing, but it was also informative. I hadn’t even realized, but I was a lot taller than she was. A good foot, if not more. I would have to keep that in mind when I was dragging her places in the future and slow my roll.

“How come you get to wear short sleeves and be cool and breezy with the kiss of the air on your arms, and I have to be all stuffy and sweaty?” she demanded hotly, her hip cocking in the standard pose for a woman on a rant.

Normally, as a smart man, I took notice when a woman gave me the hip, but a small part of her tirade was pressing the stop button on my smarts and demanding to be addressed. “The kiss of air on my arms?”

“Just answer the fucking question,” she snapped audaciously.

I wasn’t going to fuel her fire. Instead, I reached forward and grabbed the low-hanging hem of my Haley-occupied long sleeve shirt, lifted it slowly to ensure she was still clothed underneath (not that that’s what I was hoping for, personally), and then continued to strip it off of her body without her permission.

It took a minute for her instincts to kick in, but when I was moments away from baring her magnificent breasts she unleashed the monster.

Slamming her arms down onto my forearms forcefully, she knocked my hands away, and ordered, “Never mind. This is my shirt, and you can’t have it.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with me,” I mused aloud while nursing my whiplash courtesy of Crazy Haley. For some fucked up reason, I liked it. I liked the manic shouting and outbursts, the ridiculous accusations, and complete lack of decision making. It reminded me of my childhood in the best possible way.

I turned to grab the helmets off of the handle bars, snagged both, turned back to the previously adorable, grouchy woman, and offered her hers. As I stretched it out toward her, I realized it was a complementary color to my oversized loaner shirt.

“Here. This one will match your outfit.”

She wasted no time snatching the helmet out of my hand, her impression of Grumpy turning to Happy in a heartbeat. Spreading her knees, she tucked the helmet in the space between, squeezed them together, pulled yet another purple ponytail holder off of her wrist, and pulled her hair up and off her slender neck, securing it in a low ponytail to prevent it from inhibiting the helmet.

Once finished, she tucked the straps out of the way and pulled the protective bubble right onto her head. She struggled to fasten her chin strap, looking completely out of her element but equally determined.

I hadn’t moved, choosing to observe her cute ministrations instead of partaking in my own. I considered teasing her about putting her helmet on now, before my explanation and instructions, something I certainly hadn’t planned on, but she had already been through too much struggle. I figured at this point it would just be cruel.

So I stepped closer to her, brushed her hands out of the way, and took the reins on the buckle fastening. Her chin was soft and her jaw was defined. I couldn’t stop myself from trailing just the tip of my finger along her jawline after pulling the nylon strap tight.

Her eyes closed and her face inclined subconsciously. She was gravitating towards my touch, and I felt my body sway toward her preparing to seal my lips over hers and make her mine.

I stopped myself just in time, and the only way to hide the absolute torrent of emotions I was feeling was to toss my hat on the fence post next

to us and shield my eyes with the matte black helmet I always wore when I rode.

“Climb on, Hales,” I told her on a shout, hoping she’d hear me through two helmets. “I’m gonna sit behind you and we’re going to have a little lesson.”

She climbed on first, and then I joined her, my thighs enveloping hers from behind. I wasn’t sure I had ever had such a horribly amazing idea before. Both absolute ambrosia and torture, all at the same time.

I launched into explaining immediately, knowing that if I didn’t distract myself quickly, it wouldn’t take long before I was poking her from behind. And not with my finger.

“Okay, Hales. Let’s start with the most important thing. The clutch,” I started, placing her left hand on the handle bars, smothering it with my own, and squeezing the top of it.

“You’re going to control it with your left hand by squeezing like this,” I explained, squeezing the clutch with the unit of our joined hands. “It’s all about feel, so it might take you a minute to get used to it.”

Rolling right along, I kept explaining, “Next is the shift pedal,” taking my hand from her hand and laying it on her thigh.

Oh shit.

Bad idea.

And yet, I couldn’t stop. “You’re going to control it with your left foot, and it’s an upshift, so you lift up to shift.”

“Dumbing things down a bit, aren’t you,” she joked loudly. A little too loudly. I knew she was trying to ensure I heard her, but she overdid it a bit, and I had to work to contain my chuckle. “I think I got the shifting up part from the word ‘upshift’.”

Man, she was cute.

And she felt really, really good.

My hand took on a mind of its own, rubbing up and down her thigh in what was seeming like more of a caress than an educational touch. “Better safe than sorry, baby doll.”

Christ, now I was calling her “baby doll” too.

“You need to pull the clutch in to start it, anytime you want to stop, and of course, to shift,” I explained further, keeping my hand on her thigh for as long as I could get away with it without being accused of sexual harassment.

It was a struggle, but I finally gave her thigh one last pat, and then moved on. “The next most important thing is the brakes. Your right hand controls the front brake, and kind of like a bicycle, you need to be cautious when you use it.”

Hell yes. Another excuse to touch her thigh. Thank God explaining a four-wheeler was second nature to me because I wasn’t paying one fucking ounce of attention. “Right foot controls the rear brake.” It was soft yet toned, just like the other one, and the denim encasing it was worn and welcoming.

“Well, great, Dan-o. I know how to shift, and how to stop this sucker, but I’ve got no idea how to start it up or how to go.”

Her snark was just enough to push me a step further, sinking my dimple into my face and launching my left hand back onto her left thigh. Now I had both of them in my hands, and like I was watching from outside of my body, I looked on helplessly as I squeezed their flesh and then stroked both of them with my thumbs, imagining what it would be like if I could rub away the denim.

Shit, shit, shit. Reel it in, Danny.

“Patience, Hales. I’m getting there. Once we start it up, you won’t really be able to hear me anymore.” That was true. I was also enjoying free touching time.

Keeping my volume elevated enough to cut through our helmets, but lowering the timbre of my voice to a more seductive tone, I asked, “Besides, haven’t you ever heard anticipation is half of the experience?”

I knew I’d heard that somewhere, and I had to hope to holy hell it was true. I was going to have to wait for Haley, but I was hoping the anticipation would be worth it. And that she would still want me when it was all over.

A tremor rolled through her body as a result of all my thigh rubbing, and I couldn’t resist leaning forward, deeper into her body, and feeling what it would be like to be completely pressed up against her.

Let me tell you, it felt good.

Too good.

I leaned back away from her immediately, forcing my hormones to comply with the plan.

“To go, you just push down on this lever with your right thumb, and you’ll need to ease off of it when you shift. As for starting it, you need to pull in the clutch,” I said while pulling her tiny fingers in around the clutch,

before continuing, “Flick this little switch to on, and then push this ignition button.”

The familiar rumble churned beneath us, and the resulting noise made conversation impossible.

Therefore, in order to keep the educational process rolling, I used her hands as extensions of my own, revving the throttle occasionally and generally running through my normal routine.

Easing her hand off of the clutch, I pressed her right thumb into the throttle and started to roll forward at a measured pace.

At the sound of the RPMs climbing, I pulled in the clutch while easing her thumb off the throttle, and gave her left leg a nudge to remind her to shift before repeating the process in reverse order.

Gradually, I worked with her to make our way through the gears, and before I knew it we were going full out. I made her shift her way back down through the gears for practice, and then set her free to spread her Speed Racer wings and do it all on her own.

She shifted her way back up to full speed quickly, and I felt myself start to bolster with pride at how well she was doing. It’s not that it was hard, but not everyone had the coordination to pull it off.

We were flying through our biggest field, so I settled in and rested my hands on her thighs.

Everything had been going fine, but I could see the pond ahead, and Haley wasn’t acting like she did.

“Clutch!” I yelled, trying to get her to pull in the clutch so we could slow down and turn and/or stop. “Clutch!”

If possible it seemed like she pushed the machine harder, yelling back, “Butch? Who is Butch?!”

What the fuck was she talking about?

“Clutch, not Butch!” I yelled back, the pond looming out in front of us like a death trap.

“Who in the fuck is Butch?!” she yelled back again, her confusion palpable throughout her wild movements.

“Clutch!” I screamed one more time, hopeful that she would get the situation under control herself.

She didn’t.

Knocking her hands out of the way with no finesse, I grabbed the clutch and worked the brakes at the same time, bringing us to a screeching stop

just in time.

With my adrenaline flowing at full velocity through my veins, I ripped off my helmet and yelled, “Clutch, Hales! I said ‘CLUTCH’. Why the hell you would think I was talking about some guy named Butch, I have no fucking idea.”

Crazy fucking woman.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down, averting my eyes momentarily. I looked back at her to find her breathing raggedly as well and fighting to keep herself from upsetting me more.

Crazy, fucking adorable woman.

Christ.

I did my best to gentle my voice, but I knew I was still amped from the excitement. “From now on, I think it’s a good idea if I drive and you just ride with me.”

She climbed off, took off her helmet, and turned to face me, the disappointment in her eyes unmistakable.

I was a sucker, and the weight of her sadness was too much burden to carry.

“Alright, I might have another solution where you can still ride one all on your own, but I won’t lose years off of my life worrying about you.”

Wade still had my four-wheeler from when I was a kid, an automatic shift, and I was thinking she was probably around the same size I had been at eight years old.

At least she’d get to keep her independence.

## Chapter 7

I watched Haley ride around more about an hour, not doing much more than putt-putting around myself, but when we pulled up back at the house, it didn't take me long to know just how worth it was.

"Oh. My. God. That was the fucking *best*! I seriously want to do this every day of my life! And the baby four-wheeler is officially mine! Got me?" Haley squealed excitedly, her entire appearance completely disheveled.

She still looked amazing, despite the sweat and mascara smudges, and I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

"It's all yours, Hales," I capitulated easily.

"Good because I will fight someone to the fucking death if they try to challenge me," she attempted to threaten but pretty much ruined it by being one of the cutest women on the planet.

Reaching out and swiping the end of her ponytail off her shoulder, I remarked, "I don't want to break your heart, but no one is going to challenge you for that four-wheeler. It's kind of the runt of the litter. The black sheep of the four-wheeler family."

And it was. Other than starting it up to keep it in running shape, nobody had ridden that four-wheeler since I was a kid. I hoped that one day there would be someone around to use it, but as things were now, it was mostly just me and Wade.

"Okay, that's fine. No, not fine, it's good. Less mess for me. Blood stains are hard to get out of laundry from what I hear."

A truer statement had never been spoken, any blood-stained clothes of my past only good enough for the trash can. Maybe it was because I was a man, but it was easier to toss the stuff than work for hours on stain removal.

I made my way off of my four-wheeler, adjusting my pants where they had ridden up into my balls and then moving to stand directly in front of my little adventurer.

She seemed to be in some other zone, her eyes a tad glassy and her overall being unresponsive, so I prompted, "Come on, Hales. Let's go get cleaned up and see what Wade and your mom are up to."

That seemed to do the trick, breaking her out of her trance. She responded with a nod, did some convoluted run-skip-jump-girly-move, and

then fell in step beside me. I forced my legs to move slower; forced myself to use my earlier observations on our difference in height and subsequent pacing to make it easier on her.

Neither one of us spoke, but the mood certainly wasn't melancholy. We were both floating on an obvious high, our smiles probably visible from space.

Shortening our route, I headed straight for the back of the house where I knew I would find our older counterparts.

I opened the door to the porch with a squeak of its hinge, finding Fred and Ethel exactly how I expected I would.

Wade was sitting awkwardly across the porch, Allison next to him but not too close, and his demeanor was generally friendly but, without a doubt, uncomfortable to an experienced observer like myself.

Allison looked as beautiful as ever, comfortable in her own skin, and was openly enjoying an innocent conversation with a new acquaintance of the opposite sex. That is to say, she was sitting in a mildly flirtatious position, and while casual, she was engaging in some touching, just for fun.

In fact, she had just started to giggle, her delicate hand laying flirtatiously on Wade's forearm and her hair flipping over her shoulder, when her eyes made the slow journey across the room to us.

As soon as she saw Haley, I knew we were in for a treat.

I wasn't a psychic, but I had been fairly close to these women while I was young. They had always been good for entertainment value.

She jumped back in her chair, shrieked, and brought her hand to her chest dramatically, all the while leaving her other hand on Wade's arm. Which he noticed, if his eyeing it was anything to go by.

"Haley, you need a shower. Sweet Lord, you look like you've been given a makeover by homeless people."

Haley frowned at that, snapping back, "Geez, Mom. Don't go easy on my feelings or anything."

As Wade started to chuckle, I laughed at full volume. It was obvious that this mildly insulting banter was normal for them, and while confrontation was normally the catalyst of awkward feelings, under these circumstances, it just felt right.

"That *was* me being nice, Haley," Allison said seriously, her eyebrow raised in a look only a mom can give.

Pulling her back to my front and snuggling her close, I leaned into Haley's ear and said, "Come on, Dirty Haley. We'll take turns showering."



It would have been easy and efficient to let Haley shower in my bathroom while I showered in Wade's. It would have been a simple solution that wasn't invasive for anyone.

But, see, I wanted to snoop around in her stuff. And if I offered her an easy solution, I would have lost the opportunity. So instead, I pretended a second shower didn't exist.

I know, I know. Snooping through a woman's stuff sounds super skeezy. And it is. I get it, really.

But it's in my nature as an investigator.

Cough. It's true. Cough. That's not an excuse.

Whatever. Like you're perfect.

I wanted to know everything I could about Haley, even the things she doesn't realize about herself, and going through her stuff was a perfect way to find a lot of answers. I just managed it by having some rules.

When rifling through a woman's purse, firstly, you never let her know you've done it, so she doesn't feel self conscious. Next, you leave everything exactly as you've found it. She probably has an organizational system, even if the system looks like nothing more than "what the fuck, there's shit everywhere" to you. And lastly, and arguably most importantly, you never ever judge a woman based on whatever you may find. You're bound to find some crazy ass shit—mustard packets, old buttons, or even an ID badge from the job she quit six years ago covered in melted chocolate—but you file those under interesting discoveries and live content in the knowledge that as long as she's in your life, you'll never be without mustard.

So yeah, not only was I withholding hygiene in order to rummage through a woman's belongings, I also pulled an extra asshole move and took the shower first. She was just so cute when she got riled up, and I couldn't resist. Plus, it might do me a little good to get her a little mad at me so that she would do the distancing for me. I was doing a shitty job of it myself.

I was dressed in a set of fresh jeans and t-shirt, and Haley had closed the door to my bathroom, clearing me to start my investigation. I would have

waited until I heard the shower start up, but with a woman, that could have taken forever.

Rounding the bed and heading for the neon pink beacon calling my name, I crouched down in front of it and pried it open carefully. I had to go in cautious until I knew what I was dealing with, especially with this woman. I half expected a rabid squirrel to jump out and attack my face, gnawing away all of my best features.

Luckily, as I peeled one edge of the bag back, I was met with complete tranquility rather than a furry attacker.

Her white shorts were folded around a clean tank top, and her flip flops rested comfortably below them. There weren't any dividers, making the bag a basic catch all, but she had clearly separated and categorized her items to the best of her ability, which was surprising. For someone as vibrant and charismatic as Haley, I would really expect less organization. But, that was the point of this whole search. To learn unexpected facts about the woman in my bathroom.

On the bottom of the other side rested a six pack of Coke, Haley's metaphorical mustard, and a chuckle rumbled up and out of my throat uninvited. Clearly, she was addicted to the stuff.

I made a mental note to never be without it.

I took a minute to let it all sink in; all of the nuances that formed the Haley of present, as opposed to the six-year old I knew of old. In many ways she was exactly the same, but she'd also had an overwhelming amount of time to grow and expand on her already existent idiosyncrasies.

Sunglasses, a makeup bag, her phone, and her wallet all took up space above the Coke, but what stood out was the Kindle, glaring at me with what seemed like a smirk, just daring me to read it.

Perceptive to the fact that this woman had planned an entire trip based on her love of these books, I knew better than to mess up her place by switching to a different page, or God forbid a different book, but I could easily read the page she was on without messing anything up.

I glanced to the bathroom door as the water started running, and then plucked her Kindle out of her bag and plopped down on the bed, crossing my legs in front of me, and settling in to get comfortable.

Opening the cover and swiping my finger across the screen, her book opened right up to her current page. I looked at the top first, looking for a title to see if it gave away any clues as to what I was working with.

Ah, “For You” by Kristen Ashley. I wondered if this was the author she spoke so highly of.

I started to read, drawn in immediately to an intimate encounter between a man named Colt and a woman named Feb. Their chemistry was hot, and I found myself blushing a little as I gained the knowledge of the type of story Haley liked to read.

Wow.

Yeah, this was hot. Definitely.

I was just about to finish reading the page when a faint sound from the bathroom pulled me right out of the book and back into reality.

That was a moan. A sexy time type moan, and it was happening in real life.

Snapping the Kindle shut quickly, I hopped off of the bed and jogged my way over to the bathroom door for a closer inspection.

Another breathy catch bubbled out of her throat loud enough for me to hear through the door.

That was the end of any semblance of my self control.

I pressed myself up against the bathroom door, practically becoming one with the wood, sad to be lacking a glass for better listening.

That’s right. My dick was hard, and my shame was gone.

I had already violated her belongings, so I thought adding on a breach in her privacy wouldn’t make all that big of a difference.

Reasoning of the guilty is often debatable in its veracity.

Her moans were low, and I could tell she was trying to be quiet. The rhythm of the water falling changed with her stroking though, and I found myself using it to get a feel for her speed and cadence.

Christ, I was a pervert.

But, hey. At this point I was just glad I wasn’t dry humping the door.

Her breathing sped up, and as she neared her climax, I feared my dick would punch a whole right through the barrier and give me away.

I’m pretty sure the result would be a lot of screaming and flailing and very few compliments coming my way. Probably lots of name calling and shrieking. Perhaps an attempt to claw my eyes out.

All things I didn’t want.

So, I backed away from the door and begged my cock to calm the fuck down.

How many times could you suffer from blue balls before there were lasting effects? I sure as hell hoped it was a lot.

Settling back into my place on the bed, I snagged her phone out of her bag and left the Kindle out and beside me.

I messed around a little, flipping through her contacts and changing the ringtone for my number to Creed's "My Sacrifice".

It was the perfect symbolism for how hard it felt to have to let her go again, after over twenty years of separation.

Jesus. How very Alanis Morissette of me.

On the upside, my temporary switch to estrogen had deflated my penis like a popped balloon.

Shaking my head in self-disgust, I tossed her phone back in her bag and picked up her e-reader again, letting my thoughts wander as the words bled together mindlessly on the page in front of me.

What made me so attached to this woman? Was it her connection to my past and the comfort that brought me after years of wishing for something I couldn't have? Or was it genuine interest in the present version of her?

Logically, it was probably a little of both, but I would never know for sure if I didn't allow myself to develop a solvent friendship with her. One where secrets were shared and oddities learned and accepted.

I always knew a good way to know if someone was a fit for you was to take their most annoying quality and magnify it by 1000. If you were still interested in prolonged periods of time with that very annoying habit, you stood a chance.

Life was full of uncertainties though, and a fighting chance was absolutely the very best you could hope for.

I heard the bathroom door open, but I kept my eyes down and took the minute I needed to refocus them.

"Ahhh! Jesus! Holy shit, Danny!"

When I could make out the words on the page clearly again, and Haley had shrieked hysterically, and thus met her quota, I slowly lifted my eyes from the page and made it all the way to her thighs before they stalled out.

Well, I definitely liked one thing about the Haley of now more than the Haley of then.

She had grown into her body well.

"Jesus, Danny. What are you doing in here?" she snapped, forcing my eyes off of her thighs and onto her own.

“Uh, I thought you would get dressed in the bathroom,” I said on a smirk, knowing full well she wouldn’t be getting dressed in the bathroom.

Her bag was out here. Next to me. And I had just finished going through it.

But it sounded like a good excuse.

“Only men get dressed in the bathroom!” she shouted. “Women have too much to do, lotioning, and prepping, and making sure our skin is the definition of dry before putting clothes on it.”

She gave a cute speech about a lot of things, and I knew this one on the complexities of women would be no different.

So I raised an eyebrow and settled in to hear the rest of it.

“Men will put their clothes on while their bodies are still damp. We women have no idea how you could stand to do such a thing,” she explained. “And the bathroom is still all steamy from my shower and will be that way for several minutes. There’s no way I could get dressed in there and be completely dry before doing it.”

I tried to come up with something to say, but my mind was blank. I mean, what was there to say to that?

“Now, what are *you* doing?”

Now this, I could answer. And I could do it *almost* truthfully.

“Oh, mostly reading.”

“Mostly?” she asked cautiously. As she should.

“There’s a lot of sex in here. I’m really starting to understand “V” and “X,” I explained, sticking to the safe topic of her books. I didn’t think telling her about the bag search or plastering myself to a door in order to better hear her orgasm would go over all that swimmingly.

“Sex is important,” she defended.

Hoisting myself up from my prone position quickly, I shifted my way down the bed so that I was right in front of her. “Oh yeah, I agree. I’m just getting a little more understanding of what you like.”

By reading, sure, but mostly by listening.

Her hand clenched around her towel, and her teeth sunk into the fleshy pink of her bottom lip.

I was a second away from giving in when a flash of Sergio’s face reminded me why I shouldn’t.

Gulping thickly to squash my testosterone rush, I choked out, “You know, so I’ll be more help in narrowing down the field of guys out there.”

The light in her eyes dimmed immediately, and a tinge of embarrassment invaded her cheeks.

*Fuck.*

God, this sucked.

I was starting to see the benefits of living like a spinster while I was in this line of work.

The urge to comfort her was unbelievably powerful, and I had to clench both my fists and jaw in order to fight it.

She moved quickly to the side of the bed and picked up her bag, and then murmured, “Thanks Danny,” in a voice entirely different from her own.

As she closed herself into the still damp bathroom, I knew I didn’t deserve her. She needed better than a liar. Someone who distanced and embarrassed her rather than embracing her every chance he got.

It certainly wasn’t list-worthy behavior.

No matter the reason.

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## Chapter 8

“What’s the suckiest moment you’ve ever experienced?” Haley asked sweetly, Allison’s wise eyes watchful and focused on me.

Man, I was an idiot.

Haley had come out of the bathroom and joined the rest of us on the porch with such a sadder version of her spirit that I had been looking for ways to cheer her up.

Ways to make her comfortable in her skin again.

Ways to make her not hate me.

So when she suggested we play her version of “21 Questions” known as “21 Questions Can Suck It”, I was all, “Great idea,” and “let’s do it.”

Now, facing one of the hardest questions a person could ask me, that I wasn’t even allowed to really answer, I was starting to think I was a real chump.

Get to know you games are great when you’re in the position to actually let someone get to know you. But in my position, it presented too many opportunities for uncomfortable questions, and much too often, cornered me into a lie. And a lot of the time, an elaborate one.

And I hated being a fabulist.

Glancing at Wade, I expected his expression to be one of warning, but it wasn’t. Compassion suffused his every feature, and I shouldn’t have been surprised.

All of Wade’s criticisms of late were based in love and protection, not malice, and as another sufferer of unfortunate life events, he had always had an advanced understanding of my heartache.

I tried to brush off the seriousness of the question with a chuckle, bullshitting, “Oh, there are tons. Life’s a series of ups and downs. I’ve just tried to focus on the ups. You know, live in the positive.”

Yeah. I just barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes too.

You’d think since I had lived lived a life built on lies, I’d be a little better at it.

Ironic.

“Suuuure,” Haley appeased, but I knew she knew my answer was thick with avoidance. But she didn’t pressure me. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe she could sense the sensitivity of the real answer.

Or maybe she was still feeling slightly disheartened from our earlier encounter.

Either way, throughout the evening it had been fairly obvious that she was doing a good impression of herself, but the normal gumption wasn't there.

I had also noticed that Allison was often a quiet observer. Her perspicacious eyes took in everything, just logging the data and waiting for the purpose of it to reveal itself in time. I doubted people gave her enough credit or credence, and she would probably make for a really good tool in an investigation because of her sleeper-like qualities.

The night was coming to a close despite my reluctance, and as the girls started to overwhelm us with yawns, Wade began the process of moving them out.

"Thanks for coming, ladies. I had no idea Danny here had the ability to drudge up such quality company." He moved to usher them towards the door, and as he went by me, added softly for my benefit, "Or any company at all. Normally it's just the cats."

His comment was strategic, that I knew. A way of telling me to relax. No matter the circumstances, no matter my screw ups, our conversation tonight would still be one between the two of us. Loved ones with a mutual respect and understanding for one another.

Lagging behind, I followed the group to the front of the house, but caught up as they made pleasant exchanges of goodbye at the door.

Haley moved to me cautiously, her footsteps soft and her expression introspective. Stopping just in front of me, she raised herself onto her pink-tipped toes, placed a gentle hand on my chest, and floored me with one of the most tender flutters of a kiss with which I had ever been rewarded, her plump lips humming against my scruff with a melody that spoke of affection.

"Thanks, Danny. Today was great. Probably one of the best, most unexpected days of my life. I'm glad to have found you...as a friend," she murmured as she sank back to her heels and peered up at me. She seemed to stumble on the last few words, and the pain I felt as a result was excruciating in its intensity.

"I'll talk to you soon, Hales," I forced out, unwilling to punctuate our time together nor put a definition on our relationship.

I watched her turn and move out of the house, joining a waiting Allison in the car with a sweep of her door and drop of her body.

As I walked outside and joined Wade on the porch, I realized our positions mirrored those of their arrival perfectly, and the fire of the ignition, blare of the music, rev of the engine, and cloud of dust they left in their wake solidified my observation.

The sound of their ebullience faded with distance, but I continued to listen with an acute ear. I focused my attention on extraneous noises and, thankfully, heard none.

The night air felt fresh despite being sodden with humidity, and I would have preferred to have what I knew was going to be a long conversation out there.

But inside was the smarter, more secure decision, so I wasted no time moving in that direction.

Wade followed, content in his silence until we were both settled in the living room, both relaxing with an ankle over a knee on our respective couches.

As I noted the similarities between our positions, I pondered whether our mimicking of mannerisms was born of nature or nurture. Certainly we weren't actually genetically linked, but it was possible we had both been born with the same innate qualities regardless. Or possibly, Wade had nurtured me into the man I was.

If I allowed myself, a delve into the memories of my father could probably solve the mystery. But now wasn't the time. I had locked away that part of my brain quite a few years ago, and while I knew I would access it again, one day, I also knew it would be a toxin to my focus.

And I already had too many strings pulling apart the pieces of that very fragile concentration at the moment.

One day. One day I would let myself go back. And hopefully, I would be doing so from the comfort of a life of my own making. One with a family and without the pressures of living more than one story.

"Let's start with the women," Wade startled me out of my reverie.

"The women?" I stalled. I knew what he meant. We would discuss Haley and Allison and then move on to the case and our business. Because all of those things needed tending to after suffering from my neglect.

"I know who they are," he responded, ignoring my evasive maneuver and confirming just how astute he was.

“I knew you would know.”

He just nodded twice, and then heaved a sigh deep with discomfort.

“As your partner, I have to tell you that you need to get your shit together. That this is such a stupid fucking move, it’s almost rounded the circle to smart again. What you’ve done is dangerous for both us and *them*, and I find myself questioning your decision making on the whole. What if Sergio knows about our house? What if someone follows them back to their hotel tonight? *You’ve* brought that on them.”

The blow was so swift that it brought a sting to my nose. These were some of the only people I’d ever cared about, and *I* put them in danger.

In my youth I was a coward, but today I was the cause.

I had to get to them, make sure they were okay.

I stood up quickly and jogged to grab my keys from the table in the front hall, but before I cleared the door to the living room, Wade brought me up short.

“Stop. Sit down. And think.”

My skin literally crawled with the urgency to get in my car and assure myself of Haley and Allison’s safety. But I owed Wade my ear. He wouldn’t have stopped me if there wasn’t a reason.

That I knew for certain.

“You following them will do them absolutely no favors. We *know* they’re watching you. The possibility that they’re watching the Whitfields is purely speculation. You go after them now, and you may just accomplish the exact opposite of your objective.”

He was right. *So right*. God, it was like my brain was on vacation.

I dropped back to the couch and sank my head into my hands. I needed someone to pull me out of the quicksand; someone to teach my body and mind to obey.

I had never had a problem before, but it had never been this personal.

“Send Frank by their hotel for a check. It’ll give you peace of mind without adding to the clusterfuck,” Wade suggested, offering up the solution I was desperately searching for.

I reached into my pocket for my phone only to come up empty. I hadn’t had it on me all day. At least, not since my second shower. I *always* kept my phone on me.

Instead of commenting, Wade pulled the phone from his belt and dialed Frank for me.

“Frank, favor. Yeah. Listen, I want you to drive by The Beach Club on Ocean and check the parking lot for a 2013, Blue Mustang GT, license plate Alfa, Echo, Foxtrot, Seven, Niner, Charlie. Yep. Drive by only, condition report, do not approach. Thanks.”

It wasn't a surprise that he knew their license plate number. I had memorized it as soon as they pulled up too.

As he hung up the phone, I took a deep breath, happy to be doing something, even if that something was trusting that little weasel, Frank, the ATF agent and resident brown-noser of the whole operation.

I settled back onto the sofa and let my head fall forward, rubbing the back of my neck with a squeeze of my hand.

“As I said, that was all as your partner, Dan,” Wade clarified, bringing my head up but not affecting my hand. “But as your family, I'm wondering why you're even listening to me. Why in the fuck you're willing to listen to anything other than your own head and heart. You're smart. Always have been, and aside from the circumstances you've had no control over, you've always been in charge of your life. Always. Why should that be different now?”

“It seems I've fallen into a pattern of making decisions based on what I want and then hating myself for it. You said you don't trust my judgement. Well, for the first time ever, neither do I,” I explained, hoping he could use some of his age and experience to guide me.

“Seems like the weight of your conscience is even heavier than my critique.”

Once again, Wade was right. I kept pretending like I was letting him down, like he was the one judging me for my mistakes, when really, I was the one judging myself.

“Dan, I think the answer is right in front of you. You're a responsible adult, and you've had nowhere near your share of things going right in your life. Go after what you want, but do it smart. Never put yourself so far out on a limb that you're unprepared to deal with the consequences should it snap.”

I tried to focus on what he was saying to me, but I knew my concentration would be medial at best until we got confirmation on the women's safe arrival.

“Now, business. What's going on with that order from Olin? He's normally much speedier with his deliveries.”

Pulling myself back into the room and forcing myself to think about work, I responded, "Yeah, I guess it's taking him a couple of extra days with the special items. He made it seem like he was keeping them somewhere different than usual. Again, this isn't something he said to me straight out, but it was the feeling I got," moving my hand from my neck to my eyes, spanning from one outside corner to the other with the breadth of it. "I expect we'll be seeing Olin in a couple of days."

"Good. That should give you a couple of days to schedule an appointment and go in to get your head surgically removed from your ass. Don't worry, I hear it's pretty painless."

"Well, you're just a regular comedian, huh? Fine. Mock my pain, asshole, but know, one day, this is going to come back to bite you. Sometimes the tracks of the karma train are long, but they always circle back."

"Trust me," he said on a smirk, "Karma knows my deeds are good."

As the vice clamped around my chest started to loosen, I let the tension in my temples ease into a smile. "Thanks, Wade."

"I'll never stop doing everything in my power to help and protect you, Danny. Not ever," he said earnestly, his eyes steadily holding mine.

I forced a gulp down my throat around the knot of my emotion and closed my eyes for the briefest of seconds to find myself. My lack of focus made me feel like I was floating, helpless to control my direction, speed, or destination. I needed to settle. Ground myself to the present and commit to dealing with obstacles when they arose and only then.

Just as I started to lift my lids off my eyes, the sharp ring of Wade's phone filled the silence of the room. He answered immediately, cognizant of the torture I would be mired in until I had answers. "Yeah?"

I waited as he listened, my curiosity piquing as he rolled his eyes overtly. "Great. Yeah. Thanks."

Pulling the phone from his ear, he ended the call and wasted no time easing my mind. "They're fine. Arrived safely back at the hotel, and according to the obviously-desperate-if-she-was-affected-by-Frank's-flirting front desk clerk, a particularly attractive and boisterous set of women made their way into the hotel and up to their room not too long ago."

"Thank God," I murmured involuntarily. The life of any innocent person was precious, but the lives of these two women had woven a place in my

childhood heart, growing and twisting along with it as the years wore on.

“You’re not going to make perfect decisions, Danny. It’s just not possible. But you can manage the consequences. Do that and everything should turn out fine. And I’ll always be here to back you up.”

With that parting wisdom, he rose from the couch to leave the room, stopping to place his heavy palm on my shoulder, just as he had done all those years ago.

“You and I are going to take care of each other,” he stated softly.

I shook my head, fighting the tears as he sucked me in with familiar words from the first day I met him.

I stood up abruptly and pulled him in for a hug, thankful for the man who had given his life to me, and whispered, “Deal,” as I clapped him on the back like men tend to do.

Taciturn at best, I could count the occasions that we’d shared an embrace on the fingers of just one hand. But the wave of Wade’s overwhelming unconditional love floored me.

Watching Haley with her mom, I had longed for that kind of overbearing love.

What I didn’t realize was that I already had it, it was just dressed down and undecorated, just like our man cave of a house.

## Chapter 9

I know.

You were thinking after all that talking last night about my lack of focus and the stupid decisions it led to, I would be a changed man.

Obviously, you weren't paying attention.

Wade said I would keep making mistakes. I'm human and I'm smitten with a lost loved one from my childhood.

Of course I was going to keep making them.

Emotions can't be flipped off with a switch, as convenient as that would be, so this was the result.

Waking up from a restless sleep, I got moving early, throwing some supplies into my car and heading toward the ocean to do some reconnaissance. I had absolutely no plans to approach, I just wanted to see her and make sure no one else was watching as well.

Leaving my car a long way down Ocean Avenue, I pulled off my t-shirt, leaving me in only my board shorts, and instigated the ruse of going for a jog. I needed to exercise anyway, so it seemed like a reasonable way to kill two birds with one stone.

As I approached their hotel, I turned up my already heightened awareness and let all extraneous noise and action fade into the background. I was searching for two things. The Whitfield women and anyone who looked like they may want to harm them or me.

A quick jog around the perimeter left me at ease, as I saw nothing suspicious or worrisome, and let me out on the beach side of the building. As I looked out to the waves crashing loudly against the shore, I spotted them in an instant.

The blue of Haley's bathing suit matched the blue of the Gulf and stood out against her now-darkening skin. She was flat on her back and her arms rested easily at her sides. Her sunglasses shielded her eyes from the sun, and Allison lay passed out right beside her.

The two of them attracted attention from passers by, and I watched from the edge of the sand as set after set of eyes stayed locked on them.

I watched the watchers, careful to make sure none of them posed any serious threats.

Kicking off my shoes and socks, I left them sitting there at the entrance and walked my way onto the warm sand, the soft heat nearly burning my feet with every step.

I meant to keep walking, to pass them by, but as I approached them, the serenity on Haley's face lured me like a siren call, reeling me in like a fish on a hook.

My feet didn't stop until I was right at her side, looming over her like some sort of psychopath.

I had never been more thankful for a sleeping woman. I wanted to watch her for a minute, and then get the hell out of there before she noticed me.

Unfortunately, when it came to this woman, peace never lasted.

"Ahhhh!" she shrieked, so high in tone I thought my ears would bleed, her body coming to life and flailing wildly. She fell gracelessly to the sand beside her chair, face first, and as I moved to pick her up, the sweep of Allison's leg aligned perfectly with her own scream, took out my legs at the knees, and sent me straight to the flat of my back.

Coughing for air, I wheezed and sputtered, unable to draw in a full breath for several seconds.

Familiar with the feeling of knocking the wind out of myself, I kept my eyes to the clouds and forced my chest to take slow shallow breaths, easing my body into its normal rhythm again.

I felt her crawling up the length of my body, but I didn't move my eyes to hers until I had brought my breathing fully back to regulation.

Her face was shadowed, backlit by the sun, but I didn't miss it when she smiled, waved a jaunty, slightly chagrined wave, and remarked, "Oh. Hey, Dan-o," like we hadn't just created a scene of epic proportions.

I shook my head slightly in the sand, embedding the granules nice and deep into my hair, and then tested my voice. "Hales."

After allowing her to stare at me for several seconds, I used the curl of my abs to pull my upper body off the sand, forcing Haley to back up out of my space and settle her ass onto her heels in front of me. As she went I hooked my finger into the pony tail holder at her wrist and let it slide off of her arm using the backward motion of her body, palming it for safekeeping. The close proximity of our bodies and the sand tickling her nerves distracted her enough that she didn't notice. I hadn't planned on taking them from her every time I saw her, but after the first one, and the one I

found left behind on my bathroom vanity last night, I couldn't help myself. It was turning into some kind of disease.

A compulsion.

"If you're done pulling a double-team attack on me, do you think we could talk, Haley?" I asked as she looked up at me, careful to phrase my question like a statement. I wanted to seem polite, but I didn't want her to feel like she could say no.

The technique wasn't a guaranteed win, but it was all that I had.

Allison was still making her way back into her chair, and for a split second, a wave of guilt washed over me because I hadn't helped her with the journey. But as I looked over her toned legs and stomach (not in a creepy way, I swear), I started to feel a little better.

She was in *phenomenal* shape. I was certain that at least fifty percent of it had to be genetic, if not more. At a certain age, the effects of working out seemed to lessen, but not where she was concerned.

Haley glanced at her over her shoulder and got a nod in return. Some exchange had been made, but no words had been spoken. That level of communication suggested an immeasurable bond, one that had already made itself obvious, but this only added to the confirmation.

Allison seemed to be taking the whole thing in stride, which was surprising until you remembered that she fainted and caused a debacle all on her own yesterday just because of Wade's looks.

Turning back to me, Haley answered, "Sure, Danny."

"Do you want to go for a walk?" she asked, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Giving a quick nod, I climbed to my feet, and then stretched out a helping hand to her down below.

She fell in step beside me, and I made sure to keep my steps slow and to lessen their span so that she could keep up.

It didn't take much silence for Haley to feel like she had to fill it, rambling, "So, um, sorry we almost killed you and everything. But when you were looming over me like that, I couldn't see your face, and I kind of thought *you* were there to kill *me*. I mean I don't think you look like a killer or anything, but I was right on the edge of consciousness, so you startled me, and then I screamed, and then I woke up Allison with a shriek that put her on high alert-"

“Hales,” I cut her off, forcing her to take a breath for the first time in thirty seconds.

Heaving a deep gulp of air, she muttered, “Right,” knowing full well how she sounded without me having to tell her.

After that, it was like she was afraid to talk, an awkward silence descending upon us for the next several hundred feet.

“Look,” I said frankly, demanding her attention and pushing passed any discomfiture. “I sought you out today because I didn’t like the way we left things yesterday.”

Not exactly the truth. I had been trying to get a good look at her, but avoid physical contact. Still, the part about not liking how we left things yesterday was absolutely sincere. That had to earn me at least a few points.

“You put on a good song and dance, acting like everything was fine, but I could tell you were a little upset,” I explained. I lifted a hand and settled it onto the back of my neck, slightly uncomfortable with pointing out to a woman that I could see through her emotional disguise.

“And to be honest with you, that kills me. There’s nothing I want more in this world than your happiness, bold and in your face and shoved right down everyone’s throats.”

She was a lot to handle sometimes, but the world deserved to experience her just the way she was and would be missing out if it didn’t.

“Forget it,” she told me on a shrug. “It’s obvious to both of us that I was feeling a little differently about our relationship than you were, but it’s totally cool. I get it now, and bottom line, I want you as my friend, Dan Smith. So, no big deal. We’ll move past it.”

Expecting to feel relief at her understanding, I was shocked when my blood felt like it had been placed on a burner and was preparing to boil.

I absolutely hated that I made her feel like less than she was worth, like her feelings were one-sided, or like she had somehow made a fool of herself yesterday.

I was the fool. The one chasing away a once in a lifetime woman, someone who could very well be the love of my life, because a job asked me to do it.

I felt sick to my stomach, so I forced a breath from deep inside my chest up and out my throat. Unintentionally, I added a, “fuck,” to my breathing exercise, the previously comforting warmth of the sun turning into nothing but a sour heat.

Struggling to find my way forward from that point, I moved on to something I could handle—gathering information. “You’re going to leave tomorrow?”

When she nodded in response, I continued on, tightening my grip around the invisible rope connecting us, completely unwilling to let it unravel one more inch. “Will you tell me everywhere you’re going, call me every day, and let me help ascertain if guys fulfill the list or not?”

I expected some sort of bullshit answer, a joke or rant of some kind, but for once she gave it to me straight. “Yeah, Danny. To all of it, yeah.”

Certainly, all of our problems weren’t solved. But it felt good to know I wasn’t going to lose my friendship or communication with her when she left.

After having it back, I realized just how agonizing it would be to have to miss it again.

I was still in my head when she shouted, “Race you to the water,” and took off down the beach, jerking left and right like a driver trying to heat up his tires in Nascar, and just narrowly missing the dozens of people laying on the beach between her and the water.

Picking up a jog, I took off after her, knowing that whether I beat her down there or not didn’t matter. She was right where I wanted her, knee deep in the water and doing one of the most unimpressive dances I’d ever seen. She was not meant for dancing greatness, that was for sure, her complete lack of rhythm surprising but amusing all the same.

Easing from my slow jog into a full run as I entered the sparkling wetness of the water, I headed right for her.

She started to panic, hunching over and bringing her hands up in a karate stance, and squealing, “Please, please, please no!”

I had to laugh at the picture she made and wonder just what exactly she thought I was going to do to her. I certainly wasn’t going to tackle her like an NFL player.

Sliding to a stop right next to her, I scooped her up by the trim of her waist and the back of her knees, and started to wade my way into deeper water.

“No, Danny. Please no!” she freaked out, pleading with me to stop torturing kittens and clubbing seals. Surely, that was what she was shrieking about because I refused to believe it was because I was thigh deep in the ocean with her in my arms.

Pulling her tighter to my body, I smiled big and broad at her antics and relished the feel of her body against mine.

“Danny, seriously, put me down!” she pleaded desperately as I took two more steps into the water. “Don’t you dare!”

Maybe getting this over with quickly, before someone called the police was the best way to go.

I took off again, jumping and dunking us together when I got to deep enough water.

Unfortunately, a wave rolled through right at that moment and pulled Haley right out of my grip. I surfaced immediately and scanned the water so I would see when her cute little head popped up.

It wasn’t long before she came up sputtering and coughing a couple of feet away, which I eliminated quickly, grabbing her hips and pulling her toward me through the crystal blue water.

She was mad, I could see that on her face clearly, but I held on tight through her screaming, “What the fuck is wrong with you?! Let go of me,” and kept my eyes and arms locked on her despite her kicking, punching, and flailing.

I actually thought that if I held onto her long enough, she might start to bite me, but figured that could turn into something fun.

“If a shark attacks us, I will scratch your back until you bleed and leave you for dead, I swear to God,” she trudged on, making me laugh so hard I thought my kidney would burst.

God, she gave the best rants. Random and fun and creative as all hell.

“It’s every man for themselves,” she kept going, still trying to swim away from me, but failing miserably.

My cheeks started to hurt as my laughter kept right on rolling, her performance not even beginning to dim yet. “You’re going to be like chum in the water!”

When I started concentrating on what she was saying, I realized this whole WWE wrestling style rant was born in her fear of sharks. I had only been to the beach with them once as a kid, in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, but her fear of finned-monsters-of-death had reined supreme. I just had no idea that it was possible for a woman to carry the strength and intensity of that childhood fear all the way into adulthood.

Pulling her close to my body, so close that there would be no fish or other creatures swimming between us, I wiped a stray wet hair off of her

beautiful face and smiled into her eyes. They were so blue, they looked like they were reflecting the ocean.

“How is it possible that you are still deathly afraid of sharks?” I queried softly.

“Still?”

Shit. Big mistake. *Shit.*

Hoping my face and voice weren’t too stuttered, I covered, “Yeah, baby doll. Still. At the age of twenty-seven,” hoping she would buy my bullshit.

Man, the lie-o-meter sure was running a big old tally.

Fuck, I really hated that.

Instead of an outburst, she wrapped her legs around my waist and demanded, “You’ll just have to protect me I guess.”

I just about lost my shit. The feel of her legs around me combined with her asking me to fill the role of protector puffed my chest out so far I had to glance behind myself to make sure I hadn’t grown any feathers.

The urge to strut like a peacock was strong, all the testosterone that was released as a result of my ego boost firing a ton of dormant synapses.

“But I will sacrifice you for the sake of me. Make no mistake.”

That was my girl.

At least on the outside. On the inside, she would sacrifice herself in a heartbeat—if she felt you’d earned it.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Hales,” I stated, letting the corners of my mouth curve upwards once more. I hadn’t smiled this much in the last twenty years combined.

She just stared at me, studying my face and searching for the answers she couldn’t have. Not yet anyway.

I could feel a moment forming, and as much as I wanted it, I knew I wouldn’t like the result if we had it now.

So I brought the focus off of me and onto something else she loved. “So tell me about these books.”

“Here? Right now?”

I nodded. “Why not here or now? You have something better to do?”

My fingers glided over her skin like fog over a valley, skimming and slipping and drawing goose bumps out of its depth as I settled my hands on the underside of her thighs.

Trying to keep my touch innocent, I didn’t squeeze or caress, but the feel of her legs in my palms was enough to start a physical reaction. I pulled

her just enough away that she wouldn't feel it and fought to keep my expression neutral.

Besides being the wrong time and place for sexual exploration, I also really wanted to hear her answer.

Working her bottom lip with her teeth, she explicated, "I don't know. The books by this author are just so real feeling."

I listened intently, never once pulling my eyes away or allowing a gesture that would depreciate her confidence.

"You become beyond invested in the characters...feel like you know them. Feel like you *are* them. The stories are good, but to me, the characters make the difference. They're the kind of characters you'd read about watching TV, or I don't know, clipping their nails. You'd read about them doing the most inane of tasks just because you're *that* invested in them," she expressed passionately.

"And what about the men in these books? What makes them so special?" I questioned, curious to know if they had their own draw.

Her head tilted back, the column of her throat elongating and enticing me as she pondered introspectively. "Well, I guess it's the same thing to a certain extent. They feel so real. The qualities on the list are part of what makes them attractive, and they say the right things, of course. I guess part of it is just the genre of book. I'm pretty sure it's an innocent until proven guilty kind of thing. Except, in this case, you like them until they do something to make you *not* like them. It's a romance, so you're already rooting for their happy ending. But mostly, they're so sure in their knowledge that that girl is the one for them that they won't take no for an answer. And instead of changing the usually wild heroine, they take what she is and enhance it. Make her the best version of herself."

She barely took a breath, and I only understood half of what she was talking about.

But I understood her fervency perfectly.

Getting lost in the depth of her eyes, I let my heart warm the features of my face. "Okay, Hales. That's the end of your pop quiz for now. Just tell me some of your favorite titles."

"Why?" she inquired immediately.

And I suppose if I were in her position, I would have been curious too.

"Because I'm going to read them while you're gone. I can't be very much help if I don't do the research, now can I?"

And I did plan to read as much as I could, whenever I got the opportunity. Something this important to her was important to me. But I didn't plan to "help" her with my research at all.

Fuck *that*.

There was no way I was going to aid in the discovery of some other loser for her to enrapture with her charms. The very thought of it made me so fucking angry that my vision tinted red.

Clearly in a bargaining mood, she wheeled and dealed, "I'll tell you the titles if you tell me what your tattoo means."

Shit. My tattoo.

I had forgotten about the damn thing. Normally I had on a shirt and avoided the complicated explanation.

"Which one?" I evaded.

"What do you mean, 'which one'? Do you have more than one?" she asked excitedly, her head bobbing and weaving as she searched the remainder of my body.

Her zealous perusal emboldened me, a smirk shaping the edges of my dimple.

"Well, just this one," gesturing towards my chest with my chin, "And the zebra stripes on my dick."

As soon as I said it, I regretted it. It not only mocked her, but it was also such a pompous prick kind of thing to say. But it didn't matter how I felt. I had already said it, and I had to roll with it.

Just as I suspected she cocked her arm back and let it fly, whaling on me right in the shoulder with what I would imagine might be a significant punch if she were hitting someone else. "You jerk!"

How many times could one person smile in the span of just a few minutes? I was starting to wonder, but I knew one thing—I had far surpassed *my* previous record sometime in the last couple of days.

"I guess you just hear everything," she grumbled sweetly.

I had to laugh. If she thought my hearing everything was annoying, I probably shouldn't remind her of my memory.

"No, Dan-o, I don't need any further explanation about the zebra stripes."

I knew I couldn't avoid the real subject at hand forever, so I looked deep into the depths of my soul and pulled out the courage to tell the truth.

Vaguely. “I got it to symbolize my world always being just out of my reach.”

Running her fingers over the lines and intricacies gently, she whispered, “It’s beautiful, Danny, but I’m not sure I understand.”

In that instant I made a promise to not only myself, but to her, the very tips of my fingers seeking comfort in the silkiness of her skin. “One day, Hales, I’ll make sure you understand.”

She unraveled her body from mine, putting a noticeable distance between us.

“We should get back to Allison,” she suggested softly.

The full strength of my upset settled into my jaw, grinding my teeth and spasming the muscles in my cheek. This was it. She would be leaving tomorrow, which was good. Good for the case and my focus. Good for getting things back to normal.

But somehow, despite all of those obvious positives, it didn’t feel good at all.

Forcing myself to respond, I barked a quick, “Right,” but watched her face carefully to make sure she didn’t take any personal offense to my attitude.

None of this was her fault.

She started to move toward the beach, so I jumped into action.

In order to make up for my earlier antics, I worked hard to protect her from the assaulting roll of the ocean all the way to the shore, wrapping her arm around my shoulder and supporting her with an arm around her waist.

As we walked the several hundred feet back to Allison, I let my mind drift aimlessly as my eyes kept their focus. Sweeping the area, looking for a threat, just like always.

But silence wasn’t Haley’s forte, and she quickly filled the void. “The titles you should definitely check out include but are not limited to *Sweet Dreams*, *At Peace*, *Lady Luck*...Fuck. You know what? You better just read as many Kristen Ashley books as you can because I was setting up to list them all.”

Like our last ten minutes of conversation and interaction hadn’t happened at all, she dove right back into the topic of her books. I laced our hands together, a slow chuckle richening the air around us as it escaped my throat.

She ignored me completely.

“Yeah ‘cause, shit, *Mystery Man* is such a good one, too. Crap! *Motorcycle Man*. Yeah, definitely *Motorcycle Man*. Oh my God, the hot bunch. You’ve gotta try to get to the *Rock Chick* Series, too. Actually, you should probably start with that. Shit. I hope you like to read.”

I smiled down at her as she rambled, and then moved my eyes back to active duty, scanning the beach and thankfully coming up empty.

As we approached Allison’s chair, the ringing of a phone brought my head around. Allison stretched it out to Haley, informing her, “It’s Hunter.”

Just that name brought my muscles to a standstill, tightening the tendons and stretching my ligaments.

I was paralyzed, helpless to do anything other than observe.

As she the phone slid from Allison’s hand to hers, she elucidated, “It’s my brother,” clearly for my benefit.

I nodded, unable to do anything else, numb to the people and noises around us for the first time that day.

“Hey, Brother,” she greeted warmly, her eyes up and on mine and shining with her love for the person on the line.

Suddenly, her body spasmed like she’d been shocked. “Who’s dead?” she barked.

The effort it took not to jump forward and commandeer the phone right out of her hand was nothing short of herculean.

She listened intently, her full attention focused on Hunter and Hunter alone.

I listened just as hard, in spite of the fact that nothing could be heard from where I was.

“Fuck, Hunt. God, I’m so happy for you,” she whispered, a sheen coating the surface of her eyes. “Go have a beer tonight. Celebrate.”

The complexities of their conversation were vast, especially from the standpoint of an outsider relegated to hearing only one side, but a feeling started to take root deep in my bones.

A feeling that I was more involved in this conversation than any of us knew, and that somehow my life was about to change.

“Thanks, Hunt. Love you,” she murmured in parting.

She pulled the phone away from her face carefully, taking a moment to reflect as she stared at the display on the screen. As she tossed it back into her bag, she turned to face me, and I knew my face must have spoken volumes.

I just wasn't sure what she heard when she listened.

After only a moment of hesitation, she dove head first into an explanation. One she had no idea just how much I deserved.

"I know that sounds horrible. To celebrate someone's death. But let me explain it," she began slowly, watching my face for a reaction as she went.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited, keeping my expression shuttered and squeezing my biceps in order to control the reaction of my body.

"See, Ryan Parker was Hunter's very best childhood friend. Mine too, really."

The sting of my nose was immediate, the emotion at hearing my childhood name spoken aloud almost too much to handle.

"They did absolutely everything together until one day...they couldn't."

Her voice shook with emotion, the same emotion that I was hiding deep inside the fortress I'd built for all of my fears and regrets.

"José Franco murdered Ryan Parker, his older brother, and his parents one night in their own home. For years, no one has ever known what really happened that night, except that it was so brutal, all of the funerals were closed casket and combined into some kind of mass, group, family funeral. It was fucking horrible."

This was one of the only times I was thankful for my hyperactive memory. Because for me, I had an escape. For me, I had plenty of memories to take the place of their vividly gruesome compatriots. For anyone else, the memory of their family's murder would stick around forever, forced into place by its intensity, its emotional weight. I could relive every detail of that night like it was yesterday, but I could also relive last Tuesday, or the Thursday of exactly a month ago. Other people weren't built to store insignificant memories. Memories that were my saving grace.

"Hunter never got over it. Frankly, none of us did. But Hunter...he's dedicated his life to it. He was only eight years old, but he felt deep, even at such a young age, and every day, every hour, every minute, the loss of his friend eats at him. They never nailed down enough evidence to prosecute Ryan's case, but they got José. A couple of years ago. Got him for running drugs, guns, girls, you name it. Put him in prison."

I knew José was in prison. I knew every detail of his pathetic, scumsucking life. And I knew how much work Hunter put into putting that one man behind bars, but hearing it from Haley did something to me.

My arms fell to my sides of their own accord, and my hands clenched into tight fists.

“Turns out prison isn’t all that great a place for the likes of José, seeing as even other criminals don’t like guys who are rumored to fancy young kids.”

Fancy young kids he did.

*I could see Anthony pinned down with Jose behind him, as I looked out through the air vent, choking on my vomit as I struggled to stifle my sloppy cries. My parents lie dead on the floor just a few feet in front of him, and he knew his fate would be the same. I watched as one tear rolled down his face, the courage he showed by not outing my location enough to make me vomit in my cowardice mouth all over again.*

“And as of today, he’s dead.”

Lifting my eyes to meet Haley’s, I knew they were wet with my grief, but I couldn’t find it in myself to hide it.

I wanted to offer her some sort of comfort, lessen her pain because I couldn’t lessen mine.

The news of Jose’s death did nothing to bring my family back. Did nothing to spare Anthony his agony.

Moments from forgetting myself and giving in to the temptation to spill everything, my eyes skimmed over the parking lot ahead and landed on a weasel.

Shit, shit, shit.

Stepping into her body quickly, I pressed my lips to her ear and ordered gravelly, “Call me, Hales. And do it soon,” before stepping around her, nodding a farewell to the beautiful Allison, and jogging toward the parking lot to face my repercussions.

And they would be vast and complicated.

Somehow, I had to catch the limb before it fell.

## Chapter 10

“Well this is one of the dumbest things you’ve ever done, Dan,” Frank, said casually.

“You know what? Fuck you,” I barked as I rubbed at the constriction in my chest with my sweaty palm.

“Geez. Easy, Danny. You’re the one who fucked up here. Not me.”

Unwilling to be contained, the adrenaline in my veins thrumming with a never-matched intensity, a honest to God growl ripped its way out of my throat.

I was being pulled in all different directions, downright giddiness exploding in my chest from the combination of time with Haley and the news about Franco. Never, ever did I think that justice meant death. But this time, with this man, I did. Finally, he wrought the pain that he bestowed upon my family.

Meanwhile, self-loathing was so fucking potent in my bloodstream that I could barely take a full breath.

That was, without a doubt, the stupidest thing I had ever done. Making contact with Haley in public, and even worse, letting my guard down while I did it. I might as well have had a neon flashing sign on my forehead that said “This person means something to me. If you want to make my life hell, hurt them”.

Combine that with my trip down memory lane, and I was one thread short of unraveling.

I had unconquered demons from that night all those years ago. But now was not the time to try to defeat them. I had too much on my plate as it was.

Taking several deep breaths, I tried to calm my overactive emotions enough to be able to hear myself think. When that didn’t work, I punched Frank’s government issue car and left a big fucking dent.

Finally. I felt a little better.

A solution. I needed a solution. I couldn’t change my past, but I could sure as hell still affect my future.

My carelessness had made Haley and Allison vulnerable, and there was no way I was going to lose another person to the bullshit of organized crime.

Obviously, I couldn't tell them anything, and they were at least leaving town tomorrow, so chances were good they would be in the clear.

Still, I couldn't leave something this important to fate.

As I sharpened the function of my mind, forcing myself to calm the crazy splinter thoughts and dissipate the panic-induced fog of confusion, I came to a reasonable conclusion.

Someone was going to have to tail them and report back to me. I only slept about two hours a night as it was, but if they were out there on their own, I knew I wouldn't sleep at all.

As a human, I was going to screw up. It was biologically programmed into our innate imperfection. But I had to follow Wade's advice and be prepared to clean up the messes I created. That was the key. Stay a step ahead of the fall out and eliminate the messy ending by cutting it off with a solution.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I asked Frank, curious as to why he was making contact in public.

Sure, he was undercover as a minion in the cog of my arms operation, but we normally didn't instigate any kind of public communication. We certainly wouldn't have a business discussion out in the open, easily seen and heard by wandering eyes and listening ears.

"I was instructed to check in," he muttered vaguely, a smug grin just barely peaking out of the features of his face.

Fucking Wade. Always worrying.

Technically, I guess he had reason to worry, as I was here, fucking up again, but I didn't need him watching my every move, judging my every decision.

Clearly, I needed to get my shit together so that everyone would back off and let me do my job. Back off and let me have the freedom to rectify my mistakes.

"Well good fucking job. You're dismissed," I snapped, losing my patience for Frank, someone I had very little patience for to begin with, and his enjoyment of this whole scenario. He was basking in my failure.

Talk about a team player. No wonder I couldn't stand having him on my team.

His answering sneer was probably justified, as I was being kind of an asshole, but he rounded his car, folded in, and pulled away, which was exactly what I wanted.

To be rid of him.

As soon as his car cleared me, I took off at a jog, scooped up my abandoned shoes, and checked to make sure that a very important purple hair tie was still in the pocket of my board shorts.

It was there, and I had crucial shit to take care of, so I made my way to my car quickly, scanning the area as I went and once again coming up empty. Either I was becoming a real shit at spotting a tail or I didn't have one, but I was hoping it was the latter.

Still wet from the ocean, I pulled a towel from my trunk and threw it on my seat before climbing in, tossing my shoes to the floorboard of the passenger side, cranking my girl up, and pulling away from the curb with purpose.



As I drove, I worked my brain, flipping through all of my options for a mother/daughter tail and categorizing them as a yes, no, or a maybe.

He needed to be competent, trustworthy, and, perhaps the most difficult, available.

He needed to be down for anything and prepared for the worst, something that not many people were.

A few people came to mind, but it didn't take me long to weed them out.

I didn't trust them enough, they would never be free to help out, or they wouldn't be willing to do what it took to keep them safe if it turned out to be necessary. And really, that wasn't a crime. They didn't know these women. *I did*. They didn't put them in danger. *I did*. If someone were going to consent to help me they would be agreeing to give their life to me, for *me*, or be the kind of person who was willing to give their life for any innocent.

And I could only think of one person who fit that description to a T.

My good friend, George.

The chances of him being available were around 50/50, but it was completely worth the phone call. He was a member of a special forces team for the Army, and got some decent leave time with the caveat that he was *always* on call.

We were tight in high school, as tight as I could be with someone without telling them the truth about my past, but if we traded places, he was

the kind of guy for whom I would put myself on the line.

Once I had decided, it was all I could do to wait to get back to the house before I called him. But I didn't need to be on the phone while I was driving and it had nothing to do with the nation-wide distracted driving campaign.

I needed to be secure. Both in the physical and in the informational.

Pulling into the driveway after my long-ass, longer-than-it-should-be route around to our house, I did so quickly enough that it was highly reminiscent of Haley's flare.

I skidded to a stop at the garage, hopped out quickly, and opened the big wooden door. It squealed as I forced it back on its tracks, working it faster than it was used to.

As soon as it was open, I jumped back in the car, revved her up, and pulled her forward, shutting her down much quicker than normal.

Usually I worked her like a woman, rubbing her slowly to ease her way down, but at the moment, I didn't have the time nor the inclination.

I hopped out and forced the big wooden door closed, and then turned heading for the house without my shoes, shirt, or anything other than my phone.

As soon as I hit the cooled air of the indoors, my skin pebbled and contracted, sending a chill right down my spine but not slowing my step.

I stepped into my room and closed the door, palming my phone and getting down to business. First, I did my automated check-in, having realized that I hadn't done one in a while. Moving to my nightstand, I dug around in my drawer, pulled out my box and threw the hair tie in, and then shuffled through a gazillion papers until I found the scrap with George's phone number on it.

In contrast with the times, I kept no phone numbers in my phone. The ones I didn't have memorized I kept in a heap in my drawer.

It wasn't a perfect system, but if something happened to me, and someone acquired my phone, I didn't want there to be any numbers stored in it that could be used against me. Or more importantly, used against the people in my phone. I even cleared out my call history on a regular basis. It wouldn't prevent someone from looking it up if they really tried, but it would sure as hell make the process more labor intensive. That was all I could really ask for.

After dialing his number, I waited, listening to it ring in my ear and hoping this was still his number. I hadn't been able to talk to him in a while,

something I really regretted, but I knew we both had a hell of a lot going on.

On the fourth ring, I had just about given up hope, but out of nowhere he picked up.

“Dan Smith,” he said warmly across the line, the smile in his voice evident.

“Hey, Georgie,” I answered, an answering smile invading my face despite the circumstances. He hated his name, and he hated “Georgie” more, but when someone he liked used it, he took it like a good sport.

Sometimes teasing is love.

“How the hell are ya, buddy?” he inquired immediately.

“I wish I could say I was better, man. And I wish I could say I was calling just to check in. But I can’t and I’m not. I need to ask you a favor, and it’s big.”

“Anything, Danny. Always, you know that. What are we dealing with here?”

“There’s a girl-” I started, only to be cut off by an amused George.

“Isn’t that how these things always start? If there’s trouble, there must be a girl involved.”

I chuckled at his joke but didn’t waste time getting into the details. “As much as I like the idea of that, George, this time, I’m the asshole causing trouble. The girl’s name is Haley, and if I’m being accurate, I should really call her a woman. She and her mom, they’re doing a road trip across America thing, but unfortunately had the fate of meeting me first.”

“Sounds pretty fortunate to me,” George complimented.

“Yeah, well, I’m in the middle of a big undercover clusterfuck, and I’m worried I made them visible in the worst possible way. As in, really fucking visible to some motherfuckers who are anything but blind to begin with. I’d prefer to take care of them myself, but I can’t. I’m mired right in the middle of this shit, and the more I try to help personally, the more I’m going to hurt.”

“Alright, buddy. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’m there,” he agreed easily. So easily, that I knew I had made the right phone call. This was the kind of guy you wanted covering your back or the backs of those you loved. Without a fucking doubt.

“I need you in Alabama. And I need you ready for a trip. I need you to follow them, real discreet like, and make sure nothing happens to them. No

matter what.”

“Then I’m in Alabama, Dan.”

“Are you sure you can commit to this? I understand what I’m asking of you, on all fronts, and you can say no.”

“Can’t think of a better person to do it for, Danny. As long as I can find a transport within an hour of my location so I can go wheels up if I have to, I’m good to go. And I can do that pretty much anywhere.”

“I owe you huge,” I told him.

“I’m not worried. You always pay me back,” he responded, and once again, I could hear his smile.

“Be prepared for a wild ride. I promise, following these two women, you need to prepare.”

“Ah,” he breathed heavily, his amusement obvious. “Now this is sounding interesting. Where are they headed?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll find out tonight,” I explained, intending to do just that with a strategic phone call that evening. “Meanwhile, just get here. They’re leaving in the morning. The Beach Club, Gulf View, Alabama.”

“Ten-four,” he agreed. And then, he pried—something he had fucking earned by stepping up when I needed someone. “She yours?”

My lungs burned with the answer I wanted to give, the one I wanted to be fucking true. But the only one I had was probably the truest of all.

“I wish.”

## Chapter 11

As I walked into the yellow and blue building of Best Buy, I felt like a fish out of water.

I hadn't been inside of a store in...well, forever. I didn't need much, the staples of my wardrobe never straying far from a simple t-shirt and a pair of jeans, and occasionally, I had to replace them or my hat. Other than that, I didn't have much use for stores of any kind.

But this was different.

I had promised Haley that I was going to read her books (well, not *her* books), explore her passion, and step inside of her head by doing it, but at the time, I hadn't fully planned for it.

It wasn't as simple as going to the library or the store for your books anymore. E-books were not only the way of the future, they were the way of the present, and it paved the way for Independent authors like the ones she loved. All it took was a quick google search of Kristen Ashley, one long-ass list of books, and a sudden reality check to realize I needed to have the right tools if I was going to give reading this shit a go.

So here I was.

At Best Buy.

To buy a fucking Kindle.

Never in my wildest dreams. But hey, I guess I had to grow up and be a big boy at some point.

Rubbing the tension in the back of my neck with one cocked arm, I made my way inside of the store, careful to keep my awkwardness from looking like cause for suspicion. The last thing I needed was to get detained and questioned for looking like I was casing the place.

As I approached the section with tablets and e-readers, a blond sales girl came out of the woodwork, her walk turning directly into a sidle after a once over of my body.

"How can I help you?" she asked flirtatiously, hooding her eyelids and looking up from under her lashes. In a way, I appreciated the attention. I was a guy with an ego, and anytime any attractive girl built it up, I liked it. And in the past, I probably would have acted on it. Given her a quick roll in her bed, made sure she found her pleasure and I had mine, and then been on my way, my urge temporarily satiated.

But today, I had absolutely no interest.

And it wasn't that I was taken, or even that I knew it would work out with Haley in the end.

Because honestly, I didn't. I didn't know if it would all work out, if we would find our way back to one another, or if she would wait for me in the end.

And even after all that, I still didn't know. I didn't know if I deserved her or if our pairing was the right one.

Only time would tell.

"I'm looking for an e-reader...a Kindle," I explained, my tone dry and disinterested in an attempt to convey my point. Those were the only things I was looking for.

No thank you to the free vagina.

I'll pass on the promotion today.

I could tell she read my tone, but immediately, I realized she read it completely wrong. She thought I didn't get her innuendo, when really, she didn't get mine.

She moved closer, placing her hand on my forearm as she whispered conspiratorially, "I think I can help you," and winked for good measure. "Follow me," she instructed, turning seductively and working the swing of her hips back and forth with measured precision in front of me.

I averted my eyes as best I could with an ass swinging in my face, which was to say, not at all. But I felt really bad about it, so that had to count for something.

"This is our Kindle Paperwhite 3G. You can read it anywhere, in the sun, without an internet connection, it doesn't matter. And it lights from the page upward so that it doesn't hurt your eyes at night."

She held it directly at breast level, and I had a hard time believing it was anything but intentional. But the truth was, I had stopped listening and started looking, studying it until I realized it looked exactly like Haley's.

Done. That was all I needed to know.

Blondie was biting her lip and gearing up to give me a more detailed spiel, or maybe to show me some other options, but I didn't need to hear any of them.

"I'll take this one," I informed her before clarifying, "Just this."

She bent to grab the box they kept stocked in the cabinet below, unlocking it with the key strapped on her arm, and bending at the waist in a

way that I knew wasn't natural.

I felt kind of bad. There wasn't anything wrong with her, and she wasn't actually falling all over herself to make an impression, I was just overly critical. These were the things all women did to get a man's attention, the same way a man flexes his muscles when he reaches for something or settles his pants just low enough on his hips to entice.

But because of my relationship limbo, and the unnecessary guilt I felt for my one night random romp the night right before Haley showed, I was extra sensitive. I had to be careful not to take it out on the blonde too much.

"Thanks for the help," I said in appreciation as she handed me the box. I flashed her a smile, but made sure to keep the dimple out of it. The dimple would only cause me more problems.

The women loved the dimple.

*"Don't even think about it, Dimple," I instructed mentally as she smiled a brilliant white smile in return.*

"Would you want-" she started, only for me to stop her before it got too far.

I hadn't been in the role of turning someone down in a while. I really didn't have all that much female interaction, despite what you may think, and when I did, I normally wasn't worried about anyone's feelings.

It was weird.

"Thanks," I repeated, completely ignoring that she had said anything at all and making sure to keep my smile in place to ease the blow if there was one.

I didn't stick around to see her face—finally, something that was familiar—and instead, turned immediately and headed for the check out.

I had plenty of stuff to do besides tip toeing around the feelings of some girl I didn't even know.

Handing the box to the cashier, he scanned it and eyed me up and down as he did.

Yep, I was a man. Kind of a rough one. And I was buying an e-reader. Get over it asshole.

"Did you find everything you needed?" he questioned, glancing towards the blonde and then moving his eyes back to me with a little extra stink in them.

Ah, he had a crush on her. No wonder he was glaring at me with the wattage of the sun.

“Yep,” I confirmed, elaborating, “Just the Kindle.”

He read my meaning, and the ice thawed instantaneously.

God, who knew a trip to fucking Best Buy would be so mentally and emotionally exhausting. Thank the Jesus, I didn’t do this regularly. I would never survive it.

At that thought, I was taken aback. It was amazing how you could click with one person and not with another, and the differentiation in the two made all the difference in the way you handled your exchanges. With Haley, I was confident and self-assured, choosing my words wisely and sticking with them as I went. But with these people, I stumbled all over myself, feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable the whole time.

Paying with the cash from my pocket, I finished the transaction quickly and moved to exit the store as soon as he handed me the bag. Luckily, I wouldn’t have to interact with anyone to buy all of the fucking books Haley expected me to read.

That’s where technology dependency was good in my book. When it protected me from half-ass, menial exchanges with pseudo-strangers all for the purpose of buying some good. Now, I could hide behind the internet and have books delivered right there to the Kindle with no paper trail to my location and no hair-pulling fake interactions.

Win, win.



“I appreciate this, Georgie,” I said into the darkness of the alley two blocks down from The Beach Club.

“You can stop thanking me. You’re starting to sound like a chick. Or a broken fucking record. And it’s creepy,” he expressed, a smirk just barely catching the light from the moon, his brown Army regulation hair perfect as usual.

“This makes two people I’m telling to go fuck themselves today,” I said simply, implying the fuck you.

His chuckle was rough as he told me, “Good to see you, man. May be shit circumstances for you, but for me, this is a vacation. Can’t wait to see what these women have in store for me.”

“You have no fucking idea,” I muttered, handing him a piece of paper with all of the information I could think to give him including Haley’s phone number. I knew he wouldn’t be calling her if he could help it, but if

he needed it, I wanted him to have it immediately rather than having to search for it.

“I’m about to call her in about two minutes to get the other information you need, like where they’re headed, but all of her vehicle and personal identifiers can be found on that paper. I don’t think I have to tell you, but you protect both them and that paper-”

“With my life,” he finished for me. “No worries, man. For however long this lasts, they’re my loved ones. I’ll protect them as though that’s so.”

“George, there’s some stuff about me, stuff I’ve never told you, never told anyone,” I started cautiously, figuring Franco was dead and George had earned the truth.

“Don’t wanna scare you, but I already know it. I know, if I can find it out, maybe anybody can, but I promise, they’d have to dig really fucking far. And know what they were looking for,” he said, shocking the shit out of me.

“How in the fuck did you know what to look for?” I asked, struggling to keep my rising adrenaline from kickstarting my anger.

“In high school, I looked through your stuff. Found your lunchbox with all of your keepsakes,” he explained, meeting my building fury head on and taking the wind out of my sails.

Well, fuck me. If this wasn’t karma for looking through Haley’s bag, it was probably payback for some other shitty thing I’d surely done.

“Well, yeah,” I stuttered, not really knowing what to say.

“It’s absolute shit you went through that, Danny. Makes me even more impressed by you though,” he assured me, claspings me on the shoulder and finishing, “Time to stop gabbing like a couple of girls, Danielle. I’ve got things to plan, people to prepare for. Call me with the travel intel when you have it.”

He turned on his boot and exited the alley, alert and watchful like me, a side-effect of the life he led. That was the second time I’d been called Danielle in a two day span, and I was starting to resent it. My other name wasn’t as easy to feminize.

Luckily, I liked both of the people who were teasing me, which rinsed a little salt out of the wound.

Following George out of the alley, but doing it slowly, I headed for the beach, figuring I could call Haley from the dark confines of the dunes and enjoy the salty ocean air of the warm summer night.

Normally at night I was behind the bar, playing a persona, mixing drinks, and pretending I gave a shit about all of the stuff people wanted counseling on. Really, I was an outdoorsman, and I wished I could spend a lot more time breathing in the fresh air of open space.

But tonight, I had the night off, a rarity for me, and even more infrequent, it was the second night in a row. Wade knew I was setting this up with George, though, and intended to work on the case as soon as I got home.

Both of those were more important than tending bar.

Watching the lights of George's car illuminate the otherwise empty street, I followed him with my eyes as he pulled away, destination unknown. What I did know was that wherever he was going it wouldn't be far, and no one would see him if he didn't want them to.

I turned the other direction, walking right past my car, shrugging my shoulders against the humidity in the air, and heading straight for the most remote part of the beach I could think of.

I couldn't wait to hear her voice.

## Chapter 12

Settling my ass into the sand, I brought my phone up in front of me and dialed the number I already knew by heart.

I listened as it rang and scanned the deserted beach as it did.

Nothing but the waves could be heard, and nothing but the moon reflecting on the mostly calm water could be seen.

This was a really pretty place, and I barely ever saw any of it. All I saw was what I was looking for—leads in the case, danger lurking in corners, or things I needed to commit to memory. And a lot of the time, I never even came to the beach, whether I was experiencing it or not.

Working undercover didn't promote a personal life. In fact, it pretty much denied you of one completely.

The phone rang several times, and I was just about to hang up when Haley finally answered, her first statement clearly not meant for my ears.

"How in *the hell* does he do these things?"

A chuckle rumbled its way out of my chest at her frustration from my slight of hand tricks. She was just noticing the change in her ringtone. The execution was pretty simple, but when you missed it in action, it seemed altogether mysterious. And watching her search for the answers was entertaining in a way I would have never guessed.

She was to me as her characters were to her—entertaining even with the simplest of tasks and eye catching in a way that you couldn't look away. And real. So fucking real it almost hurt.

"What's up, Danny?" she asked, back on track and actually speaking directly to me.

I paused briefly, considering how to explain myself, and then responded, "Just wanted to talk to you, Hales. I tried to be okay with not knowing where you're going tomorrow, but...well...I just wasn't."

"Can you hold on a minute?" she asked, her voice slightly shaky with some unknown emotion.

I muttered a quick, "Sure," and then got dead air as she did something that required her to cover the phone with her hand. I could tell from the way the receiver sounded like it scuffed and muffled.

Thirty seconds later she was back on the line, and I could tell she was walking as she spoke. "I'm just going down to the beach. Mind if I call you

back when I get down there? I might lose you in the elevator anyway if I don't."

She hung up immediately, but I hardly even noticed. I was too preoccupied.

The beach? Oh shit. I had to make sure she didn't fucking see me.

Talk about creeping her way the fuck out.

I backed further into the dunes, letting the tall grass shroud me as best as I could while I waited for her to call me back.

As I waited, I traced patterns in the sand, occupying my body with activity in order to still my mind. As much as this phone call was a pleasure, it was for business, and I had to remember that. I needed to find out specific information, and I couldn't allow myself to get lost in the moment and forget about that. Not to mention, I had to find some way to float it into our conversation seamlessly, careful to keep from alerting her to anything that was out of the ordinary.

I caught sight of her as she entered the beach, her gait a mix between a skip and a run, the smoothness of her legs reflecting the moonlight as she extended out from her pajama shorts.

Shit.

Damn, she looked good. And I mean good.

She fluffed a towel out in front of her, straightening it as best she could and then plopping down on it like a heap of bricks, her eyes to the sky.

She took a few deep breaths, the fluctuation of air making her chest rise and fall in the most alluring of ways. I couldn't take my eyes off of it, a slight sheen of sweat making it seem to glitter.

Her top didn't cover much, and my eyes refused to pull away.

She lifted her phone to her face, an action I figured was being carried out in order to call me back.

Quickly, I made sure my phone was on silent and tried to calm the testosterone controlling my now raging cock.

I knew my voice was a rough growl when I spoke, and it came off as anger, even though that was the very opposite of what I was feeling.

"I'm not real fond of being hung up on, Hales."

She pleaded her innocence in spite of the fact that I knew she was guilty. "Oh? I'm sorry. I come by it honestly. My brother does the same thing. Just hangs up mid-conversation."

"Hales," I warned, prompting her to bite the bullet and tell me the truth.

“Alright, fine. I was just being a little too accommodating and that was the only way to balance the scales.”

Now that, definitely made sense. She was asking permission which totally wasn't her style. She wasn't rude, but she was only mildly accommodating.

“I figured as much. You sounded a little too sweet.” Out and out lying, I added, “Thought I accidentally called the *other* Haley in my phonebook.”

She squealed, half pig, half surprise, and it was loud enough that I heard it even without the phone to my ear. As she asked, “There's another Haley in your phonebook?” angrily, I scanned the surrounding area with my eyes again, going over each minute detail with utmost of care, and again, came up empty.

I laughed, careful to keep my tone soft and at a low enough frequency that it wouldn't cut through the air like her squeal. She didn't need to know I was here.

“No, baby. If you want the truth, I'm pretty sure there are five names in my phonebook, maximum.” Definitely maximum. Try zero.

“Not many friends then, huh?” she asked innocently, an honest curiosity permeating the richness of her voice.

I knew I didn't have any friends, but I pretty much never thought about it. I had certainly never had someone point it out to me directly.

But she was right.

“My inner circle is kept pretty tight...sometimes unbearably so,” I murmured in answer, the realness of the question causing my response to taper off in volume. “And I tend to limit making friends to a night to night basis at the bar.”

I cringed at my admission, but she deserved to know. Whether she was a friend or a lover, or God forbid, nothing, she needed to know.

“But not me?” she asked the sky as she stared up at it.

“No, Hales. Not you.”

Never her. She was better than that.

Better than me.

What really sucked was that it wasn't *me* that wasn't good enough. I would fight for her, bleed for her, work myself raw until she had everything and anything she ever wanted. But that was me. The real me. And that was the one thing I couldn't give her. All she could have was some watered down version. A liar.

And she deserved way better than *that*.

"Tell me something about you that no one else knows," she requested softly, taking me by surprise by taking the conversation to a very personal place out of nowhere.

"Jesus, Hales. Don't start off with anything easy. Christ," I griped, scrubbing a hand over my face and tasting the salt it left on my lips.

"Oh, just do it, you big baby," she teased, unwilling to let me off the hook.

"Well, I've been called a lot of things, but I'm pretty sure no one has called me a big baby before."

And that was the truth. Most recently, I was going by "fucking stupid" or something similar.

"They obviously weren't familiar with your whining ways," she informed me.

After a short pause, she asked, "Do you say things like that just to normalize yourself?"

"Things like what?" I queried, really not knowing what she meant.

"Things like the words 'pretty sure' when you're referring to a memory. I'm *pretty sure* there's no 'pretty' about it. You and that elephant brain are *sure*."

"Yeah, I guess I do," I responded, liking the fact that she would pick up on something so throw away. At least, it would be throw away to someone else.

She was smart. Perceptive. Completely fucking captivating.

Undeterred by the short distraction, she ordered, "Good. Now, tell me your deepest, darkest secrets," the snap of her demands softened by the warmth in her tone.

"Fine," I fake grumbled, unable to actually be cranky in the face of her light personality.

I was searching for the things I could say, wishing I could say it all. Apparently, I took too long.

"Jesus, Danny. You really are being a baby. I'll go first." I heard her heave one sigh before she launched right into her insecurities. "I generally don't care what anyone thinks of me. But....I'm afraid that one day, my family is going to wake up and be disappointed in me. My choices...maturity level...my somewhat mediocre lifestyle."

"Hales-" I started, only to get cut off by my little spitfire.

“No. Danny, I didn’t say that for pity or even because I think I’m going to have some sort of revelation and change my ways. Trust me, I’m stuck this way. Overbearing, over-exaggerated, and in your face. I just said it because no one knows it.” After a brief pause, she murmured, “But now, you do.”

She had given that to me so easily, something she had held close to her chest until that moment, that I knew I needed to return the favor.

“I feel like I’ve been waiting for someone like you...foul mouthed, brutally honest, and downright genuine...frustrating. God, you can be frustrating, but...well, I feel like I’ve been waiting for your friendship for most of my life.”

It seemed like I waited forever for her to say something, without taking a breath the whole time. The silence carried further than a high pitched scream and settled deeper into my veins as it did. I was nervous. Sure, I hadn’t been able to tell her what I wanted—about our past or what I hoped for our future—but what I had told her had been real and honest and really fucking scary.

And now, she was giving me nothing.

“You’re unusually quiet,” I said finally, tired of waiting for the relief that seemed it would not come.

“Just thinking, Dan-o. I try to do it at least once a week,” she teased lightly, her eyes still to the sky and her feet swinging in and out at the ankle.

“You try to think once a week?” I asked, checking to make sure I heard her right.

“Yeah, any more often than that, it gets in the way of fun.”

“Fair enough,” I whispered on a smile, pausing briefly before joking, “That also explains some of your behavior.”

As I watched her, she kept talking explaining their plans to drive their way to Colorado in what they hoped would be two days. She also wanted to visit the Grand Canyon (something that was apparently a life long dream), Vegas (the dream of her stripper persona), and the Pacific Ocean (an opportunity that didn’t come often for someone living in the east).

She was cute and excited and shifted around on her towel more than any person I had ever seen. It was like her energy was part of her personality, working to burn itself off in order to keep her ridiculous behavior to acceptable levels. I’d be scared to see what happened if you tied her up and

left her immobile all day, and then released her, the freedom to explode taking over and leaving gooey bits of crazy all over the place.

But I would gladly stand well within the blast radius just to feel a ray of her warmth heating the layers of my skin and settling deep into my chest, feeding my heart and, ultimately, pumping its way around my entire body.

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## Chapter 13

Now that she was gone, my focus was back. I was still thinking about her, but I didn't feel physically sick with it. The ease of having a tail on her was immeasurable also. That way, she was free to have a good time, but I wouldn't have to worry about the consequences with which I had encumbered her.

When I had finally hung up with her about an hour later last night, I then had to wait for her to leave the beach before I could.

I had found a good hiding spot during our conversation, but as it turned out, it wasn't so good for escaping.

I was trapped.

Tamping down the panic at being trapped anywhere, I waited her out, and watched with rapt attention as she finally sauntered toward the hotel almost thirty minutes after hanging up with me. Her ass swayed in a way that was practiced and perfect, and her pajama shorts did nothing to hide the underside of each swell.

I said a prayer to Jesus himself as I watched her walk away, thankful for the almost full moon He had blessed me with that night. That, and vision. Crap on a cracker, at that moment, I was glad I wasn't blind.

Once she was gone, safely inside and completely out of sight, I headed for my car, and then set out on the long journey home. Sometimes it was tough not being able to go the most direct route, constantly having to change it up and come up with a new way.

But I knew the reward was worth the work, the peace of mind that came from having an undiscovered home base priceless.

Wade and I had settled in to discuss the case, only to realize that we had reached an impasse thanks to the dead end my meet with Sergio presented. Two years of work had gone in to getting into their organization, studying the inner-workings, and taking them down from the inside out. Only to get the opportunity and be completely shut out. It didn't make sense to me, something wasn't right, but I had no other choice but to go about the business. Making deals, taking guns off the streets, and doing my best to make a difference.

Olin was bringing a delivery today, something he had notified me of via phone call last night, and I was just about set to go accept it.

Wade was wondering if that was the best decision, but for me I knew it was. I needed to get back to normal, fill the void Haley left with my routine. Make myself feel better by believing that my sacrifice enabled the rest of the world to gain something of value.

"I can handle it. You go do the obligatory meeting with our superiors, because you know I can't stand that shit, and report back to me. I'm gonna go get us some missing stinger missiles."

I turned to leave but stopped when Wade called my name.

"Danny."

"Yeah?"

"Just...be careful," he murmured.

"I will," I assured him. I always was. And part of the reason for that was knowing that I was the only family he had, just like he was mine.

Turning again, I headed for the door, but once again, he brought me up short. But this time, it was because he couldn't stand to let me have my foolish hope.

"It's probably not those stinger missiles."

I swung just my head toward him and let a smirk settle into my features.

"Dare to dream, Wade. Sometimes, it's all we have."



I took the long way, one of the several different ways I had on a random shuffle, and I watched my back the whole time. I watched for a tail for miles, and only picked one up when I came cruising by The Cabin, a place where they knew I spent my time.

I wasn't worried. In fact, I expected them to be following me, watching me do business and getting a sense for how they wanted to carry out their next move, but I kept my eyes peeled just in case. In fact, you could even call me excited. Someone watching me meant they were still thinking about me, still interested in some way.

As I pulled up to our warehouse, I shifted into neutral and threw the parking brake on just before killing the ignition, swinging open the door, and lifting out my body in one fluid motion. I left my sunglasses on, like I always did when I was doing a deal.

I didn't think keeping my eyes under the veil of my glasses was fooling anyone, but I preferred if they couldn't see them. In all of my years in the

field, Wade had always said my eyes held an unnatural kindness for the likes of a conman.

A sparkle of humanitarianism, if you will.

I thought I did a better job of hiding it than that, but I'd rather listen to Wade and be alive than be right.

Very un-man-like.

Usually being right was all-important. But I guess you can't be right if you're dead.

Taking another look at my stalker, I was happy to see that they were watching rather than approaching. It was easier for now.

I needed to get done with my deal with Olin, pass off the hardware to my superiors, and then I could deal with the unresolved Sergio situation.

It pained me to say it, but if I wanted to be done with this case before I was old and gray, I was going to have to consider fake-dating the skanky sister, Isla.

Just as I was making my way to the door, Olin came rolling in in his Suburban.

I wasted no time making the rest of my way over to the door, opening it up, and heading for our garage door, so that he could pull right into the warehouse. This wasn't the kind of deal you did outside.

At least not when you could help it.

I cranked the chain off of its holder, a hook placed conveniently adjacent to the opening, and levered the weight of the door up by leaning my body into the chain like I was climbing a rope.

Olin was waiting right there and moved in with speed as soon as the door cleared him. Immediately, I dropped the door behind him and wound the chain back onto the hook as a locking mechanism.

Excitement churned in my stomach as I approached the Suburban, and anticipation just barely blurred the lines of my vision.

Olin jumped out as I approached, rounding the vehicle to the back and opening up the tailgate.

His clothes were proper, a pair of khakis and a polo shirt, the complete opposite of what you would expect when dealing with someone involved in international crime, but to him it was a business. It certainly didn't make it right, but I could see how he saw it, and when I looked at it from that direction, all of his idiosyncrasies made sense.

Because of this, I was cautious always, but as far as lowlifes went, Olin was one of the most trustworthy. I didn't think he wouldn't turn on me if it was beneficial, but he always brought what he promised and, in the end, I was a pay day he wanted.

It was a business exchange. Simple as that.

"What have you got for me?" I asked, skipping any sort of pleasantries that might be used in normal business interactions.

"Exactly what you asked for. The usual set up, as well as a few extra toys from the Sandbox," he remarked with a smarmy smirk.

Occasionally, in person, we would talk using actual words rather than euphemisms, but it was rare. It usually just wasn't worth the risk when there was basically no reward.

"Let's see it," I instructed, gesturing toward the back where I knew he stored everything.

Removing the fake panel inset from both insides of his wheel wells, Olin opened up his compartment of goodies and gave me a few of what I'd been waiting for for the first time.

The stinger missiles.

*God*, I almost couldn't believe it.

This was an absolutely huge score.

Proof that there was such a thing as luck that supported the existence of hope and dreams.

The meat of my cheek rose and contoured strategically to make space for my dimple as a canary smile widened my lips. I bit into the flesh of my bottom lip and turned to face Olin, but the next thing I knew my vision faded to black and my flesh hit concrete with a sickening thud.

Fuck.

Not. Good.

## Chapter 14

Dark, dingy surroundings—check.

Severe pinching sensation in my ankles—check.

Overwhelmingly tingly head—check.

Floor masquerading as the ceiling while being covered in blood—check.

No memory of the last indeterminate amount of time—check.

Yeah, this was not good.

Not. Good.

Did I mention it wasn't good?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

No matter how much you prepared mentally for a situation-gone-wrong like this, you were never really ready.

But how could you be?

When dealing with the mind of a criminal, you were often dealing with the mind of someone twisted. Someone living separate from the confines of reality. Someone whose planning and rationale was something totally different from yours. You could try to predict and understand them, but unless you were a professional profiler it was somewhat of a lost cause.

The rope creaked as I swung from the ceiling, curling my abs in order to instigate some motion. When the curl didn't come easy, a cramp finding its way directly into my muscle mass and stopping my motion completely short of successful, I started to get an idea of how long I'd been like this.

And it had obviously been too fucking long.

They had me right where they wanted me.

Completely vulnerable both physically and mentally. My body was tired from the stress, but my mind was sluggish from not only the blow that brought me here, but also a long stay with all of the blood in my body rushing to it.

If I had to guess, as I didn't spend a ton of time upside down, it would take at least several minutes in the upright position before any sense of normalcy returned to my noggin.

And I was betting, I didn't or wouldn't have that kind of time.

I'd like to tell you I knew some sort of secret maneuver and used it to secure my release immediately.

But that would make me a dirty fucking liar, and in all likelihood, superhuman. It just wasn't that easy to escape from being hung upside down, your ankles and wrists bound together, and the effects of a strong blow to the head still pungent. Plus, I could feel the crack in my lip, taste the blood dripping from it, and my face felt like it was twice its normal size.

Someone had had a good time wailing on an unconscious Dan Smith.

So I would wait.

I didn't like that option, but it was all that I had. And eventually, they would come. Their intentions weren't as cut and dry, but the fact that they would come to do something—kill me, torture me, or question me—was.

As I waited, my thoughts started to wander, and being that the timeline of my life was completely unpredictable at this point, they wandered to happy topics.

To love, to family.

To Haley.

Thank God for Georgie watching over her.

When I had gotten home the night before, after we discussed all the business there was to discuss, Wade had asked me only one question, but the weight of it was so heavy, he didn't need any more.

*"Is Haley the one because she's the one, or is it because she's the link to your past?"*

*"You need to really think about it, Dan," he'd said. "Because the answer makes all the difference."*

He was right, and at the moment that he asked, I didn't have the answer.

But something I had now was a lot of time to think.

It seemed ridiculous to be thinking about something so normal while I was trussed up and strung from the ceiling in a cold, damp, dark pit of hell that, maybe just maybe, was going to be the site of my death.

But somehow, it made sense to me.

I still didn't have the answers, but as I tried to picture myself living a fulfilling life without Haley in it, I couldn't do it. Now that I'd laughed with her, held her in the curve of my arms (even if I was making excuses for whatever reason I was doing it at the time), and felt the softness of her lips on my cheek at the same time that her smile warmed me all the way through, I knew I couldn't go back.

I couldn't go back to a life without her lighting it up and freaking it out. I still wasn't sure if my reasoning was linked to my past, but I couldn't find

it in me to give a fuck. I knew there had to be reasons for the way my mind worked, and I knew they probably had to do with one very traumatic event.

When self-doubt pollutes your veins with an undeniable potency, it forces you to explore the monsters within for an answer.

For me, the monster was myself and the doubt I had placed on my shoulders at eight years old. Knowing you aren't the responsible party and living with the guilt of being a solitary survivor are two different things. Could I have made a difference with a different decision? A decision to fight instead of hide. A decision to speak up instead of staying silent.

Now, with more loved ones on the line, I was transferring the doubts of that eight year old body onto the contours of my adult mind.

I lived with the weight of three deaths. I couldn't live with more.

But as I continued to wander through the depths of my heart and mind, I found something else. That, maybe, I was working against myself. Maybe, I was the most difficult enemy I'd ever face.

I had to use the knowledge that life had provided and put it to work. Save someone. Look out for the ones I loved, but love them at the same time. Maybe the two weren't mutually exclusive.

Maybe when I gave myself the freedom to love the one I wanted, the peace it created would be enough to clear my mind and guide the way to solace.

After days of straddling the proverbial fence, I finally chose a side, and I did it in an instant, with my head almost dragging through my blood on the floor and my hands bound behind the cheeks of my ass.

But I guess if you can't see your priorities clearly when you're faced with the end of your life, you never will.

Haley was mine, and I was going to stop pretending like she wasn't.

This would take some doing, of course. I would have to ease into it for her, so that I didn't give her whiplash, and there wouldn't be much I could do before I saw her again anyway.

And I would see her again, I would make sure of it. No matter where I had to go to do it.

However, I kind of needed to figure a way out of my current situation first, and then I needed to pay some bastards back for this by systematically taking apart their operation piece by piece.

The sound of the metal door clanking as it was opened would have startled me, if my reflexes weren't as slow as fucking molasses.

Seriously, my mind and body were feeling beyond lazy. Not exactly how you hope to feel while you're trying to hatch an escape plan from people that, in all likelihood, intend to kill you.

As I watched the large man approach me, I prepared myself for anything. He wasn't Sergio, and as far as I knew, he wasn't an important part of the operation, but rather, a big, beefy foot soldier.

I caught a flash of his knife reflecting the light as he pulled it from his belt, and I only had the briefest of moments to consider what he intended to do with it.

And then I was on the ground.

In a heap, covered in blood, and feeling the shitty impact.

In one easy swipe, he had cut the rope that held me just above my ankles, leaving me hog tied, but freeing me from my hanging prison.

Giving me no time to recover, the big ogre grabbed me by the shirt at the back of my neck, similar to how a dog would grab her pup by the scruff of his hide—except, far less loving—and started dragging me, head first toward the door.

I had no choice but to comply, keeping my head positioned to avoid banging into things the best I could.

The scraping of my body along the rough concrete floor didn't feel good, but it could have been worse, so I decided to focus on the positive.

As I glanced down at my blood-soaked clothes, I knew Haley would appreciate the irony of just how tough blood stain removal was and how in this case, it wasn't going to happen. It looked like this stuff was going in the trash.

He drug me through the door, down a dim corridor, through a series of three other doorways, and into a much more well lit room, a crowd of busy people scrambling and shuffling, doing the boss' bidding.

Shrek didn't even glance at me as he pulled my practically lifeless carcass across the room to a lone chair, hefted the weight of my body and slammed it back down into the seat, the dainty spindle legs teetering with the force of my landing.

I wasn't a small guy, but he made me seem like a fucking rag doll.

Obviously, he was scary strong. Something I hoped to avoid experiencing on the shit end of say, a punch or a kick from one of his beefy arms or legs.

I spied Sergio immediately, looking on from the corner of the room with a particularly sinister look on his face, the angle of the light highlighting the black of his eyes.

What surprised me was the presence of Isla, someone who I thought played a way more insignificant role. We had believed she knew nothing of the inner-workings of their operation, but we were obviously dead fucking wrong despite the years of research. She knew what was going on, was instructing people, and was anything but a hanger-on.

Family business at its best.

Isla glanced my way, giving me a once over before turning to Sergio and speaking in what I figured to be Filipino. “Pinananatili namin sa kanya. Makikita niya maging kapaki-pakinabang,” she murmured, a small smile curving the corner of her blood red lips upward.

I had no idea what she said, but she seemed smarter than I remembered. Much smarter than her tattoo suggested. I don’t know what gave me that impression, but something was working behind her eyes and it shined despite the distance between us.

“Huwag maging sira ang bait, kapatid na babae. Pagpapanatiling ang puting tao ay magiging problema lamang,” Sergio practically spat back at her, a sneer on his face aimed directly at me.

“Tumahimik ka!” she ordered, and I could tell it was an order no matter the language barrier. Sergio looked resentful, angry even, to be listening to her, but I couldn’t seem to figure out the why or how of it. “Tandaan mo kung sino ang kausap mo sa,” she finished menacingly, her venomous words twisting Sergio’s already soured face even further.

All this time and no one had bothered to school me in some Filipino. It seemed like such a simple thing to have looked over, but it usually was the easy things that got forgotten.

Note to self: When studying up on a case, don’t overlook the obvious.

They were second generation, Filipino-American, and every day perfect English speakers. If not for Sergio’s soulless eyes, they would blend into the multicultural caldron of America perfectly, but it made sense that they would speak Filipino amongst themselves.

Not only did most families uphold tradition by speaking their ancestors’ native language in the household, but it afforded them another level of privacy to do their business.

To talk in front of their captors.

That kind of thing.

Briefly, I consider getting up and hopping, as I hadn't been secured to the chair, but with all of the people milling about with guns strapped to their belts, it didn't take me long to decide that would be a sure fire way to get myself riddled with holes.

For some reason, they didn't seem to be in a rush to do anything with me. No one had bothered approaching me since I'd been plopped down on the chair in the middle of the room, and everyone around me seemed to be going about business as usual.

I watched as they worked at tables and carefully dismantled weapon after weapon, preparing it to be packed cleverly in separate locations.

I bet that made it easier to do drops, and easier to deny things if and when a deal ever went wrong. Of course, it required a knowledge of the inner-workings of countless weapons from both inside their operation and the operations of the people they were dealing to.

Both Isla and Sergio watched from a spot far across the room. Isla leaned casually against the wall, one knee cocked, her booted foot flat against the cinderblock wall, while Sergio stood tense and annoyed, all of his malicious energy focused directly on me.

The minions were making good time on the weapon breakdown, and from what I could tell, they had the entirety of my delivery disassembled and cleverly pre-packaged just minutes after having been brought out here.

Realistically, I had no idea what time or day it was, how long I had been out, what they had done with my belongings, or any of the other important details, so I really had no idea how long it had taken them overall.

But after watching the efficient way they worked, I figured it couldn't have been more than a day or so.

I took in as many details as I could, storing them in my super memory and trying my best to wait patiently while looking casually unaffected.

And to a certain extent, I was unaffected. Worrying would do me no good in this situation. Coming up with what-if after what-if would only lead to the loss of my focus, and in the end, lead to my demise.

So, instead, I waited patiently, finally finding the clarity of mind I'd been searching for for the last few days.

Forcing my face to cooperate, I pulled one side of it up into a smug smile.

Sergio was fucking pissed.

He couldn't understand how he could be besting me so hard, and still only earning a smile. He didn't like that he couldn't rattle me, I could tell, and it was probably because, normally, he rattled everyone.

Out of my peripheral vision I spied Isla, and to my shock, in complete contrast to her brother, she was answering my smug smile with an amused grin of her own.

She got off on it. Liked that they weren't shaking me, that I appeared to be a completely crazy asshole.

Professionally, I thrived on her reaction, but personally, it scared me. She looked a little too interested, and I had a feeling I was going to find myself in a pickle at some point because of it.

And not one of those really delicious Claussen Dill Pickles. No, it would be one of those wilt-y pickles that still tasted like a cucumber.

"Pumunta," Isla instructed Sergio, glancing at me as she did. "Magtatagal ako na ang bahala sa Kano."

Kano. I understood Kano. This obviously had to do with me.

"Magkantot na," he bellowed derisively. Body language was a powerful tool when faced with a language barrier. No matter what, anger still looked like anger.

"Sinabi ko pumunta!" she shouted back, shoving off of the wall and heading my way, settling a smile onto her lipstick red lips and letting it leak all the way into her almond shaped eyes.

Sergio stormed from the room and slammed the door as he went, spitting on me as he walked by.

Fucking gross.

Thank the Jesus it hit me in the shirt and not on my skin.

I didn't care how dirty I was, that shit called for a fucking shower more than anything else I'd been through.

"Hi, Danny," she said sweetly when she arrived, her voice crisp and effective as she spoke perfect English.

"Isla," I greeted cautiously, watching with a keen eye as she pulled a knife from her boot, opened it up, and wasted no time slicing through the rope at my wrists and ankles.

There was something to the dynamic between her and her brother that was weird, quite possibly important, but I couldn't place it exactly.

All I knew was that what Isla wanted was obviously important to Sergio, or I'd be looking at a whole lot of dirt at this point. About six feet of

it. All of it above me.

"Sorry about this. My brother likes a show, you understand," she apologized.

"You're brother wants me dead. That's what I understand," I insisted back with a smirk.

"You're smart, Dan," she replied. "And far too attractive. We'll find something better to do with you than that."

She started to massage the muscles of my calves, working the blood flow back to normal after fucking it up with the ropes.

I was seriously uncomfortable, but again, I wasn't exactly in the position to shove her off of me. Plus, if my superiors were here to ask, I was pretty sure they would tell me to *fucking use the girl like we've been telling you to*.

"Besides," she whispered on a wink, "Do we look like the kind of people who would kill someone?"

"Yes. Very much so," I murmured, studying her face for some kind of something I could use. Some piece of information I was missing.

Meanwhile, the rest of the warehouse was emptying out, moving to follow Sergio now that they were done with their tear down, if I had to guess.

I had to find a way to be a part of the system.

"If you don't intend to kill me," I started, "can I take this to mean your brother is ready to do business with me?"

She smiled brightly, sliding her hands up my legs as she stood up.

"And the bruises are just like a fraternity initiation?"

Standing up and taking her hands off me, and allowing me to take a huge breath, she shook her head. "Come on, Danny. The fight was only necessity. You wouldn't have come without one."

"I'm the one who came here," I protested, and perhaps fished a little for a location since I had no idea if the here of now was the here of my first meeting, "and suggested we work together toward a mutually beneficial arrangement. I'm pretty sure you could have just sent an invitation."

"Then we wouldn't be getting to know one another," she countered.

Yeah, that would be a real fucking shame.

"Where's my take going?" I asked, jumping the rest of the bullshit and asking about my shit. Those were my guns, and supposedly my money, and I wasn't just going to give them up like they didn't matter to me.

I needed details on a shipment, a time, place, name of a buyer, something, in order to accomplish what I needed.

In order to bring them down for good, I was going to need a raid or a bust, anything to rely on besides myself.

One testifying agent was far too easy to eliminate.

"This has been a nice chat," she told me, smirking as she completely avoided the question. She didn't want to give an answer, so I wasn't going to get one.

That, or she didn't really have one. I still wasn't sure of her overall role in the operation. She obviously had some control over her brother's heart strings, but as for what else she controlled, I had no idea.

"We'll see you later," she told me, strutting out of the room and leaving me with a jaunty wave over her shoulder.

All I could think was *what the ever loving fuck?*

"Next time, I'd appreciate a less personal welcome," I quipped, stating, "A phone call will work just fine."

"I'll keep that in mind," she muttered just before clearing the doorway to leave the room.

Standing up from the chair, I looked around the empty room, curious to look around, but smart enough to know I shouldn't. They were likely watching via a surveillance system.

Besides, they had cleared out all of the obvious goods anyway, including my shipment.

I didn't understand anything about my visit, but that was the point. They wanted me confused, curious, and more vulnerable to their plans. Whatever they were.

Testing my legs slowly, I stood up cautiously and managed to walk with a little more skill than a newborn deer.

But just barely.

I followed the hallway until it ended, using the wall for support as I went, opened the outside door and walked out into the late morning sunshine. Whatever day it was, it was late morning.

Sitting right outside of the building, around the corner and in the shadows, was my car.

It pissed me off that they had driven it, taken it without permission, and it did so almost more than being kidnapped. I knew that was irrational, but it was the truth.

My swollen face ached in the sun, and with the help of the light, I could tell my eyes weren't open the whole way.

I approached the driver's side door, peaked inside of my open window, and found my wallet, phone, and broken sunglasses sitting on the passenger side seat. My gun—gone. No surprise there.

Fuck. The gun I could easily replace. I had several more at home, but I had really liked those sunglasses. And I think we've established that I *don't* like stores.

I pulled the handle to open the door, swung it open, and settled my slightly battered body inside, wincing when my rib smarted. Probably a crack in one or more of them.

The keys were in the ignition, the beep from the open door steady and annoying, so I pulled the door shut and cranked her up.

Maybe it was my cynical nature, but I half expected a car bomb to go off as I started it up. The convoluted process of beating me up, bringing me here, and doing nothing with me, just to kill me when I left seemed irrational, but that didn't mean it wasn't possible.

When I found myself still kicking, the steering wheel firm in my hands, I disengaged the parking brake, threw it in reverse, and backed out of there as fast as I could.

Now, I wasn't an idiot. At least, not most of the time. So I drove hard, and I drove fast, and I headed in the complete opposite direction of the one I needed to go.

I had so much shit that could be wired, or bugged, or GPS tracked that I wasn't going home if you put a gun to my head.

Not only was it *my* safe haven, it was Wade's. And I would do my absolute best to make sure I didn't lead them there.

## *Chapter 15*

Thankfully the combination of Wade's paranoia and experience had prepared us for a situation like this.

There was protocol to follow, a place to go, and supplies were there to be used.

I was going to need to do a full scan on my car, phone, and body.

Twenty minutes east of where they'd been keeping me, I pulled into the absolute oven of an oversized shed, and got down to business as quickly as possible.

I pulled the supplies out of the floor compartment and started with the most basic.

Me.

I could leave without my phone and my car, but I couldn't very well be without me, and there was an awful lot of time unaccounted for when they could have placed something on me, somewhere.

Using the transmitter detector, I carefully scanned my body, hoping that nothing set it off, and luckily having my desires realized.

Grabbing the back up phone, I powered it on and made a quick call to Wade.

Now, when I say call, I don't actually mean call. I did an automated dial-in to his phone that alerted him to the situation and my location.

My time was better spent covering all of my bases than having a conversation with him.

We would be able to talk later.

I scanned my car next, carefully sweeping each and every surface, and crawling underneath to scrutinize the entirety of the undercarriage. While I was down there I checked for bombs, incendiary devices, or anything else suspiciously dangerous to my health.

Again, I came up empty.

Something that should have made me feel good, in fact, had me starting to worry. Nothing made sense. I would have expected them to plant me full of tracking devices, and not detecting any just made me worry that I didn't have the right equipment for doing the discovering.

As I climbed out from under the car, I felt debris from the ground sticking to my shirt, and in turn, my shirt was sticking to me.

Sweat poured off of me in droves, running through my dried blood and picking up a pink tint as it went, and I could feel myself starting to weaken with the combination of blood loss and heat stroke.

But I kept going because I didn't have a choice, pulling open the passenger side door, dropping my phone on the ground, and smashing it with the heel of my boot. My phone was compromised in a way that you couldn't go back from, and I would need to replace it whether it had been planted with something or not. Next I pulled my wallet off of the seat, scanned it, and then thumbed through it to see if anything was missing.

But nothing was.

Again, I was thoroughly confused. I couldn't rationalize Sergio's hate of me with these results. It just didn't make sense.

My sunglasses were already destroyed, so I dropped them to the ground and smashed them right next to my phone, scanning them after it was done.

Settling my hands on my hips, I stood there, perplexed, wondering if this was as cut and dry as it seemed or if I was missing something.

Searching the bowels of my mind gave me no answers, so I decided to give my brain a rest and just wait for Wade. He was a great rational thinker and had been part of far more compromising situations than I had. Where I came up short of an answer, sometimes, he had the ability to bound right by it.

Carefully, conscious of the pain in my side and the lesions on my face, I reached one hand between my shoulders and pulled my sweat-soaked shirt over my head.

I examined my ribs, noting the swelling and bruising expanding along the right side of my abdomen and chest, but finding nothing else.

It kind of seemed like someone got started whaling on me, but didn't get to keep it up for long.

Sunlight poured into the shed as Wade stepped inside, taking one look at me and developing a pronounced tick in his jaw.

It wasn't a secret that I didn't look good, but with the way he was looking at me, I was thinking it was a good thing I had given up picking up women for casual sex.

My face—AKA my money maker—was busted.

Reaching behind his body and into his back pocket, Wade pulled out a new phone and tossed it to me. Luckily, we kept a spare set of phones at the house, and one call to the boys in the office would have it set up exactly

how I needed it. The same number, but untraceable by the specs of my old phone.

“Thanks,” I murmured about the phone. But really, it was about everything.

He nodded in response and suggested, “Let’s leave your car here for now. I’ll have an extensive search done on it just to be sure. You can ride back with me for now.”

Given how uneasy I was about my findings, I had no problem agreeing. “Yeah, good plan. The smell of fish is too ripe for my liking.”

He nodded again and then turned and left, holding the door open for me as I followed, my bloodstained shirt bundled in my hand and my new phone in my back pocket.

We rode to the house in silence, winding through a forty-five minute route because of the breach in security. It was better to be safe, and irritated, than sorry.

I tried to make myself wait, but I had been out of touch for too long. I couldn’t. I needed to know how Haley and Allison were now.

Calling George by inputting his memorized number, I finally found some peace of mind. All was well. For the most part, they had spent all of their time either in the car or in a hotel. George alluded to some sort of very interesting story about a McDonald’s, or maybe even two of them, but I could feel the weight of Wade’s eyes, and I didn’t have time to go into the details. I knew he would fill me in eventually, and I knew what I needed to.

They had arrived safely, and Georgie was enjoying keeping watch.

As soon as we cleared the front door, about fifteen minutes after I ended my phone call, the spigot that was regulating Wade’s mouth turned all the way opened.

“Why? Why would you take the meet without me? You’re seriously starting to scare me with your decisions.”

“I resent that,” I snapped. “This wasn’t a lapse in judgement, it was the best case scenario during an example of happenstance. What good would it have done to get us both into that situation, to not have you to contact when things went wrong.”

I looked him directly in the eye as I told him, “You’re the person I trust to come to my rescue, to have a plan in place when things go wrong. Because they do, Wade. You know it, and I know it. In our line of work, shit

is *going* to go wrong. It's just a matter of when and how bad and who's waiting in the wings to come bail you the fuck out."

"You look like shit," he said, lacking an argument against my rational explanation.

"Could be worse," I joked on a smirk.

His eyes were assessing, but after a few seconds they finally settled. I think he could see that I was finally finding some peace, in spite of the whirlwind death trip I had been a part of for the last day and half.

He opened his mouth to comment when my phone started to ring, serving as confirmation that the FBI had done a good job of switching over my number to the new device.

I looked down to the screen quickly, wondering if this was going to be something I wanted to deal with or not.

"Smith," I answered, swiping my thumb across the screen and putting the phone to my ear immediately when I saw the number on the caller ID.

It was Georgie's number, and for him to be calling so soon after the last phone call, I knew something had to be wrong.

"Hey, Danny."

His voice was somber, another sign that things weren't headed in a great direction. I ignored the impulse to jump in and demand to know if everything was okay, and instead, let him finish his explanation. There was no reason to shoot the messenger.

"I hate to leave you in a lurch, man, but I gotta pull off of this personal job for you. I got a call for an assignment, starting immediately," George told me with a ton of sympathy in his voice.

"Fuck. They really need a tail," I spoke mostly to myself. "When I screwed up, I did it big. I may have made them seriously noticeable."

He knew all of this, we'd gone over it, and I knew he wouldn't leave if he didn't have to, but it took a minute for my heart to catch up to what my head knew.

"I know. You know I wouldn't put you in this situation if I didn't have to," he told me earnestly. And I did know that. George was loyal to a fault, and if you were his friend, like I was, he would do absolutely everything he could to help you.

Shit, he had followed a couple of crazy women all the way to Denver, just because I asked him to.

“Listen, I’m still here. I should have left fifteen minutes ago, but I didn’t want to leave before I told you I was leaving.”

“Thanks, George.”

Shit. Who did I know in Denver? I had to get somebody else involved and fast. They hadn’t left the hotel as of yet, but they would surely be going out tonight.

“I know you have to go, but can you just give me fifteen minutes to get a plan in place?” I asked him, even though I knew I shouldn’t. He had no doubt already used up any spare time he had.

“No problem, Danny,” he told me like it was no big deal, but I knew it was. The Army wasn’t the kind of establishment that took punctuality lightly. “Hope to see you again soon.”

“Same,” I concurred with feeling, grateful to have him as a friend.

Hanging up with him, I glanced to Wade and told him, “One minute,” holding up a singular pointer finger for emphasis.

His patience was straining, but overall, he was resigned to the process. Once I had another tail locked in, I’d be able to concentrate again.

When I thought about Denver, and someone who could move to take over watching Haley and Allison expediently, I could only think of one person.

Jason Higgins. He was another agent, but he kept a much less strenuous schedule than Wade and I did. He was hardly ever entrenched in a case, and honestly, I thought his looks were too distinguishing to be good at it anyway.

He kind of had a Mark-Paul Gosselaar thing going on, and he was cocky as all hell. At least, he had been when I was around him. But I didn’t have much time, and I didn’t have many options.

As long as he did the job, I didn’t have to like him.

Putting the phone back to my ear, I dialed one of my friends who was an office clerk. It’d be easier to get the phone number out of him than to dig it out of my drawer in my bedroom.

George’s number had been stored carefully because he was likable.

Jason’s number hadn’t been handled nearly as thoughtfully.

“Hey,” I greeted as Will picked up. “I need a favor.”

“You got it man,” he agreed easily, no questions or demands in return.

“I need a phone number. Jason Higgins. Last time I heard he was still in Denver.”

“No problem.” The clack of the keys sounded over the phone as he typed away on his computer, looking up information so fucking secure it was practically being guarded by a chastity belt.

I waited patiently, or as patiently as was possible for me (which was to say, not very), signaling for Wade to toss me his phone as Will started rattling off the number.

I typed it into Wade’s screen until I could memorize it, and then thanked Will for his help.

“I owe you, man.”

“Don’t sweat it, Dan,” he disagreed. “Happy to help.”

“Let me know if you ever need anything,” I offered, hoping that one day I’d be able to pay back all of the people who volunteered favors to me so freely.

“Will do. Later.”

We disconnected at the same time, and once again, I jumped back on the phone, dialing Jason’s number while reading it off the screen of Wade’s iPhone.

All I needed was a switchboard, and I could be running a Fortune 500 receptionist desk at this rate.

Fortunately, Jason answered on the second ring. “Higgins.”

“Jason? Dan Smith.”

“Hey, Dan. Long time, no talk, man. Where are you these days?” he asked, making small talk.

I didn’t have time for that, but I couldn’t skip right over it. After all, rudeness probably wasn’t the best strategy since I wanted to ask him a huge favor.

“Alabama. On the job. Listen, I’d love to catch up, but I need a favor. I wouldn’t ask, but I could really use the help.”

“I’m listening.”

“I have a woman. Her and her mom are in Denver. Long story short, there’s a possibility that they’re vulnerable to the case I’m working even though they’re well out of state. I had another buddy doing me the favor of keeping an eye on them, but he has to go wheels up. Enter you. I’m hoping you can take over.”

“Well, you caught me at a good time, my assignment just ended,” he affirmed. “What are the details?”

“My girl and her mom.” I noticed Wade’s eyes come to me at my claim of possession, but he knew better than to address it at that moment. “I just need someone to keep watch. You don’t need to approach, just tail unnoticed. They should be gone in a couple of days, and I’ll have figured out someone else to take over by then. I just need you in the interim.”

Telling someone I needed them was awful. I wanted to be able to protect Haley and Allison myself, but only a true coward would put his comfort above their safety. And I hadn’t felt like a coward since I was a child.

“You have a secure number where I can fax you the details?” There were a lot of things for him to know, and it would be way easier to fax him a rundown sheet than to verbally address each issue individually.

He confirmed, spitting out the number as I once again entered it onto the screen of Wade’s phone.

“Great. I’ll send it ASAP. I need you on them as soon as possible.”

“Alright,” he agreed easily enough. But his attitude was completely different from George’s. I mentally berated myself, reminding my sensibilities that this was only a temporary solution. He wouldn’t be able to get into too much trouble. I just had to stop being so sensitive.

I had called him out of the blue and asked a really big favor. He deserved a little break.

Shaking it off, I said, “Later,” in parting and pulled the phone from my ear, wiping the sweat and blood off of the screen afterward.

Wade had taken a seat on the sofa, crossed his ankle over his knee, and clasped his hands loosely in his lap.

Clearing the numbers from his screen, I entered the fax into mine and locked it.

Like a softball player, I pitched his phone back to him underhanded, watching as his brown eyes followed it, one long-fingered hand reaching out to snag it when it arrived.

“Good. You’re done,” he noted with a snide sarcasm only he could pull off without getting throat punched. “Let’s talk about your makeover, and the reason you got it. Fill me in here.”

“Everything was going as normal,” I started, diving right in. “I knew they were watching, but I honestly never saw it coming when they took me. I still don’t even know what the fuck happened to Olin. I’m sure I’ll find out eventually though.”

He inclined his head to the side and scrunched his brows in a gesture of both understanding and concurrence on the unknown.

“I was out, like black, for what I would estimate to be a day or so. I came to, and I was hanging from the ceiling by my ankles, wrists secured and head throbbing. I didn’t have many options, so I just waited. It’s likely they had a camera in there, because not five minutes later, a big oaf of a guy lumbers his way in and cuts me down, drags me out to the main warehouse, and plops me down in a chair.”

I took a deep breath, wiped a gentle hand across my forehead and continued, “What the purpose of that was, I have no idea. I watched them steal our shit, and learned a couple of things in the process, but in the end, I think I got more questions than answers.”

Which definitely wasn’t what you wanted.

“Okay,” he responded, gripping the firm line of his jaw in the ‘v’ of one hand. “What’s your take on all this?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we need to wait to move on this,” I announced, completely surprising myself. And *definitely* surprising Wade.

His eyebrows climbed to his hairline, but he waited for me to explain.

“Yes, they nabbed a federal agent, yes, I witnessed illegal activity, and yes, I know the location of this particular warehouse. But something isn’t right, Wade. We still know nothing about who they deal with both incoming and outgoing, we don’t know how they move so unnoticed, and after being there and watching, I’m not sure we really know anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, they wouldn’t have left me there, let me walk out under my own power, and given away their location if it mattered. They just wouldn’t have. Two fucking *years* of trying to organize a bust would not have happened if these people were idiots; if they weren’t astutely business minded.” Rambling on, talking a mile a minute, I explained, “And Isla is a factor. I’m not sure how, I’m not sure why, but she’s directly involved. She’s way smarter than she portrays, and she knows the ins and outs of their business. She’s not just a family member. Plus, she wants something with me, and as much as I really don’t fucking want to, I think we should use it.”

“Well, this is surprising,” he said, half in an effort just to mock me since this was his idea from the beginning. If he was trying to hide it, the smirk on his face ruined it.

Instead, I ignored him and continued, “And they disassemble every weapon that comes through there. The amount of knowledge they have on such a wide array of weapons is impressive. But it also makes our life harder because I can almost guarantee we will never find those stinger missiles from the outside. Even with me on the inside, they’re probably as good as gone. I should just get ready to be there for the next shipment, the next deal.”

The man who raised me studied me intently for all of thirty seconds before declaring, “Okay. I’ll follow your lead on this, Danny. As shitty as the situations you seem to get in with these people are, you always find some kind of whimsical way out. I don’t understand it, but I’m thankful for it. And your observations seem on point. I’m glad to see you thinking like yourself again.”

He paused briefly before questioning, “Why do you think that is?”

Settling my hands on my hips, I met his eyes fleck for fleck. “I had a lot of time to think; a lot of reasons to get my priorities in line.”

When I didn’t say more, he prompted, “Yeah?”

“I’m done putting Haley on the back burner. I know that part of my connection to her is one from my past, but I come by it honestly and she makes life better. The logistics of actually being with her while she’s gone, while the case is in full swing, are still blurry, but I’m done pushing her away. I’ll do what I have to to protect her.”

“And what about when the case is over?” he mused, wiggling his ankle back and forth over his knee.

“I intend to resign. Move back to Knoxville.” Taking a deep breath and blowing it out, I whispered, “Franco is dead. It’s time.”

## Chapter 16

Boiling fucking water.

That's what I was going to be in after going completely silent for the last two days and failing to make any contact with Haley whatsoever.

Sure, I had a reason. A really fucking good one that included two black eyes and a cracked rib, confirmed by the doctor forced on me by Wade after our debriefing, but she didn't know that.

And the kicker...she *couldn't* know that.

I wasn't allowed to tell her the details, even if I wanted to—even if she deserved it.

*"I think I'm going to tell Haley how I feel. Be honest with her, and do my best to deal with the consequences," I told Wade as we continued to work through all of the implications of the day's developments.*

*"You wanna tell me being honest with her is more important than keeping her safe? I call bullshit." he answered vehemently.*

*"She'll think it is," I distinguished, knowing he was right, but knowing that I would face a battle because of it. Haley hated liars, and I was the biggest of all.*

So instead, I had to take the blame as the asshole and roll with it, hoping she would forgive me if I went in hard with the honesty.

Okay, the fake honesty.

Fuck, my life was annoying sometimes.

I waited as the phone rang in my ear, ready to dive right into my apologies and get them over with. "Hey, Danny," she said as she answered on the third ring, her tone a forced-casual chirp, some blaring music in the background.

"Let's not waste time with bullshit, Hales. I'm an asshole. The fact that I haven't called in the last couple of days to check on you makes me a raging dick. Call me one so we can move on," I declared boldly, holding my breath as I waited for her reaction.

I wasn't scared of it, I just wanted it over with.

I wanted her banter, her light, and her silliness to shine on me, especially now that I had decided to let my heart open its doors.

She didn't make me wait long, responding immediately, "You're a fucking dick," the feminine subtlety of her laugh contrasting drastically

with her foul mouth.

“Good. I’m glad we got that out of the way. Now, how the hell are you? Have you and Allison gotten thrown in jail yet?” I asked with the goal of focusing the conversation on her. I really didn’t feel like coming up with some elaborate lie to explain what I’d been up to.

“No jail time to speak of,” she answered as the music faded out of distracting levels. “Though, you definitely wouldn’t have qualified for my one phone call since you dropped off the radar.”

I chuckled, easing the reality of the situation by imagining what it must seem like from her perspective, and thoroughly enjoying the fact that she didn’t take any shit. “Pure Haley. One insult just won’t do it. Gave you a free shot and you still had to get in a sucker punch.”

She said nothing for a few long moments, when the question tumbled from my lips without prompting. “Feel better?”

“Absolutely.”

Good. My strategy of meeting her fury head on had worked, and now we could go back to Danny and Hales and the banter that bolstered my pleasure.

“Good. Now, really, how’s Denver? You didn’t change your plans and go somewhere else, right?” I asked, gently probing for information at the same time that I made simple conversation.

Of course, I knew she was in Denver. I knew her every move, and when it was necessary, I intended to control them from afar.

She loved alpha males, and that was exactly what I was going to be.

Creating an illusion of her independence was the best for both of us. I got peace of mind, and she got her sense of self.

I just had to pray she never found out, and be prepared to handle the situation if she did.

Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

“Nope, we’re in Denver, as scheduled. However, I couldn’t tell you much about it other than Hotel Monaco has a comfortable bed, good room service, and impeccable massage therapists.”

“Haven’t actually done anything yet, huh?” I laughed, really fucking thankful that they had been holed up in their room during most of the time I’d been incommunicado. Of course, again, I already knew this from Georgie, but it felt good to hear it again, directly from the source.

“Lazy is my middle name,” she declared, and then corrected, “Or it has been today anyway.” I could hear her moving, wandering around her room most likely, and I tried to picture what she was wearing or how she had her hair.

“We’re going out tonight though. You actually caught me right in the middle of getting ready. I was trying to decide what to wear on my bottom half,” she informed me, rendering me speechless with the answer to my unasked question.

Holy shit. She was naked, or at least in just her panties, but I preferred to visualize the first, all that smooth skin presenting itself for my eyes and, pray God, my hands.

Man, I couldn’t wait to get my hands on her. Accordingly, I found myself fantasizing, wondering if she shaved or not, if there was a design or landing strip, or if her skin was bare, perfectly accommodating to the stimulation of each and every nerve.

I pictured them all, and no matter which it was, I liked it.

So lost in my thoughts and physical reaction, I almost forgot I was on the phone, prompting her to question, “Danny?”

Honesty.

That was the way to go. There weren’t many circumstances where the truth was available, so I decided to take the opportunity. Especially since she couldn’t knee me in the balls over the phone.

“Sorry, Hales. Just took me awhile to move on from you telling me you’re talking to me, right now, without pants on.”

“Geez, you’re such a man,” she scoffed.

“Yeah, baby, I am,” I agreed easily, using my hormones to teach her a lesson about all men. “Keep that in mind when talking to guys. Not only will they not hear anything you say once you mention anything even remotely sexual, *especially* a lack of clothes, they’ll also see it as an in. You need to be careful.”

“Are you saying I should modify the way I walk, talk, dress, and act just so some guy can’t claim he had reason when he sexually assaults me, when in fact, none of those are reasons at all?” she protested vigorously.

“Hales. Listen to me,” I urged, hoping she would take what I had to say to heart. Nothing about this was fair, but I wanted her safe.

No, I *needed* it.

“I am listening to you,” she snapped.

“Okay. Then *hear* me,” I clarified carefully. “I think you should be able to flap your gums saying whatever shit you want, toss your hair, bat your eyelashes, stick out your ass, or fucking fondle your goddamn self and still say no. But not every man believes that. And I’m *not there* to take your fucking back if it happens to be an asshole that you land on your hook.”

Taking a breath because I was starting to get worked up, I continued, “So I’m just saying be careful. If you think the last few days without a phone call were too much, you’ll see the real meaning of infrequent when I’m doing twenty-five years in prison for hunting some guy down and fucking murdering him.”

Okay, so maybe that was extreme, but it was also true. I could feel the rage start to build even just thinking about it. If it were to actually happen, I would be uncontrollable.

“Right, Dan-o. I’ll have a mind to my actions,” she conceded. Thank God.

In the future, she could flaunt all the skin she wanted.

For me.

“Good,” I replied, some of the tension easing out of my shoulders as the fury receded.

“I haven’t had time to call, so I definitely haven’t had time to read,” I noted on the understatement of the century.

I had barely had time for anything, what with getting kidnapped, searching all of my shit, checking in with George, Jason, Wade, and my superiors, and getting checked out by a doctor.

That said, I had the time now. My face wasn’t exactly bartender worthy, so once again, I had the night off from that job. I intended to spend some of it downloading some books and reading. Something low key. Something that made me feel like I was with Haley. “That changes tonight. While you’re out tonight, I’m going to be reading the first *Rock Chick* book.”

“You’re really going to read these books?” she asked disbelievingly. I wasn’t sure I liked that she thought I was full of shit (though, unfortunately, I was most of the time), but I could also see how a promise made by me to read some romance novels would seem pretty unbelievable.

I chuckled softly as I informed her, “Well, as many as I can fit into your road trip, yes.”

Well, in the time frame of her road trip and in between everything I had to do in order to end a two year investigation.

Small details.

She sat silent on the line—something I thought was an impossibility.

“I see I’ve shocked the un-shockable girl,” I muttered with mirth. I didn’t get the chance to be honest often, so again, I decided to take it. “I want to understand your list, Hales. I want to know the reasons behind it, the men you dream about. I want to live the worlds you lived when you read these books and know what you felt when you read them. I want to know *you*. And your mother daughter road trip proves that your books are the perfect place to start.”

“Wow, Dan-o. I didn’t realize you were so girly,” she shocked me.

“Girly?” I croaked out in affront. Girly definitely wasn’t how I wanted her to think of me.

In fact, two minutes ago, she was complaining about how manly I was. I bet she was one of those people who complained about how cold it was in the winter, begging mother nature to bring on the heat, and then completely flipped her tune in the summer at the first sign of sultriness.

It could have been irritating.

But the way she did it...it was just cute.

“Well, yeah. Usually girls are the ones making sweet, slightly long-winded explanations like that,” she elucidated.

She wanted a standard man’s response? Well, I’d do her one better.

“Okay. I also want to read about all the sex scenes that turn you on and lead to you touching yourself to ease the ache.”

“Okay, that was definitely a more manly answer,” she responded, her voice roughened slightly with arousal.

Oh shit yeah.

After the way the last couple of days had been, I wanted nothing more than to bury myself to the hilt inside of her.

I didn’t tell her that. Any more sexy talk and I would be stroking myself.

“Thanks,” I said instead, smiling at the fantasies playing through my mind.

“Hey, Danny, I’ve got to go, okay? Allison is totally ready, and I’m still half naked.”

Ah, fuck. I groaned and adjusted my pants, muttering, “Jesus,” under my breath as I did.

It took me a solid fifteen seconds to get my focus back, and she gave it to me, waiting silently on the line until I responded. She knew what she was

doing. “Okay, Hales. Have fun, be safe. Watch out for each other, don’t leave your drink unattended, try not to mention nakedness to other guys, and hold strong to the list.”

*“And please don’t actually meet someone that I’m going to have to beat up in the end,”* I added to myself.

“You got it, Dad,” she ribbed me.

“No way, babe. I am definitely not your daddy.” Maybe it was my encounter with Isla, and the reminder of her tattoo, but for some reason I went there, finishing, “Unless, of course, you’re into kink.”

“Danny!” she snapped, so fucking cute I could barely stand it.

“You mean Daddy, baby?” I teased, turning up the sex in my voice about twenty degrees.

“I will cut you,” she snapped good-naturedly.

“Right,” I smiled. The idea of her carrying out her threats was pretty comical. But I also wanted her to be safe, so I reminded her again. “Hales, seriously, be careful. And call me when you get back in tonight.”

“Jesus, Danny!”

“Haley. Do your friend a fucking favor, give him some peace of mind, and fucking call him when you get in tonight. I want to know that both of you are safe. Dial my number, say, “I’m home, Asshole,” if you want, and then hang up. I could care less. As long as I know you make it back in one cute, little piece.”

“God, Dan-o. You make it seriously hard to be a snarky bitch when you act so nice. You are totally cramping my style,” she complained petulantly, and I could have sworn I heard Allison’s soft giggle in the background. “Bee tee dubs, why was part of that in the third person?”

She had to know the answers to everything. “Nothing can keep the snarky bitch caged, baby,” I told her. “And I’d miss her if she was gone.”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about. I’m with my *mother*,” was her completely unhinged rationalization.

Laughing loudly in her ear, I argued, “Hales, your mom is almost as crazy as you are. So I have to tell you that your seemingly comforting statement brings me no comfort whatsoever.”

“Fine. Stop talking to me so I can cover up my nakedness,” she teased me. And she had to be teasing. That was just too cruel to have been on accident.

I groaned and glanced down at my still hard cock, wondering if there would ever be a time when I wasn't in a state of constant torture around her.

"I'll call you when I get in tonight, *Daddy*," she mocked in her best phone sex voice, but most importantly, she had said she'd call. I needed to hear directly from her, especially since Georgie had to go on an assignment and all I had left was Jason.

Plus, I was starting to get the picture that tomorrow is never guaranteed, and if I was headed to my death, I wanted to talk to her right before it happened.

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## Chapter 17

Death.

Jason was going to meet an untimely death.

The prick didn't listen. Sure, he was doing me a favor, but I specifically instructed him to watch, not approach.

And clearly, he had approached.

The night had been decent. For the first time in ages, I had spent it relaxing, reading *Rock Chick* and getting introduced to some crazy-ass women and super alpha men. I knew Haley and her mom would be out living it up for awhile, so I had waited patiently for a phone call, and then texted Jason for a check in when it started to get late.

No wonder the cocksucker had responded with some bullshit, short, "Alls well" text.

He was fucking working *my* woman. Greasing the wheels to get in there for a date.

"Yeah, Allison was drunk. Like super smashed and feeling talkative, so she had accrued a group. Jason was one of those guys. He started up a conversation, and frankly, asked me out almost immediately for tomorrow night. But he was respectful and good-looking, and as much as I could do an assessment on the spot, he seemed to fit the list," she explained, blissfully unaware of my homicidal tendencies amassing.

In an attempt to lesson the throbbing ire behind my temples, I pressed two strong fingers to my head.

Unfortunately, my fingers weren't magic—at least in this context—and didn't do a fucking thing to stint the pressure.

"Immediately?" I questioned. "So he asked you basically nothing about yourself?"

"Well, technically that's true," she confirmed. "But he was there, on the outskirts while we were talking directly to other people. It was really a group conversation, so while he may not have asked me directly, he heard me talking to other people."

My jaw clamped down on itself so hard that I lost the ability to speak.

"Plus, that's what a first date is for—getting to know someone. Duh."

Skillfully, I covered my rage with a sigh.

“I don’t have to talk about this stuff with you, Dan-o,” she offered, making me realize I had to get my shit together. Jason was a fucking dead man, but Haley, well, she’d done nothing wrong. You push a woman away, tell her to find another man, and she looks like Haley does, she’s going to go out there and find a different man. I just had to play it patient and be thankful that I at least knew where she would be the next night, and if she was with Jason, she couldn’t be with *other* men. A silver lining.

“Yes, you do, Hales,” I reassured her softly. “Don’t you dare start keeping any of this shit from me.”

“Oh..kay,” she whispered uncertainly, making me hate that I had been a jackass.

The best way to move on would be to just move on. The more I apologized or explained, the deeper it would keep us in the sludge of this topic.

I took a deep breath and forced the last bit of hardness out of my voice. “So what else happened? I know that the night had to be more eventful than scoring a date.”

My effort to change my tone was well worth it when she moved on, her voice once again at ease. “Well, Allison officially took the title of troublemaker for the night. While I was a perfect lady, she got completely shit-faced,” she mentioned again, something I had heard but not really processed before because I was worried about the date.

Still. “Hales, I highly doubt you were a perfect lady.”

Unsurprisingly, she protested vehemently. “Hah! I most certainly was a perfect-”

“Hales,” I cut in.

“Fine,” she pouted. She knew she wasn’t going to win that battle. “What did you do tonight?” she asked normally before adding, “You fucking Know It All,” scathingly under her breath.

I shook my head slightly, amusement making the ends of my lips tip upward.

“I fear the two of you in Vegas,” I observed, thanks to the way she was *outside* of Sin City. Lord only knew what she would be like in the clutches of that place.

I expected a phone call explaining the cost-benefit analysis of becoming a hooker, and how she thought it might be appropriate to give it a try.

Or something else equally as vexing.

“Just let it go, you little girl. We’ll be fine,” she mocked me.

A bark of laughter coughed out of my throat in surprise. I can’t believe I let her get away with calling me a girl so much. I must really like her.

“I told you what I was going to do tonight.”

“You started reading? The first *Rock Chick*?”

“Sure did. Indy sounds hot, but she’s also fucking crazy.”

Like some other girl I know.

“Oh, what, and Lee’s not?” she protested.

I heaved yet another sigh at riling her hackles once again. She thought I was insulting her book, something I would never do. “I didn’t say crazy was bad, babe. In fact, it’s not. Crazy is interesting,” I explained, and then clarified, “At least mildly crazy. There are limits. At some point, crazy is just crazy. But your kind of crazy, the kind that doesn’t think boiling bunnies is a good hobby, is cute.”

“You know what’s crazy?” she asked. And then answered herself, “This fucking conversation. “And I can’t believe we’re having it at-” pausing to look at the time, I presumed, before continuing, “One forty-one at night. I have to go to sleep. I have a date with Zack Morris tomorrow slash today, and I need my beauty sleep.”

“You don’t need any beauty sleep. You’re too pretty as it is,” I grumbled. And she was. Once I claimed her officially, I was going to have to spend half of my time making claiming gestures just so that I didn’t have to beat the assholes off of her with a bat. And I would still probably have to beat a few of them that had no respect for a taken woman.

“Not sure why my looks are upsetting you, Dan-o,” she noted, picking up on my tone.

Ugh. “This fucking sucks,” I groused to myself, keeping my volume just below understandable.

“I know you’re sad that I’m going to hang up, but don’t worry Senor McScruffenstuff,” she consoled me, coming up with some crazy ass nickname I chose to ignore. “I’ll talk to you again tomorrow.”

“Before and after your date,” I added, making sure she knew that I expected a phone call at both times.

She was mine. She just didn’t know it yet.

Jason, however, was going to get an earful. I’d already made it clear, she was mine, but when I got off the phone with Haley, I was going to make it even clearer.

Fucking crystal.

She giggled, thinking I was parenting her again, but agreed anyway. "Okay. Before and after."

She didn't understand that this had nothing to do with that kind of protectiveness and everything to do with needing to mark her as mine.

I heard the click of the line and knew immediately that she'd hung up on me. She was wholly familiar with the fact that it annoyed me a little, and this was her way of getting revenge for being forced to follow my orders.

I would take it. If she started messing with some other guy, trying to get him annoyed at every turn, then I would worry.

For her, it was a form of love to torture you.

Just ask her mother.

Wasting less than fifteen seconds between realizing Haley had hung up with me and dialing Jason, I waited as the call rang in my ear.

It was late, but I was calling him anyway. He bought that by being a fucking douchecanoe.

He answered just as the fourth ring started, and his voice was garbled with sleep.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jase," I said simply, waiting to see how he responded to a phone call from me in the middle of the night. If I could gauge his reaction, I would know how to proceed with his ass-chewing better.

"Everything alright, Dan? I made sure the girls got back to the hotel safe, followed their cab back, and made sure they were safely inside before I left."

Alright, at least he was concerned for their safety.

Brownie point number one.

I'd go in a little easier. For now.

"Yeah, yeah, alls well, Jase," I told him, using his text message wording to spurn him.

"I hear you have a date tomorrow." Pausing briefly, I lowered the timbre of my voice to correctly convey my distaste, and then added, "With *my* girl."

And then he made a colossal mistake. Something no man should say to another man if he expects to make it out in tact. "*She* doesn't think she's your girl."

Fuck *that*. I had stated my intentions from the beginning. *I* introduced Haley into his life. *I* brought her to his attention.

I didn't care how hard he fought, he couldn't fucking have her.

"She's mine, Jason. Trust me. You'd do good to remember that."

"Right," he answered vaguely, which was definitely not a confirmation that he understood me.

Fuck, why did Haley have to be so pretty? Turning regular men into assholes and the ones who were already morally questionable into even bigger assholes.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I practically seethed. "Let you know where to take her."

"Alright," he answered sleepily, still not really getting the seriousness of the situation.

"Most importantly, you protect her with your fucking life," I said, bringing the focus back to the whole reason he was even involved in this mess.

The man in me wanted to beat on my chest and pull him off of protection duty, despite my lack of a replacement. But the lucid part of my brain, a much smaller section, knew better.

My needs and wants came second to her safety.

"I understand, Danny," he said acidly. It was pretty clear we were both done with one another for the night.

I thought that I may have heard him just hang up on me after that, but I couldn't be sure because I was already moving to hang up on him.

We had reached a standoff—a standstill, even; neither of us willing to accept the dissatisfaction of concession easily.

I had a feeling he was going to be a problem.

But he was one I wouldn't hesitate to squash.

## Chapter 18

My facial swelling was receding, and the bruises were fully developed and deep purple, just at the peak of discoloration before sliding off the slope to a dingy yellow tinge.

Thank God Haley wasn't here to see this, and if I could help it, she'd never know the extent of what happened. A watered down version, sure, but I saw no reason to use the rest of the gory details to scare her.

After staying up late to read all of *Rock Chick*, I had moved on to the next book, *Rock Chick Rescue*, and I was more than halfway through it. Sleep alluded me after my phone call with Jason, but after reading more and more of these books, I started to feel better. I was drawn in by the fact that the men went about pretending they were dating the women, even when the women denied it, or maybe, didn't realize it.

I found myself in an unbelievably similar situation.

I could also see a little bit of Haley and I in both of the couples. The women were the light to the men's otherwise dark lives. They had dangerous lifestyles and careers, and the women provided their tunnel to happiness.

Nourished their enjoyment of an ugly life.

And that was exactly what Haley would give to me. I knew it with absolute certainty.

I just had to earn it by being the man she needed me to be.

Pacing back and forth in my room, I dialed her number and waited.

When she answered the phone, she did it without greeting me, as though she was already in the middle of a conversation. "You have never had better timing, Danny boy."

As soon as she finished speaking, I knew why.

"Just told Allison you set her up on a date, huh?" I inferred, having gained the knowledge of another mother daughter date set up from Jason.

Of course, Jason the douche was taking Haley on a separate date, leaving Allison with a complete stranger, and by the tone of Haley's voice, I had to imagine Allison wasn't happy about it.

And I couldn't blame her. I, too, was less than thrilled.

"What...how did you...how the hell?" she stuttered out, too shocked by my omniscience to get out a coherent sentence.

“I have ways,” I hinted vaguely, smiling at her comedy.

“If you weren’t so cute, you’d be scary,” she declared earnestly, a smidgen of awe softening the raw edges of her voice.

“Cute?” I wondered, seriously questioning what was leading her to categorize me as chipper, girly, and cute—all things a man never strived to be.

“I think it’s the dimples,” she educated me. I decided to trust her as the authority on this matter.

“That must be it,” I agreed, realizing why she found a cuteness about me that others didn’t. “It would explain your calling me cute, when no one else ever has, anyway.”

“Why would that explain it?” she asked curiously.

“Because, my little misfit, you’re one of the only people who makes me smile,” I informed her through a husky whisper.

And she was. Aside from the rare laughs Wade’s disconnect with present society provided, my life afforded few opportunities for outward displays of mirth.

“Dan-o, you’re probably one of the most fun people I’ve ever met,” she argued, the conviction of her statement acting like a window over the phone.

“Only with you, babe,” I admitted. “You’re the fun one; I’m just willing to go along for the ride.”



Never had I spent an entire day indoors, in my room, doing nothing but reading a book. I was always on the move, trying to make things happen, and no injury would have stopped me.

And they weren’t stopping me now. I barely even noticed my face and ribs, but these books were sucking me in. They were funny and quirky and filled with plenty of adventure.

Not to mention, they were taking place in Denver, and Haley was there, right at that moment. I found myself reading faster and faster, eager to figure out what she would be thinking about, noting, and cataloging as she explored the same city in which her characters did their galavanting.

Because of my speed reading, I had moved on to the third book in the series, *Rock Chick Redemption*. After reading about Reiver’s, I knew that

was where Jason needed to take her. It was a popular place in Denver, and to Haley, it would just seem like lucky happenstance.

But I would know I gave her that.

Of course, it was via the unfortunate conduit of Jason Higgins.

A fucking bummer if I'd ever heard one.

*Rock Chick Redemption* also boasted a heroine named Roxie. She had several insecurities, but the one that stood out for me was extremely similar to what Haley had confided in me.

She worried her family judged her choices. She knew she was loved, but she wondered when it would all be too much.

They were both remarkable women, the latter being mine *and* real, and I made a mental note to reassure her how special she was every day. To build her up and reinforce any and all genuine behavior.

When my phone rang on the bedside table, I snatched it up, spied the 865 area code, and connected.

"Hey, baby doll," I opened, going in a little softer and sweeter than normal.

Knowing she had been on a date with another guy was working my nerves. And it wasn't like she had come home super early, signifying a dud of a date.

It was fucking late.

"Uh, hey, Danny," she whispered, unsure of herself and her reaction to my greeting.

"How was your night?" I asked, half interested, half dreading her answer, my anxious knee bouncing like a pogo stick, the springy mattress a convenient trampoline for my bare foot.

"It was okay. Not something that bears repeating," she stated carefully, avoiding the details what seemed like on purpose.

"Tell me about it," I prompted softly. The tone in her voice alerted me, put me on edge, and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. But I had to keep calm and collected, or I'd be prying a figurative bullet out of my foot.

No woman wants to open up to a man on a rampage.

"So we went to dinner at Reiver's, which was cool because of the KA reference, conversation was mediocre but pretty slow." Lowering her voice, talking really fast, and mumbling, she continued, "Then we made out for a

while and he may or may not have felt me up a little bit.” She perked up and moved on quickly, querying, “So how was your night?”

I was listening but my lungs were frozen and the red haze had taken over my eyes. All around me my decor had changed. Red walls and linens, like a murder had been committed right at this spot.

But really, the homicide had yet to be committed.

I would fucking kill that asshole. Not only had I explicitly warned him to keep his dirty fucking hands off, the tone of Haley’s voice didn’t suggest she had been happy about it either.

“He touched you?” I choked out around the gravel crowding my throat and rubbing it raw. I jumped to my feet, standing at the side of my bed with a hand to my neck, my elbow cocked high like a chicken wing.

“Well, yeah,” she agreed cautiously. “Just my boobs though. It was no big deal,” she attempted to downplay the situation.

Swear to God, I had never been that livid in my life. My muscles bunched and my neck disappeared, the tension in my shoulders influenced their way higher, eating up the difference and settling right at the base of my head.

The anger was so all-consuming that it started to curl into my vision at the edges, blurring the lines between right and wrong and leading me to consider going to prison for Murder One.

Sure, it wouldn’t be ideal, but if I figured out a way to marry Haley first, they’d probably let her in for conjugal visits.

Unfortunately, since I couldn’t react at Jason, at least not in that moment, I took it out on her.

“*Just* your boobs?! Jesus, Hales. Don’t give it up so easily!”

My remarks cracked like a whip, and as a victim of the recoil, even I began to feel the sting.

“Are you calling me slutty, Danny?!”

“What?! God, no. I just meant...Jesus, fucking hell...” I paused, licking my lips and gathering my thoughts so that I could put what I was feeling into the right words. So that I could put it into words that would let her know how extraordinary she was, but help to prevent my heart palpitations in the future. “I meant that you deserve the fucking *best* guy the world has to offer. So give yourself a little more time to see if that’s a standard the guy meets. That’s all.”

“Oh,” she murmured, clearly surprised. “Thanks, Danny.” We both soaked in the silence for a moment, our thoughts swirling around us like a woven cloud.

Of course, this was Haley, so the silence didn’t last long.

“He fucking sucked by the way. Definitely didn’t know top from bottom or left from right if you catch my drift.”

As much as it pissed me off that she had reason to know these things, it was also really funny. And satisfying that Jason was a shit lover. “So a big old “x” through the x-rated skills qualification, huh?”

“Oh, yeah. Understatement of the year. He treated them like water balloons he wanted to pop. If I had implants, I swear I’d be in surgery right now due to their rupture.”

“Jesus. Fuck Me,” I mumbled under my breath, convinced I was losing my mind. Somehow, my body could do two completely different things at once, both raging at Jason and reacting physically to the suggestion of playing with Haley’s sweet rack. “Can we stop talking about fondling your tits, Haley?”

“Ten-four. Gaw-tit. Ix-nay on the it-tays. Tits out.”

“Haley.”

“Fine,” she grouched. “I should have known when he didn’t know who Kelly “Wet Dream” Kapowski was. If you’re a male member of our generation and didn’t spend your formidable years rubbing it out to a picture of Kelly Kapowski, something isn’t right.”

God, this girl was awesome. I laughed out loud, deep rolling belly laughs, hurting my smarting ribs but not giving that first fuck.

“I take it you spent some time with Ms. Kapowski yourself?” she asked, the smile of her voice practically resonating over the line.

My laugh just barely slowed, and my dimple sunk deeply into the recesses of my cheek.

“Well I didn’t have a cutout or anything, but I am pretty good with visualization from a memory,” I remembered fondly, having watched several episodes of *Saved by the Bell* before going to school in the mornings. Not to mention, I was pretty good at visualizing a certain someone else from memory.

“I bet,” she remarked, adding her melodic laughter to the roughness of mine.

We were both quiet for a few long moments, just enjoying the weighty feel of our connection, even if it was only through a phone.

“Where are you?” I asked, trying to visualize her. Her position, the fall of her hair, the silk of her legs tucked up under her supple ass as she spoke.

“In my room. Why?”

“Where’s Allison?” I asked further, adjusting the bulge in my pants as I continued my fantasy.

“In bed asleep. I escaped her vengeance tonight, but tomorrow is a new day,” she reported, even though she was wondering why I was asking. Regardless of her confusion, if I asked, she answered. And it was really fucking flattering.

“Your sharing a room is inconvenient,” I muttered, wishing I could claim her in some instinctual, carnal way, even if it was a poor substitute for the real thing.

I had a feeling faking it with Haley would be better than living it with someone else.

“Why?” she asked quietly, her voice betraying a surprising shyness.

Until the moment it left my lips, I wasn’t sure if I was going to go through with it. But as soon as it was out, nothing had ever felt more right. “He didn’t make you feel good, baby doll. I was going to change that,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Danny-” she started nervously, unsure of my intentions.

“You deserve to feel good, Hales,” I explained, cutting her off before her uncertainty led to mine.

“How are you going to make me feel good when you aren’t here?” she squeezed out, passing an obvious thickness in her throat.

With my dick in my hand, I let a chuckle rattle loose, and imagined her magnificent body reacting like mine.

Her eyes would be hooded, her nipples pebbled. And the beat of her heart would be pulsating under the swell of her pretty breasts.

“A real man doesn’t need to be anywhere near you to make you feel good, baby,” I told her, so eager to make her feel the ecstasy of her pleasure, I was just about crawling right out of my skin and right through the phone.

Softening my voice, I whispered into the phone exactly like I would breathe into her ear if I had the chance. “A woman like you, Hales, so rough around the edges, tough talking and playful, a man can easily make a

mistake. Touch you rough and go at you fast. But that's not what you need, is it baby?"

Nope. Hard and rough wasn't it for my Hales. She liked it low and slow, deep and decadent, and so fucking connected it almost hurt.

She needed the balance. Her life was rough and rambunctious. Her sex needed to fill the void.

It just so happened, that suited me perfectly.

Lowering my voice one more register, the grip of my hand tightening ever so slightly, I whispered, "You want me to touch you soft, right baby? Tease you. Tickle you. Worship every inch of skin I can find. Just barely touch my skin to yours, avoiding all of the places you really need until you're right at the point of breaking."

My skin was on fire, coming alive with the sensations of Haley's skin on mine, my fingertips exploring all of her most beautiful areas.

"Danny," she breathed, sounding desperate for something. No matter what that something was, I was determined to give it to her.

"Yeah baby?"

She wanted to speak, but she couldn't, the taut tension of our sexual rubber band tensing between us and threatening to break.

"You need me, Hales?" I crooned, admitting boldly, "'Cause I fucking need you."

She was there, I could feel it. Desperate to touch herself and have me return the favor. Yearning to share the ultimate intimacy, and to do it right at that moment.

"Dan-" she forced out, before stopping, unable to complete my full name.

Her breathing labored over the line, and I had to close my eyes tightly to keep from embarrassing myself.

But something was wrong. The silence stretched on what seemed like endlessly, and she wasn't rushing to fill it.

"What the fuck, Danny?" she asked softly, confused and hurt and trying to make sense of me.

Running my hands roughly through my hair, I groaned and cursed, angry with myself for going too fast. For pushing her forward before explaining the difference in where we were before versus where we were now. Which, in reality, the only difference was my state of mind. We'd been drawn to one another from the beginning.

She deserved to understand.

The only thing I didn't regret was how right it felt, how connected we were, and how sure I was that it was not a one-sided emotion.

She definitely wanted it too, and responded exceedingly well to soft and slow.

She was perfect.

But I was a prick.

"Shit. Shit. Fucking *fuck* me," I cursed to myself, wondering how in the hell I needed to navigate out of this one.

"I'm sorry, Hales," I apologized, my balls so blue they were reminiscent of Papa Smurf's cheeks with a little less beard.

I wanted to explain further, but if I stayed on the phone now, I was going to embarrass us both. No, I needed to explain first. To let her know the state of play had changed.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Haley. We need to talk."

Her anger rolled over in waves, but I ignored it the best I could. At least if she was angry at me, she was thinking of me somehow. I'd rather be on her mind, no matter the reason, than be an afterthought at best.

"Danny-" she tried again.

"Just don't set up any dates for tomorrow, Hales," I demanded quickly before hanging up. I couldn't handle another post date phone call, and if I hadn't been clear enough to stop them, I would have to figure out some other way to distract her.

## Chapter 19

The next morning I was up early, releasing Jason from his duties with an overly polite phone call.

Don't worry, he would get the punishment he'd earned, and I would make sure he didn't see it coming. But for now, I just needed him gone.

After that debacle, I found Wade in the kitchen, pouring a bowl of Frosted Flakes and looking like a normal guy. A rarity. Wade, seldom anything but serious and focused, hardly ever appeared to be relaxed. Maybe that was what kept him looking so young. All that facial tension was like a home-remedy face lift.

"Turns out, I may need a favor," I stated vaguely, watching as his head turned from his bowl to me and his eyebrows went up. "If you don't want me in prison for murdering several people that is."

"What's your motive?" he queried, slipping into his investigative shoes as soon as a crime was mentioned.

"Fondling my woman. And not even doing it well."

"Ah, shit," he breathed out on an exhale, dropping Tony the Tiger to the counter. "Jason is one dumb fuck."

I just nodded, pulling my own bowl down from the cabinet and stealing the cereal box from him. As I shook out my flakes, I finished, "So I need you to recommend someone else to follow them for the rest of the trip. I need someone who's available, no more switching around and having to worry about finding someone else day after day."

Wade nodded warmly, expressing quite clearly that he would take care of it for me. "I'll find you someone reliable. You can take this off of your plate."

"Appreciate it," I told him, even though I didn't really need to. I knew he knew I did.

"Consider us even, because you're going back to work tonight at The Cabin. I'm too old for that shit, and I'm tired of covering for you."

Shaking my head and chuckling, I moved to get the milk out of the refrigerator, poured it into my bowl, and then placed it back in its spot. This made three nights that I'd been off, and Wade had covered the last two, the first one not having one fucking clue where I was or if I was alive.

Sometimes, I thought it might be harder to be in his position than mine. Wondering where he was, powerless, versus being the one living the threat and controlling it the little bit that I could.

That's the mark of real love; when the idea of losing them is worse than losing yourself.

Exiting the kitchen and taking my cereal out to the back porch, I could hear Wade start to speak, no doubt on the phone in order to find someone to watch Haley and Allison for me.

Looking out for me. Like he always did.



Swamped. The bar was freaking swamped.

The Cabin was *never* this busy. Either that, or three days out of practice had me acting like a newbie again because I was seriously struggling to keep up.

And as nosey as my regulars were, not even one asshole said something about my fairly obvious facial bruising. It was weird.

I had spent the day pouring over files and folders and trying to rationalize an answer out of a pile of questions.

Basically, I had spent several hours working and ended up even more confused than when I started.

We were missing some crucial detail, something that would tie all of the mysteries together, but thus far, I hadn't found it.

But with the fate of my freedom balancing on each and every mystery, you better believe I would.

The phone in my pocket started to ring, and instead of being a good employee, I checked it.

I had no bartending aspirations. Several types of phone calls would be more important than serving some drunk fuck his seventh drink.

I managed to answer on the second ring after seeing who it was, and moved quickly from the bar to the mild privacy of the back room.

There was no door, but at least I didn't have people right on top of me, so I had the space to suck up properly.

"Swear to Christ, Hales, I'm not avoiding you. Believe it or not, I was really busy today. I was actually just about to call you," I explained fully, feeling bad that I was using her tail as a crutch.

Wade's buddy, Calder, was on the job and had checked in with me earlier when they arrived in Moab. If I didn't have those check-ins, I would be forcing myself to stop and make more regular phone calls, and it wasn't fair to Haley.

"Sure you were," she teased. But the sting of her hurt was there. She wasn't upset, but she needed the reassurance of my calls. Especially with the direction I had taken things the night before.

"I was, Hales. I haven't been able to think about anything else all day."

"The almost phone sex or me in general?" she inquired boldly.

Je-sus Christ.

"Goddamn, baby doll." Taking a gulp of air, I glanced back out to the bar, and then turned my face away as I answered, "Both," on a gravelly admission.

And now I was semi-hard.

Excellent.

"Listen, I've been thinking about it and-" she started as a couple of regulars, Sue Ellen and Noah approached the open doorway.

"Not now," I told them angrily, covering the mouthpiece with my hand.

"We're tired of waiting, Danny!" they yelled. "Get back out here and serve our fucking drinks."

Pissed off beyond belief at the interruption combined with the knowledge that they wouldn't leave me alone until I filled their glasses, I softened my voice and exhaled, "Hales, God baby, I am so sorry, but I've got to go."

"Alright," she retorted, her disappointment evident.

Great. Now she was upset.

The complete opposite of how I wanted her to be after talking to me.

"Baby doll, do not read anything into this. We'll talk about everything, first chance I get. I promise," I attempted to comfort her.

"I...Well, I like you, Danny," she murmured softly. "I'll wait for your call."

And just like that she was gone.

I had to remind myself that neither smashing my phone nor Sue Ellen and Noah's faces would do me any good.

As I left the back room and came to a halt behind the bar again, I found that they had actually done me a favor.

Because a fake blond woman with softly rounded features stood at the door with a smirk on her face, and she was one of the last people I wanted listening to my phone call.

Isla.

Sauntering from the door to the bar with a sway of her hips that didn't go unnoticed by male patrons, she settled onto the stool directly in front of me and greeted, "Hello, Daniel. I see your face is healing. Perhaps someone should check the state of your body." And then she winked.

Ah, fuck.

Why did I do this again?

Oh, right. Justice for the world. Finding the right end of the right and wrong compass, or stick or whatever, that kind of thing.

In the beginning it seemed like a glamorous cause, but the luster had really fucking faded with time.

"No one calls me Daniel," I informed her of something that was, in fact, true.

"I think it suits you. And that's what really matters, isn't it? What *I* think."

"I'm not sure. Is there a reason it should matter to me?" I threatened boldly.

She smiled, the crazy bitch. "I'll see you tomorrow night. Nine. You know where to be."

"Nope. You won't. I work here tomorrow night at nine," I disagreed. Contrary to what they would have you believe, these kind of people don't want easy. I would be fun as long as I was a challenge. For as long as I could entertain her, she would keep me around.

And it was my job to make sure that was long enough to get the information I needed in order to make a successful bust.

"Alright, Daniel, the morning after next then," she agreed as she slid off of the stool and sashayed her way slowly to the door.

I leaned into the bar, my arms planted wide, and watched her go. My bruises had just faded to manageable levels. Hopefully, I wouldn't find them replaced by more. Or perhaps accessorized by a nice bullet hole.

It would be a cruel move if God let me die before experiencing the sweetness of Haley's body as we made love.

Made love.

Made *love*.

Yep, I was fucked.

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## Chapter 20

“I hear the third party in your love triangle showed at the bar last night,” Wade inquired in search of confirmation, but also, in large part, to tease me.

“This is not a fucking love triangle. It’s a love line, and that bitch is standing right between me and what I want.”

“Love, huh?”

Shit.

“Well, look who’s a tricky bastard,” I sneered amiably as I turned to face him and was overpowered by his smile. “Fine. Love. Yes. Deal with it.”

“Knew I loved Melly after three days. Sometimes you just mesh. And this girl, with you, I see it. She lights you up like a fucking firecracker.”

Taking a seat on the wicker love seat on the porch, I set my tea down on the table beside me and settled my laptop into my lap.

I had just gotten a phone call from Calder, telling me about a big old scene our performers were creating at the Grand Canyon, and that had been followed shortly by a text message from Haley pretending to be falling off the side of a cliff.

Apparently her intention was to make me panic, but people don’t send text messages in emergency situations, and they certainly don’t send them from the person in peril’s phone.

I pulled up YouTube, scanning the latest videos, and it didn’t take me long to find it.

As Wade heard the voices start to play over the speaker, he abandoned his spot and settled in next to me to watch. Following Haley’s swan dive, they ranted for a solid five minutes about the ins and outs of their virginity, their dialogue worthy of a stand up comedy act. But at the same time, it was touching. Allison’s obvious love for her lost husband, her first love, ached in the depths of her voice and came across clearly even through the disconnect of video.

This is what viral videos were made of. Heartache and happiness; a healthy mix of both. No wonder they already had so many hits.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I called her back without delay.

I’d made a concerted effort to text and call her all day today, every opportunity I got, but we still hadn’t had a chance to talk about the

important stuff.

As Wade's thigh brushed up against mine, I was reminded why.

Privacy.

Or the lack of it.

Neither one of us could seem to find the right amount of time alone in order to have the kind of conversation we needed to.

I was still laughing from the video when she answered, which wasn't well received.

"What the hell?!" she shouted at me, outraged that I wasn't concerned for her life as it hung in the balance.

Supposedly.

"Babe, I knew it wasn't real," I explained, trying to cushion the blow.

"That picture looked authentic! It looked like we were fighting for our damn lives!" she argued loudly.

"Hales, no way would you have been taking pictures and sending them to me had your life actually been in mortal danger."

I could feel her start to deflate, the vibes of her adrenaline high starting to wear off. "Plus, I saw the video of you and Allison on YouTube. Classic."

She still said nothing, and for once, I was the one filling the silence.

"By the way," I continued.

"What?" she lashed out.

I smiled anyway, undeterred. Especially since I knew where I was going with this.

"You look really beautiful."

I could tell I shocked her when the ice at my ear warmed, her quiet, affectionate voice offering a sweet, "Thanks, Danny."

I absolutely loved turning her from sour to sweet.

"What are you up to, Dan-o?" she asked, and when she used that nickname, the way she used it, I didn't want to be named anything other than stupid Dan Smith. "Besides pining away for my company of course," she added while trying to achieve cuteness. And she did, but she also managed some startling accuracy.

I chuckled and answered truthfully, "Just getting ready to go to work."

"What time is it there?"

"I'm two hours ahead of you, baby doll."

“Huh. I would have thought only one,” she said, sounding adorably confused.

I tried to explain it to her, but I could tell it went right over her head. And it wasn’t because she wasn’t smart, it was because she only half listened when it wasn’t something of consequence. “It would be, but the Grand Canyon doesn’t recognize Daylight-Saving time.”

“Crap. Whatever. You’re confusing me, so I’ll just take your word that you’re two hours ahead.”

“Good idea,” I replied through a smile.

“How did you occupy your morning?”

“Besides watching you on YouTube?” I teased. “Reading, of course.”

Which was, naturally, true. I had been reading both books and files, studying up on the Villanuevos.

“Of course.”

“I definitely see why you like these books so much,” I said as I gave Wade the side eye, suggesting he should move his ass back to his own seat.

He did me one better, rounding the coffee table and heading inside, leaving me to my privacy on the porch.

Elaborating further, I told her, “The sex is good, and the dialogue is damn funny.”

“Agreed.”

“I also went out on the four-wheeler for a little while, just to clear my head.” I had a lot of thoughts, some bad, some really fucking good, rolling around in my brain, and a nice ride on the four-wheeler helped to cleanse the extraneous.

“Did you tell my baby four-wheeler that its mommy will be back for it and not to worry?”

“Um, no,” I broke it to her gently.

“Will you go tell it I said hello before you go to work?” she tested me, pushing on the bounds of our relationship to see what she could get away with.

“I tell you what,” I offered. “How about I don’t, but tell you I did?”

She pretended to pout, a staged whine just barely carrying through the line, but the sound of her upturned mouth ruined the effect. “Well it would have worked, but you ruined the illusion by telling me.”

My laughter turned into hers, as I gently parted ways. “Gotta go, baby. Gotta go tell your baby you said hello, and then run to work.” I had been

upping the affection in a steady climb. She took it easily, but I wasn't sure whether she had made note of the transition or not. Joking, I told her, "The boss really rides my ass if I'm late."

"Bye Danny," she continued to laugh, and I could have sworn it was the best sound in the world. Her laughter, caused by me.

It was freeing and fulfilling in a way that my life had predominantly lacked.

But she was filling the holes one by one without even knowing it.

"Bye, my beautiful Haley," I murmured in parting, the words rolling off of my tongue as naturally as a curse word.



Work didn't feel quite as hurried that night, and I had no surprise visitors. In fact, I hadn't spotted anyone following me since my involuntary visit to the warehouse. Whether that was because they weren't interested in my every move anymore or they had figured a more sophisticated system for monitoring, I had no idea.

Maybe they felt they had gathered all the information they needed and figured me out.

Unfortunately, it was anyone's guess. I didn't have the answers, and I had a feeling I never would.

We were approaching the finish line though, a sense of foreboding excitement forming in my bones and moving outward, taking hold of the muscle, and feeding my sense of purpose.

The sooner I solved everything, the sooner I would get my life back. The sooner I could start living a life with Haley. One where she knew all my secrets, including the fact that she was mine.

Because at the moment, without the time to have a necessary conversation, she still didn't know. I tried to lay my hints, but my standoffishness on the front end was working against me.

When I pulled into the garage at home, I called her before hefting my body out and carting it into the house. Her ever-present banter prevailed, the sound of a Las Vegas casino floor churning in the background.

Our conversation didn't last long, and it didn't sink deep, but it was good to hear her voice nonetheless.



The next morning was surreal, pulling up to the warehouse where I'd been beaten, and doing it willingly.

It seemed like a pretty foolish thing to do, but I was starting to get used to doing ill-advised things for the cause.

I moved inside carefully, scanning my surroundings as I went and preparing myself to catalogue each and every thing I saw.

Sergio was the one who met me inside.

Again, not good.

I didn't exactly like Isla, but she looked far less like she wanted to kill me than her brother did at pretty much all times.

"Kano," he greeted roughly, his voice not even trying to hide his distaste.

He didn't like me, didn't see my use, and he wanted me dead.

What I couldn't figure out was why I wasn't.

"The only thing I like about you is your reach. You seem to have the ability to pull from locations untapped by many others."

This was true.

I had made connections, built them as necessary, but if I was being fair, my success wasn't all mine. A lot of it had been given to me, and a lot of it was the result of hours and hours of Wade's research. Given enough time, he could pull a detail out of a file that was a game changer, a detail that had been passed over by countless others.

It was a special talent, and I desperately wanted to learn it. But I wasn't sure it was something that could be developed, but rather was an innate talent, something with which Wade had been born blessed.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," I declared, refusing to beat around the bush with all sorts of bullshit. I needed a reason for coming back to this place, a reason to put in all the work that being a mole would entail.

"You're going to share your shipments with us," he said on an evil chuckle, "just like you did a couple of days ago."

"And what's in it for me?" I asked.

"You live."

"Not good enough," I fired back instantaneously.

His voice was downright sinister when he whispered, "Not good enough?"

"No, it's not. The only way I'm sharing my operation with you is if you share yours with me."

“I see you’re not getting this, but you don’t have a choice, Kano,” he spat condescendingly.

“Yeah, I do,” I shot back, unwilling to waver. Them stealing my business did me absolutely no good. I refused to roll over no matter the risks.

“Then it seems we’re at an impasse,” he declared. “We’ll see which of us that works out better for.”

Pissed, I turned on my boot and stormed out of the warehouse. My time had been wasted, and nothing had been gained.

At least not for me. They had to know I wouldn’t agree to just giving them my business. So reasonably, they had to be getting something else out of it. And I was going to figure out what if it was the last thing I did.

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## Chapter 21

Back to being ignored by the Villanuevos, I spent all of my free time either explicitly mapping out the details of everything I'd seen, heard, or witnessed in all of my experiences with them.

But it wasn't until Wade got a phone call from an informant, that the puzzle pieces finally gathered on the same table. They sure as fuck weren't put together, but it was possible. Finally.

"Informant just told me that they moved a shipment yesterday, at the same time that Sergio was giving you the run around at that meaningless warehouse."

"I don't understand," I started, only to stop myself with the answer.

My wide eyes flicked up to Wade as I connected the dots. "Sergio isn't running that show. Isla is."

God, yes. That was what was off about the whole thing.

"What makes you say that?" Wade asked.

"It seems so obvious now," I murmured to myself. "Sergio follows orders from Isla. I watched an entire exchange between them where he cowed to her orders. Sure, I have no idea what she was ordering because she was speaking Filipino—something we should have learned, by the way—but the body language was unmistakable. He resented her for it, definitely, but he did what she said."

After a brief pause to think, I added, "That's probably why I'm alive, come to think of it."

"And she's the one who sent me to that warehouse this morning. She told me to come the night before, but I turned her down. But she's smart. Smarter than I want to give her credit for. She knows me, she's studied my personality, and she knew I wouldn't agree. So she agreed to yesterday morning, making it seem like my idea, when really, it was just what she wanted."

"She wanted you busy so that you couldn't follow their shipment," he surmised.

"Yep."

"Well, shit." Pointing toward the mess on the table in front of me he petitioned, "Hand me her file, will you? I'm going to go over this thing with a fine tooth comb."

Shaking my head I whispered, "All this time...two years...we've been looking in the wrong direction."

"No," Wade disagreed. "We've just been overlooking the obvious. But you caught it. And now, we can end this. We can get back to our lives." He paused and smiled, his affection radiating off of him like a mist. "You can start one with Haley."

Speak of the devil, my phone blared out its ring. A glance at the screen confirmed it was her, and I answered without delay.

She didn't greet me at all, but instead launched into the opening for one of her rants.

Man, I missed her.

"I think I have a gambling problem," she told me, the hum of the convertible and Allison in the background. They must have been on their way out of Vegas.

My phone beeped in my ear, and I had no doubt that it was a text message from Calder informing me of exactly that.

He'd been a good tail, not quite like having Georgie on the job, but he kept alert and uninvolved. That was all I could really ask for.

"How much money did you lose?" I asked through a chuckle, noticing the curve of Wade's lip out of the corner of my eye.

I think he was actually happy for me.

"Forty fucking dollars!" she shouted in my ear, forcing me to pull the phone away and wince from the intensity.

"Um," I mumbled as I pressed the phone back to the side of my face carefully.

"Do you know what I could buy with forty dollars?" she ranted on, seething with outrage. I could just see her wringing her hand on the wheel with crazy eyes.

And all over forty dollars.

"These days?" I asked, knowing she wasn't going to like my answer. "Not much."

Of course, I was right, so she moved on, steering her rant in another direction.

"Vegas isn't good for me, Dan-o. If I stayed for even one more day, I would be a damaged woman when I left. Or poor. Or maybe I would be "winning" but only Charlie Sheen's version."

Fuck me. Charlie Sheen's version of winning. I almost asked her if that involved a prostitute, but I refrained, stating instead, "Then by all means, get the hell out. I like you just like you are."

She was silent, no doubt lost in her head, but I really needed to move this phone call along.

I had something I wanted to ask her, but in order to do it, I needed to get shit done and make things happen.

"Haley?" I prompted, to which I got no response.

"Hales?" I tried again, snapping her out of her head and finally getting her attention.

"Sorry, Danny!" she squeaked, hopefully not only focused on me again, but also the road. She was driving after all.

"Fuck," I whispered to myself, knowing I was being an idiot again, but not caring enough to stop myself. I missed her. And with any luck at all—and a lot of hard fucking work—I would bust this case wide open before it mattered.

"I want you to come back to Alabama when you're done on the west coast. You and Allison drive back in your car, spend the night, and then I'll pay for a plane ticket for her to fly back to Knoxville so we can have a few days just the two of us."

Wade's head whipped up in shock, but I ignored him. I needed this. I would do whatever I had to do to make it safe, work whatever angles I needed to, lose as much sleep as necessary, but I was doing it.

"And that was an order, not a request. It's not open for discussion, negotiation, bartering or anything else you can come up with. And I know you don't follow orders, but you're still fucking going to."

I knew that was controlling, but I really didn't fucking care. I needed to see her, and I wasn't going to let anyone tell me no. Even her. Maybe especially her.

If I wanted a life with her, I was going to have to start being convincing.

"Now, I gotta go," I said regretfully, but I had a lot of work to do in a short amount of time. I had backed myself into that corner, but given the reward, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. "Be careful, let me know when you get there, try to stay out of trouble," I said, paused slightly, and then amended, "well, too much trouble, and don't stay out there too long before you get your cute, little ass back here."

“Are you talking to me?” she protested, just for the sake of protesting. “Because my ass is-”

Cutting her off, I said my goodbyes. As much as I wanted to listen to her ramble, I didn’t have the time. And with any luck that would pay off in a big way about a week from now. At least, that was my estimate of how long it would be before they got back.

“Gotta go, baby doll. Talk to you soon.”

As I hung up the call, I looked up at Wade and met his eyes, taking responsibility for my actions. “That’s happening, and I don’t care what I have to do to make it so. So let’s get to fucking work and end this shit before she gets here.”

I waited one beat, and then two, and finally, I was met with the blinding whiteness of Wade’s wide smile.



I worked my ass off, and still, I came up empty. Until the night before Allison and Haley were scheduled to come rolling into town.

Optimism had still won out though. Allison’s flight was scheduled for the morning after next, and plans had been discussed with Haley excitedly.

Well, mostly she talked excitedly, and I just listened with a smile on my face or a laugh in my throat.

But finally, while I was standing behind the bar, Isla came sauntering in, a smirk on her face, her blond hair freshly dyed. I’d imagine she had to do it quite often because of the contrast between her naturally dark hair and the nearly platinum blond of her dye. I was no woman, but roots must have been a bitch.

“Hello, Daniel,” she acknowledged me, settling her petite frame onto the stool at the bar.

“Isla,” I received her in return, wandering which way this meeting was going to go and looking at her with a completely different set of eyes. They were still my rich hazel, but now they were in the know. And they were watching her every move.

“I’m headed to the Philippines to visit my tatay—my father—for several days. He’s ill, and business needs to be seen to.”

“Okay,” I said on a nod, unsure why she was telling me these details.

Maybe she wanted me to let my guard down. That seemed to make the most sense.

“In the meantime you should avoid my brother. He’ll avoid you, but you should return the favor. He tends to be unpredictable when I’m not around,” she warned me.

The question was, why was she warning me?

She read it clearly on my face, and didn’t waste time filling in the blanks. At least, with the information she wanted me to have.

“You’re cute, Daniel. I want you to be around when I get back.”

Just like before, she didn’t stick around, sliding off of the stool with a wink and heading for the door.

All I could hope was that it was the truth.

Well, hope, and research thoroughly.

Wade didn’t raise no fool.

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## Chapter 22

Flight 4461 All Nippon Airways.

Isla Villanuevo was guaranteed on that flight earlier this morning, confirmed by the FAA, clearing the way for me to bring Haley into town as planned.

Granted, Sergio was still home, from what we knew, and he was the one who hated me more.

But Wade was doing me a solid, relieving Calder and acting as invisible, personal security for myself and Haley for the next few days.

He would be my eyes and my ears so that I didn't have to, and I couldn't think of anyone I trusted with the task more.

Wade didn't bust my balls, instead resigning himself to doing my bidding for the interim, and followed me to The Beach Club, affording me the opportunity to greet Hales and Allison at their hotel when they arrived.

I had missed her. Her smell and mannerisms, combined with the sound of her laugh and the warmth of her smile. And as soon as I could finagle it, I was going to get my arms around her and hold on tight.

She was completely oblivious as I watched her pull in, no doubt road weary and the antithesis of alert, but as I approached her door, I thought she would see me.

Of course, with Haley, I was going to have to teach myself to expect the unexpected.

She jumped and screamed, her shriek piercing the night air like the bleep of a siren, falling haplessly into a helpless Allison's lap. Not surprisingly, this set off Allison's screams, her nails clawing at the door like a trapped animal and nearly deafening Haley by whaling her fears right into her ear.

I tried to get their attention verbally, but before long it became clear their terror would need something stronger to break its hold.

Leaning into the empty driver's side, I blasted the horn three short times, thankfully, bringing their bodies to ease and silencing the shrill, ear-splitting blast of their screams.

Wade must have been pissing himself with laughter. Christ, that was undeniable. Tailing these women was not boring, how stake-outs could so

often be. You stayed perked up and watching because you never knew what they would come up with next.

I shook my head slowly and let a smile just touch the tips of my lips.

Another, much more innocent, use of “just the tip”.

“What is wrong with you?! Didn’t you learn your effing lesson when you snuck up on us at the beach?! We don’t handle sneaking well!” Haley yelled, apparently not learning her lesson after her freak out almost brought down the roof.

“Christ, Hales, quiet. You’re gonna wake up everyone within a twenty mile radius of Gulf View,” I shouted back, but added a whisper. It was a shouty-whisper. Intense but quiet, all at the same time.

“And whose fault is that?” she continued to yell in return.

Losing hold on my patience, I shouted back, “I thought you saw me! I wasn’t trying to scare you!”

“Bumpy ride.” That came from an amused Allison, and it was delivered in a deliberate mutter.

“Well, aren’t you just a know it all!” Haley snapped, this time baring her fangs at her sweet mother.

A laugh rumbled out of my chest, easy and carefree for the first time in ages, knowing Wade was watching over us.

I wasn’t even sure how it happened, didn’t see it coming, but within the blink of an eye, Haley had scrambled her way across the car and launched herself into my arms.

She wrapped me up tight, her ankles clenching behind my back while her hands did the same around my neck. Her soft citrus scent was strong, the strands of her auburn-brown hair adding to the allure by engulfing my face.

It felt incredibly good.

Incredibly right.

Incredibly real.

Like it was meant to be.



I didn’t hang around that night. I knew they were exhausted, and I wanted her to have another night with her mom. Officially end their road trip together, an experience meant for them, not me.

I was just a detail in their stories, the same way they were a detail in mine.

The same way all people are just pieces of each others' lives.

Hopefully, their slice of pie in the pie graph that was my life would grow and expand with time, but no matter what, no matter their significance, they would still only be a piece.

Life's funny like that. Someone can be enough to be your world, but they're still only a part of you, no matter how hard you fight to make them fill the entire space.

The next morning, we dropped Allison off at the airport, something I was feeling a little bad about, but she seemed happy to go.

I could only imagine that after that much time away from home, that much driving and drama, she was ready for a little break. To settle back into the routine of her life.

"What are we doing?" Haley asked as we pulled into my driveway, flying completely blind to all of the plans I had.

And to be honest, I only had a few, and most of them centered around touching her.

But the things that were thought out, strategized, were either things I knew she would enjoy or those she had alluded to on her list.

"I figured you would want to say hello to someone," I responded as we pulled in.

She was confused for a minute, looking around before coming to the obvious conclusion.

"Wade?"

Still, it was the hilarious way she said it, like she wasn't excited to see Wade at all, that made me bark out a sudden burst of laughter.

"Um, no. Sorry to disappoint you, but Wade's gone for the next few days," I explained, smearing the truth just marginally. He was gone, he just wasn't far.

"Butch?" she questioned, causing me to completely lose my hold on my control. Belly laughs so deep they ached rolled through me, bringing me a natural high I wasn't sure I had ever experienced.

Obviously, Haley was the best kind of drug.

"No, baby doll. But you are right on topic," I said on a squeeze of her dainty knee.

After that clue, she was with me, excitement overwhelming her and making her throw her hands straight into the air, her head slamming back into the headrest.

“My baby! You’re taking me to ride! I knew there was a reason I loved you!”

My breath stalled in my chest, but I kept my eyes forward after noticing the pink flooding her cheeks like a reservoir unleashed by a busted dam.

She hadn’t meant to say it, but she *had* meant it. I only hoped she felt the same way when all of the dust settled and just the two of us were left standing in the open.

She felt awkward because of her accidental admission, so I took the opportunity to touch her and comforted her again, squeezing her knee and adding a lingering pat at the end.

Flicking my wrist to turn off the ignition, I left my car in the driveway for the first time ever. I would put it away later, but right then, at that moment, I just wanted to get close to my girl.

She jumped out in a hurry and rounded the hood in my direction, the panic in her voice rising as she noted, “Danny, I just realized I don’t have any-”

And I knew she was thinking about a change of clothes. I didn’t have much knowledge of the female mind, but this one wasn’t too hard to decode.

“You do,” I cut in.

“Um, I don’t,” she protested, scrunching her brows and cocking one hip into attitude stance. “And how do you even know what I’m talking about?”

“Because I had Allison pack you a bag with clean clothes and any other girly shit you use to get ready,” I said simply, ignoring the hip and raising an eyebrow of my own in challenge.

She was gearing up to argue some more, I could feel it, so I moved to “handle” her as her mother would put it.

“Danny-” she began, only to be stopped by me.

“Hales,” I interrupted. “I think I can hear your baby crying for its mommy all the way from here.”

That got her attention, and it did it in a hurry. I reached out to her with a hand, and she didn’t hesitate to close hers around it. She picked up her most excited of gates, a half-walk, half-skip combination that was becoming one of her signature moves.

Or, I guess, it had *been* one of her moves. I was just learning it.

Leading her into the house, into my bedroom, and ending in my closet, I grabbed another shirt and tossed it to her. She shut herself in the bathroom immediately, a slight disappointment, but definitely not a surprise.

It didn't take me long to realize that I hadn't given her any time to grab her bag, so I jogged back out to the car, grabbed it, and moved even more quickly back into the house.

Being kind of a douche, I just opened the door, regardless of her desire for modesty and handed her her bag, leaning in and placing a lingering kiss on the apple of her cheek before retreating.

She stood there in the open door for a minute, reacting to my kiss, but finally pulled herself out of it, shutting the door and changing her pants with haste.

I moved out of the bedroom and headed to the living room, knowing she would find me when she was ready.

Haley wanted to get on her four-wheeler, and I wasn't going to stop her with a simple disappearing act.

Settling into the couch to wait, I crossed my ankle to my knee like usual and sank into the cushions, basking in the glow of having Haley in my house.

"Ready?" I asked as she entered the living room shortly after.

"Uh, yeah," she responded like she was saying, "Uh, duh." Apparently, I had asked a silly question. "Let's go!"

Hefting my weight off of the couch, I stood at my full height and did it while I laughed.

I think I had laughed more often with her in the span of an hour than I had in the entirety of the rest of my life. No matter what, she was always amusing me.

Sometimes when she wasn't even trying to.

Most often when she was handing me her attitude in order to dole out some sort of punishment.

I liked all of it.

Reaching out between us, I laced our fingers together, squeezing when they reached their fully curled position, and then led her to the back porch, through it, and out into the field, setting a brisk pace on our way to the shed.

Hacking and coughing and breathing heavy, she struggled beside me, reminding me that her short little legs had to work sixteen times as hard as

mine. I often forgot because I was convinced her legs were magic. She was tiny, as were they, but they managed to look like they were six feet long.

Instead of slowing down, I stopped, swung her up onto my back, and rejoiced when she looped her legs around my waist to hold on.

Man, I was thinking I should keep her like that at all times.

I knew we hadn't talked about her feelings, but I was hoping my actions were doing at least some of the speaking for me. I touched, caressed, or kissed her any chance I got, and I wasn't sure how she could misinterpret that.

It took me no time at all to get to the shed with her on my back, so I reached around, settled my hands on her ass, and eased her down, her breasts sliding deliciously along my back the whole way.

She made me even harder in person, as made sense since I had just had my hands on her perfect ass, but it made an adjustment necessary. I tried to be as discreet as possible, but if she noticed my reaction at this point, it wasn't the end of the world.

She rushed to her four-wheeler, like it would disappear if she didn't get there quickly, and pulled the ponytail holder off of her wrist to secure the copper fall of her hair in a low ponytail. Pulling the helmet on her head with ease, she cut to the chase and skipped the struggle this time. Tilting her head, she whined, "Help me," with a pathetic pout of her plump bottom lip.

Placing my helmet on the seat of my ride, I helped her out, swiping the pad of my index finger along her feminine jaw as I moved away.

I wanted to pepper the line of that jaw with kisses, licks, and nibbles, and I intended to make my wishes come true before long.

I climbed astride and gestured for her to do the same on her mini me.

I started it up, letting it warm up a little, and she copied me as I expected.

When I was happy with the state of the engine, I looked over my shoulder and waited for her nod. She was ready.

And so was I.

Only, my readiness had little to do with the machine between my legs and more to do with the warm, wet treasure between hers.



When we finished up with the four-wheelers, I pulled Haley back into the house and offered her my shower first. I didn't have anything that

needed searching, and I would really rather have her in a better mood, so I started up Project Butter Her Up. It wasn't hard, all of the activities of this project coinciding with the behavior I would have displayed anyway.

After that, I used my limited culinary skills to make her a chicken and lettuce wrap, joking and bantering as we shared space in the kitchen.

It was nice. Domestic.

Completely foreign to me.

Finally, I led her outside, pulled my car into the garage, and took out my motorcycle, eager to tick off her M.

But it hadn't been going as expected.

It was enjoyable, definitely. Anything where her body wrapped around mine was a win in my book, but she didn't seem comfortable, and that really surprised me.

"Is there a reason you're climbing me like a fucking spider monkey?" I questioned as we came to a stop at a red light, allowing me to turn my head and watch her facial expressions. "You're the one who put having a motorcycle on your list. Call me crazy, but I thought that implied that you like riding on one."

"I've never been on one before, thank you very much, and it's scary," she informed me unexpectedly.

Wow. Like I said, expect the unexpected.

"You put it on the list, and you've never been on one before?" I said on an exhale, the volume of my voice and pattern of my breathing betraying my slight exasperation.

"Well, yeah," she retorted on a shrug. "It sounds really hot in books. And I do like it, but that doesn't mean I don't feel like I could die at any minute," she said as she dug her hands into my waist like talons.

I glanced over my shoulder again and shook my head slightly, attempting to comfort her with a statement that was anything but consoling. "If it makes you feel any better, you don't have to be on a motorcycle to be in danger of dying any minute. Freak accidents and all that."

"You know, Dan-o. Somehow, that doesn't make me feel better at all. Can't imagine why."

I let my laughter go, shaking my body and hers. When she plastered herself even closer to me as a result, I just about lost my mind.

So this was what life felt like.

Free. Fulfilling. And really fucking enjoyable.

Grabbing her hands quickly, I pulled them toward my face and placed a small kiss on her palm, and then cinched them tighter around my waist.

When the light turned green, I cracked open the throttle and smiled, letting the freedom of the ride and the girl at my back take me away.

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## Chapter 23

When we pulled up back at the house, I was riding a high so tall I felt like I was flying.

I lifted Haley off of the bike with my hands spanning her hips, lingering just slightly on the sliver of skin that exposed itself from the ride.

She stepped back from me and ran her hands through her hair, before throwing her hands out to the side and yelling, “Fuck, Danny!” in a voice I wasn’t expecting.

She wasn’t happy. She wasn’t riding the high like me. She was upset and her voice was hoarse with the strain.

“What are you trying to do to me? I’m about one breakdown short of being committed from all of your fucking mixed signals!”

I knew it wasn’t the time to joke, but sometimes I just couldn’t help myself.

“Well, you’ll look good in the jacket. White’s a good color on you.”

It didn’t take long to realize I should have listened to my instincts and passed on the poke in the form of a joke.

Her clear turquoise eyes filled with tears, and I stepped toward her only to be brought up short by an annoyed hand. “I will effing throat punch you!”

She cocked her arm back, the emotion overwhelming her, and in that moment, I didn’t think. I just moved.

Stepping into her completely, I slammed her body against mine and brought my lips down on hers with the intensity of twenty-two years.

I shuffled her back towards the motorcycle, careful to just press her up against it without tipping it over.

Time stood still as I slowed the movement of my lips, working my way to the very outside edge of both of hers. Her cupid’s bow was prominent, and I made sure to pay special attention to it, exploring the lines and curves languidly.

My heart beat fast and my breaths were uneven, but my lips battled successfully against the urge to rush and took their time, savoring the moment, one we wouldn’t ever get back.

This was our first time really connecting, giving in to the passion that had rumbled between us from the very first conversation.

Her eyes fluttered as she tilted her head in perfect invitation, working with me instead of against me.

She melted into me, letting the moment sweep her away and trusting me to keep watch over her physical safety. Reverently, I moved my hands from her arms to her sides, gliding even further down to her hips and staying for a while. When they got their temporary fill there, I moved them to her jaw, cupping the weight and fragility of it in my hands and caressing her cheeks with my thumbs.

The sensitivity of my skin heightened, the pleasure of her skin on my fingertips feeling just as good as it would have on my dick.

At least, that's what I chose to believe because the idea of pleasure greater than this was completely unfathomable.

I could have explored just those areas for hours, but there was more to discover, even more that Haley had to offer. Using my tongue to part the delicate seam of her lips, I ran just the tip around the rim of her entire mouth, introducing myself to her taste and taking my time.

She was sweet, the taste of Coke like heaven on my tongue as it transferred from hers.

It was a struggle at first, and my lips never moved from hers, but she managed to raise herself onto her toes and surround my shoulders with the warmth of her arms.

The heat of the day mixed with my arousal and created a potent steam of pheromones and sex rising off of both of us as we pressed even harder against one another.

As I explored her taste buds, I pulled her deeper into my body, exposing my hardness for the first time as I ground it into her taut abdomen.

I wanted her, and she wanted me, and it wouldn't be long before we ate each other alive.

She started to sag with the intensity, but I supported her weight as she gave it to me, keeping her in the moment, eager to take each and every pound of her into my arms.

Slowly, she pried her lips from mine, looking up into my eyes and whispering, "Danny."

It was sweet and soft, and now that I had my lips off of hers, I spied her jaw and remembered what I wanted to do with it. I moved my lips over her skin, kissing my way down the line it created and spending a little extra time at the sensitive spot behind her ear.

God, she tasted good.

The fucking best.

The best I had *ever* tasted.

She repeated my name again, breathy and sensitive to my ministrations.  
“Danny.”

“Hales,” I said back, not knowing why she was saying my name, but not particularly interested. I was occupied by the fruity spot behind her ear, and I liked it.

She called out to me again, prompting me to respond in kind one more time.

“Great,” she gasped as I moved my lips along the crease of her collar bone, circling her hips with my hands and lifting so that I could plant her perfect ass on the seat of my bike. I was going to take her right here if I could manage it.

She moved her head to the side, fighting to keep talking. “We know each others’ names. But I actually have more of a point than that.”

Obviously, she wasn’t going to shut up until I addressed the issue at hand. Groaning and pulling away slowly, I focused on the heat of her pretty blue eyes and turned it up with the heat of my own.

“Dan-o, you are the one who told me I should stick to the list, and you are not the list,” she claimed ridiculously. Did she not feel my dick pressed into her stomach and the heat of her arousal radiating out from the center of her thighs?

Fuck the fucking list.

We were right for each other, and I thought she could feel it.

“I am the goddamn list, Hales,” I forced out, tightening my grip on her waist and pushing my arousal deeper into her stomach. “I’m fucking perfect for you.”

“Excuse me,” she cut in with a hand to my chest. “Mr. I Am the List. Just look at your name.”

Her face twisted with distaste as she explained, “Dan Fucking Smith.”

Stupid excuse.

That wasn’t even my name. As far as I was concerned, I didn’t give a shit what my name was.

“Fuck my stupid name. I’ll be Roper, or Eagle, or Mary Jane, or Gandalf the fucking wizard. Hales, my name can be whatever the fuck you want it to be. As long as when you say it, you’re calling for me.”

“But you said I should stick to the list. You made fun of me for it!” she protested, but this time a smile started to crack the vault of her lips.

She was toying with me.

Fucking hell.

I guess I deserved it.

“Yeah, baby. That’s because I didn’t want you to end up with whatever-that-guy’s-name-was. I would have made up some other shit to keep you from giving him a shot if he’d had a better name.”

Her heart rate picked up, and her face registered genuine surprise. I really thought I had been more obvious than that.

“You, of all people, remember his name was Tom,” she pushed again, just for the sake of pushing.

“You’re right. I do remember Tom, the pleat wearing asshole who eye-fucked you every time you turned your head away. But the memory of him is so insignificant compared to the memory of you, that it doesn’t even register,” I stressed, forcing her legs tightly around my hips and tipping her back to feel my arousal where she needed it. I was done with this.

She was mine, and I was fucking claiming her.

Her breasts heaved with her ragged breath, and my eyes licked up every luscious movement. I couldn’t wait to get my mouth on them; show them the attention they deserved.

“I remember everything about you from that night. The way the purple tank top looked against your skin, the way it made your eyes even more vividly blue, and the citrusy way you smelled. The way you respect your mom with words *and* actions, as unique as those may be, keeping one eye on her the entire time in order to look out for her safety. The way you looked me directly in the eye with unwavering confidence, and I even remember the exact words you spoke. I never ever fucking forget. I never knew how good that could be, how much of a fucking good thing it was, until the night you came into The Cabin. Before that, it had been nothing but a curse.”

“It was lavender,” she corrected like a crazy fucking woman.

“What?”

“The tank top was lavender.”

“Baby, I don’t speak girl. If it’s not in ROY G BIV, I don’t know it. It was fucking purple.”

She was still fighting it, unwilling to believe it was true despite the cloud of rightness that surrounded us.

“But you made me leave, you pushed me away, you-”

“I did all of those things, baby doll. I’m a dick and a douche and I’m both of those on a whole other level. But can we please discuss this when I have more blood in my brain than my dick? Because right now, the blood supply is definitely down below.”

Finally, she shut up, and I didn’t waste the opening, bringing my lips down to meet hers again.

This time I didn’t prime her, I didn’t explore, I just drove my tongue back inside, letting it dance with hers freely.

Holding her as tightly against me as possible, I slid my hands to the flesh at her hips, back up her sides, and then settled at the juncture of her neck. I couldn’t get enough of any one place, my hands running to keep up with my urges.

Wanting even deeper access to her sweet mouth, I used my thumbs to tip it backwards, exposing the line of her neck and drinking her in like it was the last glass of water in the desert. I drank slowly, but I made sure not to waste even one fucking drop.

When she moaned down my throat, my tongue stroked even deeper, eager to bring out more noises and pleasures.

As her intensity matched mine, our speed slow and savoring, I found myself groaning into her sweet mouth, pushing my rock hard dick deeper into her body subconsciously.

God, how I longed for her to be wearing a skirt, but it not only wasn’t practical on the motorcycle, it was something I myself had warned against. Not that I wanted her to be wary of me.

Luckily, I didn’t mind a challenge, skimming my fingers to the front of her jeans and working the button loose. I slid the zipper slowly down its track and continued to work her mouth with mine.

Tightening her grip around my shoulders, I lifted her up, pushing her legs back when they went to wrap around my waist on instinct.

I wanted them there, and badly, but I needed her pants gone first. I squeezed her ass to praise her as she let her legs dangle, and then moved my hands to her hips, skating my way inside of both her jeans and panties, flexing my fingertips into the newly discovered flesh.

It was soft and supple and so fucking silky I could barely stand it.

Giving her time to prepare, I settled my hands there, kneading and comforting for a few moments before separating the fabric from her flesh and pushing it over the ledge of her femininely rounded hips.

I followed her clothing down her legs, brushing them off when they hung against her skin while she toed off her boots to clear the way.

Once they were gone, we stood panting together, our breaths mingling and mixing even as our mouths still went at one another.

She wanted my clothes off too, I could tell, but that presented more of a problem.

So I gave her what I could.

Lifting her legs by the backs of her thighs, I spread her open to my eyes and pulled her wetness against the rough bulge in my jeans.

I moved us as a unit, throwing my leg over the bike to straddle it, her legs still open over my thighs and providing one of the best views I'd ever been offered.

I'd fantasized enough, but the reality was beyond the pale. She was bare and glistening, swollen and ready for me. Her skin the most delicate of pinks.

Neither of us bothered to say anything with words, but we were feeding off of each other, taking pleasure from seeing the rapture on each others' faces.

I'd never had sex on a bike, but I was fairly confident, with how determined I was, I'd have no problem making it happen. And I'd gladly share this first with the woman I was in love with.

Some other good news was that we were in the garage and Wade couldn't see us.

Talk about awkward. There was close, and then there was *close*, and I had no desire to traverse that line.

My mouth stayed on hers, soaking up every reaction, moan, and gasp like a sponge.

Slowly, she removed her hands from around my neck and slid them down my chest, running them along the ridges of my abdomen and shaking as she did. It wasn't nerves though, it was the fact that she was so fucking turned on that her body was spiking.

I was finding myself in a similar place. She moved to the front of my jeans, working my button and zipper just like I had worked hers—with

skill. She made sure to protect my cock, which I appreciated, freeing it from its confines.

Feeling the magnetism, it stretched out toward her, craving her touch. She reached inside of my boxers, wrapped her fingers around me, and swirled her thumb directly around the tip as she pulled him outside.

I dug my hands into her hips, groaning and fighting the urge to embarrass myself.

She pulled back from my mouth in order to look at our intimacy, and I followed her lead.

She was so close, just waiting to be filled, and I was there, stretched out, eager, and ready to fill her.

“Danny,” she pleaded, shifting her hips toward me restlessly.

I was lost, but not so much that I didn’t remember to protect her.

“In my pocket,” I instructed, filling my hands with her body, as she reached into my pocket to grab the condom.

She gave me a look, one that was curious, and getting used to the way her mind worked, I had a feeling I knew what she needed to know.

“I’ve had one with me every time I’ve seen you, baby doll,” I said, looking her in the eyes and sweeping my thumb along her jaw, and then admitting the truth. “Didn’t know when my resolve and self-control were going to crumble, but I knew it would happen at some point.”

She didn’t respond, instead rolling the condom down my shaft as my eyes burned holes right into hers.

Sliding my hand from her jaw to her hip, I lifted her up softly as I cupped her round ass in both hands. Each cheek provided a perfect handful.

She rested a hand on my shoulder for support and reached the other between us, positioning my tip at her opening. I took my time, bringing her down and around me slowly, meeting her eyes the entire time.

About halfway down it started to become too much for her, as she laced her hands behind my neck and let her head fall back, her eyes closing in ecstasy.

Unfortunately for her, I wasn’t okay with it. In the future, sure, but now, in this moment, during our first connection, I wanted her eyes.

I wanted to ride the whole journey with her, never losing the personal contact I had never had in any of my other encounters.

I squeezed her hips and slowed her decent until her eyes came back to mine.

“Eyes, baby,” I growled roughly. “You and me, we’re going to live this together. We’re going to be present in each other the whole damn time.”

She was tight and I was big, but after a short while I finally found my seat all the way inside of her. I stretched her to the max, and cognizant of that, I gave her some time to acclimate before I even attempted to move.

Our position, sitting up and facing one another with her legs draped over mine, was beyond intimate, and the eye contact made it even better.

I’d had plenty of sex over the years, but I had never felt anything like this. This was life changing.

This was the kind of thing I’d die to keep.

We moved together slowly, as much as the position allowed, our breaths mingling in time with one another in a way that sounded like music. I never took my eyes off of hers, the brightest blue flecks standing out in wonder as she searched the depths of my hazel.

She needed more, to be even closer, and she slid her hands down and then up again under my shirt.

Bracing her with an arm to keep her steady, I reached behind my shoulder blades and pulled my shirt off with the other. My rib was still smarting and the light bruising was still there, yellow in tint, but both of us were too preoccupied to notice.

Not wanting to be alone, I pulled her shirt and bra off so that her skin met mine, and then pulled the ponytail holder out of her hair letting it fall down the length of her back.

I tucked it onto my wrist, continuing with my fetish of stealing them. I had managed to steal one every time I’d seen her, and I wasn’t going to stop now, our first time together.

Returning my lips to hers, I spoke directly against them. “You’re perfect, Haley. Never met a woman more perfect than you.”

She scoffed violently, producing a chuckle so potent from me that it almost ended in a snort.

I knew why she reacted that way. She had her flaws. But they weren’t flaws to me.

“Exactly the way you are, Haley. You’re perfect *for me*.”

## Chapter 24

Following the act itself, Haley still cuddled cozily into my bare chest, I wanted to bask in the moment.

Savor the snuggles.

That kind of thing.

Of course, for Haley, silence led to thinking, and thinking almost always led to a rant.

Without warning she leaned back, presenting her beautiful nipples to my view—something I could tell she didn't notice—and snapped, "You liked me the whole time, didn't you?! You were messing with me on purpose!"

Oh boy. Here we go.

"I most definitely wasn't messing with you, Hales," I murmured on a dissatisfied exhale. I wanted to go back to a couple of minutes ago, but she deserved an explanation. "I have had feelings for you from the very beginning, but there's a lot more to this than you think," I whispered softly, trying to explain and thinking of the best way to do it.

Alas, her half-listening habit took over. "You jedi-mind-tricked me!...No, it's worse than that. You jedi-*alpha*-mind-tricked me!"

In a way, she was right. I had had a hand in every move she made from the moment she met me. A lot more than she knew. But, ironically, that made me just like the men in her books, and I hadn't even tried.

Still, I didn't think admitting to all of my sins was the best way to go. The reason this worked was because it was the best system for both of us. Independence for her, peace of mind for me. If she knew the whole truth, it was bound to ruin it.

Especially with her stubborn streak.

I tried to be serious, but come on.

She was naked.

In my lap.

On my motorcycle.

And she was giving me one of her signature comical rants.

I was in heaven, and the smile on my face reflected that.

"You're like a Secret Alpha. Controlling the situation by using ass backward Jedi mind tricks."

Ha. A Secret Alpha. I liked that.

“Is that anything like Secret Santa? Because I didn’t get you a present,” I interrupted, poking at her theories and teasing her lovingly.

“Danny!” she screamed, not nearly as amused as I was.

Which kind of made sense since she was the one putting on the show.

However, I knew I needed to take her distress seriously. A little teasing was fine, but any more than that and she would be having my balls for breakfast.

Not in the good way.

“There’s more to this than you understand, Hales,” I semi-repeated, continually digging myself into a hole by being vague. The more I said without actually *saying* anything, the more pissed she got.

“Well, effing make me understand, Jerkface,” she barked, taking me back to my childhood in an instant and making me feel the affection because of it. That was what she used to call me when we were kids.

“I knew you were right for me, Hales. Knew I was right for you, too. From almost the minute you opened that dirty, little, perfect mouth of yours.”

Over twenty years ago. She’d sparked something in me even back then. Like two magnets drawn together. Like two halves of a whole.

God, this case needed to be fucking over so I could be completely honest with her. As it was, I was preparing a grave I wasn’t sure I would be able to escape.

“But you’re too much of a stubborn mule not to have to find that out on your own. You had that list and a picture in your mind of what you were looking for. But I know you, I know that list was only half of the reason for the trip.”

Her eyes studied mine closely, watching for the truth, but reflected in hers was the indication of her agreement.

“I knew you wanted to have an awesome time with your mom and that finding a guy that was right for you would be a bonus. You needed to go on the rest of your trip, but I knew you wouldn’t go if you thought something was really starting with me.”

Cupping her jaw, I swept a thumb across her face and committed each and every contour to memory.

This way, I would never forget. “However, I didn’t want you to meet someone else in the process. You’re a catch, Hales.”

I was lucky I'd hooked her. Now I just had to be careful that she didn't jump the line.

"I know. I'm awesome."

Swallowing a chuckle, I kept on with my speech, telling her, "So yeah, I jedi-alpha-mind-whatever-ed you. I twisted the qualities of the list in order to keep the guys away. You had your fun, but I kept you to myself all the same."

Staring at her hair, my arm took on a life of its own, reaching out and separating a small section before wrapping it around the length of my finger and giving it a tug.

I loved her hair, especially down and flowing around us as she sat cradled, naked in my arms.

"And come on, none of those guys were good enough for you anyway. Think about your books. Really think about them. I know what you like. It's not some specific quality the guy has. It's that he wants to be all of those things for that specific woman. He wants to be whatever she needs him to be, and he'll challenge, take on, and defeat any obstacle that gets in his way in order to do it."

That was me.

"You drove me crazy," she admitted shyly, dropping her face and nuzzling me.

Descending my lips to her hair, I spoke quietly, stroking the ends through my fingers. "Baby doll, it must have been a really short trip."

"Ha fucking Ha," she said, scrunching her face in my chest and prompting more laughter from me.

"Do you remember that first conversation we had on the phone?" I asked as my mirth waned, still speaking into the softness of her hair.

"I know you do," she mocked, attempting to cock her eyebrow, but she really had trouble with it. Luckily, the face she made instead was ten times cuter.

"You told me one of your deepest darkest secrets. That you're afraid one day your family is going to realize--"

"I know what I told you," she cut me off, covering my mouth with her hand, unhappy that I was bringing this topic back to the forefront.

"Well, do you know what I was going to say to you after that, when you wouldn't let me say anything because you were so scared you wouldn't like what I had to say?" I challenged.

“No, Danny. I have many skills, but mind reading is not one of them.”

Pulling her back gently by a gather of her hair until her eyes met mine, I whispered, “Hales, the way you feel is normal. It shouldn’t be some deep dark secret. You love your mom and Hunter, and that’s what love is.”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s what love is’?” she asked sarcastically, completely averse to the idea that the way she was feeling wasn’t some scandal; that it was normal, everyday, and just plain common stuff.

Everyone suffered from the insecurities of love.

“If love were a location, it would be a paradoxical mixture of the safest place on earth *and* the most vulnerable. Like an airplane. It’s not quite the safest place on earth, but it’s pretty damn safe. But people are seriously scared of it. And when you fall, it’s a hell of a long way and the landing is really, really shitty. Same as love.”

“That’s got to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard. And yet, it also sounds true.”

“Stick with me, babe. I’m an absolute fucking geyser of knowledge,” I said on a wink, running the fingers of one hand through her silky hair and using the other to trace random patterns along the flesh of her bare hip.

“You know, Danny, I think I will,” she agreed. “At least long enough to have you breath fire one more time.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I grinned anyway.

“Though, I have to request a bed this time.”

As soon as the word ‘bed’ left the sumptuous curve of her lips, I had her on my back and on my way into the house. Sure, she was naked, I wasn’t wearing much more, and Wade was watching somewhere, but we were quick. If he got a peek it was just that. Only a peek.

A bed sounded like just the right place to show her the rest of my attributes.

But more importantly, it was the right place to show her how much I admired hers.



It didn’t take long to realize I could get lost in Haley’s body, spending all of my time worshipping it with my lips and hands, and generally using my body to give her pleasure.

She was an eager sexual partner, up for almost anything and always aiming to please, but she looked out for herself too. She stayed connected to

the moment and reached for her pleasure, which in turn, enhanced mine.

I lost count of the ways we explored each other the night before, rounding all the bases in one fell swoop.

In fact, we had just finished having a romp in the shower where I had pushed her up against the wall and taken her from behind. It wasn't work to stay connected emotionally, even in the position because we were both on the same page.

We went slow and deep, concentration on every touch and each and every pump.

Reluctantly, wearing only a pair of shorts myself and placing her in one of my t-shirts, we had finally come up for air. Or in this case, food.

So far I had kept her orgasms sustained but let her caloric intake slip. And with how small she was to begin with, she needed the food in order to burn all that energy in the bed.

We kept it simple, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches acting as the perfect solution to two lousy cooks whose concentration centered on much different organs than the stomach. That and a Coke.

Plus, Wade had been busy following me, and the house didn't have much food.

Haley's smile was wide and genuine, but every once in a while, it faltered. It had taken me this long to figure out, but when I finally did, I couldn't believe I was such an idiot.

We had had the talk...sort of. But we certainly hadn't talked about what these few days implied for the future. She had no idea that I planned to center my life around building one with her.

"Haley," I called, pulling her attention away from her sandwich and getting the perfect view of her pretty face. Her hair was still drying from our shower, tussled around her face from our lovemaking and inviting me to run my hands through it.

Moving closer, I did just that, separating a section and twirling it around my finger as I began, "Now I know I was a real jackhole in the beginning, and maybe you're feeling a little unsure about where this is going."

Her face was fresh, clean of makeup, and her eyes shone with love and curiosity.

She cut in immediately, unknowingly making me relive one of my most hideous nightmares and inciting a brief plotting of Jason's murder. "This clinginess is all your fault. You selfishly pushed me away, making me

needier and far more desperate than I would have been. And Zack Morris could have ruptured my breasts. I hope you know that. Then what would you have played with?"

I laughed it off, or at least pretended to. Truthfully, my laugh was about as fake as Pamela Anderson's tits.

The memory of another man's hands on her brought the ugliest version of myself just beneath the surface.

"Haley, I'm trying to discuss something serious with you. I won't ask this often, but concentrate and listen to me, honey."

She nodded in the affirmative, so I kept right on with my talk. "Where do you see this going, babe? What do you want from you and me?"

Please God, want a you and me.

She glanced up at me from under her lashes, a shyness overwhelming her features for only the second time I had ever seen.

She seemed unsure of how to answer, maybe not quite knowing what I was asking, or maybe, not trusting in what she wanted to ask for.

"Do you want to know what I see?" I asked, tucking her hair behind the shell of her ear.

She nodded once as I grasped her by the hips and settled her onto the counter in the kitchen. Stepping into her body and the counter, I settled between her legs when they fell open to accommodate me.

"I see me following you to Knoxville and starting a life with you," I whispered, her eyes widening in surprise as they came up to meet mine.

"You've got a lot more to give up than I do, and I think it's time for a change. It'll take me a little time to make the arrangements, but when you leave to go home, I won't be far behind you."

Swear to Christ, she gave me one of the sexiest looks I'd ever seen. A look I would long for, lust after, and remember for the rest of my life.

And two seconds later, her lips were on mine. Both of her hands clamped onto my jaw, her fingers caressing my stubble in a way that I knew she liked it. It was a little longer, having been busy for the past day and half without time to shave, and she used it to her advantage, pulling me toward her as she laid back on the counter.

I followed her down, a smile on my face, my hands trailing their way under the bagginess of my shirt.

"Is that a yes?" I asked against her lips as her fingers in my scruff found my dimple and toyed with it.

“Oh yeah,” she said, nodding her head exaggeratedly and planting her lips back on mine.

I guess the talking portion of the morning was over.

I wasn't complaining.

Our sandwiches forgotten, Haley showed me just how much she appreciated my sacrifice.

What she didn't understand was that I was the lucky bastard—the one getting the better end of the deal—a life led by tragedy and loneliness, all ending in the capture of her heart.

I'd gladly walk through hell again if the exit led me here.

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## *Chapter 25*

The taste of her lingered on my lips hours after she was gone, a mix of Coke and toothpaste-y freshness.

This morning, saying goodbye to her had been torture and had taken a good twenty minutes, fifteen of which were spent vacuum sealed together, our lips and bodies struggling to get closer to one another in spite of the impossibility.

Wade pulled a ninja and appeared next to me on the porch only minutes after she had gone. He was so quiet about it that I didn't even notice until he clasped a familiar hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, buddy. The sooner we finish this, the sooner you can move on to living your own life," he told me, leading me into the house to get down to work.

So here we were, pouring over folders and pictures, no closer to the answer than we had been before.

It was starting to frustrate me.

I ground my jaw and flexed my fists, and it didn't take long for Wade to notice.

"So, moving back to Knoxville, huh?"

The question was random and a little sad. Maybe Wade would make the transition with me. Not to live in the same house or anything, but I hoped he would take the opportunity to move on, live his own life instead of the life the Bureau assigned him.

But that was a conversation for a different time. I nodded in answer, and then watched him gulp, his adam's apple bobbing noticeably.

"Are you planning to take any of the furniture?" he asked as he glanced around the room in an attempt to make conversation.

I started to laugh at him when it hit me.

And it hit me fucking hard.

"Fucking furniture!" I yelled, jumping to my feet and putting Wade on high alert.

"What?" he asked frantically, completely missing the boat on my train of thought.

"That's the answer, Wade. Jesus. They're moving the guns in the fucking furniture!" I shouted.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before now. It makes perfect sense,” I mumbled, fully manic in my realization.

“Explain it to me,” he prompted in an attempt to reel me in and get some answers he could actually work with.

“When they had me there in the warehouse, the chair they sat me in was dainty, ill-fitting to the space, and it wasn’t the only thing. As they tore down the weapons they did so on a couple of unusual looking tables. Of course, I didn’t realize at the time, but it was all handmade. Isla told me herself she was going home to the Philippines to visit her unwell father, to see to family business. They have a homemade furniture business! I remembered I had read that somewhere in her dad’s paperwork, but it’s been ages since I saw it. He hand makes the furniture, and it gets shipped out worldwide.”

“Are you sure about this?” Wade asked, his brown eyes glowing with an excitement that rarely characterized them.

“Yes!” I confirmed. “But, wait, there’s more. I think there’s a reason Isla’s in charge, a reason she’s the one going home to visit her father. Filipino women often garner enormous amounts of respect from the men in their families. I think Isla’s father has always favored her, and it’s done nothing but build Sergio’s resentment. In fact, I think he may have taken the initial meet with me, just to muck up the works and best his sister. Trust me, watching her order him around, he didn’t like it.”

“He resents the success of their international arms business so much that he would sabotage it, just to get back at his sister?” Wade asked, disbelieving.

“I think he’s hoping it will come down completely on her head. He resents that *she*’s made it a success. After all, his role is basically to be a bag of hot air, all talk. She’s the one who handles everything. He’s hoping when she goes down, he’ll be free to step in.”

“Are you saying you think he knows your undercover? Why else would he involve you otherwise?”

“I think he just thinks I’m mucking up the works. Clouding her head and her judgement because of her sexual interest in me.”

“How solid is this?”

“Well, it’s not. It’s just a theory. A damn good one, but a theory all the same,” I admitted. “But I think it’s worth the risk. The transport is definitely in the furniture, though. Stuff comes in and out of the country no problem.

Deliveries go out to a list that's probably shown as being only furniture business. Some of it may even go through unsuspecting third parties—innocent furniture dealers. It's a really good system."

"Okay, we'll move on it."

"Isla comes home today," I told him something he already knew. He was the one who got the information directly from intelligence. "My guess is that there's a shipment on its way from the Philippines not far behind. We'll move on that."

Wade nodded and moved to take out his phone in order to make all the necessary arrangements and notifications. He was much better at handling the details than I was.

Before he put the phone to his ear, I jumped back in time, answering, "And no. I don't want any furniture. You can keep everything for when you find a special lady of your own."

He scoffed loudly and shook his head, something I didn't fully understand.

"Come on, Wade. You've lived like a monk my entire life."

"No. I haven't."

"Okay, so maybe you're right. Not a monk. A lot of sex with random women definitely crosses off monk. But seriously, you didn't ever want to settle down with someone, have a family?"

"You know as well as anyone that I wanted that at one time, Dan."

"Yeah, I know. But, you don't want to try again?" I questioned softly, sensitive to how he felt about Melly. I knew it had been a ton of years, but I understood why he held on.

"I think that ship's sailed for me," he said simply, ending the conversation by leaving the room to make his phone calls.

For no reason whatsoever, a feeling overwhelmed me that this wasn't the end for him, that he had more to give, and someone else had a world to give to him.

I couldn't wait to witness it.



I was working the bar that night when Isla walked in. It didn't matter that I had been expecting her to show her face, or that for once Wade was here to back me up and act as a second set of ears. It skeeved me out that I had to pretend to like anyone other than Haley.

But the decision makers in the Bureau had been pretty clear. Get close enough to her to plant something on her. They had no idea if it would survive or not, but after the intel I had provided, they thought it was worth the risk.

Finally, we knew what we were looking for.

So instead of protecting myself like normal, I rounded the bar to greet her, allowing her to plaster herself around my shoulders in a tight hug. Meanwhile, I groped her ass, planting the paper-like tracking device into the back pocket of her skirt.

The problem with that was that she would take that skirt off rather than keeping it with her, but it should lead us to their home base. With the rest of our capabilities, we were hoping that would be enough.

Having felt like I had lingered in the hug long enough, I swung my eyes upward, coasting through the bar with a fake smile plastered onto my miserable face.

The door appeared, and in front of it stood the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. And the look on her face was absolute horror.

In a serious gut check, I fought the nausea, sure that I was going to lose my lunch and dinner all over the bar floor.

Both of us stood frozen for several seconds, unable and unwilling to accept the alternate universe we had entered since she left that morning.

This was *wrong*. Wrong on so many fucking levels.

Coming unstuck, she spun gracefully on one foot, shoved her way out the door, and took off into the parking lot.

At the look of her agony, I lost all self-control and took off after her.

I narrowly noticed Wade slipping out of the office and stepping in to do damage control with Isla as I left.

She was almost to her car when I finally made it through the crowd and out the door, so I sprinted after her, the gravel of the parking lot shifting and sputtering under the speed of my feet.

Reaching for her arm, I wrapped my hand around it gently, willing her to turn around.

She did, but she did it violently, ripping her arm out of my clutches. Her voice shook with anger as she whispered, "Don't you fucking touch me."

Something else had taken hold inside of her, an evil I had never witnessed. Even when Haley was complaining she was doing it with light.

But not tonight. It was like I had snuffed out her flame.

“Hales-” I tried, only to be cut off violently.

“You’re a liar, Danny,” she whispered, a single tear tracking down her face. “I *hate* liars.”

The acid ate away at my stomach as I digested her statement. It felt like a toxic weight, implanted inside of me and unremovable.

I was a liar. I didn’t want to be, but that didn’t change the facts.

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” I reasoned as I fought for control, the bitterness taking hold as I reached out for her again.

It wasn’t her fault, but everything would have been fine if she had just gone home like she said she was.

“Oh yeah! That makes it better! Out of sight out of mind, huh Dan-o?” she hissed, jerking violently away from me again. “Well that shit doesn’t work for me.”

All I could do was watch tragedy play out in front of me. Like a car wreck in progress, I was powerless to change it.

“Jesus, what a stellar defense. You weren’t supposed to be here, you weren’t supposed to catch me red fucking handed,” she mocked, making her voice deeper in an attempt to imitate mine.

Frustrated and devastated at the same time, my hands clasped behind my head, elbows sticking out to the sides, and then slid off roughly. Fresh tears coated my eyes, and I did nothing to stop them from pooling across my entire hazel depths.

“That is not what I meant, and this is not what it fucking looks like. You and I are in a fucking relationship, and that means something to me.” I reached out for her hand, and this time I forced her to let me keep it, begging her to believe in my conviction. “It means *everything* to me.”

“You could have fucking fooled me,” she argued as she searched for the door handle behind her. “Thank God you wrapped up your dirty meat before putting it in my heat! She looks like a fucking leper!”

Her body turned toward the door when she found the handle, but she turned back for one final hit.

“I hope your dick gets leprosy! Don’t worry, it should go perfectly with your zebra stripes. Until it falls off, that is.”

I knew I had to find a way to try one more time. A way to get her to hear me, to feel the depth of my emotion.

“Haley, wait. Do not get in that fucking car without hearing me out,” I ordered, hoping for the first time in her life, she would follow it.

She paused, considering it for long enough that I thought I had a chance, the pain in my chest pulsing with each second I waited.

But Isla ruined any chance I had. “Danny baby, what the fuck?”

And in doing so, reminded me that I wasn’t *allowed* to choose Haley. Countless man hours and *lives* would be sacrificed, so instead I had to sacrifice myself.

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, *fucking shit!*” I exploded, muting my volume in an attempt to look normal to a nosey Isla.

I stood there like an idiot, knowing I couldn’t have the woman I wanted, but unwilling to walk away.

And then, out of nowhere, Haley turned to face me, a look of longing on her face.

She wanted me to choose her, that’s all I had to do. My body moved toward hers of its own accord, but the sound of Wade’s voice brought me up short.

“Danny!”

The only thing I could do was compartmentalize, covering the pain with an objective, a mission.

In a matter of seconds, I became a shell of myself, shutting off my emotions, dropping Haley’s hand, and heaving a defeated breath.

I’d had a brief taste of happiness, and now it was gone.

Probably for good.

## Chapter 26

“I need you to go check on her. Make sure she’s okay. If there’s anyone I would trust to be there for her, it’s you,” I begged Allison from a spot on my floor in front of my bed, my head in my hands, my eyes wet with tears.

Somehow, I had managed to salvage the mess I’d made at The Cabin—at least, professionally.

Isla was down for the drama, getting off on my cold heart filled with rage.

For all intents and purposes, I had checked out, in a spiral of depression so severe I feared permanent damage.

Fortunately, I had already planted the tracking device, and Wade handled the rest, prompting me when he needed something from me in the form of a response or action.

As soon as we’d gotten home, several hours later, I’d called Allison. I was worried about Haley. About her driving as upset as she was, doing it by herself, and if her heart felt like mine, I feared for her health.

Allison, as always, was the face of reason. I didn’t hide my upset, but she didn’t let it sway her. She wanted information before she formed an opinion or took a side.

“What did you do?” she asked calmly, staying true to her character. Despite her normally level head, I really thought she would yell or accuse or react in some over-the-top way.

This was her daughter we were talking about. Her best fucking friend.

But she didn’t.

“It’s a long story. One I really want to fill you in on, but I *can’t*,” I pleaded, trying to make her understand me by weighting my words.

“I know the story is long. That, I’ve known from the beginning,” she said sagely, her knowledge and understanding seeping through the phone and settling deep within my chest.

“You know who I am,” I offered boldly, knowing that if I was wrong, there would be no way to play it off, no way to turn back. But, in the depths of my despair, I found it hard to care.

“Sure do, sweetheart,” she said simply. My eyes closed in order to fight back my emotion, the tears that had already pooled in my eyes fighting to find their way out. I met her head on with a one word question.

“How?”

“All it took was one look, Ry. Only one person has ever looked at my daughter like that, and in this case, a mother’s intuition is stronger than any other investigative equipment at your back.”

I took an audible breath as Allison prepared to knock me off my feet.

“Now you settle whatever it is you need to settle, and you take your time doing it. This time, when you come for my Haley, you better come prepared to fight. You fight for her until you can’t fight anymore, and you do it knowing you may have to do it for the rest of your life. If you do that, I’ll help pave the way.”

I took one deep breath and wiped the very girly tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. All of Haley’s teasing had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“When I come back, you better believe I’m never going to leave.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” she said, her voice warm and welcoming.

I was about to hang up when she stopped me.

“And Ry?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve loved you every single second of these last twenty-two years. God saved you for a reason, honey.”

Peace. That one simple statement brought me peace.

I knew a was going to have a fight on my hands. Haley had been learning about a new love. I had been rediscovering an old one. And the lies I had created separated us like a canyon.

But Allison gave me some much needed hope.



The next morning, as we were suiting up for the raid, I gave my buddy Will a call and asked him for Hunter’s number. With a little light hacking, he could access almost anything.

I had finally gotten a handle on my emotions, and instead of dwelling on the disastrous fight, had decided to do whatever it took to find my way back into the fold.

Whether it took days, months, or years, I was going to fight for Haley until I couldn’t fight for her anymore, just like Allison had advised.

I could have made it a lengthy phone call, offered explanations and apologies, but despite not having the time myself, I didn’t think it would

matter to Hunter either.

One thing mattered to both of us.

Haley.

As soon as he answered, I didn't bother with a greeting, preferring to dive right in. "Do your sister a favor and go check on her. Be the brother she thinks you are."

He started to ask me what I'd done, and I'm pretty sure he'd started to call me a dicklicking asshole, but I didn't hang around to find out. I hung up immediately, and worked on finding my focus again.

I checked the clip of my gun, slid it back into place, and tucked it into the small of my back. My backup weapon was strapped to my ankle just in case.

"Ready?" Wade checked, doing a once over as he asked.

"Yep."

And I was. I was so ready to end this shit it wasn't even funny. And today was the day.

Something in my eyes must have confirmed my response because he finally nodded and moved toward the door, me trailing slightly behind him.

We loaded into the convoy, going for the standard approach.

You start out by going in low and slow, but once you get a visual confirmation, you go hard and hit fast.

One of the boys had been assigned to find Isla's location last night via the tracker and then follow her this morning, and this is where it led.

At a warehouse sitting twenty miles outside of town, a warehouse so completely different from the one in which they had shown me that it was almost comical, a furniture truck sat outside getting loaded.

I watched carefully as minions carried chairs and tables wrapped in protective dressings onto the truck, paying special attention to the characterizations of the furniture. It looked like I was right, a few of the home made pieces I had seen before making their way onto the truck among the others.

On Wade's signal we moved, converging on the warehouse and busting inside, startling the operation.

At first, I didn't spot Sergio or Isla, but upon further inspection, it didn't take long to find them both on the other side of the room next to one another.

One of our guys named Johnny went straight to one of the chairs, breaking it open and finding the parts to an AK-47.

It felt like fucking Christmas.

A smile worked its way onto my face, and at the sight of it, the male Villanuevo lost it.

“Do you see what you’ve done?” Sergio spat, pulling his gun from his belt and putting it directly to Isla’s forehead, pressing it severely into her delicate flesh.

“You’ve ruined us. You wanted his business, I told you I could get it, by eliminating him, but no, you wanted him as your puppet!” he ranted, his grip with reality fleeing as quickly as his freedom.

None of us saw that coming, but it wasn’t completely out of the ordinary. He was a desperate man faced with nothing but desperate choices.

Isla said nothing, and in the moment it made her look like a crazy bitch. She had a gun to her head, and her world was crumbling.

But she was the smarter of the two of them, avoiding incriminating herself and letting it ride. That was her best option.

I couldn’t help but think about what a waste her intelligence was. She could be a successful, upstanding, very, very rich businesswoman. But instead, she had chosen the criminal underworld.

It didn’t make sense. But, I had to remind myself, everything involved in these scenarios rarely did.

In the end it didn’t take long for our guys to disarm Sergio, leaving Isla smiling in the aftermath. But in that moment, I had to ask.

“Why? You seem like you’re smart enough to know better than to let me get involved, make your operation vulnerable to this kind of thing?” I questioned Isla as they walked her by me in a shiny set of handcuffs.

“In America, I’m considered innocent until proven guilty, right?” she asked in return, a smirk curving her eyes upward in a cat-like expression, moving cooperatively with the officer leading her toward the custody of his car.

It may have been the end of the road for me, my resignation practically stamped out and confirmed the second those cuffs locked around their arms, but the fat lady had yet to sing on this case.

## Chapter 27

My boots echoed against the tile floor as I made my way out of the terminal, passed security, and straight out to the pick up area. After everything that had gone down, I couldn't believe he had actually agreed to pick me up.

Fucking stupid.

The whoosh of the automatic doors gave way to the heat of late summer, and it didn't take long to spot Jason's BMW parked at the curb.

He was outside, leaned against it, and had a cocky grin on his face.

He obviously thought the fact that he had fooled around with Haley when I asked him to protect her was funny.

Good. It actually made my mission a whole hell of a lot easier. After all, it's a lot harder to beat the shit out of someone in a confined space, and it would have been a shame to get his expensive seats all bloody.

"Hey, Danny-" he started to greet me as he shoved away from the car and straightened to his full height.

Blood splattered the window of his car and coated my knuckles when my fist connected perfectly, breaking his nose on the first strike.

"What the ever-loving fuck?!" he yelled, both of his hands automatically forming a catch-bowl for the blood pouring out of his mangled, teen heartthrob look-alike smeller.

"Cut the bullshit," I growled. "You took advantage of a situation you had no right to." Getting close into his face, I knew my voice was raw with the force of my anger as I whispered, "And you were fucking rough with her."

"I was just messing around a little. You know, just having a little fun. I wasn't gonna start something serious with her, just a quick little hook up, that's all," he argued like it somehow helped his case.

"There's no five fucking second rule for this shit, dickweed. One second, one minute, an hour, it's all the same to me. I don't care if you're a one pump chump, you fucking touched her. And she's *mine*."

I had a longer speech prepared, more insults to throw, and a few more punches planned, but I should have acted faster.

Or moved off of airport property.

The chirp of a patrolman's siren alerted me to his presence as he pulled up at the curb behind Jason's beamer.

People panicked when it came to violence in this setting, so I was royally fucked.

"Back away sir," the cop ordered me, as I was still menacingly inside of Jason's personal space, his hand to the butt of his gun.

Well, shit.

There were plenty of witnesses, and the blood was pretty solid evidence against me. I didn't even bother to resist as I raised my hands in front of me and waited for him to turn me around and cuff me.

As he did, the nice officer gave me the usual spiel. "You're under arrest for Assault."

I heaved a deep sigh but cooperated completely because I had no badge to flash. I had resigned from the FBI that morning.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights?"

"Yes, sir," I answered respectfully, giving Jason a big old wink as the officer walked me to his car.

It wasn't like me to say this, but that had been totally fucking worth it. I just wished I had gotten in a few more hits before the police arrived.



When it came time for my one phone call, I used it wisely, calling Wade with the hopes that he would be able to pull some strings for me and get them to drop the charges.

I didn't have to explain my situation when he answered though, because the phone call did it for me.

A collect call from such and such prison usually tells the tale.

"Hey there, Uncle dearest," I said when he answered.

"Really, Danny?" he sighed, exasperated and exhausted. He'd been working hard for two straight years (really, years before that), and this is how I started his vacation.

Whoops.

"Yeah, Wade. I cannot even tell you how fucking good it felt. It was so totally worth it."

“Jesus. Don’t say that too loud in there,” he advised.

I couldn’t control my standing with Haley. Not yet, anyway.

But I could sure as hell wail on Jason a little bit. The only consequence was a visit to the clink.

Better than the complete devastation the fight with Haley left in its wake.

“Alright, I’ll get you out of this,” Wade offered without me having to put myself out there.

Thank Jesus. I really hadn’t wanted to ask. Wade did too much for me as it was.

Obviously, I’d accept the help, I just didn’t want to bother him by asking for it.

What? There was a difference.

Maybe.

“I’ll send a representative to get you out,” he went on, confusing the fuck out of me.

“A representative? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll see,” he replied ambiguously before hanging up, leaving the dial tone ringing in my ear.



“Well shit on my hand and smear it around,” I heard from a figure outside of my holding cell.

“Um, no thanks,” I shuddered in answer, wondering who in the fuck said something like that.

And then, as he stepped out of the shadows, I wasn’t wondering anymore.

“Hunter?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. Phrases like that could only come from someone with his personality.

“Yep. I’m your representative, here to save the day.”

Shit. It seemed Wade was finding more and more amusement out of fucking with me as the days went on. But really, I couldn’t complain. He was getting me out of jail for an assault I had very obviously committed.

At an airport.

In front of hundreds of witnesses.

I’d take what I could get.

“Word came down that you’re free to go,” the officer standing diagonally behind Hunter cut in, using his keys to open the cell door as he stepped forward.

Hunter stepped to the side and stayed silent, waiting for me to clear the cell into the hallway with him.

We walked side by side behind the guard, out through processing, and finally out the doors into the Colorado sunshine.

Throughout that whole time, neither one of us said anything. But the curiosity had gotten the better of me, and I couldn’t keep silent anymore.

“What happened? Why are you here?” I inquired.

“I got your phone call, went to Haley’s apartment, took one look at her, turned and left, and hauled my ass to Alabama to kick your ass. Of course, you weren’t there, jailbird.”

The news of Haley’s upset burned in my chest like indigestion, spreading like it had no borders.

“Well, as you can see, I’ve already been in the tank for assault today, and I’m not sure Wade’s got the power to get me out of trouble twice. If you intend to assault me, I recommend we find our way off of police property.”

“No worries, man. The impulse has passed.”

I nodded as we walked, hopping down the stairs and walking blindly toward the parking lot, assuming he had a rental car or a cab waiting somewhere around here.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, he pulled me to a stop, forcing me to turn back and look at him in question. My eyebrows were slightly raised, and I waited for him to say what he needed to.

I didn’t know if he needed to be angry with me or not, but I wanted him to have the freedom to do whatever he felt was necessary.

“Wade filled me in on the whole story. I hope you don’t mind, but I was raring for some answers when I got there, so he did it for me.”

“I understand,” I muttered softly.

Hunter reached out and grabbed my shoulder, dragging me into a tight hug and clapping me on the back twice.

Again, my nose felt the twinge of unshed tears as I celebrated a reunion with my very best friend.

“It’s good to have you back,” he whispered into our embrace. “I’ve missed you.”

I squeezed him tighter, just momentarily, before backing away and nodding in agreement, just barely stopping myself from crying for the second time in two days. "I've missed you too, Hunt. I hated to leave."

He nodded too, his throat bobbing vividly as it clogged with emotion.

"Let's go," I said, breaking the spell. "I've got a girl's heart to win back."

He smiled again and fell in step beside me, leading me to the cab he'd left waiting.

"Denver International," I said as we climbed in. "And hurry."

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## Chapter 28

Hunter flew back to Alabama with me, helped me pack up my stuff as quickly as possible, and then made the drive back to Knoxville with me. It was nice to catch up, and it didn't take long for us to move passed the unbelievability and emotion and just be us.

Meanwhile, he had also been a go between for me, feeding me information about what he knew or heard of Haley's whereabouts and asking Allison to counsel me in the best approach.

As much as she knew about her daughter, I didn't need her help.

I knew her daughter too.

I loved her daughter.

And I wouldn't leave until she loved me back.

That's how I found myself on Haley's doorstep as she went to leave the next day, Hunter staying a good ten feet behind me because he, and I quote, "feared for his legacy."

I, personally, thought Haley was more of a verbal opponent than a nut shot taker, but maybe she was different with her brother. Who knew.

She closed and locked her door, juggling all of her belongings and her Coke, thus delaying her noticing me.

When she finally did, a strong gust of wind blew down on me straight from the North Pole.

"Danny," sounded like shit coming out of her mouth, her obvious distaste of my name (or the person) creating a stench around me.

I did my best to ignore her anger like I always did, even though this was caused by something far more serious, murmuring a soft, "Hales," in response.

She opened her mouth to let me have it, but instead, glanced over my head and found someone she thought was an ally working against her.

"What's Hunter doing here?"

"I needed backup," I explained, trying my best to take the blame on myself, tucking my thumbs into the pockets of my jeans.

"And he volunteered to do the job?" she questioned on a roll of her eyes.

Her hair was pulled back into a perky ponytail, which highlighted the blue of her eyes by tightening your focus on her face.

She looked beautiful.

Of course, she always did.

Pointing at Hunter as she said it, she accused, “You, Brother, are a fucking traitor.”

Just the sight of her finger extended toward me did things to my chest. It felt tight and empty all at the same time, longing for its missing piece.

I *had* to touch her. Just had to.

So I reached out slowly and took her hand in mine, rubbing the back of it with my thumb for as long as she would allow. “Hales, listen. There is way more to this story than you’re aware of, so please just give me a chance to explain.”

Expecting her to turn me down, I waited a beat too long and incensed her agitation again.

“So explain already! Of course I’m going to at least give you a freaking chance to explain! I’m not a Nazi or something equally as evil. Jesus.”

My hand shook as I reached into my pocket and pulled out my stash, uncurling my fingers to reveal the collection of her ponytail holders and sliding them on my opposite wrist.

“My, my, my, what sticky fingers you have, Gramma.” She shook her head in both wonder and aggravation as she muttered, “Man, you are one talented pick pocket, Dan-o. You have a real gift for petty crime. Good tidings for the future.”

One corner of my mouth tried to curve into a smirk, but I made sure to keep a tight rein on it. The last thing I needed to do was laugh in the face of her anger under these circumstances.

I liked my penis where it was, thank you very much. And when she forgave me, I hoped to be able to use it.

“I took one every time I saw you, Hales. Just couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re a weirdo,” she accused, needing my every move to be wrong in order to justify her thoughts. To protect her theory that everything had been one big lie.

“Count them,” I invited on a shake of my head.

She counted them, out of curiosity rather than because I told her to, but had no reaction.

“Maybe I’m a little slow, but you’re going to have to fill in the blanks here,” she enunciated, further trying to rile me in order to validate her upset.

If I reacted strongly at her, she would feel more justified in her razored words.

"I've only seen you nine times, but I have ten hair ties," I told her in explanation.

"Maybe you just raided my bag," she suggested snarkily. "We've already discussed your propensity to steal things."

I took one last deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to do. If I thought she was mad at me now, I better brace for what was surely coming afterward. "The first one I took was quite a long time ago. And the only thing that was fully developed on you were your insults. You were just a sarcastic, attitude ridden six year old."

Her head snapped up immediately, studying my eyes with so much intensity that I knew she had figured it out.

After all, given the hint, it wasn't that big of a deduction.

She closed her eyes tight and whispered, "Ryan Parker," the pain in those two words like a physical weight around us.

I cupped her cheek in the palm of my hand and confirmed, "In the flesh, baby doll."

"You fucking told Hunter who you were before me?!" she screamed as the anger took hold, knocking my hand off of her cheek and taking a step back from me in revulsion. "I've got to tell you, that seriously pisses me off. And you've already topped up your piss off Haley jar. It's over-fucking-flowing, Asshole, and I hate cleaning up a mess."

"Fuck me, Hales. I love your drama, but can you cut it out for two fucking seconds?" I requested, the fact that her rants were so comedic not helping me to win her over.

"I didn't choose to tell Hunter first. He came to Alabama to kick my ass. Something about making his hard as nails, kick ass, funny as shit sister cry. He just got more than he bargained for," I explained, leaving the whole going to jail in Colorado part out. We had agreed that was a no go because a confession to that meant a confession about Jason. And a confession about Jason meant a confession about the tail following them all the way across the country.

Not a good idea. Maybe one day, in bed, with my dick still inside of her when we were married with three kids I would fill her in on those details.

Anytime before then was too scary a prospect.

Sure, that may sound like a trick, like I was trapping her into being with me without all the facts.

All I can say is fuck yes. When it came to Haley, I didn't care what I had to do to keep her. I would play as dirty as was fucking needed and then some. Every day, all day, until my last breath.

She was worth it.

Hunter chimed in, trying to help me by stating, "Yeah. It was one fuck of a kick in the balls when I realized who he was."

She focused on me, accusing, "That was a fucking fantastic speech you gave me that night. Very convincing. 'Call me Roper, or Eagle, or Gandalf the Wizard'. Of course you didn't give a shit what I called you. Danny's not even your real name." I clenched my jaw across the hurt and forced myself to take everything she wanted to give me. "You also had another woman in your arms and your hands on her ass one night after you fucked me for four days straight."

I thought she was done, but she had yet to nail the final nail in my coffin. "And I know it's not something you forgot. You don't ever fucking forget."

She shoved passed me and Hunter, heading for her car like a woman on a mission. I called after her, but she acted like she didn't hear a word.

Like I didn't even exist.

It didn't matter that I deserved it. The pain still soaked in all the way, leeching into the hope I had built as a fortress around my heart.

For now it held up, but I didn't know how much it would be able to take before it broke.

## Chapter 29

Three days later...

I knew it was a sink or swim type of move, sitting back and watching as she ran out of her apartment, climbed into her car, and took off toward my house.

That's right, my house. I realize these kinds of things normally took more than three days to achieve, but not when you had Wade in your corner. From the moment I told him I was coming to Knoxville, he had been making shit happen. Looking out for me. Being the best damn family I could ask for.

But back to Haley being on her way there, and how I was headed up Shit's Creek and praying I had a paddle.

I rationalized it by focusing on the fact that I didn't know for absolute certain that she was headed to my house. I knew I had given the address to Allison, and Allison had told me that she'd given it to Haley. Anything more than that was just wishful thinking on my part.

Plus, if my plan worked out it would pay off instead of blowing up in my face.

That said, I didn't exactly have a great track record.

Nonetheless, my note was waiting for her just in case.

*I lived my whole life with my world just out of reach. Now that I have the chance to have it all, you think I'm going to give it up that easily? I'm at your apartment, Hales.*

*See you there.*

*~Dan "Fucking" Smith*

My phone started to ring and my heartbeat sped up. She was calling me. God, I couldn't believe it. Putting the phone to my face, I answered, "Hales?"

"Nope, wrong Whitfield," a manly voice rumbled into my ear.

Shit. It wasn't her. It was Hunter.

*Shit.*

I must have grumbled over the line because Hunter remarked, "Don't sound so excited to talk to me, dude."

I couldn't even find it in me to apologize.

Naively, I had really thought it was going to be her.

"Listen, man. Don't be such a fucking downer. I called to tell you I just clocked her going twenty over the speed limit heading in the direction of your house. I think you can perk up a little."

Fuck yes!

"Awesome. Thanks, Hunt. Now get off the fucking phone, so she can call me," I instructed somewhat frantically.

"Stop being such a basket case. This is the twenty-first century. You have fucking call waiting," he observed, schooling me pretty well.

"Fuck you," was my only response before hanging up.

I shook out my shoulders, amped from the excitement.

When my phone rang again in my hand, I checked to make sure it was Haley's number and then answered on the first ring, saying, "Yes, I'm really at your apartment," and then hanging up immediately.

Oh shit. There was no going back now. She was going to be riled like a pissed off lioness with someone after her cubs. Her crazy must have rubbed off on me though, because her anger didn't incite fear. It got me excited. She was so much fucking fun on a rant.

When she got home, I was stretched out on the steps out front, my elbows resting on the step behind me and my long legs casually crossed in front of me.

"What the hell, Danny? Making me drive all the way across town and back is not a good way to start this conversation," she said as she stormed toward me, the sway of her hips enticing in even the most inappropriate of moments.

"Sure it is, Hales," I replied like I knew what I was talking about.

She growled in response, her shoulders tensing and flexing as she clenched her fists at her sides.

Even without summoning it, my dimple popped out, softening the features of her face ever so slightly.

"What the hell am I supposed to call you now, anyway?" she asked, and I had to resist the urge to pump my fist in the air like Jersey Shore. Just the fact that she was planning to call me anything was a victory. "And don't even say it! I am *not* calling you fucking Gandalf."

"I've been Dan Smith for almost twenty-two years, Hales, and truthfully, for most of those years, I wished for nothing more than to be

Ryan Parker again. But for the last few weeks, I've been Dan *Fucking* Smith, and I like that even better because that's who I am to you. Your Dan-o, your Danny, your Dan Smith. All yours, Haley," I told her honestly, my longing to hold her swelling in my chest enough that I had to raise my hand to it to ease the ache.

She nodded, her eyes shimmering too.

She could see my sincerity. And really, I had a feeling it was impossible not to. My heart was in my fucking throat.

"Believe it or not, all of your frustration was for a reason, baby doll," I ventured. "Can we go inside and talk about it?"

"I'm thinking you better give me a reason to let you inside, Dan-o," she countered, still putting up a good fight just like I knew she would.

But my girl was back.

She had used my nickname.

"Fair enough," I agreed while nodding, doing combat against my burgeoning smile. "The reason I had you drive across town is simple. I wanted you to know that I knew enough to give you the time you needed to work through your thoughts. You're an incredibly forgiving person, but you need time."

She nodded to tell me I was right, so I kept going.

"But I also wanted you to know that while I was giving you the time you needed, I didn't expect you to be the one to have to come to me. I am one hundred percent in this, and sitting outside of your apartment for hours on end is a small price to pay for a chance to have something real with you."

A real chance to be us. Without the stupid lies.

Finally, she said the magic words. "Access granted, Dan-o."



Normally, I didn't think the physical could do the talking for you. I thought you needed to settle things on an emotional level and then move on to connecting intimately again.

But I wasn't usually the one suffering from blue balls as I waited for emotional peace to catch up with hormones.

We'd gone over the basics of my deception, the reasons behind it, and Haley seemed to understand where I was coming from.

Talking it out with her, it didn't take me long to realize that I should have told her the truth. Not from the beginning; that just wasn't feasible. But if I'd told her when she came back, when we spent several days making love, I would have been in a lot better situation.

Tunnel vision had clouded my judgement. I was trying so hard to do the right thing, that I completely missed that the key to that was honesty with the woman I loved.

It wouldn't have been any different for her safety if she knew. Sure, the government wouldn't have looked on it kindly, but they also would have been left without a choice.

And the real kicker was that I had been honest with Georgie, feeling an obligation because he was doing such a monumental favor for me.

But so was Haley, by handing me her trust and allowing me the chance to love her.



"Okay, Danny. I guess I could see how maybe you could be right about this," she said in response to my proof that our story wasn't a ridiculous one by using a reference to *The Gamble*.

Smiling and lifting her into my arms, I whisked her off to the bedroom, declaring, "Haley baby, the Badass Alpha Male is *always* right."

She laughed into my neck, the vibrations chasing their way down my spine and settling in my hardening cock. "I'm going to show you how much I love you, Hales. I'm going to worship your body for so long, that you'll never question it again."

And that was a vow I intended to keep by repeating it every day of my life. Now that's what I call winning.

# Epilogue

The wedding day.

Everyone portrays it like something that makes your nerves attack, anxiety taking hold and having to get bitch slapped in order to make her let go.

But not me. I wasn't nervous in the slightest.

I was marrying my best friend, and a woman who was by far the hottest fuck I'd ever had.

It didn't seem like there was anything to be nervous about to me.

Folding the newspaper article that I kept with me always, something I'd had the joy of experiencing a couple of days after our reunion while sipping coffee in a bed full of Haley, I tucked it into the breast pocket of my tux and gave it a pat for reassurance.

Haley saw me more clearly now than she had even then, but that article was a turning point; a moment in time where she decided the rightness of us was more important than the wrongness of my lies.

Everyone seated in front of me rose, signifying the arrival of my bride, and my eyes moved to the end of the aisle with an ease I only felt in her presence.

I couldn't wait to see her, the turquoise contours of her eyes flickering and flaunting in contrast to her stark white dress. A dress that meant today, she was going to become my wife.

As she came around the bend and into view, all of the air rushed out of my lungs, leaving only love behind.

She was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, in her dress, in her jeans, or in nothing at all.



"Haley Lilianna Whitfield, I promise, as your own personal Alpha Badass, to love you with zeal and kiss you with skill," I started my vows, having designed them after weeks of Haley taunting that her vows would be epic, and mine would need to respond in kind.

Allison's giggle drifted up to my ears, making me smile even harder. Her year hadn't been the easiest one, but her spirit never faltered.

What Haley hadn't bothered to tell me was that while her vows were indeed epic, they were short as shit. *"Now that I have you, I'm never letting you go. I don't need to vow my life to you because with the way my mind works and how much I love you, I'll fight harder and longer than anyone else to keep you. I'm stubborn like that. And awesome."*

Mine, on the other hand, were a little on the longer side.

But no less perfect.

"Taking my manly role seriously, I promise to protect you when you're in danger and keep my mouth shut when you're not. I promise to use my gorgeous, sexy, tattooed, hard body to romance you every day and my previous experience and "junk" to provide you with the x-rated skills and virility you desire."

She was blushing hard now, clearly embarrassed by my lack of censorship in front of a mixed crowd.

"I promise to not only understand your quirkiness, but value it *and* you for what you are, baby doll. In a quest to be perpetually young-hearted, I promise to embrace the laughter you mine from me and cause as much as I can for you. After spending my whole life wondering where you were, I promise to think smart and keep myself from danger even though it's part of my aura. And last but not least, I promise to love you and only you until death do us part."

She bit her lip, fighting hard to stave off a sob. I squeezed her small hands with mine, swiping my thumbs along the back in a caress as one lone tear trailed over the apple of her cheek.

We'd gone through a lot to get here, and to finally be saying the things I said every day, in front of a crowd, in an official capacity that joined her to me for life brought a peace to my mind that I never imagined would be possible.

"All I'm missing is the name, but I'm begging you to let that one, little detail go, make me the happiest man alive, and promise to be in my life, in my bed, and in my heart for the rest of your ever loving life."

She'd helped me battle my demons, and I'd spend the rest of my life battling anything and everything she needed me to.

"Until death, Dan Smith," she whispered hoarsely. "'Until death. To the bottom of my heart."

I didn't wait for permission because I didn't need it. Haley was mine, her lips coming up to meet mine half way. I cupped her face with my hand,

exploring her mouth like I was doing it for the first time.  
It still tasted like Coke.



“Danny,” she whispered as my cock stroked her slow, my fingers joined with hers to stimulate her on the outside, surrounding our connection every once in a while just to experience it.

She wrapped her legs around my back, locking her ankles together and forcing herself closer and closer with every stroke. It didn’t take long to feel like one person, to feel completely in tune with one another, building and building it as our breaths mingled with one another, and finally finding our pleasure together, at the same time.

Rolling off her, I pulled her into my chest and settled her head on the peck across from my tattoo.

Separating pieces one at a time, I played with her hair, savoring the feel of it in my hands and on my body.

Haley sat up slowly, noticing the difference in my tattoo and tracing it with the tip of her delicate finger.

I had just done it yesterday, and we’d been sequestered as per wedding tradition today. She hadn’t had a chance to see it.

“When did you do this? *Why* did you do this?”

“I had it filled in, baby,” I murmured softly, cupping her cherubic cheek. “I’m not reaching anymore. My world’s right here.”

*The End*

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## Translations:

\*These were purposely kept untranslated until the end. As we were living the story through Danny's eyes, and he didn't speak Filipino, we needed to not be able to understand what was being spoken either.

We're keeping him. He'll be useful.

Don't be foolish, sister. Keeping the white man will only be trouble.

Quiet! Remember who you're talking to.

Go. I'll take care of the Kano.

Fuck that.

I said go!

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LAUREL ULEN CURTIS is a mother of one. She lives with her husband and son (and cat and two fish!) in New Jersey, but grew up all over the United States. She graduated from Rutgers University in 2009 with a Bachelor of Science in Meteorology, and puts that to almost no use other than forecasting for her friends! She has a passion for her family, laughing, and reading and writing Romance novels.

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