

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark pinstripe double-breasted suit over a white shirt, stands with his arms crossed against a red background. In the top right corner, there is a gold hexagonal badge with the text 'BILLIONAIRE', 'BOOK 2', and 'DADS'. The title 'Surly ROMANCE' is written in a mix of script and bold sans-serif fonts, and the author's name 'NIA ARTHURS' is at the bottom in a white sans-serif font.

BILLIONAIRE

BOOK 2

DADS

*Surly*

ROMANCE

NIA ARTHURS

# **SURLY ROMANCE**

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BILLIONAIRE DADS BOOK 2

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**NIA ARTHURS**

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Billionaire. Recluse. My new worst enemy.**

Darrel Hastings is the sexiest therapist from hell.

Tall. Jacked. Green-eyed jerk.

My mere existence seems to put him in a bad mood.

As hot as he is, I'm not exactly getting warm and fuzzy in his presence either.

So when Darrel mistakenly offers me a decorating job, I turn it down so hard his head spins.

I'm not interested in taming this cold and heartless beast.

Until I stumble on the two little secrets running around his castle.

Turns out, the tin man has a heart.

Why is it always the gruff ones who turn out to be the secret softies?

As we work together, Darrel's scowls start turning into smiles.

And my heart finds a new obsession.

But there's a reason Darrel hated me on sight, and it goes much further than I'd ever imagined.

When the truth is revealed, can I hold on to my surly beast and his adorable little guests? Or will I lose the little family I'm starting to fall in love with?

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# CHAPTER 1

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# ALL THAT GLITTERS

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## SUNNY

THERE'S a fine line between genius and insanity and, today, I'm diving so far into the deep end I'll probably emerge with a tinfoil hat and a love for pineapples on pizza.

The coming madness isn't all that's driving me. It's the potential for disaster that kicks my heart into overdrive. I don't want tonight to fail—but it could, and that in-between of risk and recklessness gives me a buzz.

I'm slipping back into the Sunny I was in high school. I'm talking bad decision-making, potentially traumatizing, horrible ideas Sunny.

Groundlessly confident.

Painfully immature.

Nothing like the Sunny who's struggling to scale her interior design business, bogged down by picky clients, and smothered by self-doubt at every turn.

Tonight, I'm free. And I'm also dangerously close to having a heart attack, but it's the best kind of panic. The kind that makes you feel alive. That gets all the way into your fingers and toes. That makes you invincible.

My eyes track the scantily clad performers waiting backstage. They're ready. And Kenya... Kenya's somewhere in the room, probably regretting having ever met me.

A glance at my watch sends a thrill down my spine. I'm buzzing with anticipation and it's making me sweat. I use the feather boa to dot at my neck.

"Make sure the light stays on Kenya at all times," I tell the technician who can't seem to locate my eyes. Or maybe he dropped his keys in my sparkly bra. It would explain why he's looking at my chest as if it'll unlock a secret cave of treasures.

I clear my throat pointedly.

His head bounces up. "Got it."

I give him a little pat on the back for encouragement. "Don't mess up."

The smile that stretches over his face is practiced. I can almost feel the sleaze oozing from his skin. "Hey, after all this, would you like to grab a drink?"

“Let’s see how you do tonight, and then we can talk about it.” I flip my hair, watching as his grin widens. Normally, I wouldn’t encourage him, but I need everything to go perfectly. Kenya’s going to tear my head off if it doesn’t.

As he hurries to take up his position, my eyes drop to my watch.

Six minutes to go.

Time to find the star of tonight’s show.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.” Kenya Jones, my best friend and co-conspirator, is currently dry heaving into the human-sized present that she’ll be jumping out of in approximately—I check my watch again, five minutes.

I rub my hands against the itchy feather boa. Hot pink. Just like the sexy police uniform baring my midriff and flouncing in a short, flared skirt.

“You’ll do great.” I adjust her headpiece, a giant feathered monstrosity that we’ll have to jam into the box to get it to fit.

“Why did I say yes to this?” Her mouth opens and closes in a panicked breath. Purple eyeshadow sparkles on her eyelids and brings out the mahogany-toned hues in her dark skin. Her lips are a sultry burgundy that pairs beautifully with the gold and red in her head piece.

“Because you trust me?”

She snorts.

“Because you love surprises?”

“Not even close.”

“Because you finally cut off your toxic family and you’re embracing the inner rebel that was suppressed for years?”

Her eyes narrow. “Isn’t it just because I was drunk?”

“You know what they say. A drunk guy... can’t lie.”

“What? Drunks lie all the time!”

I laugh and squeeze her shoulders. My fingers slide against the sparkly pink coat she’s wearing. “You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.”

“Don’t try that reverse psychology crap on me. You know I love a challenge.”

“I’m not challenging you.” I stare her right in the eyes. She’s my best friend and she can tell when I’m in BS mode. Right now, my sincerity shines through. “If you’re uncomfortable, we can stop here. Planning tonight’s festivities with you was half the fun.”

Kenya's feelings matter more than the plan. The fact that she came this far, when she's such a stickler about rules and social conventions, is a major win. I'd happily kick off these stripper stilettos and get a massage instead of prance on stage.

"No." She shakes her head determinedly. The headpiece dips and dances with the movement. "We came this far. I can't stop now."

"You sure?"

She juts her chin down and one of the feathers bows to me. "Where's my mask?"

"Got it right here." I push her curls out of her face so I can set the intricately designed mask over her flared nose. Her curls tangle in my fingers. Kenya has a glorious head of natural hair. It's all frizz and volume, driving me crazy with jealousy. My hair has only one setting—limp. Teasing any sort of style into my locks has always been a struggle.

"There." I step back and gesture to her. "You look amazing."

"I'm wearing a peacock on my head."

"And the peacock would be proud he gave his life for you."

She rolls her eyes. We both know these feathers are fake. No peacocks were harmed in the production of our terrible plan.

At least she's smiling now.

And looking a lot less nauseous.

She blows out a sharp breath. "Let's do this."

"Have fun." I give her a quick hug and then tap the gun at my thigh. "On your signal."

Another nod from Kenya.

*It's go-time.*

I step back and two of Kenya's old college friends draw near to us. They're dressed just like me in risqué pink police officer outfits. One of them carries a stepping stool, which they place right in front of the box.

After one last look at me, Kenya climbs the stairs, places her gloved hands on the edge of the box and jumps inside. She lands with a thump.

I rap my knuckles against the box. "They'll carry you out now."

"Let's do this thing!"

I laugh, loving that note of wild excitement in her voice. We might crash and burn, but we'll go down swinging.

Whirling around, I face the stage and listen to the noise from the bar. They're playing honky-tonk music. The kind with banjoes and violins and

men wailing about the girl who got away.

A smile slowly creeps over my face when the music cuts and the lights in the bar go dim. I can see it all from the wings.

“Okay, go! Go!” I hiss, gesturing to the mixture of Kenya’s friends, cousins, and professional dancers.

They line up on stage. As the first of the girls appears, a hoot goes up from the men.

It’s quickly silenced by a low and gruff voice barking, “Who the hell hired strippers?”

I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter.

The voice—which belongs to none other than Holland Alistair—continues to lecture his guests. “Who did it?”

Grumbled responses meet his question. I’m still in the wings, so I can’t see what’s going on in the bar, but I can imagine the thunderous look on Holland Alistair’s face. He’s not ‘the king of contactless real estate’ for his way with people. I bet everyone is shaking in their boots right now.

I walk out with the box, dragging it center stage via a trolley. My heels click on the wooden floor, and I observe the bar that was reserved for Alistair’s bachelor party.

There are about fifteen men gathering at the front of the stage. Some are holding pool sticks and others grip their beers tightly. Their faces are upturned and recognizable thanks to their proximity to the spotlight.

I look over the gathering crowd.

None of them are Alistair.

That must mean...

My eyes shoot to the back of the room where two men are standing. It’s hard to see in the darkness, but I can just make out their outlines. One of them has a clearly aggrieved stance, feet spread and arms over his chest.

That must be Kenya’s fiancé. I’m surprised Alistair’s making such a fuss about our little show—which hasn’t even started yet. I guess I owe Kenya fifty bucks. She was right about Alistair not being interested in seeing anyone but her naked.

We’re at the middle of the stage now and I drop the handle of the trolley. A low, brassy sound blows through the room. It’s the start of Kenya’s burlesque music.

A lone spotlight shines directly on top of the giant bow, and a hushed silence falls on the crowd again. The men in front of the stage creep

forward, waiting.

“Unless it’s Kenya jumping out of that box, I don’t want to see it,” Alistair announces. “So get them off the freaking stage.”

I notice the hulking figure beside Alistair start to move.

My inner alarm bells go off. Those giant shoulders look familiar.

I squint through the darkness at the man stalking to the front of the room.

His steps are rigid.

His back is ramrod straight.

I gasp in recognition. *Darrel*. I’d know that stride anywhere. Alistair’s gruff *bother-in-law* moves like he has a standing reservation with a machine gun in a war-torn country.

Tall and dark-haired with thick muscles, he barely says a word to anyone. Not that he has to say anything to be intimidating. His cold stares are enough to send the enemy camp skittering.

I have no idea why people pay to talk to him about their feelings. I’d be terrified to have a therapist as intense as Darrel. He doesn’t seem like a people person. It’s mind-boggling to me that he’d leave his throne as the Wall Street king to sit in a room asking people ‘how do you feel about that’ repeatedly.

The music swells and Kenya bursts out of the box. My focus returns to the performance and I stick my foot forward, matching the position of the other professional dancers.

Kenya wiggles her arms like a seaweed caught in a rough tide and hoists herself out of the present. The hooting stops. So do the crude whistles. Instead, a shocked stillness falls on the men as my best friend does the most awkward burlesque dance in the history of organized movement.

Darrel stops in his tracks. He’s close enough to the stage that I can make out a bit of his face. Green eyes silently bore into Kenya. A tick appears in a jawline as chiseled and gorgeous as they come. His thick eyebrows tighten a bit, like he’s trying to make sense of what he’s seeing.

Kenya kicks her legs out and moves her hips from side to side like she’s desperate to keep a hula hoop from touching the floor. Her lips are trembling, and I can tell she’s trying her hardest not to laugh.

Excitement builds inside me. My best friend is having an absolute blast. Planning this entire performance was definitely worth it.

The music changes and Kenya starts to unbutton her pink coat. The crowd livens up again, cheering for her and telling her to ‘take it all off’. I guess men can forgive dorky dancing if a woman is flashing enough skin.

Darrel seems to come out of his daze. He barrels toward the stage again.

This isn’t good.

Kenya’s enjoying herself. I can’t let Darrel stop us before her big finish.

I break formation and dance to the far end of the stage. Wiggling my feather boa so it looks like I’m intentionally interacting with the crowd, I make a beeline for Darrel.

His foot is already on the first step leading to the stage when I intercept him. I throw my feather boa around his neck and tug him forcefully back to the main floor. He stumbles, not expecting me to accost him with so much strength. I tighten my grip on the boa, digging my fingers into the soft material as I try to herd him away.

Darrel allows me to drag him for two seconds before he snatches the feather boa right out of my hands. He flings it into the darkness where it wafts sadly to the floor like an oversized snake rejected by its lover.

With a dark scowl, Darrel points at the stage. “You and your friends need to leave. Now.”

I shake my head.

His glare intensifies. “I respect that you need to make a living, but my friend has no interest in this type of entertainment.”

Annoyance froths in my stomach. *Kill joy*. Can’t he just let it slide? Does he have a personal grievance against ‘fun’?

That’s a rhetorical question. I *know* this guy would rather chew a bag of nails than crack a smile and act like a normal human being capable of feelings like joy and happiness.

He’s even worse than his brother-in-law. Alistair is grouchy and bossy, but at least he knows how to loosen up. Every time I’m unfortunate enough to be in Darrel’s sexy presence, he’s proven that he has a stick up his butt the size of a full-grown mahogany tree.

I glance desperately at the stage where Kenya is now deep into our routine. Her arms are swinging back and forth and she’s *killing* it. The headpiece is a nice touch, adding a dramatic flair to her intentionally off-beat movements.

My determined stare swerves to Darrel. This man is not allowed to rain on our parade. Kenya is *just* starting to take more chances and embrace her



wild side. It's not like she'll have many opportunities to do stuff like this. The moment she's Mrs. Holland Alistair, she won't be allowed to pop out of gift boxes and dance off-beat to Rhianna in public. At least not without ending up on Page Six.

I scramble in front of Darrel and wiggle my shoulders, trying to keep him distracted. He doesn't so much as glance at my body as he sidesteps me. I move with him, standing directly in his path.

*Don't even think about getting on that stage, you cold-blooded behemoth.*

Darrel faces off with me and tries to move in the other direction. I shuffle to the side too, sticking on him like glue. When he stalks the other way, I'm right there like this is some kind of choreographed waltz.

He makes a sound of displeasure low in his throat and side-steps me again. Like an idiot, I blindly follow him, not expecting him to fake me and dodge right at the last minute. He narrows his eyes when he gets past me, but I'm not done yet. I jump in front of him again, barring his way before he has a chance to climb the stairs.

Darrel stops abruptly and gives me a hard look. I hold my ground, but a thread of self-preservation sparks to life inside me.

This allergic-to-fun monster is at least six feet, two inches and over two hundred fifty pounds of solid muscles. He could flick me with his thumb and forefinger and I'd go careening into the wall like a cricket on the back of a fly swatter.

He stares me down, not moving a muscle. Then, slowly, Darrel's gaze turns a little more analytical, as if he's seeing something familiar about me underneath the mask. I duck my head and keep dancing. If Darrel knew it was me under here, he wouldn't just throw me into the wall, he'd probably pin me there and toss darts at me.

I have no idea why, but the man utterly detests me. Every time we meet, he either glares at me or ignores me altogether. It's not like I'm his biggest fan either, especially after how rude he was when we first met.

Darrel stops trying to mount the stage and advances on me. "Who hired you guys?"

I clamp my lips together.

The sexy curmudgeon takes another step toward me. I shuffle back and my body bounces against the wall. There's nowhere for me to run. Not that I'm interested in running.

My hormones have decided to hijack my good sense and take over. I'm turning warm and liquid from Darrel's proximity. He smells like soap and freshly-turned dirt and something distinctly him. The way his dress shirt stretches over his shoulders and hugs his biceps makes me want to reach out and squeeze whatever part of him I can find.

*Please do not fantasize about squeezing anything about this man, Sunny.*

Just a few paces behind me, Kenya is wearing a frilly, prison-themed costume and is shaking her hips for her husband-to-be. The music is about to end, and I have no idea if she's giving the signal because Darrel is blocking my view.

Darrel hovers over me, not touching my body and yet crowding me in all the right ways. Shadows play over the sharp planes of his face and lips that are thin and firm. I hate him. How can he be so aggravatingly hot?

His hand comes up to touch my cheek. It's a whisper-soft caress that sends a quiver through my belly.

And possibly lower than that.

Okay, *fine*. I'm definitely feeling hot and bothered right now.

It's frustrating. I'm one hundred percent annoyed by Darrel's unjustifiable dislike for me and I'm determined to treat him just as coldly as he treats me, but I am *not* immune to this level of up-close growly perfection.

Despite the number of times he's ignored me or grunted out a one-word response when he's forced to communicate, I've got eyes.

And he's got them too. The purest emerald eyes I've ever seen in my life. Greener than the rich landscape surrounding the Mayan temples in Belize. When the sun glimmers directly on Darrel's eyes, golden flecks come out and start swimming around like stars falling into a turquoise Caribbean Sea.

His intoxicating gaze fixes on me.

Then it falls.

Right down to my lips.

I suck in a deep breath as he eases his face close to mine. My fingers land on his chest to push him away but, instead, I find myself digging my fingers into his shirt and pulling him closer.

My heartbeat picks up speed until it threatens to drown out the loud music. I lick my lips, waiting for something I shouldn't want.

Darrel bypasses my mouth entirely and stops when his lips are close to my ear. In a deep, scratchy voice, the hellion growls, "Put some clothes on, Sunny."

The '*you look ridiculous*' isn't spoken, but it's implied.

My eyes collide with his and I see the disdain rising in them. I shove him. Hard. And he doesn't budge because he is a two-ton rock with devastating green eyes and a resentment for me that can fill a paint vat.

"How did you know it was me?" I hiss. The music is reaching a crescendo. It shouldn't be possible for him to hear me except he's still pinning me to the wall with his hard stare. We're nose to nose now, glaring at each other. And instead of tingly feelings down south, all I have is a burning desire to punch him in that chiseled face.

Darrel doesn't say a word.

Typical for him.

The music gets faster and faster. From the corner of my eyes, I notice the other ladies gearing up for the big finish.

I take stock of my options. At this point, I'm nowhere close to being able to run on stage so I can join the rest of the bachelorette party. The most I can do is complete my part of the routine from here.

Reaching down, I unstrap the gun that was pinned to my thigh by a garter belt. Ducking away from Darrel, I lift the gun and point it at him.

"What are you doing?" Darrel grunts.

From the corner of my eye, I see the swirling activity on stage. The dancers pick Kenya up and hoist her on their shoulders, turning her in a circle as she lifts her hands to the sky.

*Now!*

"I suggest you close your eyes, big guy."

His eyebrow pops up.

I whirl around and aim the gun at Kenya.

My fingers coil over the trigger.

What happens next is something I can't explain. One second, I'm on my feet and taking aim at my best friend, the next I'm being tackled to the ground.

I hit the floor. Hard. All of Darrel lands on top of me. The gun gets jostled from my hand, but it still goes off. Confetti explodes in Darrel's face. The blast sets off the hidden canons that had been planted throughout

the room. Streams of colorful paper explode in the air, blending into the chaos of applause and the last, fading notes of the music.

Kenya's happy laughter bounces off the walls and I wish I could join in her celebration. Instead, I face a glowering man who's eyeballing me like he wishes I were the one exploding into a thousand tiny bits.

"What the hell was that?" I demand.

Darrel stays quiet. As I squirm, I realize the ground is soft. A quick glance reveals that I landed on Darrel's hand. Did he slide his palm beneath me so I didn't rattle my skull when he threw me to the ground? It's kind of sweet and I almost say so. Until he yanks his palm away and my head bops against cement.

I push myself to a sitting position, glaring at Darrel as he brushes confetti off his shirt. He lowers his head and shakes his hair, making bright pieces of paper rain down to the floor. His hands are trembling slightly. How did he take me down so fast? I thought he said he was never in the military.

My frustration drains away, replaced with a frightening emotion that I've been trying to fight since Darrel and I first met.

Curiosity.

It would be great if my body would work with me and *not* find this gorgeous grump so intriguing. And it would be even better if he wasn't a part of Kenya's new family, forcing me to be around him and constantly battling my unwanted attraction.

"Sorry," Darrel rasps.

My jaw drops and I watch as he carefully avoids my eyes. Why does it feel like he scraped that apology out of the dregs of his heart? I don't get it. He's not Count Dracula with everyone. I've seen him play dolls with Belle, joke around with Alistair and even smile at Kenya. It's just that he turns into a snarly vampire when I walk in the room.

*His personality stinks, Sunny. Who cares if he's a sexy bag of mysteries? Stop acting like he's even worth your time.*

Behind me, Alistair is running on stage and scooping Kenya up. They're laughing and talking excitedly. She still has her mask on, but I guess he figured out this was a prank.

My best friend is smiling brightly, caught up in her fiancé's arms. Alistair points to the headpiece and she takes it off, motioning to it and laughing again.

In the second that I turn to look at them, Darrel withdraws and stomps angrily to the exits. My eyebrows crash together. I fight the urge to follow him and watch him leave instead.

“Sunny!” Kenya calls me. I notice the dancers are filing off stage. The professionals are going home, while the bachelorette party is going to change into clothes that covers more than the necessary bits. The plan is to stick around if Alistair doesn’t mind a co-ed party or head to another bar if he acts stuffy.

I jog to the stage and wave at Alistair who dips his chin in welcome.

“Fantastic performance,” Alistair says, although his eyes are on Kenya and his broad grin tells me she could have danced the Macarena and he would have loved it.

My best friend preens. Her brown skin is glowing with a thin sheen of sweat. The spotlight’s been turned off, but she still looks like the main character in a romantic movie skipping off into the sunset.

“It was Sunny’s idea.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Alistair muses, kissing Kenya’s temple.

She pouts. “What? You don’t think I’m capable of making a plan to crash your bachelor party by jumping out of a gift box and dancing horribly while confetti rains down on you?”

Alistair narrows his eyes and inspects her face. He takes a moment. Then he answers, “No.”

Kenya rolls her eyes.

My lips arch up.

“How did you come up with this?” Alistair asks me.

“I thought it would be fun to do something a little different for the bachelorette party. It was either this or mini golf.”

“Mini golf?” He scrunches his nose.

“It’s better than beer and pool.” Kenya yawns.

I snort. “Kenya rejected the party bus and male stripper idea, but it would have saved us a lot of effort. We wouldn’t have had to rehearse for three weeks to nail the routine.”

“I’m not interested in male strippers,” Kenya says.

“Smart girl.” Alistair offers his hand for a high five.

“Correction. I’m only interested in one guy stripping for me.” Kenya slips her fingers into his. “Since we surprised you tonight, how about you

return the favor and get your friends to put on a little show for my birthday?"

Alistair snorts. "I don't think you want to see Ezekiel naked."

I don't think he could *get* Ezekiel naked. Alistair's executive assistant is the type of man who irons his handkerchief each morning. He's definitely not in touch with his sexy fireman side.

"What about Darrel?" Kenya asks, smirking mischievously at me.

In spite of my best intentions, my brain is eager to conjure images of Darrel without a shirt on. My throat gets a little dry. When Darrel landed on me, I felt his pecs pushing me into the ground. I bet he'd be glorious naked.

Not that I care.

Besides, Darrel is too stiff to dance sexily. Even if he did something as crazy as a strip routine, he'd probably deliver every move with that deadpan expression of his. It would throw the entire party off.

Alistair strokes his chin. "I don't think Darrel would ever go for something like that."

"Shame." Kenya sighs.

Alistair narrows his eyes at her. "Why is that a shame? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Of course not, Holland. You know you're the only one who's allowed to shake your thang in my face."

"Make sure you have plenty of dollar bills too." He kisses her sweetly.

"Well, while you two make the rest of us single folks wildly uncomfortable, I'm going to head backstage and change." I hook a thumb toward the curtains.

Kenya takes my hand and squeezes. "Are you going to stick around? Alistair agreed to blend the bachelor and bachelorette parties."

"As if there was a doubt in your mind that he'd say yes." I shake my head and then glance at Alistair. "Are you sure you don't mind the girls crashing?"

He pins me with his intense hazel eyes. "Are you kidding? I'll take any excuse I can to spend time with her." He nods at Kenya. "As long as we get to take that box home and she jumps out of it again. For me only."

"You'll have to pay up first."

"Baby, name your price."

I pretend to gag. These two are sickly sweet together, when they're not playfully arguing. Sometimes, I think trading barbs is their love language.

With a sigh, I step away from them. “I don’t think I’ll stay tonight.”

“Why?” Kenya’s eyes widen.

I rub the side of my arm. Darrel protected my head when he dragged me to the ground earlier, but he’s still a steely giant. I got crushed by a stone-faced wall tonight. I’m not really in the mood to socialize.

“Baby, I’ll go change real quick and come back.” Kenya pats Alistair on the arm. Her giant engagement ring glimmers in the lights.

Alistair kept the proposal low-key, which surprised everyone. He’s not exactly a subtle guy and he’s been extremely loud and proud about his love for Kenya, dripping her in diamonds, clothes, and attention.

However, he dialed it all the way back for the proposal, choosing instead to have an intimate family dinner with Kenya and Belle—his adorable daughter. Kenya told me she cried when he went down on his knee and Belle was right there to catch her tears. I really couldn’t wish any better for my best friend.

Kenya follows me to the dressing room. I rummage through the plumes of feathers to find my clothes.

She clears her throat. “Sunny.”

“Mm?” I push through the heap until I locate the dress. It’s a short, flashy number that pairs well with anything. Since I’m not as curvy as Kenya, the built-in bra also helps to give my body more shape.

“What’s going on with you and Darrel?”

My throat gets dry. “What do you mean?”

“I saw you two earlier. He had you pressed against the wall, and he was looking at you like you were his next meal.”

I let out an exaggerated gasp. “You had time to pay attention to me while you were onstage?”

“Had to check on you. You were supposed to help me with my big finish.”

“As you know, I got held up.”

“By Darrel.”

“Right.”

“Who was looking intently into your eyes.”

“More like glaring intently into my eyes.” I step behind a changing screen, pluck the police badge off my skirt and undo the straps of my sparkly bra. “He even body-slammed me to the ground during the big finish. If that’s not evidence that he hates me, I don’t know what is.”

“I don’t know. I saw something between you. There was so much...”

“What?”

“Tension. It sizzled.”

I stick my head out so I can glare at her. “Don’t make me throw up.”

“You can’t lie to me, Sunny. I see the way you watch him.”

“You can see with those heart-eyes? I thought all you could think about was your fiancé?” I shrug into my dress and step out to meet her.

Kenya plants her hands on my shoulders. “He’s a great guy.”

“He’s a menace and I’m not interested.”

“Sunny.”

“See you at home.” I lift a hand in goodbye and hurry away from the bar.

My best friend is dead wrong. Darrel is not a good guy. He is the scourge of the earth to me, and I wouldn’t be interested in the grouchy, close-mouthed jerk if he and I were the last two people on the planet.



## CHAPTER 2

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# THE RATIONAL LIFE

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## DARREL

THE BRAIN IS a complex piece of biological tech that thousands of years of study and research can't fully unravel. Yet I understand the brain a hell of a lot more than I understand Sunny Quetzal and her crazy impulses.

Full disclosure, I'm not using 'crazy' in a clinical sense. From what I've observed (and against my better judgement, I can't help but pay attention to Sunny Quetzal), her frontal lobe seems to be functioning just fine.

It isn't that she's *incapable* of rational thought. It's that Sunny's trained her synapses to fire in directions that most socialized human beings would reject at a subconscious level.

Translation: *Sunny does what she wants whether it's a good idea or not.*

What's even more dangerous is her charisma. With a head toss and a confident smile, she can influence others to believe her outlandish ways are perfectly sound. More than that. She can make you believe her wildness is charming.

I'd suggest she see a therapist, but I doubt she'd acknowledge my professional advice. In fact, she'd probably take it as an insult, hurl a couple choice words at me and flip me off with those elegant and dark fingers.

Sunny takes pride in making emotional decisions and will defend those choices with totally flawed logic. She'll be loud about it too. Which is one of the many things I dislike about her.

Last night's ridiculous burlesque show is another example of her destructive impulsiveness. I'm still finding confetti in the crevices of my body *hours* after I've showered. I might be shaking out pieces of twisted paper from my hair twelve years from now.

My phone rings in the quiet of my office. I glance at the device sitting primly on my desk—a giant wooden monstrosity that was a gift from my father. The surface of the desk is bare except for the phone, a laptop, a keyboard and a lamp. I detest clutter with my every breath and it calms me to see all that clean space.

Picking up my phone, I glance at the screen and frown. *What does Alistair want with me?*

"Hello?" I grunt.

“You left your glass slipper behind when you ran away yesterday.”

I squeeze my fingers against the bridge of my nose. “What do you want?”

“Kenya asked me to call and see if you were okay.”

“I should have known this was an assignment from your bride.”

“I’d be a sad and lonely person if I was interested in your personal life, Darrel, since you do nothing exciting at all.”

My eyes narrow. Alistair’s gotten a lot cheekier since he met Kenya. Not that he wasn’t outspoken before, only he knew better than to voice all the thoughts that came to his head.

Kenya’s a bad influence.

But I believe that’s Sunny’s fault.

Everything is Sunny’s fault.

Whether that’s a rational thought or not can be evaluated on a separate occasion.

“I had something to do.”

“You’re the one who organized the party. What did you have to do that was so urgent?”

Lying is one of the most practical accomplishments of the human brain, so I feel no shame when I confidently tell Alistair, “I had to make a call.”

“You weren’t running from Sunny?”

It’s a pointed question, and I detest him for it.

“What does Sunny have to do with anything?” I force my voice into a dry, bored tone.

Alistair gets very quiet.

And I get very nervous.

I’ve been careful to not even *glance* at Sunny when she and I are in the same room. We don’t speak and we don’t interact beyond the necessities of social propriety. If I could avoid her entirely, I would.

“I don’t know, Darrel. You tell me what Sunny has to do with it.”

A lump forms in the center of my throat. It is imperative that no one finds out about my history with Sunny or the embarrassing secret I’m determined to keep under wraps.

When I still say nothing, Alistair pipes up. “I heard you slammed her into the ground last night. You wanna explain that?”

My lips press together, and I breathe shakily into the phone. “Last night was...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I’ve been trying to forget about my collision with Sunny, but Alistair’s foisted the topic on me. Now my brain is running at full speed as if it was waiting for this moment.

“What is it about her that gets on your nerves?”

Everything. Her irrational impulses. Her disdain for logical arguments. Her stubbornness. Her soul-deep laughter. Those dark eyes, deep and alluring. Her perfectly symmetrical nose. Soft brown skin. Long, willowy body.

Geez, that body.

She was practically served up on a silver platter in that ridiculous sparkly bra and flared skirt. I held her in my arms, and it made my brain misfire. She’d been soft against me and she smelled like... flowers mixed with a salty Caribbean breeze.

*Not* that I’d wanted to notice her smell.

Or the fact that her eyes sparkle like stars.

Or the fact that her chest squashed against mine like magnetic particles in the blood stream.

My pants start to tighten and I squeeze my eyes shut to keep the bodily response in check. Still, my heart beats faster—a product of overacting pituitary glands firing instructions to my nether regions.

Even a dedication to logic and reason can’t hinder biological functions. Unfortunately. And despite my utter distaste for Sunny Quetzal, she is the only woman who consistently and frustratingly titillates the part of my brain that triggers arousal.

“Kenya’s worried that you two won’t make it to the wedding.” Alistair’s voice is lower now. “Is there going to be a problem, Darrel?”

I know Alistair’s warning is not personal. With Kenya’s influence, he’s managing his need for control and dominance, but just because he’s taken his foot off the gas doesn’t mean he can change the makeup of his brain.

My brother-in-law is still fiercely protective of his people. That includes his daughter and his fiancée. I can hear the ring of a threat in his voice, not against me personally but against anything that I would do to destroy Kenya’s day.

“I gave my word to be your best man, and I honor my promises. Even if it kills me.”

“Why so dramatic? It’s not like Sunny has murderous intent.”

He’s wrong about that. Sunny is tearing me in two. Self-preservation demands I stay far away from her, while my base instincts insist I get her naked as soon as possible. A mind in constant war with itself *will* start to self-destruct. It’s very likely that Sunny Quetzal will be the death of me.

“I’m not sure what the purpose of this call is, Alistair.”

“I’ve got a concerned fiancée wondering if her maid of honor and my best man are going to choke the life out of each other before the big day. I’m calling to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Now who’s being dramatic?”

“I’m not the one body slamming women to the ground.”

I tilt my head back and sigh at the ceiling. “It was an impulsive response. I apologized.”

“You overreacted. You never do that.”

“No one’s perfect.”

“And no one abhors flaws as much as you.”

“Is that an insult, Alistair?”

“I’m asking you sincerely to play nice with Kenya’s best friend.”

“Impossible.”

“For a man who claims to love rational thought over all else, you sure wear your emotions on your sleeve.”

I sigh heavily. “Dislike is not an emotion. It’s a synapse in the brain. The *amygdala* activates when key neurons—”

“Fascinating but sadly I have more interesting things to do. Kenya just walked in.”

“*Hey, baby.*”

I hear a kissing sound and cringe. Alistair’s lack of self-control around his fiancé is something he’s utterly proud of. Kenya encourages it. Their obsession with each other is one I don’t understand. So many clients have walked into my office, broken and torn after a relationship gone wrong.

Love is a damaging phenomenon. I learned that lesson the hard way in high school and, as an adult, I pride myself on avoiding any relationships that could rattle the status quo.

Those who say they ‘can’t help falling in love’ are the weak ones. Self-restraint is a superpower. The brain is the control center of the body, but it doesn’t control *me*. I choose which direction I want to take, not the muscle in my skull.

And if I say there will be no more thoughts about the beautiful and irritating Sunny Quetzal, then there won't be.

"Oh, hold on a sec, Darrel. Kenya wants to talk to you."

I lean forward. "Actually, I'm busy—"

"Darrel!" Kenya's sweet voice purrs over the line. She's a petite go-getter with a strong sense of purpose. I'd need neuroimaging to be sure, but I'm almost certain she has a unique electrical stimulation in her frontal lobe that pushes her toward challenges.

In that sense, she's very similar to Alistair who reacts with glee when presented with a problem. They both feed on resistance and find it thrilling to fight through difficulties.

"You'll be at the last dance practice, right? I'm telling you long in advance because you missed the last two sessions."

I open my mouth to form a rejection, but there's a knock on the door. Dina, my head nurse who also doubles as the center's receptionist, pokes her head in. Her wrinkles deepen in distress as she gestures to me.

"Sorry, Kenya. I have to go." I press my fingers into the arm of my chair and rise.

"You'll be there, right, Darrel? I won't take no for an answer."

"Come on, Darrel," Alistair adds. "You said you keep your promises. This dance class falls under your best man duties."

"Fine," I grind out.

"Perfect!" Kenya's exuberance sets me on edge. She's a little too happy to watch me stumble over my two-left feet in a practice room.

"See you then," Alistair says.

I end the call and toss the phone into my pocket. Whipping my lab coat from the back of my chair, I slide my arms into it.

The coat is pretentious and a pain to iron, but I've seen the benefits of wearing it. The white fabric is a symbol. A label. A way to calm a patient's mind and associate myself with something they can trust.

"What's wrong?" I ask Dina.

She nibbles on her bottom lip. "Darrel..."

I'm on edge immediately. Like me, Dina doesn't rattle easy. She's been a psychology nurse for longer than I've been alive and no matter how unnerving a case is, she doesn't waver. Seeing the panic so clear in her expression, I brace myself for the worst.

"It's the hospital." She gulps. "They're calling you."

My heart sinks. "Is she..."

Dina just shakes her head.

I surge past her, jump into my car and drive to the hospital as fast as I can.

\* \* \*

THE CAR CAREENS TO A STOP IN THE HOSPITAL PARKING LOT. FLICKERS OF A memory gnaw at me. I see flashing lights. A body on a stretcher. Alistair's bloody face staring at me with agony.

My body refuses to move. I sit in the vehicle and take in deep breaths. The past and the present are colliding. I've got to jar my brain back to reality by any means necessary.

Keep breathing.

*This feeling is just a shockwave going through your temporal lobe.*

Inhale.

*Emotional instability can be conquered with knowledge and proper stimuli.*

Exhale.

*Claire is not inside that hospital. Nothing inside that building can hurt me.*

I fall back on the techniques I teach my patients. I count backwards from ten, keeping my breaths paced and steady. When I've got my panic under control, I scramble into the hospital.

The smell hits me first. Sharp. Chemical. The scent is disguised by an air freshener that struggles to cover the stench of sickness and desperation. Doctors surge past me, their eyes focused and their steps sharp. There's always someone who needs help. Another family in crisis. Another body shutting down.

Stomping through the corridors reminds me of the night Claire died. I know, in theory, that it's only my memory index surging to the forefront, but it's hard to tamp down the flood of nausea.

Claire was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. The ambulance sped her to the hospital, but she wasn't brought to a room. She was taken straight to the morgue. Slipping the sheet off her face was one of the most horrific things I've ever had to do.



Thankfully, I'm not headed in the direction of the morgue today. Instead, the nurse at the desk directs me to the emergency room.

I step past the beds separated by wispy curtains until I locate an elderly woman lying on a cot. Grey hair spills around her white pillow. Veiny hands are clutched on top of her stomach. Her chest is pumping up and down.

*She's alive.*

Relief spills through me, rushing to my fingers and toes.

I draw near to her.

To my surprise, she senses my presence without opening her eyes. "I'm sorry they called you."

"Of course they'd call me." I fold myself into a chair near her cot. "I'm disappointed you didn't want them to."

"We shouldn't be bothering you."

I adjust the sheet so it's covering her up to her chin. "I would have been very upset if you kept this from me."

"You should be worrying about your own life." Her voice has a slight wheeze. It makes my heart pinch.

"My life is perfectly in order."

"You're a busy man."

"I had nothing on my agenda today." That's not true, but hearing the truth won't be helpful in a case like this.

She opens her eyes and pins me with a watery blue gaze. "I can't look at you without feeling like we're taking advantage of your loyalty."

"Professor Stein was there for me during the darkest time of my life. This is hardly enough to pay him back."

"You made a promise to help him. Not his family. This is a lifetime commitment. One you didn't ask for—"

I reach out and take her hands. Her skin is paper-thin as if one sharp wind can tear it open and expose the flesh underneath. Moles dot her arms and her veins are especially blue in the sunlight.

"Professor Stein would have traded his life for his family. Honoring him is taking care of the people he left behind."

She closes her eyes and lets out a shaky breath. "The kids don't know."

"They've stayed with me before." I think of the bedroom I personally decorated in the farmhouse. It has a bunk bed, a dresser and a poster of Michael Gazzaniga because even children are old enough to appreciate a psychologist who made scientific breakthroughs.

"I don't know, Darrel. In the past, it was only for a few short months. This is..." She coughs. "This will be different."

"I promise, I'm going to take care of them."

"I know."

"I'll make sure they'll feel at home."

"I know that too."

"Then why is your heart beating so fast?" I gesture to where our hands are clasped.

"You're analyzing me."

"I'm pointing out the obvious."

"This isn't fair. None of it is." She sighs.

"I've thought this through, Ms. Jean. I can do it."

"I'm not worried about your ability, Darrel." She pulls her fingers away from mine. "I worry about how they'll handle all this." Tears fill her eyes. One spills down her cheek and falls into the deep wrinkles carving her face like a map. "They've lost so much in their short lives."

My breathing is steady. So are my words when I assure her. "I'm going to make the same promise to you as I did to Professor Stein before he..." I catch myself and let that comment fade. "I *will* take care of your family like they're my own."

"It's a burden."

"It's done. And I don't go back on my promises."

She bats away the tear. "I'm going to talk to them. Prepare them. Micheal, he... he won't take this well."

"I can be there, Ms. Jean."

"I'd prefer if you weren't. I still have some time before... I'd like them to have a few days of normalcy with me."

"Okay."

"One more thing, Darrel."

I lean over and check her IV fluids. "What is it?"

"I contacted the social worker."

I freeze. "When?"

"Yesterday."

My lips arch up. "You acted like you weren't sure about my intentions, but you were already making moves."

"I believed in you, but I also prepared myself for the worst." She's smiling now. "The social worker will be at your place this evening. I was

going to call you, but I ended up in the hospital before I had the chance.”

“Wait. You said... this evening?”

“I don’t want to wait until the last minute. While I’m still alive, I can help with the paperwork. It’ll prevent any complications when the time comes.”

Now would be the time to lie to her. To tell her she’s got plenty of years in her. To assure her she can watch the kids grow up and have kids of their own. But she wouldn’t believe me. She’s a smart woman.

“I’ll meet the social worker this evening. Don’t worry.”

“Darrel.”

“Yes, Ms. Jean?”

“Thank you.” Thin eyelashes flutter. “Thank you so much.”

Her gratitude feels unwarranted. If it wasn’t for Professor Stein, I’d still be stuck in a job I hate, trying to find meaning in a life that made me feel dead inside. I wouldn’t be the man I am without him. I owe him this much.

The curtain draws back with a loud whirr and the doctor appears. His eyes are somber and his steps are as slow as a funeral march.

“Are you the guardian?” he asks in a tight voice.

I nod.

“Let’s talk.”

I follow him into the hallway and let my hands fall limply at my sides.

His dark eyes study me intently. “You’re her grandson?”

“I’m a... friend.” It would take too long to explain my connection to Ms. Jean right now.

“It’s just you?” He arches an eyebrow. There’s a hint of a scolding in that sentence as if he’s personally offended I’m the only one who showed up. “Where’s her family?”

“Dead.”

His face drops. Normally, I wouldn’t be so harsh, but I have no time to convince him that I’m worthy enough to speak on Ms. Jean’s behalf.

“What happened today?” I ask firmly.

He shuffles his feet as if the news he’s about to unleash is too unnerving to stay still. “She fainted on the job and was rushed to the hospital. I sent her to do some scans and...” He presses his lips together. “It’s not looking too good.”

“She knows.”

His eyebrows lift. “Does she?”

“Yes. She’s made arrangements.” The funeral hall director met with her several times. She knows exactly what kind of coffin she wants, a shiny walnut design with etched gold handles. Her funeral colors will be blue ‘*like the sky above the cemetery*’ and green ‘*like the grass over her tombstone.*’

Most people would find planning their own funerals morbid, but Ms. Jean planned it like she was preparing for a party. *I want it to be in a church, but I don’t want any boring speeches or tears*, Ms. Jean told me a year ago, when she sent the kids to stay with me for the first time. *Then after the funeral, I want fun music. And beer. And dancing. Make sure there’s dancing.*

My eyes bore into the doctor. “Can you make sure she’s not in pain? That’s the only thing I ask.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I walk out of the hospital with my shoulders hunched. The sun burns my eyes and falls on top of my head like it wants to fry my hair. Warmth. Light. Life. It feels like a fantasy even though it’s in front of me.

I’ve seen how close Death is to all of us. Much closer than we think. My thoughts veer to a dark place. To Claire. To the day my life changed for the worst. I wonder if it’s better to pass on suddenly, like my sister did the night of the accident, or to draw out the time, knowing your days are numbered and forcing your family to prepare for the end too.

I turn on upbeat music on the way to the center and try to herd those thoughts back into their dungeon. I still have clients to see today. It’s not smart to be caught up in my own issues when a clear head is needed for my sessions.

\* \* \*

BACK AT THE CENTER, THE DAY BEGINS IN EARNEST AND I MEET WITH clients without taking a break.

At four on the dot, Dina enters my office with a tray of coffee. It’s nothing like Ezekiel’s brew, and I mostly drink it just to be polite.

I eye the brown gunk with distaste and swipe it off the tray. “Can you change the sign on the door? I don’t want any walk-ins unless it’s an emergency.”

“You never head home this early.” Her eyes widen. “Is Ms. Jean okay?”  
I shake my head.

Dina sighs and holds the tray to her chin. “That poor woman. And those kids...”

I check my watch and push out of my chair before she can start laying on the sympathy. I detested everything about losing my baby sister, but coping with people’s condolences was an unwelcome addition to my grief.

There’s not much to say when a life is snuffed out, and the people who try to deviate from the script and get creative with their condolences were the ones who made me want to jump into the casket with Claire.

“I need to head home now. The social worker is inspecting the farmhouse today. I can’t be late.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I can do it alone.”

“Yes, but you don’t *have* to.” She eyes me. “It’s been a year since you’ve known this day was coming. Why haven’t you told your family the truth? Alistair still thinks you were taking care of a patient’s kids last year. He has no idea what’s really going on.”

“Ms. Jean, technically, was a patient,” I grumble. We put her on the official client list so she could have access to me and Dina in case of an emergency.

“You know exactly what I mean, Darrel. You intentionally made it seem like she was ‘missing sessions’, when referring to her missing treatments at the hospital.” Dina tilts her head. “I don’t get all the secrecy. Helping this family is not a shameful thing and Alistair is—”

“I thought we didn’t pry into each other’s private lives, Dina.” The warning is gentle but clear.

She pins her lips together. “If you’re asking me to butt out, I’m going to politely decline.”

I sigh. *Guess she’s not going to drop it.* “Alistair is busy with his wedding. This is a happy time for him. I’ll let him know what’s going on when the kids move in permanently.” It’s not like I can hide that I have two tiny people in my house. Alistair is going to have some questions.

“So you’re really doing this? You’re really taking them in?”

“It was decided a long time ago.”

A smile inches across her wrinkled face. “You’re a good man, Darrel.”

A good man? The label makes me itchy. There are so many reasons that term doesn't apply to me. Starting with the argument I had with my sister just before she left on that tragic trip with Alistair and ending yesterday when I seriously considered laying a kiss on my arch enemy's juicy brown lips.

If I'm what the world classifies as a 'good man', then we definitely need to revisit the meaning of the term.

"Didn't you say you had to meet the social worker? Go, *go*." Dina shoos me out of the therapy center.

I hustle to the farmhouse, wondering if the social worker would subtract points for a wrinkled shirt and the five o'clock shadow around my chin. Unfortunately, I don't have time to shave or freshen up. The moment I pull into the driveway, the social worker is right behind me.

"Mr. Hastings." She extends a dark hand. Her hair's up in a puff and two giant hoops dangle from her ears. Her uniform falls just below her thick knees and she's wearing orthopedic black pumps. "I'm Ms. Bennet, the social worker assigned to Ms. Jeans's case."

"Ms. Bennet, nice to see you."

"You just got home?" She arches a brow.

"Uh..."

"How late do you work most days?" She flips open a tiny notebook.

I blink rapidly. The fierce expression on her face makes me uneasy. Why do I get the feeling that she already dislikes me?

I gesture to the front door. "Why don't we head inside and talk?"

"I asked you a question, Mr. Hastings."

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips. "It depends on my workload. Sometimes, a session will go over the time we've allotted. Sometimes, a client will call me after hours."

Mental issues don't take a break after five o'clock. Many times, a client will face their darkest thoughts at an hour when the rest of the world would be decompressing.

She keeps scribbling in her notebook. "So you don't have a reliable schedule?"

"I wouldn't say that." I choose my words carefully. From the tight way she's holding the pen, to the pursed lips and narrowed eyes, Ms. Bennet seems to be on the hunt for infractions. "I'm open to changing my schedule

to fit the children's needs. I'm also open to hiring a nanny in the case that —"

"In the case that what? You can't be there for Micheal and Bailey?"

I inhale a deep breath and let it out calmly. "Ms. Bennet, why don't you come inside? I can offer some refreshments."

Sitting down and distracting her with food will trigger dopamine and, hopefully, get her to associate me with something sweet. It's a dirty psychology trick, but desperate measures...

"Mr. Hastings," Ms. Bennet follows me into the kitchen, "have you met with Micheal and Bailey before?"

"I was there when Bailey was born." I open the fridge and pull out the box of orange juice. I'd offer her something more grown-up, like wine or whiskey, but that would probably earn more earnest notebook scribbles. "Professor Stein was ecstatic that his wife was able to carry to term. Micheal was already a miracle baby, but they were both older by the time Bailey came around."

"You're familiar with the family."

"Professor Stein was my mentor." More than that. He was like a father to me. A much better one than mine ever was. But I'm not going there with this social worker who seems like she's been getting glaring lessons from Sunny Quetzal.

*Why am I thinking of Sunny right now?*

I shake my head. "Both of the boys stayed here while their grandmother was getting treatments."

"Ms. Jean is interested in naming you as the boys' official guardian. Did you make this request?"

"We discussed it a long time ago. The boys have no other kin—"

"You are not kin," she bites out.

I suck in another breath. If she were my patient, I'd probably prescribe breathing exercises along with daily journal writing to identify what her emotional triggers are. Since this is a very different conversation, I force myself to stop analyzing her and try to appeal to her sympathies.

"A family isn't necessarily made of people related by blood."

"And a single man loosely connected to a family of scholars doesn't just *volunteer* to become a father of two."

My teeth clench at the term. "I wouldn't be a father." *I wouldn't call myself that if you held me at gun point.* "I'd be a guardian."

Her eyes narrow. "I see."

Damn. What exactly is she seeing? Something tells me I won't like the answer.

I bounce to my feet and gesture to the stairs. "Why don't I show you where the boys will be staying?"

She nods, her lips tight.

I take her up the stairs to the room Micheal and Bailey shared when they visited. "Right now, they have a bunk, but I intend on converting the office for Bailey to have his own room."

"Did *you* decorate?"

I glance at the bedroom with its bare walls, neat furniture and the poster. It's warm. Spacious. Free of clutter. "Yes."

"And they stayed here?"

I blink. "Yes. Is something wrong?"

"It feels... barren." She folds her arms over her chest and taps her fingers twice. "Like an after-thought. It definitely doesn't match the rest of the house."

"The decorating for the rest of the house was done by a company. I did the boys' room myself."

"Was it not worth having a professional come in and do it?" She arches an eyebrow. "You put so much thought into the rest of the house, but couldn't be bothered with the boys' room?"

My irritation spikes, so I clamp my mouth shut before I say something thoughtless.

"Mr. Hastings." She clasps her hands and leans forward, her eyes boring into me. "Are you aware of the magnitude of responsibility that having—not only one child but *two* will place on you? Not to mention, these kids have lost their mother, their father and now they're about to lose their grandmother. They've faced more loss than a full-grown adult can bear."

"Which is why my background in neuropsychology is such an asset."

"Is it? Or is it simply an experiment?"

I stiffen. "I don't understand what you're trying to imply."

"Your father was a high-ranking military official and your mother was an heiress. You and your sister grew up with money and status. She went on to found Belle's Beauty. You became the king of investment banking." She eases back and surveys me. "You were at the top of your game before you suddenly decided to change directions and study psychology. And now, as a



single man with no significant other, you've suddenly decided to raise two children who don't belong to you?"

"Male mentorship is a necessary component in the fabric of a boy's life. And I hardly see what not having a girlfriend has to do with my ability to care for these kids. Regarding my change of employment, it was a sound decision. I am not a man who moves on impulse."

"And yet your track record speaks for itself." She shakes her head, her lips sagging with disapproval. "Mr. Hastings, what these children need is stability." Gesturing to the room, she says, "I really hope that Ms. Jean put her trust in the right person."

I pull my lips into my mouth. Since there's nothing left to be said, I see Ms. Bennet out and then I walk back into the boys' room.

In the silence, my brain spins with potential fixes.

Problem #1: The social worker hates me.

Problem #2: The social worker might not approve the guardianship.

Problem #3: The social worker thinks the boys' rooms need better decorating.

The solution pops into my brain at once.

I pick up my phone and call Dina. "Get me the interior designer who worked on my farmhouse. I need them in my office. *Tomorrow*."

After ending the call, I stride to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water. I'm going to prove that I can be a good guardian to these kids. I made a promise to my professor, and no matter what, I'm going to keep my word.

## CHAPTER 3

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# IN THE WIND

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## SUNNY

“It’s because you don’t have childbearing hips,” mom croaks into the phone. “I blame your father.”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. My fingers are splayed in the middle of a home decorating magazine. This particular publication is mind-numbingly boring, but I find my biggest inspirations by critiquing mainstream trends. Something about seeing the way I’m ‘supposed’ to do things makes me want to go in the opposite direction.

“It’s my fault too.” Mom moans. “First, I fell in love with a man who isn’t Mayan. Even worse, he had to be tall.”

I don’t buy her whining for a second. She’s acting like she and dad don’t adore each other. There were many times I stumbled on my parents mid-PDA when I was growing up. Scarred me for life.

“Mom, you love dad’s height. Don’t even pretend.” I flip the page of the magazine.

“He passed those genes on to you. Now you’re taller than all the nice men I set you up with.”

“Not all of them.”

“Enough of them.”

“Mayan men are getting taller now, mom. It’s genetics. Besides, no one cares if the woman is taller than the man anymore.”

“Then explain why you scare off your blind dates every time?”

“Because I’m not interested in going back to Belize and being the quiet Mayan wife.” I flip the page and sketch out a design in my spiral-notebook. “I can’t embroider. I can’t even stick a thread into a needle. And I definitely can’t cook. Can you see me bending over hot stones patting out tortillas?”

“Ay, your father spoiled you,” mom wails. “He insisted on doing everything for you and now, you can’t even make your own tortillas.”

“I can make tortillas, mom. Just not the way the elders would want me to.”

“Come home for the weekend. I’ll teach you. It’s easy.”

“Sorry. I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Working.”

“A real job?”

I tip my chin to the ceiling. “I’m the boss of my own business. Most parents would be proud.”

“Designing? You call that a business?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a sigh. Here we go again.

Her voice climbs in dismay. “You go to college. We spend thousands for you to study and then you throw away your degree to spread beds and put up curtains for a living? Ay-ya, I don’t know where I went wrong. I should have never let your father convince me to come to America.”

“Dad wouldn’t have survived in the village. He barely convinced the elders to marry you.” I open my laptop and maneuver to the design I’m working on.

I scored a huge gig, not that mom would acknowledge it. A few weeks back, I signed a contract with Stinton Investment. Someone on the board heard that I’d designed an office for Fine Industries and offered an impressive amount of cash to finish their space.

“With enough time—”

“No amount of time would have gotten the elders to approve of him. The moment you fell in love was the moment you were headed out of Belize.”

We have this exact conversation every six months or so. It’s more often if mom finds a ‘good enough’ Mayan man to set me up with. ‘Good enough’ meaning, of course, that he’s working in America (which is more common these days) and that he’s just as traditional as she is (which is basically impossible).

As much as she likes to lambast me, it’s not a one-sided disinterest. More and more Mayan men aren’t dating within the culture either.

“So mouthy. You always have a comeback.” The scolding in her tone makes me look up instinctually, wondering if a lone slipper will come flying at me like a missile.

Thankfully, I’m safe.

“You see what moving away from our people did to you?”

I roll my eyes. “What did moving away from the elders do to me?”

“You’re Americanized. Now you have all these crazy ideas.”

“Which idea is crazy? Working for myself or being happily single?”

“A woman your age should have a family.”

“Mom, I’m not even thirty.”

“Time passes quickly. Before you know it, your eggs will get old.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“With all the canned food and plastic meat in this country, you can’t be sure of anything. Aren’t you worried?”

“Not even a little.” If I cared about getting pregnant, I could find a man to get the job done. Mayan or not, most heterosexual guys would be eager to get the baby-making part out of the way for me.

For some crazy reason, Darrel’s stony mug comes to mind. I imagine him draping me over his bed and parting my legs so he can give me a baby...

“Children are a blessing.”

My head whips up and I shudder. Why the heck did my brain go to such a dangerous place?

“You should be more engaged.”

“I do want a family, but I want to find a man who’ll be a good and dedicated husband to me *as well as* someone who’ll be a good father to my kids.”

“You want too many things.”

“I’m taking my time because it’s important. You’re so obsessed with continuing the family line that you can’t even take me seriously.”

“The reason marriages fall apart is because the young people are the ones making the decisions. If we went back to the way things used to be, it would get better.”

“Back in the day, women weren’t allowed to speak in male company. You want to go back to that?”

“See, you pick and choose which traditions you want to criticize, but they weren’t all bad. If we were in Belize, you would have been married at \_\_\_”

“Fifteen?”

“Sixteen.”

I sigh. “Child brides aren’t legal anymore, mom.”

“But arranged marriages are.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, push me, Sunita and you will see.”

My fingers fall away from the magazine. “You’re fretting over nothing, mama. I love being Mayan. The fact that I’m living here isn’t going to stop

me from honoring my culture.” My lips curve up. “You’re the one who taught me not to hide who I am.”

“Of course you shouldn’t hide. You’re incredibly privileged to be who you are, Sunita.”

See that? That right there is why I can’t be mad at this woman. My mother is the bravest person I know, and I saw it fully when we moved to America.

Our first order of business once we arrived was blending in. We thought it would allow people like us to live harassment-free, but we were wrong. We can speak perfect English, eat only McDonalds and dress in western clothes, but nothing can hide the slope of our forehead, the shape of our noses, the lilt in our words or the color of our skin. ‘Different’ will always be a label that follows us around.

After an incident that involved a man yelling racial slurs at mom and waving a gun around from the window of his pickup, mom decided ‘to hell with it’ and went wild.

I’m talking wearing traditional Mayan blouses out to the grocery store, starting a Mayan embroidery class at the community center, and sending maize tortillas to our neighbors on holidays. *If I’m going to be harassed because I’m different, I might as well embrace those differences so they have a better reason to come after me*, she said.

Mom chose the loud and proud Mayan route. Which, unfortunately, means her biggest dream in life is to see me married off to another Mayan man so we can make more Mayan children and complete her mission of ‘saving’ our Mayan culture.

“I really don’t understand why you’re pressuring me to marry into the culture when *you* didn’t.” My brows wrinkle when I notice an invoice from the moving company. I hired them to transport the office furniture last week and they’re asking about the second half of the payment.

Any day now, I should be receiving the remainder of my invoice from Stinton Investment. The gig from the investment firm will more than cover my remaining bills. It’s still annoying to see an arrears email though. I’m going to pay the movers on the date we agreed. Why are they harassing me just because I’m a small business?

“This is not about me, young lady. It’s about you and your future. A Mayan man will understand you in a way no one else can.”

“Okay... and?” I reply to their email, assuring them their money will come, and then log into social media.

“And he’ll be prepared for an apocalypse. If the world ever comes to an end, the people who know how to live off the land are the ones who will survive. These Americans are so obsessed with the billionaires and the tech moguls, but farmers are where the real wealth is.”

“Mom, you’re so...” My words fade when I notice today’s headline.

*Stinton Investment Goes Belly Up*

“I’m so what? What were you going to say, Sunita?”

“Mom, I’ll call you back,” I reply breathily.

“What? Don’t hang up on me!”

I toss the phone and pull the laptop closer to my chest. Clicking on the link like it’s the golden ticket from *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, I skim the article. A sick feeling spreads from my stomach to my chest as one phrase jumps out at me.

*Bankrupt.*

It’s like a cosmic bat to the head.

No.

I close my eyes and open them as if it’ll magically change what’s in front of me.

*Bankrupt.*

My fingers tighten into fists. The company who still owes me money—money that I need to pay my bills and the moving company—is shutting down.

“You can’t be serious!” I shriek. Heart pounding, I grab my phone and call the manager from Stinton Investment. We’d been working together throughout the project.

The phone goes straight to voicemail.

“Okay, Sunny. Don’t panic.” I hop to my feet and pace my tiny living room. “Even if they’re bankrupt, they have to pay you. There are laws about this stuff.”

Sweat beads on my forehead and a noose of a reminder tightens around my neck. *I did extra work for these guys.*

At the last minute, the company asked me to design more offices. Rather than charge for the extra furniture, painting and labor, I used their initial deposit—and my own funds—to cover the costs.



A jolt of foreboding runs through my body. My composure unravelling by the second, I head out the door at a mad dash.

The mid-morning rush is brutal. Under the circumstances, I have no choice but to drive like an idiot. Someone flips me the bird when I cut into the next lane. I return the gesture. *You have no idea what I'm going through, buddy. Don't test me today.*

As I near Stinton Investment, I see chaos. Police cars are flashing red and blue against reams of steel and glass. Men in suits carry boxes of files, hard drives, and computers. They stack them in large black vans. A crowd gathers, cellphones up to watch an empire fall.

"No, no, no!" I hurl the car into the basement parking lot, not bothering to park properly. Head spinning, I take the elevator to the third floor. My fingers tap the side of my pants in staccato beats. Each second stretches out to an hour.

I arrive at the office and stop short. The scene before me is like a clip from a natural disaster movie, except there's no CGI tornado in the background. Employees run back and forth. Shredded paper spills over the floor. The tiles are stomped with boot marks. Desks have been ransacked and phones are ringing off their hooks.

I turn in a slow circle, taking in the scene with ever-mounting dread. None of the faces look familiar, so I grab the nearest flailing office worker.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where—"

"I don't know! I don't know!" He shakes his head back and forth like I'm torturing him. "I had no idea about any of this."

"Wait, I just want to—"

"Gah!" He breaks my hold and runs, crying, into the hallway.

The pressure in the back of my head is mounting, galvanized by the stench of fear that permeates this battered office. Understandable. These people just got sucker-punched and their livelihood got ransacked in the blink of an eye.

I get the feeling.

In the distance, I spot a familiar face. It's the manager who was my liaison with Stinton Investment.

"Hey! Hey you!" I wave frantically.

The man with the bald spot at the very top of his head looks up. He sees me and freezes as if going completely still can scrub him from my sight.

I plant my hands on my hips and march to him. “You know I can see you, right?”

His eyes connect with mine. They widen slightly. In a burst of movement, the manager sprints in the opposite direction.

*You’ve got to be kidding me!* I take off behind him, dodging overturned desks, crushed binders, and open cabinet doors. Pumping my arms, I increase speed and grab his tie that’s flapping in the wind like happy dog ears. My fingers close around the material and I yank for all I’m worth. The manager makes a choking sound, his feet scurrying forward while his shoulders and back bend toward me.

We both stumble, but I manage to plant my feet on the ground and balance us both. The manager whirls around and holds his hand up like I’m about to take his watch and wallet.

I stare into his panicked face. “Why did you run?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say but sorry.”

*Relax relax relax.* “You’re not the enemy here. I know that. I just need to know how I can get my money.”

“You can’t.” He swallows and his Adam’s apple nearly slaps me in the eyeballs.

I laugh crazily. “Yeah, that’s not going to work for me.”

“Look, you’re not the first person to rush in here today asking for payment. I’ll tell you what I’ve told everybody. There isn’t any money.”

“No, you don’t understand.” I yank the tie and he bounces closer. His body odor fills my nostrils, but it’s nothing compared to the stink I’m about to raise in this place. “You asked me to prepare more offices. You assured me that I’d be reimbursed. I turned down other jobs for this. I trusted this company because I trusted you.”

“And I’m so sorry. Really.”

My head starts to pulse. “Sorry isn’t going to pay my bills.”

“Look around, we’re all in a bind right now.”

“And I’m not blaming you. I’m really not, but you’re the only one who can verify that the company owes me.”

“I have to worry about myself.” He pries my hand off his tie. “But I wish you the best.”

“No.” I grab for him again.

He jumps back with the finesse of someone half his size. “Sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Please, at least tell me where I can go to get what’s owed to me.”

“We’re all trying to figure that out right now. We’re in the same boat, Ms. Quetzal.”

Not exactly. Some of them have money to pay for lawyers. Some of them might be in unions. A few lucky ones have a savings account to fall back on. I have none of those things. I *need* this payment. If not, I’m going to have to beg my bestie for room and board. And she’s going to insist I move into her new home with Alistair.

Not happening.

Living with honeymooners is going to be a nightmare. The thought of hearing their happy giggles all night long, walking in on them after coming home or eating dinner next to their obnoxiously cute flirting makes me sick to the stomach.

Poor Belle.

She’s going to have to survive it somehow, but I won’t.

“I’m sorry,” the manager says again, as if those two words are all that’s left of his vocabulary. Spinning around, he takes off like I’m Godzilla about to stomp on his car.

The noise in my head gets louder. The office is too crazy, the people are too frantic, and I’m on edge.

I need to get out of here.

On the elevator ride back to the lobby, I force myself to breathe and think about how I’ll get out of this. No answers come to mind.

Stepping out into the sunshine, I fish for my sunglasses and peer at the police officers. They’re all wearing stern expressions. I have a feeling they don’t know where to find the crook behind this mess either.

Gulping in huge dregs of air, I stumble to my car and ignore the way each step makes me feel like I’m sinking further and further into the ground. Somehow, I make it to the car, but I can’t move to start the engine.

At that moment, my cell phone rings and the name of my former boss flashes across the screen.

Hello, sucker punch number two.

I left my old job for the thrill of running my own company, but did I leave quietly? No, not me. I lectured the boss about the importance of creative freedom and swore I’d be the next Nate Berkus. Drunk on the spirit of entrepreneurship and taking risks, I told her to watch out for me. That

she'd see my name in print one day. That I'd be sitting in a comfy chair next to Oprah.

Turns out, there's no Oprah, no magazine features, not even a cheesy home makeover TV show. Instead she might see my name in an ad on Craig's List begging for work.

I jam my head against the steering wheel, moaning under my breath.

The phone goes silent.

Then it starts ringing again.

I could ignore it, but my former boss, Shanya, won't quit until I pick up. That much I know. She's a cutthroat interior designer with a nose for style and a flair for business. Although she rarely designs anymore, her brand is such a stalwart in the industry that whatever she puts her name on gets popular.

I clear my throat and pick up the call. "Hello, Shanya. This is Sunny Quetzal speaking."

"Are you free? I have something for you." Shanya's voice is as dry as bitter vodka in a Siberian snowstorm.

"Actually, I'm busy flipping a darling Victorian. My schedule's so packed, I don't even have time to eat." I force out a laugh. "You know how it is when you're just starting out."

"I know the project you were working on is going through some turmoil, Sunny. You don't have to lie."

"What?"

"You were with Stinton Investment, right? The company that's currently being investigated for fraud?"

"How did you know?"

"Your social media," she responds dryly.

My eyes widen. "You still follow my accounts?"

"I watch out for all my competition."

The swell of pride that Shanya considers me competition is quickly drowned out by the reminder that I'm nowhere close to beating her right now.

"Were you paid?" Shanya asks.

I consider lying to her, but there's no sense in doing that. She can make one call and find out the truth. "No."

"Good."

"Good?"

“This way you’re more likely to agree to what I’ll propose.”

“I’m listening.” I can’t keep the hope out of my voice. Nothing like potential homelessness to rekindle an old alliance.

“I need your assistance with a client. They’re refusing any other designer but you. No matter what plans we try to show them, they’re insistent.” Her voice holds a hint of annoyance. “I don’t want to lose their business, but I also don’t want to hand them over to you.”

“So this would be on contract?”

“If you’re interested.” She pauses. “I’d pay half of your fee upfront. I’m willing to extend that to you based on our history.”

My pride tries to rear its ugly head. *You don’t need her. You can do it on your own.* I beat that thing down with a two-by-four. One glance at my bank account and pride can take a very long hike.

“I’m interested.”

“Come to the office, and let’s discuss how we can help each other.”

\* \* \*

IT’S LATE AFTERNOON WHEN I DRIVE TO THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN TO MEET the client. My GPS stops me in front of a quiet townhouse. The weathered brick, glass windows and charming arched rooftop look like something from a storybook, but nothing else stands out to me.

Through the glass panes on the front door, I notice a small lobby filled with bookshelves, a sofa and a coffee table. *I wonder who this client is?*

I know he’s wealthy. Shanya’s price tag alone means that she only works with a certain type of clientele—the ones where money is an afterthought because they couldn’t run out of it in this lifetime or the next. But I also know that there’s no price on Shanya’s pride and yet she was willing to crawl back to me for help. Which means this client has more than just money to throw around.

I pull the door open and a bell jangles above my head. The melody is a lot sweeter than I expected and I look up, realizing the ‘bell’ is actually wind chimes in disguise.

Tilting my head back all the way, I inspect the wind chimes intently. The glass stems are purple and the sunlight pierces them just so, sending magical reflections dancing on the wall.

“We replaced the bell a long time ago. Wind chimes are less jarring,” a voice says.

I glance up and notice a tall woman with a sharp face, sagging cheeks, and a welcoming smile. She’s wearing a light blue nurse’s outfit and comfortable sneakers.

“Hi.” I return her smile with my own.

“You must be Sunny Quetzal.”

“That’s me.” I offer my hand to her.

She takes it. Her grip is firm and assured. “Might I say, it was quite a battle getting you here.”

“A battle?” My eyebrows hike.

“The company tried to give me the runaround and kept pushing other designers at me. I was stunned when I found out they’d let you go. Someone as talented as you? Are they insane?”

A smile presses against my cheeks. After the day I’ve had, it feels great to hear compliments. “I wasn’t *let go*. I quit to start my own firm.”

“Oh? They didn’t tell me that.”

“And I’m technically not supposed to either.” I wink. “So let’s keep this between us.”

Her smile widens. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“It seemed rather urgent.” I arch an eyebrow. Shanya didn’t disclose much. Not that she ever does. Her philosophy is that the client doesn’t know what they want, only we do. I’m more of the belief that a house is a reflection of its owner. It’s one of the many reasons I left the company. I couldn’t follow my heart there.

“I *loved* what you did to the farmhouse.” The nurse bounces on the tips of her toes like she wants me to sign her pocket protector. “The boss is a little... creatively challenged, so he wouldn’t have thought of making his home that cozy.”

“I’m glad he’s satisfied.”

“More than satisfied. Not that he’ll ever express it.”

Darrel’s face comes to mind. I guess being cold and grumpy is a common rich guy symptom.

She sticks her head close to mine. “This request is going to be a little different. We know you usually take pictures and record these projects for your portfolio, but we’re going to have to ask you to keep this one under wraps. The circumstances are a little... intense. We hope you understand.”

I arch an eyebrow. “What kind of room do you want me to design that I have to keep it a secret?” My mind starts conjuring creepy dungeon-themed basements. “It’s not illegal, is it?”

I wouldn’t condone illegal behavior under usual circumstances but, after finding out about Stinton Investment this morning, I’d rather put clashing patterns in my living room than bend the law just to accommodate a selfish jerk with too much money.

“I’ll let the boss explain the details.” The nurse gestures towards a closed door and bends her head slightly. “Coffee?”

“Water’s fine,” I say, gripping my purse.

“Sure thing.”

I approach the door, prepare my ‘I’ve got this covered’ smile and knock.

“Come in,” a man grunts.

My fingers freeze around the doorknob. I recognize the voice behind the door. It’s sharp. Gruff. Impatient. And it belongs to the man who regularly treats me like the town pariah.

My first instinct is to back away, but the nurse is right there, staring at me like I’ve come to rescue her war-ravaged hometown and lead them to prosperity. Cringing inside, I push the door open and walk in.

The room is surprisingly spacious and bright with large windows overlooking a cluster of tall trees. One lone chair faces a teal sofa in the middle of the room. The walls are bare except for an abstract-art painting. The colors are green, cream and pops of red. It’s exquisite. Something I would have picked out myself.

“Sunny?”

My eyes swerve away from the furniture and collide with a pair of stormy emeralds set in a face made for TV, movies, and maybe even a throne.

“Darrel.” The name tumbles from my lips with a hint of unease.

“What are you doing here?” His brows crash together. Slashing cheekbones and a chiseled jawline taunt me with their beauty. “I don’t have time for this.” He checks his watch, lips tightening even more when I remain in place. This is the most he’s ever said to me in all the time that I’ve known him. Honestly, I should smack him over the head with my purse and sashay out of here.

Instead, I fold my arms together. “What are *you* doing here?”

“This is my practice.” His eyes cut through me. How can something so beautiful be so cold?

“And I’m here because you begged me to show up.”

“Me?” He snorts.

“Yes, you.”

“I don’t beg.”

The exchange between us is creeping over the ten-word limit. Which means that Darrel Hastings is either drunk or under an inordinate amount of stress.

I point to him. “You made a big fuss. Rejected every other designer. Almost gave Shanya a headache.” I stride to the painting. It really is beautiful. “I’m the only one allowed to work on your house. That’s what you told Shanya.” Turning, I flaunt a proud smile. “So I’m here.”

The surprise that charges through his expression is more satisfying than the cheesecake platter at my favorite cafe. *Take that you grumpy Neanderthal.*

“You... decorated my farmhouse?”

“I didn’t know it was yours.” I fold my arms over my chest. If I did, I might have left a stabbed-up teddy bear in the garden so he could taste my wrath. “But yeah, I did. Lots of natural light in there. I was unusually inspired.”

His eyes narrow slightly, as if he’s trying to figure out if he should believe me.

“What I don’t understand is why you’re trying to keep this project a secret. I don’t usually get requests to keep a design under wraps. Most people love being featured on my blog.” Something about the world acknowledging how wealthy and privileged they are tends to make rich people all warm and fuzzy inside. It’s not like I have a problem with it. The more names I can attach to my work, the more valid my portfolio will become.

“I think there’s been a mistake.” Darrel slaps his laptop closed and rises like he’s about to make a proclamation. *Here ye! Hear ye! Sunny Quetzal shall be forthwith banished from the land!* “I wasn’t aware that you were the designer and I’d prefer—”

“Stop.” I lift a hand.

He glowers at me like I drank all the milk and put the empty carton back in the fridge.



Is he seriously going to kick me out *just* because I'm the one who walked through the door?

*Screw you, Darrel Hastings.* "Before you say anything, I have something I'd like to say first." With a dramatic wave of my arms, I announce, "I wasn't aware you were the client. If I knew, I wouldn't have taken this job."

His eyes narrow.

"My creative energy can't survive around so much," I wiggle my finger at his giant body, "negativity." I'm being a dramatic princess, but it's the only way I can save my face. There's no way I'm letting Darrel Hastings of all people *fire* me before I've even been on the job for a full hour. "Even now, I feel my creativity sputtering out."

He scoffs as if I need more help than any of his patients.

"I don't think this is going to work," I add.

"Agreed." He juts his chin down as if it's the first sensible thing I've said since I walked in.

*Are you crazy?* The part of my brain that cares about things like budgets and paying rent and being able to afford fried jacks at my favorite brunch place shakes to life. *Did you forget what happened this morning? You're broke. And Shanya already agreed to pay you the first half. You need this job.*

Yeah, but I can't survive *working for* Darrel Hastings of all people. He's standing behind his desk in a tight button-down that shows off his pecs and slacks that loosely flow over his strong thighs, looking like a gorgeous bull ready to impale me.

Our little staredown is creeping past the three-second mark because both of us are refusing to blink. This is what we do. I show up and he gets pissed off from my mere nearness. We can't have *one* decent conversation. He'll be an impossible client.

"I'll tell Shanya to send someone else."

He nods. "Perfect."

*Ugh.* I'd give my left lung to smack him.

Stiffly, I turn and march to the door. My head is so high I must look like a giraffe wearing a neck brace. My steps are sure and swift.

I reach out to twist the knob when the door blasts open, almost hitting me in the face. Quick reflexes and three years of on-again off-again Zumba allow me to jump backwards.

The hallway is empty and yet I feel the wind rush past me on both sides.  
Glancing down, I notice two little boys fling themselves into the room.  
Both of them make a beeline for the brute behind the desk.  
And both of them are crying.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# BRAIN FREEZE

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## DARREL

SUNNY QUETZAL is detrimental to my blood pressure.

It's embarrassing enough that I had no idea she was the designer behind my farmhouse when she walked in the room. Or that I felt a jolt in my chest when her cinnamon-brown eyes connected with mine. Or that I gave her a hungry once-over before I could control myself.

Not that anyone could blame me.

She's stunning.

Objectively speaking.

Every red-blooded male at John Hearst High School would agree.

All these years and she hasn't changed a bit. Same tight body, same shiny black hair, cat-like brown eyes, and an unhealthy obsession with getting the last word.

I would have sent her skidding out of my building if she hadn't volunteered to walk out first. There are so many reasons working with Sunny would be a bad idea.

She's gorgeous.

She's infuriating.

She's Kenya's best friend.

And if Sunny finds out why I need her to decorate rooms for a seven and eleven-year-old, Kenya's going to hear about it. If Kenya hears about it, it won't be long until Alistair finds out too.

Allowing Sunny Quetzal into a complicated part of my life when I haven't even informed Alistair yet is just a recipe for disaster. I'm going to discuss the guardianship with my brother-in-law when I'm good and ready. Not a second before.

Sunny's about to leave and take her intoxicating Caribbean-breeze fragrance with her, when the door bursts open and two small blurs sprint around the desk and catapult themselves at me.

Sunny gasps and whirls around. I don't have time to track her expression because I'm too busy staring at the kids who are clinging to my legs like a tree hugger protesting deforestation.

“Micheal? Bailey?” I touch each of their heads. My fingers sink into soft brown curls.

Footsteps thud through the room and both Dina and Ms. Bennet enter my office. I meet the social worker’s eyes. Her lips are pulled halfway into her mouth and she’s wringing her dark hands. My gaze tracks the furrow in her brow, the sheen of sweat on her temple and the jagged cut of her nails. She’s clinging to her car keys, the thinner end of the key jamming into her palm. There’s no notion that she feels the pain, which is a sign of shock. The fact that she was able to drive all the way here with the kids tells me she’s used to functioning under immense amounts of stress.

Not a good thing at all. Especially in her line of work where stress is a constant part of her day. I make a mental note to suggest she talk to someone before her stress seeps out in more dangerous ways.

My eyes land on Sunny next, only because she’s staring at me as if she’s wondering whether she stepped into the twilight zone. I suppose it would shock her that little children voluntarily run to me, since she believes I’m so cold-hearted I eat babies for breakfast.

I rip my gaze from hers and focus on the little boys. No one’s said what this sudden visit is about, but my gut knows. *Ms. Jean must be gone.*

I blink rapidly to keep my tears back. I don’t have the luxury of exploring my grief. Consoling Micheal and Bailey is the most pressing need. They’re both looking at me. Watching me. Waiting.

A child’s brain is impacted by the caregivers in his or her life. That means whatever I do in this moment will set the tone for the way both Micheal and Bailey associate me and my care in the future.

I kneel to their level and wrap an arm around them both. “It’s okay.”

“She’s dead.” Bailey, the younger of the two boys, sobs into my neck. His glasses slide down his nose, but it stops just before falling off his face. “Grandma’s gone.”

His voice breaks, and it makes a little piece of me break too. I can understand what he’s going through. I still remember the way my heart wrenched out of my chest when I got that call about Claire. She was my best friend and to think that I wouldn’t be able to see her again...

I squeeze the seven-year-old a little tighter. “It’s okay to cry.”

“No.” Micheal, the older of the two, eases back and wipes his face. He’s got fair skin and light brown eyes that remind me of Professor Stein. Like

his father, he's wise beyond his years and carries an air of melancholy. "Grandma told us she didn't want us to cry."

"Not crying is okay too," I assure him. "As long as you know that I'm here for you both."

Michael turns slightly away and scrubs the heel of his hand over his cheeks. He's probably feeling an incredible amount of pressure now that he's all Bailey has left in the world. I'm hoping, in the coming weeks, he'll learn to give some of that eldest-sibling burden to me.

Bailey turns his face up. He's got small features and blue eyes that are magnified by the round window glasses. "Mr. Darrel."

"Yes?"

"Is it true that we're going to stay with you now?"

I nod.

Ms. Bennet clears her throat. "Hastings, can I speak to you?" She juts her finger at the door. "Outside."

"Of course. Dina?"

"Yes, yes." Dina rushes around the desk and gathers the boys to her like a mother hen with her chicks.

I pass Sunny, who's standing frozen in the middle of my office, her jaw slack and her eyes pinned to me. My heart kicks up a notch. Did she hear Bailey's question? Did she hear my response?

My fingers wrap around her elbow and I start to push her out. "As you can see, I'm a little busy right now."

"Who are those kids, Darrel?" She stumbles behind me as I tug her to the lobby. Her voice is low and urgent.

"I'm asking you to leave."

"Are they really staying with you?"

Damn it. She heard. "You don't need to care," I growl.

"How can you say that? Do you think I'm as heartless as you are?" Her eyebrows tighten. "I can't just walk away when two kids are bawling their eyes out."

"You can and you will."

"Or what?" She folds her arms over her chest, her lips tight in a challenge.

"Leave now, Sunny," I bark. Repeating the instruction won't magically yield results, but I'm hoping there's enough bite in my tone to scare her into submission.

“Mr. Hastings.” The social worker gives me an impatient look.

“I don’t have time for this right now.” I release Sunny’s hand and jut my finger at the door. Eyes darkening, I mouth to her, “*Leave.*” Hoping she’ll take the hint, I turn away from Sunny and gesture to the hallway. “Ms. Bennet. Let’s talk over here.”

She follows me there and faces me. “Mr. Hastings, I apologize for barging into your practice. I realize I should have called first.”

“It’s fine. Tell me what happened. How did you...” The lump in my throat swells when I think about Ms. Jean. “How did you find out?”

“I received a call from the hospital informing me that Ms. Jean wasn’t doing well. I picked the boys up from school and I was bringing them to their grandmother, to say their last goodbyes.”

“Did they see her?” I ask, trying not to think about the moment when I took that sheet off Claire’s lifeless body.

“I didn’t give them the choice. I guided them right back to the car and brought them here.” She pulls her hands together and glances down. “It’s what Ms. Jean wanted. She hopes the boys can remember her as the bright and loud personality that she was.”

I nod.

“Now, given how suddenly this happened, I’m going to assume you don’t have all the things we discussed in place?”

“I’m working on it,” I grind out. Although I’m farther from the goal now than I was yesterday. Maybe I was a little too hasty throwing Sunny out of my office. The boys’ rooms still haven’t been done yet and I was dead-set on having the same decorator.

“I can have the boys stay in a group home until you can be properly assessed...”

My eyes widen. I open my mouth to protest.

“But,” she lifts a hand, “it was Ms. Jean’s request to have them stay with you. I’ll honor that and recommend they be placed in your care as an emergency guardian. However, this does not mean that the guardianship has officially gone through.”

“I understand.”

“You have to work out all the things we discussed previously. I’m still not convinced this placement is the right fit.”

I dip my chin. At least she’s honest enough to voice her bias against me. We can work through that.



Ms. Bennet casts a look at my office where the boys are talking to Dina.  
“You call me if you need anything, alright?”

“I will. Thank you, Ms. Bennet.”

She stalks out of the hallway. I hear the wind chimes humming as she makes her exit.

*Ms. Jean is gone.*

There’s a difference between preparing for your life to change and facing that moment.

*I’m responsible for these kids.*

It hits me right in the chest, a two-ton cinderblock sitting on my shoulders. I swipe the back of my hand over my mouth, feel the tremble start at the tip of my fingers, and lean against the wall.

*Deep breaths, Darrel.*

Inhale.

*Professor Stein saved my life. I owe him this.*

Exhale.

*If I can train a grown man to fight through sleep paralysis, I can make sure two children are fed, cared for and protected.*

After counting backwards from ten, I ready myself to go back to the office. As I’m about to take the first step, I see a flash of pink in the corner of the hallway. My eyes lock in that direction.

*Did I just imagine that?*

A low thud erupts in the distance, as if someone knocked against a chair. With a huff, I rush out of the corridor and spy Sunny making a mad dash for the exits. I lurch forward and grab the back of her shirt just as she’s trying to sneak past Dina’s receptionist’s desk.

“Hey!” She squeaks.

I haul her backwards.

Her hands clasp over mine and she tries to pry my fingers off. “Don’t stretch out my shirt. I paid fifty bucks for this.”

I honor her request and grab her hand instead. The moment I touch her, an electric current trips through my body. I push that feeling aside and focus on my annoyance. It is just like Sunny Quetzal to completely ignore my demands and do whatever the hell she wants.

“I told you to go away, Sunny.”

Her brows pull taut as if they want to shake hands. She digs her feet into the carpet and leans back. “Is that why you needed interior decorating? You

need to prepare rooms for these kids?”

“I’m not answering your question.”

“I’m not leaving until you do.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I just heard you talking to that lady, Darrel. She said you couldn’t keep the kids unless you prepared well.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I heard you.”

“No, you didn’t *hear* me. You were *eavesdropping* on a private conversation.” I rasp out. “Two different things.”

Her chest rises and falls with an aggravated breath.

I keep my stare on her, matching her glare for glare. This is a waste of my time. There’s so much I need to do now that Ms. Jean is gone. The hospital bills need to be paid. The funeral director needs to be contacted. I need to call the boys’ school.

I have a million and one worries buzzing around my head and the last thing I need is this beautiful, frustrating woman adding another headache.

“Okay, fine. I guess I did eavesdrop, but it’s not like you would have told me. I didn’t have a choice!” She throws one hand up.

There she goes, making illogical explanations as if they hold any weight.

A *rational* person leaves when their presence isn’t required.

A *rational* person won’t press themselves against the wall and listen to private conversations.

I stop abruptly and haul Sunny to me until she’s practically standing on top of my toes. “Stay out of it.”

“Not a chance.”

“Sunny.”

“I *am* sorry for eavesdropping, but now that I know about the kids, I want to help.”

“I don’t need your meddling.”

“What you *need* is to impress that social worker. Having two rooms decorated by *me* will be a huge plus.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s the simplest problem in the world. You just want everything to be complicated.”

I freeze, my fingers tightening on her wrist. If she wasn't the most exasperating, bewitching, troublesome woman I've ever met...

Dina walks out of my office. Micheal and Bailey shuffle behind her.

"Darrel?" She arches greying eyebrows. "What do we do now?"

Micheal and Bailey look to me too.

My stomach drops. *What do we do?*

I don't know.

And the problem is that I should.

I have experience helping others work through their grief. After Claire, I rallied around Alistair. He was so checked out that he completely detached from Belle. And Belle, poor thing, she cried all the time. Because of them, I learned to change diapers, heat up milk, and burp a baby.

I've got plenty of experience bringing a grief-torn man from the brink and taking care of an infant, but children ages seven and eleven... They're old enough to understand what's going on and young enough to be unsure of how to grapple with it.

Sunny breaks away from me and approaches the boys. Bailey shirks back while Micheal watches her with curious eyes. It's right in line with their personalities. Micheal is the inquisitive brother, while Bailey is more fearful of the things he doesn't understand.

Right now, he's pointing that suspicious look at Sunny. And who can blame him? *I* barely understand Sunny most days.

"Hey." She sticks her hand out to the older brother. "I'm Sunny. I'm going to be decorating your bedrooms. Mr. Hastings asked me to make it awesome."

I bore a hole through the back of her head. What part of our earlier conversation did she not understand?

"We don't need our rooms decorated," Micheal says. "We just need a bed."

"That's where you're wrong, buddy. A room is more than a bed. It's a refuge." She raises her hands dramatically. "Have you ever seen a home makeover show?"

He shrugs and then nods.

"Well, I don't have a TV show, but what I do have is skills. See, I'm not just a good interior decorator... I'm the *best*. That's why Mr. Darrel hired me."

*I did not hire you.* Here she goes, running full sprint in a direction I told her not to go in. See what I mean? Illogical.

I glower at her. She gives me back a knowing smirk, all brown eyes and silky black hair and tight jeans over legs that go on forever.

“Sunny,” I warn.

“Do you know what I need before I can design the best room for you?”

“What?” Micheal asks.

“Ice cream.” Sunny bends slightly and grabs her knees, smiling like she’s not inserting herself into a situation that has no place for her.

Bailey’s eyes light up.

Sunny smiles too. This is bribery and she knows it.

“What does ice cream have to do with designing rooms?” Micheal asks, crossing his gangly arms over his shoulders. The way he’s leaning towards Sunny says he’s interested, but he won’t be as easily swayed as his younger brother.

Sunny remains at his eye-level. “There are a lot of things, but I’m not going to tell you now or it might influence what you do later.”

He considers her words for a minute.

Bailey hops forward, a grin growing on his tear-stained cheeks. “Are we really going to get ice cream? Are we?”

“We have to ask Mr. Darrel.” Sunny stands between the brothers and looks up at me with an exaggeratedly innocent expression. “Please.”

“Please.” Bailey copies her stance and places his hands beneath his chin.

Micheal doesn’t make the pleading face. He stares at the ground, hands behind his back like he couldn’t be bothered. But his ear is turned to me, and I can tell that he’s listening keenly.

Great. How do I say no to kids who’ve just lost their grandmother?

I can’t.

It’s physically impossible.

“Of course we can get ice cream.”

Sunny raises her fist in a cheer. Bailey follows suit because he’s an impressionable child that would celebrate comets plummeting toward the earth if it was pretty enough. Micheal has no outward burst of approval, but his lips quirk up at the corners.

Dina gives me a knowing look. “I’ll stay here and clear your schedule for the day. You go ahead with Ms. Quetzal.”

“Ms. Quetzal won’t be joining us. She’ll be going home.” I give her a firm stare.

“But I didn’t bring my car,” Sunny mumbles, batting her eyelashes. “I’ll need a ride.”

“Catch a cab,” I bite out.

Sunny pushes out her plump bottom lip, sending an unwanted pulse through my pituitary glands.

“Darrel,” she purrs my name, “work with me here.”

I drag my eyes away from her and run a hand down my face.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Sunny throws an arm forward. “To the Batmobile!”

“You know Batman?” Micheal croaks, looking up at her like she can dial the caped superhero on her cell phone.

“Are you kidding? I read the original *Detective* comics, starting with...”

Micheal’s eyes brighten. “Issue Number...”

“... Twenty seven,” Sunny finishes with him. Then she laughs that aggravating soul-deep laugh. “You know Batman comics?”

He gestures to the leather necklace with the Batman emblem. The way her eyes glimmer tells me she’d noticed and brought up this conversation on purpose. *Is she some kind of con artist?*

“My mom gave it to me,” Micheal says, his eyes misting over. He rubs pale fingers over the emblem.

“It’s beautiful,” Sunny whispers.

Bailey pushes on the tips of his toes. “I like Batman too.”

“Do you, bud?” She tilts her head at him.

“Mm-hm.” He nods enthusiastically, causing his dark curls to flop up and down.

“How about you tell me what else you like over ice cream?”

“Okay!”

Sunny struts ahead of me, Micheal and Bailey close on her heels.

My jaw drops.

Three minutes.

It took three minutes for her to bewitch the boys the way she charmed an entire high school.

Bailey slips his fingers around her hand, and she holds on to him as if she’s known him forever. I should follow them, but I’m too frustrated to move.

Sunny ignores my dark stare because she has a death wish and opens the door. As the wind chimes sing, she glances over her shoulder and asks calmly, “Coming, Hastings?”

“Sunny.”

She doesn’t wait around to hear the rest. The wind chimes make a musical crash as the door slams shut behind her and the kids.

“She’s fun.” Dina chuckles. “I like her.”

“I don’t.”

Her eyes narrow so quickly that her wrinkles bounce against each other. “Why don’t I believe you, Darrel?”

*Probably because it’s a lie.*

But there’s no way I’m admitting that.

Clearing my throat, I stomp past her and join the boys who should be crying about their grandmother but are laughing about Batman and ice cream instead.

\* \* \*

BAILEY DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF ICE CREAM CONES.

“Buddy, you’re dripping all over your shirt.” I reach for more napkins from the dispenser and realize they’re all out.

Bailey lifts his soft blue eyes to me. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I lift my lips in what I hope is a reassuring smile. “I’ll be right back.”

I push away from the table where Micheal and Bailey have taken refuge. Sunny’s supposed to be at the counter ordering her own treat, but I don’t see her anywhere.

My head whips back and forth in search of her. I barely get in a couple steps before I bump into the very woman I’m looking for. The collision comes with a hint of perfume and a flutter in my pulse, followed immediately by a freezing mound sliding down my shirt and jeans.

“I’m so sorry.” Sunny’s eyes widen when she notices the stain she left on my pants. “I swear I didn’t see you there, Darrel.”

I growl at her. It’s thirty degrees in the ice cream parlor and both my shirt and jeans have been smeared with Oreo cookie ice cream and caramel sauce.

“Let me get some napkins.” She whirls to the counter, snaps some tissues and attacks me with them.

“It’s fine.” It’s not fine. This shirt was a gift from Claire after her trip to Italy. *You’ll never find a material as soft as this, Darrel.*

“I know we can’t stand each other, but I’m not this petty. I really didn’t see you.” She continues to wipe my shirt like her hand is a Brillo pad.

“Sunny, it’s—” The rest of the words choke in my mouth as she dives below the belt with the paper towels, and I jump away. “Just watch the kids while I wipe this off.”

She pins those brown eyes on me. The same eyes that made my mind go blank whenever I saw her walking down the hallway in school.

Her gaze sharpens slightly. “It was an accident, okay? No need to growl at me.”

She’s scolding me when *she’s* the one who ruined my shirt? *The nerve of this woman.*

“You’re still glaring.”

“It’s still cold.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And I guess the world should roll over and applaud you for that.”

Her eyebrows tighten. “What is your problem?”

My pulse is slamming against my veins, my stomach’s tightening, and there’s a twitch in my heart from standing this close to her.

The ice cream’s too cold.

I can’t think right now.

“Just watch the kids,” I bite out.

She scowls at me and remains in place while I stalk to the bathroom. The door slams shut behind me. I bend over the sink and pour cold water into my palms. Splashing my face, I let the water drip down my nose and chin.

*She doesn’t even remember you, you idiot. You need to get over what happened and move on with your life. Oh, and stop being a prick to her.*

I take a few deep breaths and then scrub my shirt as best as I can. Since splashing water on my crotch will bring even more attention to the mess, I dampen a wad of tissues and dot at the area as best as I can. When that fails, I pull my shirt out and let it hang loose over my groin.

My steps are long and hurried as I leave the bathroom. I get close to the table where the boys are polishing off their ice creams. The treats are

working to distract them. Grief will hit them later, in the silence and in the dark but, for now, they're not thinking about the loss they've suffered or the way their lives will completely change for a third time.

Sunny glances up when she sees me coming. She holds my gaze, her eyes narrowing like she wants to punch me. I guess I'd deserve it. I'm not usually this irritable, but my rational side shuts down and all my defenses go up when I'm around her. It's one of the many reasons I dislike her. She turns me into the kind of man who snaps at women.

"You guys ready to go?" I grip the back of Bailey's chair.

Micheal continues to eat his ice cream silently.

Bailey chirps at me. "But we're not finished."

"It's getting late, buddy. And you have homework."

"I hate homework," Bailey grumbles.

"Me too." Sunny tenderly cleans his face with a napkin, sopping up the ice cream dripping down his arm too. Her tenderness is a sharp contrast to the angry look she tosses me when I pull out my keys.

"It doesn't matter whether you like homework or not. What matters is that it has to be done."

"Killjoy," Sunny mumbles.

Micheal snorts.

I narrow my eyes at her. She and I might have our issues, but she shouldn't be a bad influence on the kids. "We're leaving."

A few minutes later, Bailey and Micheal pile into the car. I open the front door of my truck for Sunny, but she scoffs and tells me she'll be in the back with the kids.

The sun is setting when I climb into the driver's side. A bitter wind shuts the door before I can grab it and do it myself. I suck in a full breath that doesn't quell the agitation in the middle of my chest. Now is not the time to feel so unsettled, but I can't help it.

It's her fault.

It's always Sunny, chewing away at my rational mind and spinning me like a top.

I get on the road.

The back of the car turns into a party. Their voices get louder and louder, overlapping over one another. Sunny starts humming the theme song of the old *Spiderman* cartoon and the boys jump in. Energy and amusement whip the air like a hurricane and it teases the hair at the back of my neck.



The fact that I have to drive is doing jack squat to keep my attention off the rearview mirror. In the glass, I see Sunny nestled between the two boys and tilting Bailey's ice cream so the drops fall on her napkin.

Micheal is watching her intently, as if he wouldn't mind messing his clothes up with ice cream so he could get the same attention. The boys are getting more smiles from Sunny than I have in a lifetime.

I should watch the road.

I should stop caring about the aggravating woman in the backseat.

If only she'd butt out of my life and make it easy for me.

"Where's your place?" I bark at Sunny.

The smile drops from Sunny's face immediately and she answers in a dry voice. "Just take me back to your therapy center."

"I can take you home," I insist gruffly.

"I don't want you to take me home," she answers in an equally perturbed tone. "So just drop me off there."

Before I can argue further, Sunny shifts her attention to the boys. "So Bailey, tell me more about school. What's your favorite subject?"

The seven-year-old starts chatting like he's been waiting his whole life to answer that question. Sunny draws Micheal into the conversation too. Gradually, the noise in the backseat gets loud again. A moment later, I hear her bright laughter ricocheting through the car.

My chest gets tighter and tighter. I actively command my muscles to relax. If I don't get myself together, I'm going to bust a vein before the boys can get home. And then they'll lose two guardians in one day.

As usual, Sunny Quetzal makes everything harder for me. Every time I glance at the mirror, she's flashing that pretty smile. Or bursting out in that contagious laugh that makes everyone want to press as close to her as possible. Or tucking her shiny, silky-straight black hair behind her ear.

Her hair's always been thick and bone-straight, like she passed it through a steam roller every morning. The color is jet black and it gets even shinier in the sunlight like she's a freaking pixie fairy.

I tighten my fingers around the steering wheel and force myself not to think about the past or take anymore peeks at the backseat.

Finally, I pull into the parking lot of the center. Sunny says her goodbyes to the boys and pops out without so much as a grunt at me.

"Hey," I glance at the backseat, "you two sit tight. I'll be right back."

Bailey nods enthusiastically.

Micheal just stares at his phone.

I grab my keys, hop out of the car and chase Sunny down before she can get too far. I want the boys in my eyesight just in case.

“Hey,” I yell. Even though she’s got long, perfect legs, mine are still longer than hers. It doesn’t take much to get in front of her. “We need to talk.”

“Now that you’re suddenly interested in talking to me, Darrel, I kind of wish you’d go back to just speaking via grunts.”

It would be awesome if a little thread of regret wasn’t squeezing my neck right now. “Look, I need you to keep this from Alistair.”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“He doesn’t know yet.” I ignore the fight in her words and focus on getting my point across. “I want to be the one to tell him.”

She folds her arms over her chest. “Fine.”

“Also,” I glance at the boys, “I...”

Her eyes bore into me.

I rub the back of my neck. Asking for help from anyone is tough, but asking for help from Sunny Quetzal is painful.

“You what?” She plants both hands on her hips.

“Will take you up on your offer to decorate their rooms.” I glance at the sky and pretend the horse-shaped clouds above us are fascinating. “Since you’re insisting on it.”

She laughs. And if my brain-motor functions weren’t connected, I’d probably sink to the ground at her feet.

“That’s a very masculine way of asking for a favor, but yes. I *will* help you with their rooms. One condition.” She lifts a dark finger. “You don’t get in my way.”

“What does that mean?”

“You leave the designing, the remodeling, everything to me. I get whatever I want for the house.”

A dangerous proposition, but she is the best at what she does. I can admit that.

I stick out a hand. “Deal.”

She eyes it and then she places her dainty fingers in mine. “Deal.”

Time stops for a minute when she smiles at me.

The world shifts off its axis.

The sky gets a little brighter.

I squeeze Sunny Quetzal's hand, and I get the feeling that my life is about to shift dramatically—just like it did when I saw her prancing down the school hallways for the first time.

Yanking my hand back is an act of self-preservation. Knowing Sunny Quetzal didn't end well for me in high school. She's not going to get me twice. I'm grown now. I'm responsible for two young boys. I have a practice to run and patients to keep up with.

No matter what, I can't fall for Sunny Quetzal and her dazzling smile. Again.

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## CHAPTER 5

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# THE FLIRTING MONKEY

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## SUNNY

BEING hot and being a jerk should be mutually exclusive. Pricks like Darrel should walk around with a giant sign on their forehead that says ‘*Beware. Will Bite.*’

Instead, the stone-faced hunk rocks a square jaw and eyes capable of spitting hellfire even though they’re more of a Caribbean Sea turquoise than sulfur and brimstone.

He. Is. A. Jerk.

But do jerks regularly go around taking in orphaned children after their grandmother passes?

I think of the adorable little boys I met yesterday. Micheal and Bailey had me scribbling in my notebook until midnight, looking at Batman-themed rooms, and freaking over every detail because I am emotionally invested in these rooms being perfect.

It’s easy enough to pretend that I’m doing all the hard work here, but it’s only because of Darrel that I have this job. He’s putting in the effort. And the kids can see it. I will never forget the way they ran to Darrel like he was the lifeguard who’d splashed into the water to save them from drowning.

It makes zero sense.

In my world, people can be separated into groups.

Bastards like Darrel should go to one side.

Benevolent Mr. Scrooges belong in another.

The fact that Darrel is straddling the line is even more annoying. Why can’t he just pick a side? Why does he keep confusing me? Is he a jerk or is he a grumpy Daddy Warbucks minus the bald head and pipes that can belt out ‘*I don’t need anything but you*’ in the key of G?

I drum my fingers against the table, listening to the bustle in Jamaican Patties while a plate of crispy, golden fry jacks stares at me. Steam rises from the bowl of refried beans and shredded chicken breasts seasoned to perfection.

“You must really be upset if you can’t eat.” A dark hand falls over mine. The giant engagement ring is bright enough to have its own moon revolving around it. “I’m so sorry about that investment firm, Sunny. The CEO really

did you dirty.” Kenya grabs a fry jack and tears it to pieces. “He deserves to pay for what he did to you and all those poor employees.”

“Huh?” I glance up. “Oh, yeah.” I’ve definitely been obsessing over the money I lost and *not* the oversized grump who’s opening his house to two wonderful young boys and doing everything in his power to make that home feel welcoming. “Yeah, it sucks.”

“I was so angry for you when I found out.” Kenya is a petite, sparkly-eyed optimist until she gets mad. And then she turns into a Pitbull in the red zone. “I already talked to Alistair. We’re going to track that guy down and force him to give you an apology.”

“Whoa, it’s not that serious.”

“Why is it not serious?” Her nostrils flare. “We’re sitting here at Jamaican Patties and you haven’t touched *one* fry jack.” She sticks up a dark finger. “Not *one*. This is a national emergency.”

I grab the flaky fry jack and stick it into my mouth. The outside has a crunch while the inside is soft and airy. It’s delicious. “Mm. See? I’m eating just fine.”

Kenya bends forward, her dark curls gliding over her shoulders. “Alistair said that CEO has been known to do shady things. He’s kind of like the black sheep of his family, but Alistair hired someone to track him. Once we get it sorted out, I’ll tell you.”

“Kenya, really, it’s fine.” Since my mouth is currently stuffed with fry jacks, it comes out more like ‘*mmfa, mmmf mmfy mmff.*’

My best friend continues her one-woman monologue. “You were so excited about that contract. You planned what you’d do to the offices for weeks. You even hired extra workers to get it done in time.” Her eyes lift to the ceiling and she firms her bottom lip. “I was right there with you when you shopped for the office equipment. I stayed up with you while you agonized over the designs. I lost sleep because of this project and the prick didn’t even bother to pay you? This is as much a blow to me as it is to you. I won’t be able to sleep at night until it’s resolved.”

I shudder. Kenya’s always been determined but, with Holland Alistair’s money and social network behind her, she could probably launch her own missiles and command Alistair’s hacker army.

“You don’t have to take it so personally.”

“Of course I do. You’re my best friend. Any attack on you is an attack on me.”

A swell of gratitude fills me and I jump around the table. Wrapping my arms around Kenya's neck, I squeeze her close. She's the only sense of normalcy in my life right now and I want to hold on to that for all I'm worth.

"Thank you. You're amazing."

"That's a given."

Okay, Alistair's cockiness is rubbing off on her. I pat her hand. "You don't have to worry. I've got other jobs lined up."

"What other jobs?"

I ease away from her. "This and that."

"Are they design-related jobs?"

"Mm-hm."

"And you're getting the money upfront?"

"Yup."

"Then why do you still look so stressed?"

"I'm fine." Translation: *a surly neuropsychologist with muscles like a god keeps running through my mind and driving me crazy. I routinely want to choke him and get him naked. Please help.*

"You're getting red." She points to my cheeks. I slap a hand to my face, mortified. The black on my dad's side gave me dark skin, but the Mayan genes running through my veins makes it clear when I'm flustered.

"It's just... the fry jack is hot."

Kenya nods and seems to buy my explanation. "Do you need some help with the new projects? Money or—"

"I don't need money," I say quickly. Kenya's overly generous and I don't want our relationship to morph into the kind where we're constantly outdoing each other in the gift department. Unlike my best friend, I do *not* have a billionaire willing to fulfil my every wish. I'd empty my bank account trying to keep up with her.

"Well, do you want me to move back in?" Kenya asks.

I laugh. "Do you want to move back in?"

Although Kenya's got a nice job and an entire publishing house in her name, she still calls my cramped apartment 'home'. Mostly because it would be inconvenient for her to rent her own place when she spends all her time with Belle and Alistair at their penthouse mansion.

Since I love company and my best friend, I have no problems with her randomly dropping in for a sleepover. It's even more fun when she brings



Belle, my little accomplice-in-arms.

“Not really.” Kenya scrunches her nose.

I laugh at her antics. The fact that she wears her adoration for Alistair on her sleeve is cute. “I’m good, but thanks for asking.”

My cell phone begins to dance on the table. Both Kenya and I jerk our attention there. Darrel’s name flashes across the screen. I take a panicked breath and lunge for the device, but I’m too late.

“Why is Darrel calling you?” Her eyebrows pop to the top of her forehead.

“Darrel?” I open my mouth and gasp. “Why is he calling me?”

“I just asked you that.”

“I’m as shocked as you.” So... lying to my best friend is not a habit I believe in. It makes me feel like an awful human being, but Darrel asked me to keep his guardianship quiet until he can talk to Alistair. Under normal circumstances, I’d totally ignore his request and spill everything to Kenya. But this isn’t just about me and my beef with the hot therapist.

Two innocent children are involved, and I don’t know why Darrel wants to keep it under wraps, but I’m sure he has a good reason. Maybe the kids are in danger or have to be hidden from something. I won’t let my big mouth get me in trouble with this one.

She narrows her eyes. “You’re a terrible liar, Sunny.”

“I’m not lying.”

Kenya gives me the Caribbean mad-stare *I am done with you and your nonsense get your butt in the chair right now you have so much explaining to do* finger-jut of doom. “What’s going on with you and Darrel?”

“Nothing. I swear.” I scoop my purse out of the chair and back up while I talk fast. “I have to go now. I’ll call you.”

“Sunny!” she bellows my name.

I crash through the doors of Jamaican Patties and jump into my car. Once I’m a couple miles away, I call Darrel back.

“Sunny,” he growls my name.

My brain scrambles like cracked eggs in a skillet. I’m still not used to Darrel Hastings *speaking* to me. With actual words that have actual meaning. And the way he gruffly calls my name...

“I left the house key with Dina. You can pick it up from her.”

“You’re trusting me with your house keys? What if I clean out everything in your farmhouse?”

He grunts. "You don't strike me as the type who'd like the food in jail."

I snort out a laugh. Did the Almighty Grump just... crack a joke with me?

"Wasn't a joke," he grumbles as if he can read my mind and wants to make sure he doesn't get his grouch card revoked.

I cough to hide my laughter. "Is the house empty?"

"Are you asking as an interior designer or a thief?"

Another joke? Is this an alternate dimension? Has Darrel been swapped with an alien? "Does it matter?" I smirk. "I'd be long gone by the time you find out."

He clears his throat. "I have sessions all morning, and the boys went to school."

At the mention of the boys, I grow sober. "How are they?"

There's a long pause as if Darrel is considering whether it's any of my business.

I hold my breath.

"As well as can be expected, I guess. They didn't mention their grandmother again, but that doesn't mean they're not grieving in their own ways."

My heart flops in my chest. "I know it's not much, but I'm going to do my best to make these rooms perfect for them."

"I believe you."

They're only three words. Just three simple words. But it's as close to a compliment as Darrel Hastings has ever paid me. In fact, this is the closest to a mutually respectful conversation we've ever had.

He clears his throat. "One more thing. I've locked all the doors in the farmhouse except for the boys' room and the office. Every other bedroom is off limits."

My curiosity spikes. Why did Darrel go to such lengths to block me off? Is there something in one of the rooms I shouldn't see?

"Don't tell me you're hiding a dead body in your house?"

His end of the line goes silent.

My smile droops. "You're... not, right?"

"Goodbye, Sunny."

The dial tone rings in my ear with creepy finality. I gulp down my unease. Mysteries and Darrel Hastings go hand-in-hand. Kenya told me a long time ago that no one knows why Darrel suddenly quit his job making

piles of money and enrolled in school to study brains. He didn't even tell his late sister Claire about it. What if the truth is more morbid than any of us expect? What if Darrel's obsession with brains came... after his first kill?

I imagine the emotionless cyborg as a serial killer. Scythe in hand. Eyes of steel. A jaw line as sharp as a knife. Then I laugh at my own imagination. I'm being ridiculous. It's not like I don't know anything about Darrel. He's friends with Alistair and a good uncle to Belle. He's not a danger to the kids or to me. Besides, this is a job with a hefty price tag. One I need now that my money is in the wind along with the CEO of Stinton Investments.

Whether Darrel likes it or not, I'm going to be all up on his house. And I might even stumble on that secret he's trying to hide.

\* \* \*

MY CAR SLOWS DOWN IN FRONT OF A GORGEOUS FARMHOUSE WITH A sprawling garden out front. Towering trees wave their fronds at me like hula dancers greeting tourists just off a plane. Sunshine dances on the zinc roof and spills over the porch, racing past the trailing ivy hugging charming white trellises.

It's a house that does *not* suit the imposing Darrel Hastings at all. Which is one of the main reasons I had no idea the home I'd designed was for him.

*"The client wants a refuge. Somewhere he can come home and decompress, forget about his day, be one with nature. You know the shtick."*

*"Whoa. He's willing to shin out this much to pretty up a farmhouse? He could build a castle with all this cash."*

*"It's what he wants, and he's willing to pay so we get it right the first time. Don't let me down."*

I love projects where money is not an object. It allows my creativity to flow, unhindered by a pesky budget that squeezes me into corners and forces me to find more creative ways to bring my vision to life. I never thought I'd be back here, designing two more rooms.

I stick the key into the lock. It turns with a click. The door creaks loudly when I step inside. I push it back and forth and listen as the creaking gets worse. I'll find some oil later and apply it to the joints to get rid of that noise.

I let the door smash into place and observe the rest of Darrel's home. The farmhouse has an open concept plan with lots of windows admitting sunlight and revealing the gorgeous forests surrounding the property. Pillows, rugs and paintings in muted tones tie the rooms together. The design flows just as beautifully in the living room and kitchen spaces.

I eye the wine rack sitting neatly on the counter and turn away. Just because I know the client personally doesn't mean I should make myself at home.

First things first. I need measurements.

Heading back out to the car, I grab my tool kit and drag it into Darrel's house. It takes a couple tries before I find a bedroom door that will open—Darrel wasn't kidding when he said he'd locked up.

Finally, I stumble on the right place. The room is on the second floor. Third door on the right. A peek inside reveals two suitcases open in that careless way that children do everything. Clothes litter the floor.

A bunk bed is pressed against the wall. I scrunch my nose. *What on earth?* Apart from the dresser, closet, and a black and white painting of a random old man on the walls, this room could be a prison cell.

"Where's the color, Hastings?" I turn in a slow circle. "Where's the life?"

Thankfully, the room looks like it's a good size and there are tons of windows. I'm just eyeballing it, but I don't think I'll have to tweak my designs too much.

I notice a door that looks out of place in the wall. Approaching it cautiously, I twist the knob and push. My eyes widen when I notice an en suite bathroom.

"Now we're talking!" I let out a bark of laughter and rub my hands together, evil villain during his opening monologue style. Ideas are bursting out of me like a game of whack-a-mole. It would be *perfect* if the office was next door to the guest room. I could connect the boys' rooms via the bathroom.

*Oh this is sweet.*

The thrill of a new challenge is beginning to bubble up in my stomach. I always get a little insane when I'm at the start of a design. Something about taking a blank canvas and transforming it into something new makes me feel alive.

“The bed will go here.” I turn in a slow circle and point to the empty space with a flourish. “Or can it fit?” I rub my chin as I speak to myself. “The room looks smaller because of this giant bunk bed.”

I lift my arms and flex my muscles at the silence. Do I have enough strength to push that heavy piece of furniture? Deciding to ignore it for now, I snap my tape measure from my tool kit and measure the walls.

When I get to the wall where the bunk bed is wedged into the corner, I narrow my eyes. This bunk is an eyesore. Where did Darrel pick it up? Military boot camp? I chuckle. It wouldn’t surprise me if he did.

Something colorful on the top bunk catches my eye. I draw near to the bed and press on the tips of my toes. Crap. This is a *tall* bunk bed. I can’t quite get a good look. A few frantic jumps is my next try. When that doesn’t work, I reach for the bunk bed ladder.

I need to see what’s on that bed. Especially if it’s connected to Bailey. It’s much easier to design Micheal’s room because he’s got clear interests and a more solemn personality, but I’m still looking for a key piece that I can implement in Bailey’s room.

Bailey is the Energizer Bunny on crack. Yesterday, he jumped from one topic to the next, making it impossible to extract a clear design point from him.

I put my tennis shoes on the first rung, realize I probably shouldn’t be scaling on top of their beds with my dusty sneakers and slip them off. Ready to try again, I clamp my fingers on the ladder and pull myself up.

The bright red that I saw on the bed belongs to a stuffed toy. It’s a scrawny orangutan with a stitched smile and big eyes. The toy is scuffed and dirty in places. The stitches for the eyes are falling apart, making the monkey look like it’s winking in a sleazy way.

“Interesting,” I muse. “Does Bailey like animals?” I bring the monkey to my face. “Hey, are you flirting with me?” The slight increase of pressure from my hand causes the monkey to squawk like a radio.

*“Goodnight, son. Daddy loves you.”*

My eyes widen. I squeeze the teddy bear again and the same recorded message croaks out. The voice doesn’t sound familiar. Does it belong to Micheal and Bailey’s late father?

My heart pinches. These poor boys. I want to wrap them in my arms and give them a proper hug until the world stops hurting them.

“What are you doing?”

That voice did not come from the monkey.

Shocked, I throw the monkey back on the bed with both hands, not realizing that I need those hands to prevent a smackdown with the ground. By the time I remember to keep my grip on the ladder, gravity's already decided that I'm going to be its next victim.

*Crap.*

*Crap crap crap.*

I grunt, trying to hook my toes around the steps so I don't flail wildly to the ground. It doesn't work and only upends me further, quickening my descent.

I'm falling off the ladder and there's nothing I can do about it.

Heart in my throat, I squeeze my eyes shut.

Brace myself for a harsh landing.

Maybe a broken arm.

A broken neck?

I'm not that far from the ground, am I?

Darrel snatches me from the air before I find out whether necks can crack from falling off bunk beds. I'm not sure what he was intending, but if he was going for a smooth superman catch, it fails spectacularly. My elbow connects with his jaw and he curses, wheeling us around.

Oops—"Sorry," I hiss.

His body stumbles backward, propelled by the motion of catching me and the fact that he may now need jawbone surgery. One more backward step and he's down like a boxer getting wiped out by Tyson.

My head slams against his chest, forcing me to wonder if it would have been softer if I'd just landed on the ground. What is this man made of? Rock?

"Ugh." I rub my chin.

Darrel lifts his head and slants me a glare that's dark enough to level cities. Does he have no other expression than soft glare and angry glare? Geez. It's not like I pushed him down. Why is he so angry with me?

I ease myself up slightly. "When did you get here? I didn't hear you come in."

He tries to sit up, but he stops midway and flops back down.

Is he seriously injured?

Panic sets in. Darrel's the type of client who'll sue for damages. I don't have any money for medical fees. I can barely cover my car insurance after

paying off all the accounts I owe.

Throwing my irritation away, I focus on making sure he doesn't have to visit the hospital. "Are you okay?" I grab his face and lift, checking the underside of his jaw. He's clean-shaven today, which is helpful. There's already a slight bruise forming from where my elbow connected with his chin. "Oh." I cringe. "That looks like it hurts."

His breathing thickens and his frigid stare makes me want to dive under the covers.

"I can't sit up because you're pinning me to the ground," he growls.

Oh. "My bad." I scramble to a sitting position, but moving that fast makes me dizzy. A strange pressure builds in the back of my head. My legs turn shaky, and I know I'll just face-plant again if I try to stand. Putting a hand to my temple, I gasp out. "Just give me a second."

My heart is roaring in my chest, my hands feel clammy and my throat is tying itself up in a tight, little bow. What the heck is this? Why do I feel so strange?

There's a light touch on my chin and a deep, growly voice says, "Breathe, Sunny. Just breathe."

"I am breathing," I snap and gasp out at the same time. It's not breathing that's the problem right now. It's the way my throat is tightening up and making me feel like I'm choking.

"You're not choking. A second ago, your sympathetic nervous system triggered the fight-or-flight response, flooding your body with a burst of energy so it could respond to danger. Now, you're feeling the effects of a withdrawal as your frontal lobe—"

"Stop. Talking," I choke.

I'm breathing.

I'm okay. No broken skulls in sight.

And Darrel's still annoying. So he's obviously fine too.

Except he'd probably be annoying even with his jaw wired shut so... that's no guarantee that he shouldn't still visit a hospital.

Picturing Darrel Hastings in a body cast glaring at nurses and doctors is the weirdest mental image *ever*, but it's funny enough that my breathing becomes steadier and the knot in my throat goes away.

My mind clear, I press my fingers into my chin to test if there are any bruises. It's a little sensitive to the touch. Did I break skin when I slammed my face into Darrel's glorious pecs?

“You won’t need stitches.” Darrel grunts. “You’re fine.”

“And you?”

He makes a pained sound and places a hand on his jaw. I can’t tell if he’s playing up his discomfort for sympathy points or not, but I did wallop him in the face pretty hard. These elbows are no joke. I’m ‘skin and bones’ according to my ancient Mayan grandmother who believes that good Mayan girls should be a little plump in order to be attractive. These arms of mine can turn into weapons with the right amount of pressure.

My fingers probe his jaw again. “Is your face the only place that’s hurting?” I move my touch to his shoulders. His neck. His chest.

I should probably focus on finding injuries but, instead, I’m savoring the opportunity to be this close to a non-growling Darrel Hastings. His body is absolutely magnificent. *What would it be like if he ditched the glare and all these clothes?*

He sits up abruptly, shoving me aside. “Stay off ladders.”

“I wouldn’t have fallen if it wasn’t for you.”

His eyebrow jumps. “How do you always have a comeback?”

“Now you sound like my mother.”

He rolls his eyes.

“It’s your fault, Hastings.”

“That makes no logical sense.”

“You’re the one who came in here and surprised me.”

He shakes his head at me, causing a lock of his hair to tumble over his forehead. My heart leaps to full attention. *Gorgeous.*

I pounce to my feet, arms stiff at my sides and a scowl curling my lips. I’m going to ignore how stunning he looks right now. And I’m going to forget how hard and manly he felt when I was on top of him. I can’t hurl insults properly when I’m thinking of how attractive he is.

“You weren’t supposed to be home at all. What are you doing here?”

He lifts his gaze to the ceiling. “I... forgot something.”

“Yeah right.” I laugh disbelievingly. “You said you have meetings all morning.”

“They got... canceled.”

“Bull. You came to check on me, didn’t you? Because you don’t trust me to be in your house alone.”

“That’s not true.”



“I’m not going to take your prized science books, Darrel.” I scoff. I was joking about cleaning out his house earlier. Did he actually take me seriously? *Ridiculous!*

I wouldn’t have survived all these years as an interior designer if I had sticky fingers. One of the basics of the job is trust. People allow us into their sacred spaces, allow us to touch their things and the memories associated with them because they believe we’ll give them something better. Stealing from clients would be extremely violating, not only to them, but to my craft.

He scoffs. “I told you why I’m here.”

I study his stony expression. “Okay. Maybe it’s not that you’re afraid of me stealing. Maybe you didn’t want me breaking into your bedroom.”

His pure green eyes snap away and I know I’ve stumbled on the truth.

“What exactly do you not want me to see?”

“Have you gotten your measurements?” He grips my wrist and tugs me from the boys’ room. “If you don’t need anything else, you can head out.”

“Why are you always kicking me out of places?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he grunts, still dragging me down the hallway like his ultimate dream in life is to become a bodyguard on *Maury*.

“You tried to kick me out of the center when I saw Bailey and Micheal. Even before then, you tried to kick me out of Alistair’s bachelor party.”

He grunts. “I thought you were crashing the event.”

“You thought I was a stripper.”

“I thought you were somewhere you didn’t belong.” His eyes narrow on me. Sunlight hits them with fire and they come to life with embers of gold and brown. “Because you always are.”

“That’s untrue.”

“Get out, Sunny.”

“There are nicer ways to say that.”

“I don’t have time for this.” He continues to pull me.

We’re in the living room now. I grab the handle of the sofa and try to plant my legs on the ground.

“I haven’t measured the office yet,” I bawl out.

With a huff, Darrel brushes close to me and pries my fingers off the couch. “I’ll measure it for you.”

“I don’t trust you. I have to do it myself.”

“Tough luck,” he growls in my ear.

I swear, I don’t intend to make the little whimper sound when he hovers close to me. It just... happens. Darrel Hastings is standing directly behind me, legs spread and body arched over mine, growling into my ear as I breathe hard and fast. If that’s not going to be fodder for every dirty dream I ever have going forward, I don’t know what is.

My fingers loosen on the couch and he seizes the opportunity because he is a heartless super-grouch with not an ounce of human emotion in his chiseled body.

Darrel turns me around, hefts me up like I’m a sack of potatoes and throws me over his shoulder. My lips have a proper introduction with his rather cute behind as he marches to the door.

“Hastings!” I scream, fisting my hands and pounding his butt. Firm, but not the point. “Put me down!”

“No,” he says simply. The screen door slaps open and closed. A bucket of sunshine pouring on my face is the only indication that we’re now outside.

“You’re being ridiculous!”

“Guess I’m spending too much time around you. It’s starting to rub off.”

“Jerk.”

He just grunts.

“You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re only allowed to work when I have time to be home to supervise you.”

“Are you kidding me? That’ll take forever.”

He marches angrily down the steps. My head bounces against his back with every angry descent. He smells like mint and sandalwood.

I’d sniff him like a drug if he wasn’t so infuriating.

“Hastings!”

No response.

“You promised I could do whatever I wanted with this design!”

Still nothing.

I open my mouth to yell at him again when, suddenly, Darrel goes still.

Since the only view I have is of his posterior—which, again, really isn’t that much of a hardship—I don’t know what he’s looking at or what’s making his muscles get all stiff and tense under my body.

The sound of wheels turning over gravel is my first clue.

The second is a door slamming open and shut.

“Hastings?” A feminine voice that I’ve heard before but I can’t place rings over the too-quiet front porch.

Darrel drags me off his shoulder and flings me on my feet like I’m the radioactive spider that’ll turn him into a superhero. His eyebrows pinch together and a flush spreads over his neck.

The expression on his face would be hilarious, if I didn’t notice the two little faces in the car.

My eyes widen. “Why are Micheal and Bailey here? Shouldn’t they be in school?”

Darrel whips his head around to investigate the car too.

The no-nonsense social worker I met yesterday nods stiffly at me and then focuses on Darrel. “Hastings, we need to talk.”

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## CHAPTER 6

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**THIS AGAIN?**

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## DARREL

I LOOK between Micheal's tightening jaw and Bailey's tearful blue eyes, my stomach dropping harder than it has a right to. "You're saying Micheal hit someone?"

"He shoved him," Ms. Bennet corrects me, her eyelashes bouncing slowly. The careful way she's speaking and holding herself hints at mistrust. She doesn't feel at ease in my company. "A teacher intervened before things could escalate, but it was enough to warrant he go home for the afternoon and cool off."

I fold my fingers together and set them on my knee. The room falls into a strained silence. The seconds stretch. I can practically snap the tension in two with my fists.

"Why is Bailey here too?" A soft voice comes from my right. It's Sunny, sitting on the arm of my chair like she's a queen holding court. One long, long leg is folded over the other.

If everyone in the room wasn't staring at me like I'm a judge about to sentence someone to the electric chair, I'd probably be appreciating how that tiny skirt of hers shows all the way up to her creamy brown thighs. Or the way that sparkly pink polish on her toes makes me want to jump out of my own skin. Or how throwing her over my shoulder had me considering whether I wanted to change directions and throw her on my bed instead of the porch.

But I really don't have time for thoughts like that right now.

Which is why she shouldn't be here.

I have no recollection of telling her to make herself at home. In fact, I distinctly remember growling out an order for her to leave before ushering the social worker, Micheal and Bailey into my farmhouse.

Ms. Bennet glances at her and then at me and then at Bailey. "Bailey, do you want to tell them what you told the dean of discipline?"

"Ebenezer called me a crybaby," the little boy blurts.

Micheal's fists tighten.

"A crybaby?" Sunny scoffs. "With a name like Ebenezer, he shouldn't be bullying anyone."

“Ebenezer bullies everyone in my class,” Bailey explains in a rush, talking more confidently now that he knows someone will listen. “He’s dumb as rocks. That’s what Micheal said.”

My hard gaze flits to the older brother. “Micheal?”

He clamps his mouth together and looks at something beyond me.

“Why were you crying, Bailey?” Sunny asks, butting in again as if she has every right to.

His bottom lip pushes out. “I... I miss grandma.”

A sigh gets trapped in my chest and makes it hard to breathe. I flatten my hands on my thighs, struggling to find the best way to resolve this.

Both boys are dealing with grief. It’s a highly unstable time in their lives, but that’s no excuse for Micheal to hurt someone else. Even if that someone else was being a jerk.

While I’m figuring out how to address this, Sunny does what Sunny always does.

Acts without thought.

Jumping out of the couch, she wraps her arms around Bailey and hugs him. The moment her arms close around the kid. It’s game over. The tears are back in his eyes again and they’re slipping down his flushed cheeks.

Micheal sheds a tear too, although he flings it away like it committed a crime against him. My heart rearranges when I see him breaking down, but I quell the rush of sympathy. Micheal still needs to be disciplined in some way for what he did today. I can’t let myself get soft or this opportunity for a lesson will disappear like smoke.

“Oh sweetiepoo,” Sunny coos to the little boy, rocking him back and forth. “It’s okay to cry. And it’s okay to miss your grandma too.”

I clear my throat. “Sunny.”

She ignores me.

Ms. Bennet rises to her feet, drawing my gaze her way. “I’ll let you take over from here, Mr. Hastings.”

“Let me walk you to the door.” I pin Micheal with another loaded look *don’t you dare move from that chair until I get back*. Then I follow the social worker to the door.

A hand in my pocket, I stop her before she leaves. “Hey, I appreciate you bringing them all the way here, but why didn’t the school call me?”

“They don’t have your number.”

“I’m sure I gave it to them.” Even if I didn’t, Ms. Jean would have.

Her eyes skitter away. “They don’t have your number in the emergency contacts list. I asked that they inform me first if anything happens to the boys.”

“Why would you do that? *I’m* their guardian.” The words escape with a bite. “If something happens, I want to be the first to know.”

Her eyes drop to half-mast, and she glances at me as if it’s taking all her energy to be polite. “Is that a scolding, Mr. Hastings?”

“Ms. Bennet, I appreciate you granting me emergency guardianship, but it’s clear to me that you don’t trust my intentions. I am very dedicated to taking care of these boys.”

“Intentions and experience are two different things. Someone might have the best intentions in the world, but when they find themselves breaking up school fights, dealing with teenage angst, and being held responsible for two emotionally-torn kids who’ve suffered more loss than is imaginable, the tune might begin to change.”

“I’m not the kind of man who flakes on his promises. If you’d give me a chance to prove myself, you’d see that.”

“My job is to assess risks and mitigate them. Blindly trusting someone could ruin a child’s life.”

“Ms. Bennet.”

“*Until* I’m satisfied, I’d like to keep a close eye on you and these boys. Do you have a problem with that?”

It doesn’t feel like she’s asking me. The words ring with a hint of a threat.

I step back and allow her to take this round. “No.”

She bobs her head and stomps to her car. I let the door slap shut behind her as blood rushes through my ears. I’m drowning in irritation, which means my brain is secreting too much cortisol. If I let that stress hormone flood my system, there’s no way I can address Micheal in a calm and rational manner. My annoyance with Ms. Bennet will flood out on him and he’ll sense that. Kids are especially sensitive to tone.

Deep breaths.

*I can do this. I can do for Micheal what his dad did for me.*

Turning abruptly, I prepare myself to be the guardian I’m supposed to be when I realize the living room is empty. I stop abruptly. Micheal isn’t in the chair where I left him and Sunny and Bailey are holding hands, heading to the kitchen.



I stalk toward them both. “What’s going on? Where is Micheal?”

“He went to his room.”

My chest rises and falls on an impatient breath. “I need to talk to him.”

“Right now?” Sunny’s direct gaze sends my pulse ratcheting up to a near toxic level, and I can’t find any rational thoughts that’ll get my breathing under control.

I’m teetering too close to an emotional response and that’s so freaking dangerous that it makes me furious. At myself. At her. At the doubts in my own mind.

She releases Bailey’s hand. “Why don’t you see if there’s anything to drink in the fridge, hm?”

He nods and scurries to the kitchen.

Taking two steps toward me, Sunny leans close. Sunlight sparkles in her eyes and glows beneath her brown skin. She’s always had that ancient fairy queen look to her, with that long black hair, thin face, and sharp cheekbones.

“Micheal is going through a lot right now.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I spit. The words are harsh and not intended for her at all. I’m frustrated. *She’s* frustrating. I’m losing my mind here.

She frowns at me, but her voice remains calm. “Maybe he needs some space.”

“And maybe he needs to remember that there’s someone looking out for him. Someone who’ll hold him accountable for bad decisions.”

“You really think this grieving kid needs a scolding right now. *Right* now?” Her words are low but fevered.

I thrust my hands through my hair. “It’s none of your business.”

“You keep saying those words like they’re supposed to mean something.”

“They do mean something, Sunny. They mean *butt out*.”

No, I’m not this guy. I’m not the man who snaps at women in the middle of a sunny kitchen while a seven-year-old watches with big blue eyes behind his glasses. I’m not the guy who loses my grip on control because uncertainty is eating him alive.

I don’t have chaos in my head.

I have answers.

Logical explanations backed by science.

I have the privilege of always being right. Always knowing what to do.

"If you're doing this, then I'm coming with you," Sunny insists.

"I don't need you there."

"You don't know what you need, Hastings." She drags a hair clip off her wrist, yanks her hair up and pulls it into a ponytail.

Suddenly, I'm that kid in high school watching the prettiest girl glide down the hallway. I'm in the crowd, looking on while all the jocks flock to her and try to get her attention. I'm there, wishing I could say something but knowing I won't be around long enough to make it count.

I blink and the memory is gone. Instead, I'm looking at Sunny as she is now. All woman. All stubbornness and pride. Willowy limbs, full lips, bright brown eyes and the confidence that comes from always being adored simply because she owns her differences.

Sunny slants me an aggravated look, but she tries to disguise it when she turns to Bailey. Gesturing to him, she says sweetly, "Did you find something to drink, Bailey? Go ahead and watch some TV until I come back, and we can talk about lunch."

"Okay." He bobs his head. He's sharp enough to sense that something is off but still young enough that the promise of watching cartoons when he's supposed to be in school can distract him.

"Let's go." Sunny whips a hand forward.

Which is annoying all by itself, but not as annoying as the urge to hold her hand and admit that I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

Scratch that.

I know what I should be doing. Staying as far away from this woman as possible and being a consistent, stable presence in Micheal and Bailey's lives. It's the *how* of achieving those goals that stumps me.

Every time I think I've managed to shake Sunny Quetzal loose, she comes ricocheting back to me. Like a boomerang.

Sunny marches upstairs. The boys' room is locked and she aims a smug smile at me as if one lock is enough to deter me from going in.

I rap my knuckles on the door. "Micheal, it's me. You need to open up."

No response.

I shuffle my feet and keep my tone level. "Micheal, we don't lock doors in this house." After another pause, I add, "Don't make me ask again."

A lock clicks.

The door swings open.

Micheal stands in front of me, his face pale and his arms hidden within the pockets of his hoodie. His gaunt cheeks fill to the brim as he sucks in a breath. "What?"

He's eleven. Too young to be channeling that much attitude.

I lift a hand to signify that I've come in peace. "Let's talk."

He rolls his eyes.

This is exactly what I mean. Eleven. He's not even a tween yet. Where did he learn to do that?

"Micheal, what happened at school today?"

He frowns and wraps his arms around himself.

In therapy, the goal isn't to give advice. It's to get the patient to stumble on their own understanding, but I can't seem to find the patience right now.

"Micheal, why did you hit that boy?"

"He didn't hit him. He shoved him," Sunny whispers.

I glare at her.

She glares right back. "Get your facts right."

Micheal glances at her and smiles.

He.

Freaking.

Smiles.

At her.

The same teenager trapped in the body of an eleven-year-old is making alliances with the one woman who drives me crazy. And if winning over boys with emotional baggage isn't a Sunny-thing, I don't know what is.

"He's scary, isn't he?" Sunny steps in front of me, knocking my shoulder on the way.

I scowl at her.

She ignores me and drops into a crouch just inside Micheal's room. "I always thought Darrel was like the fun police. But growlier."

Micheal's eyebrows twitch. He doesn't seem to understand what she's talking about, but he doesn't disagree.

"Sunny," I warn. Where is she going with this?

Sunny wraps her long, toned arms around her knees. "School is tough, right?"

Micheal pauses. He studies her as if he's trying to get in front of the conversation. Make sure she isn't going to pull a lesson out of mid-air. He must conclude that she's worthy of his trust because, after a beat, he nods.

“School’s a lot tougher when you’re different.” Her voice is soft, as if she’s speaking to Micheal as a friend rather than a child. “When I first moved to the States, I was terrified of going to school with all these kids who were...” Sunny falls silent.

“Who were what?” Micheal steps closer to her as if he *needs* to hear what happened.

Honestly, I do too. I don’t remember Sunny lacking confidence at *all* in high school, but it wasn’t like I was ever in her social orbit and close enough to see her struggles.

She touches her silky hair. “I’m half Mayan, and half black. Where I come from, we call that Creole.” Her laughter is sad. “Where I come from, I’m normal. But over here, it isn’t normal. The other kids didn’t understand my accent. They made fun of my clothes. It was brutal.” She brushes at the hem of her skirt. “One day, I got shoved into a locker. While I was crying and scared and wondering if I’d suffocate in the dark, something clicked for me. I decided that my life had to change. I’d either make myself invisible or I’d fight back.”

Micheal leans forward.

I lean forward.

The orangutan stuffed animal probably does too.

“Guess what I chose to do?” Sunny’s smile is mischievous.

“Change schools?” Micheal squeaks.

“Nope.” Her shoulders hike to her ears. “I decided to fight. From that day on, I kept my head up and traded insults with anyone who came at me. I wore my Mayan blouses and I made it cool. Anyone who insulted me learned that they would pay for it. I couldn’t beat the bullies on their terms, but I could fight them if the game changed. So I changed it and made it mine.”

My eyebrows hike.

My heartbeat picks up.

It’s like getting a glimpse into a celebrity’s personal life. Sunny isn’t a celebrity to the world, but she was to the kids at John Hearst. She’s also the woman responsible for one of the most embarrassing moments of my formative years.

And it’s weird to hear that she didn’t grow up dreaming of terrorizing people.

I should know that.

I do know.

I knew it from the moment I laid eyes on her in the school hallway and saw that gorgeous smile.

The girl who walked around like the queen bee of the school and the girl who slapped someone for making fun of the janitor seemed like a mystery I wanted to unravel. Only I ended up tying myself in knots and leaving the school shamefully instead.

Sunny's voice rings with sincerity. "Here's the thing Micheal. Now that I'm older, when I look back on those years, I really wished I'd taken a different path. Because one day, I woke up and realized I'd become the very thing I hated. Someone who hurt other people."

Micheal blinks. He's not saying anything, but every muscle in his little body is tuned to Sunny.

"You don't think you're going to become that person at first." The smile that flickers over her face is full of sadness. "At first, all you can think about is surviving. But then you keep making that choice. The choice to drop to a bully's level. After a while, it feels normal."

Micheal swallows hard, his eyes circling to the ground.

"I know you were only defending your brother today." Sunny glances over her shoulder and I'm shocked when her stunning brown eyes fall on mine. "Mr. Darrel knows it too." She returns her attention to the boy and places her hand on his. "All I'm asking is that you think really hard about the choice you want to make. Because that decision can determine your future. We want your future to be a great one. We want you to become someone your dad would be proud of, so next time think carefully before you—"

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"It's okay, baby. I'm not scolding you."

"I just wanted to protect Bailey and that guy kept shoving me." Micheal hangs his head.

Sunny snatches him into her arms just like she did with Bailey. To my surprise, Micheal doesn't resist her. He sets his chin in the crook of her shoulder and cries.

She pats his back, soothing him. "It's okay."

I blink in shock. Just like that? Micheal's walls were all the way up with me, but Sunny can just prance around them like she's got the keys to the vault? I can't believe how well she connects with him.

“You feel a little better now?” she asks him, pulling back.

He nods.

“How about some food? If Mr. Darrel has the right ingredients, I can whip up my favorite Belizean meal.”

“Are you really Mayan, Sunny?” Micheal asks.

“That’s right.” She taps her forearms. “Real Mayan blood runs through these veins.”

“I thought all the Mayan people were dead.”

She laughs and wraps an arm around his scrawny shoulders. “That, my dear Mike, is what they want you to think.” As she walks past me, Sunny winks. “In reality, we’re alive and well. We live mostly in Central and South America...”

I turn around and watch her, still amazed that one, she got Micheal to listen to a lecture without making it feel like a lecture and two, she regrets her cruel past. *I wonder if that includes what she did to me in high school.*

Either way, it’s not what I expected. Sunny puts up such a hard exterior that it was easy to believe she hadn’t changed since high school, but the evidence is piling in front of me. Sunny is different. She’s... better.

I shouldn’t care, but it’s drawing me closer.

Just like it did when I was a kid.

Dangerous, dangerous territory.

Because back then and now, Sunny Quetzal is the only woman who can shut down my frontal cortex and turn me into a lovesick fool.

\* \* \*

I’M RIGHT THERE WITH MICHEAL AND BAILEY, PULLING A LONG FACE WHEN Sunny has to leave after lunch. Sure, my disappointed face looks like all my other faces. And it’s not like Sunny cares either way, but *I* know what I’m feeling.

And the longing is strong and clear.

Sunny hugs both Micheal and Bailey, promises to come back with another Belizean dish—rice and beans with stew chicken and salad which, frankly, sounds *amazing*—and then floats past me as if I don’t exist.

Given how raw and honest she’d been with Micheal, I thought she was over our fight from earlier.

I was wrong.

Very wrong.

The screen door slams shut and she's gone without so much as a glance at me.

Awkwardness sets in around the table now that it's just me and the kids.

I clear my throat. "Do you boys have homework?"

Micheal nods.

Bailey scrunches his nose. "I hate homework."

He's mentioned that. "Even so, bud, you have to do it."

He groans.

"Come on, Bailey. I'll help you." Micheal pushes away from the table and holds a hand out to his little brother.

"Hey, Micheal," I call.

The eleven-year-old stops and pins me with clear brown eyes. I see his little jaw clenching like he's bracing himself for a scolding.

I don't deliver on it. "Call me if you need any help."

His shoulders drop a smidge. "Okay."

The boys walk off and I retire to my office. Since the kids are home so early in the day, I can't go back to the center. Instead, I meet with patients online through video calls. I already pushed my schedule back yesterday and I really don't want to do it again.

When I take a break to check on the kids, Bailey is playing on a handheld console while Micheal is reading a comic book. With his face smushed up to the pages like that, he really looks like Professor Stein.

"You kids okay?" I ask.

They nod.

I glance around the messy room and try not to cringe inside. I'll give them a bit of time to get adjusted before I start riding them about putting clothes where they belong.

The sun sets while I return to my office for another round of video-call sessions. This time, when I head outside to check on the boys, they're rummaging in the kitchen.

"Hungry?" I ask. "What do you feel about pizza?"

"Yeah!" Bailey thrusts a fist to the sky.

Micheal smiles.

Pizza's always a crowd pleaser.

I dial the company and check Micheal's homework while I wait. The bell rings fifteen minutes later and I'm impressed.

"They got here quick," I mumble, reaching for my wallet.

Bailey runs around the table in a circle yelling, "Pizza, pizza, pizza!"

If I were a few years younger, I'd probably be joining him. It's been a long time since Sunny's delicious fry jack meal and my belly's grumbling loud enough to wake the dead.

"Settle down, Bailey." I reach for the doorknob and twist. "You'll scare the..." My jaw drops. "Delivery man."

"Sorry. I didn't know you had company or I'd have brought a box," Alistair says.

I stare at my brother-in-law as if he'll disappear any minute now, replaced by a shaggy-haired teen with acne, braces and a pizza box.

"Is it pizza?" Bailey hollers.

"Uh..."

Footsteps patter and, a moment later, Bailey pokes his head out. "Where's the pizza?"

A motorcycle engine spares me from having to make an introduction. Not that I'd know how to start. *Hey, Alistair. This is Bailey. One of two little boys I'm now solely responsible for. Would you like some tea?*

The pizza guy swaggers up the stairs and swings the pizza box at me. After exchanging the money, he wishes me a goodnight in a bored tone, completely oblivious to the tension between the two adults on the porch and the rambunctious little boy who's about to chew the pizza through the cardboard box.

I clear my throat and hand the box gently to Bailey. "Take this inside to your brother. Tell him to watch some TV while I talk out here, okay?"

"Okay!" Bailey snatches the box so enthusiastically, I'm not even sure he heard half of what I said.

"Is that a patient?" Alistair points to the little boy who's running gleefully inside.

I shut the door. "Alistair."

"Are you baby-sitting?"

I wince.

"No?" He covers his face with a hand. "Do you have a long-lost son? Is that it?"



“Let’s talk over here.” I draw him away from the door and to the far end of the porch.

He looks slightly frantic. “What the hell is going on, Darrel? You didn’t...” He presses closer and lowers his voice. “You didn’t kidnap him, did you?”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Does it look like I’m joking right now?” he barks.

I rub the back of my neck. I’ve been putting off this conversation for a long time. Not because I don’t trust Alistair but because talking about why I have these kids will lead to a discussion about Professor Stein and the part he played in my life. It’s something I haven’t shared with anyone.

“Alistair, I’m going to be a...” ‘Dad’ doesn’t fit. It’s not right. It conjures images of a stone-cold Major yelling at me to get up from the mud and run the drills again. “Legal guardian.”

“What?”

“I’m applying for legal custody of these kids.”

His jaw drops so hard that it makes an audible thud. “Kids. That’s plural.”

“I know how grammar works, Alistair.”

“Who are they?”

“Bailey and Micheal. One is seven and the other is eleven.”

He blinks rapidly. “You know that’s not what I’m asking.”

“They’re the kids of my professor.” If I leave it vague, he won’t ask too many deep questions, will he? “I made a promise to him.”

“You promised to adopt your professor’s kids? That’s rather specific.”

“It kind of falls under the banner. Their grandma and I arranged it a year ago. She was sick for a while, so I watched them last year and...”

“You knew this was going to happen since *last year*?” If Alistair’s nose flares any harder, his brain might be able to pass through it. “Wait. Is the grandmother the client you were ‘meeting with’?” He scrunches his fingers. “The one who was ‘being treated at your clinic and ‘has two kids’?”

I nod slowly.

“You mean you lied to my face?”

“How does someone announce that they’re adopting two kids?”

“You say, ‘hey man, nice weather, oh and by the way, I’m adopting two kids.’” His eyebrows are about to fly off his face. “Just like that.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“No.” Alistair waves his arms. “Nothing is simple for the great brain-therapist who analyzes everything until he gets cross-eyed. You wouldn’t look for a simple solution even if there were one.”

Sunny said something similar to me and, hearing it from Alistair again makes me wonder if there’s some credence to it.

After a moment of self-reflection, I reject the assessment. So I think through every choice deeply? Why is that a bad thing? Rushing into a situation without logical consideration is a recipe for disaster. By weighing all the risks, I’m not likely to get hurt.

He shakes his head, jaw still slack. “Kenya told me you and Sunny were up to something, but I didn’t think I’d find out you were hiding *children* from me.”

“I’m not doing anything with Sunny,” I say quickly. Maybe a little too quickly.

Alistair’s eyes glint at me. “No? Then why did you call her today?”

“She’s designing the boys’ room.”

“*You’re* her new job?” Alistair points at me.

“Why are you surprised by that?”

“I guess she didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?” I step forward. “Did something happen to Sunny?”

Alistair watches me carefully. “She did some work for Stinton Investment. They stiffed her when the CEO ran off.”

“Stinton Investment.” I frown. “Aren’t they the firm that went bankrupt?” I may not be in the field anymore, but finances used to be the only thing I knew. I still keep up with the latest news.

“Yes. Unfortunately, Sunny did some extra work on credit for them, thinking they’d pay her back for everything. They didn’t and now she’s in trouble.”

My heartbeat picks up. “She didn’t say anything to me.”

“I’m not surprised. Both Sunny and Kenya like to tackle problems on their own.” He sighs as if he’s thinking of his fiancée’s legendary stubbornness.

Determination thickens my voice. “I need to make a call.”

“A call? To who?”

I’m stalking back to the front door, my mind already far away.

“Hey!” Alistair calls at my back. “When do I get to meet my nephews? We should set up a play date with Belle.”

“I’ll call you,” I grumble. Then I storm inside. It takes effort to stop in the living room and coax my expression into a lighter one.

Bailey smiles at me, his face plastered with tomato sauce. “You want some, Mr. Darrel?”

“Not yet.” I meet Micheal’s eyes. “You good?”

He nods, as silent as ever.

“I’ll be in my office. Call me if you need me.”

When I arrive in the quiet room, I lock the door behind me and plop into my chair. Tenting my fingers, I lean my elbows on the desk. *Sunny’s in trouble*. It has nothing to do with me. In fact, I’m the last person who should be helping her after everything she did in the past.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. I think about Sunny. The way she comforted Micheal by sharing her past. The way she held Bailey as he cried on her shoulder. The way she whipped up fried jacks with love and genuine care.

My eyes burst open. I tap the screen of my phone, scroll through my contacts and call an old friend.

The line rings.

And rings.

And rings.

When I’m just about to give up, a voice says, “Max Stinton.”

“Max, it’s Darrel.”

The frost in his tone lessons but only a smidge. “Darrel.”

“I need a favor.”

“If this is about what my brother did—”

“It is about what your brother did.” I tap my fingers against my pants. “He stole from someone.”

“He stole from a lot of people.”

“Sunny Quetzal.”

“Name doesn’t ring a bell.” He sighs into the phone. “Look, Darrel. I’m going crazy over here trying to clean up Trevor’s mess. Again. I don’t need —”

“She needs her money and an apology,” I growl.

Max sighs. “My brother’s gone missing. We don’t know where he is. We’re working through the list of people he scammed and it’s a mile long. That woman... she’s not on it.”

“Put her on the list, Max,” I bite out. “Give her her money and an apology.”

He goes silent. He’s probably cursing me out in his head, but we worked closely together when I was in Wall Street. He respects me enough to keep his mouth shut.

“Fine,” he growls. “Her money and an apology.”

“Good,” I snarl. And then I hang up the phone.

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## CHAPTER 7

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# COLD COFFEE

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## SUNNY

THERE'S ONLY *one* cure for grief, heartbreak or abnormally missing two adorable kids who'll attend their grandmother's funeral today, and it's trying to complete a massive design and construction job in twenty-four hours.

Probably shouldn't be pushing myself this hard, considering that the moment I'm finished with this project, Darrel Hastings will stake a cardboard cut-out of me on his front lawn that says '*Sunny Quetzal, not allowed. Shoot on sight*'.

It's not a secret that he doesn't want me around Micheal and Bailey. Because he thinks I'll be a bad influence or because he doesn't have a heart? You decide.

The sexy grouch hates me for reasons that still haven't been made clear. What is clear is that he doesn't respect my opinions. At all. He refused to take my advice about giving Micheal time to cool off yesterday and barged into a grieving kid's room like an emotionless robot. Who knows what would have happened if I wasn't there to calm Micheal down?

Darrel freaking Hastings.

People like him—the kind who believe they know everything just because they spent a couple years drowning in science mumbo-jumbo—are the worst.

His hum-drum 'I know what you need better than you do' shtick is annoying.

His green eyes that get all soft and caring when one of the boys is crying is annoying.

His giant hands on the back of my thighs as he throws me out of his house is annoying.

I curl my fingers into fists. Just thinking about Darrel makes me want to stick up a picture of his gorgeous face and throw darts at it. But before I can ruin my walls and dart myself out of a security deposit, my phone rings.

It's mom.

The last person I want to talk to today.

Scratch that.

The second last person I want to talk to today. Darrel is definitely first on the 'avoid at all costs' list.

"Hello," I answer grumpily.

"I found him! He's perfect for you! Oh, Sunita, he's everything." Mom's exuberant words are not fitting my current vibe. I'm more in an 'all men can suck it' mood and mom is... well, she's the opposite of that.

"Found who?"

"His name is Gabor Cituk. He has no plans to live in America, but he's here studying agriculture..."

Oh wow. A farmer. He's mom's dream guy.

"... *And* his family lives in Mexico, which isn't too far from Belize, but there's enough distance that he's probably not related to us!"

It's a legitimate cause for celebration. The Mayan community is relatively small. Picking from a tiny pool like that, and accidentally dating a cousin is bound to happen.

"He's busy with his finals, but I convinced him to take you out for a nice meal. You have time tonight, right?"

"I—"

"Even if you don't, make time. This is the one, Sunita. I can feel it."

"Mom," I choke out her name because this is the absolute *worst* time for a blind date, "I have to work."

"Work? What work?"

I restrain the eye roll because, somehow, my mother can *sense* when I'm giving her attitude, even if she's thousands of miles away.

Keeping my voice calm, I inform her. "Work-work. That thing I do with curtains and bedsheets that pays the bills."

"Sunita, you can miss one day of housekeeping, can't you?"

I flick my gaze upward. "Mom, you know good and well that I don't clean houses. I decorate them."

"Sunita, *you* know good and well that a man like Gabor won't be on the market for long. Frankly, I'm surprised he's unattached. This is a sign. The gods have blessed us with a chance. We can't let this opportunity pass us by."

"I can't tonight, mom."

"Then tomorrow?"

"I don't know." Giving mom a flat-out no will only make this conversation longer and I don't have time to be lectured on why good



Mayan women should marry good Mayan men.

“Don’t worry about the details. I’ll arrange everything. Everything!”

“Mom...”

“You said you have work, *noh*? Go ahead and clean those houses.”

The dial tone sings in my ear.

I throw my head back and groan at the ceiling. This is not a good start to my day. Letting mom loose on my love life is like a bull shopping in a china shop. Everything is bound to break. The ‘everything’ being my sanity.

I suck in a short breath and let it out slowly through my mouth. Freaking out about mom and her determination to film her own *The Mayan Bachelorette* show is not high on my list of priorities today.

With a groan, I grab my car keys and bag and head out to meet the contractor. The team has already been briefed on the design and the timeframe. It’ll be a mad dash all around, so I’m relieved Shanya found someone to take on the job. That probably has more to do with her influence in this business than anything else.

The one good thing about working for a well-established company is I have no financial risks. The contractors I’m meeting today have been doing business with Shanya for years and they’ll be paid by her. If anything goes wrong, Shanya will handle it.

Although I love being an entrepreneur, I’m still shaky on dealing with the curveballs that owning a business can throw. It was a struggle to build up credibility with the contractors and furniture stores. Which is why losing all that momentum after the Stinton Incident is so damaging. I didn’t just struggle to pay my bills. I lost trust with the folks I need to keep my business afloat.

My phone rings.

*Maybe it’s the contractor asking where I am?*

I grab my earbuds, stick them in and tap the side twice. “Hello, this is Sunny Quetzal.”

“Miss Quetzal,” a deep, unfamiliar voice rasps in my ear, “this is Max Stinton.”

“Stinton?” The name registers and, with it, comes a flood of negative emotions. I’m talking Pompei-levels of lava flooding my soul and tingling in my fingers and toes.

I flick the indicator and jerk the car to the side of the road. This tongue-lashing needs my full attention, and I can’t risk ramming into another car

when I'm on such shaky financial footing.

Snatching the phone from the passenger seat, I slap it to my ear. "You have a lot of nerve calling me after running away with my money, you lying, thieving rat face."

"The rat-face you're referring to is my brother. Trevor Stinton."

I pause and my anger clears long enough for his words to resonate with me. That's right. The name I saw in all the newspapers wasn't Max, it was Trevor.

Still suspicious, I narrow my eyes at the highway. "How do I know you're not Trevor Stinton posing as someone else?"

"Because, Ms. Quetzal, my brother wouldn't call and apologize to anyone."

I freeze. "This is... an apology?"

"On behalf of the Stinton Group, I want to extend my sincerest apologies. We combed through the accounts, saw your missing payments and we'll send your money in full."

My jaw drops. "You will?"

"Yes."

I blink rapidly. All the anger is backed up in my throat. I was supposed to be spewing cuss words like a sailor and threatening to sue but, now that I'm being paid, I'm not sure what to do with all the fury locked inside me.

"If that's all—"

"Wait."

He does.

"Why are you apologizing to me? You weren't the one who ran off."

"I should have done a better job overseeing the Stinton Group's affairs. I hope you can accept my apology in my brother's stead."

His words make my heart hurt. That hardly seems fair. Why should Max Stinton have to go around apologizing and recompensing people for a wrong he didn't commit?

His voice sounds weary. If he's the head of a huge international business like Stinton Group, it means he worked his butt off and probably devoted his life to that company. People who put in the work should be compensated for the things *they've* done. Why is he forced to act as a martyr for his jerkwad brother?

"Thank you, Mr. Stinton." I clear my throat and relax my hands off the wheel. "I hope you can find your brother and sort everything out."

“Thank you, Miss Quetzal.” His words are brusque. Almost like he’s already moved on. I guess rich and powerful men are like that. Always distracted. Busy. Ready to jump to the next money-making venture.

The dial tone rings.

He’s gone.

My eyebrows pinch together as I try to make sense of what just happened. Something about that entire phone call feels... unnatural.

Not the apology. I believe Max Stinton meant what he said. And one glance at my bank account shows that a deposit *was* made to my account.

What strikes me as odd is that the owner of a billion-dollar corporation would call me.

Me.

Regular old Sunny Quetzal.

Not a billionaire.

Not married to a billionaire.

Not even an influencer or actress who *could* become rich overnight.

Getting a call from the owner of Stinton Group hardly seems likely. Not without an external push. I know only one person who’d care enough to fight an entire corporation on my behalf.

So I call Kenya.

“I was just about to call you.” My best friend gasps. “Do we have some kind of soulmate connection?”

“Yes, we do. And I need to go first.”

“So do I.”

“Rock paper scissors?”

She scoffs. “What are we? Eleven?”

“Twelve. Duh.”

She laughs.

I don’t. “Did you and Alistair blackmail Max Stinton into apologizing and giving me my money back?”

“What? No.”

“Really?” My eyes widen.

“Did you know Darrel was hiding two little kids at his farmhouse?”

“Uh...”

“Sunny!”

I gulp. “Are you sure Alistair didn’t call Stinton? It doesn’t make sense that a gazillionaire would call me personally just to apologize, Kenya. It

was so weird.”

“We’re still trying to track down Trevor Stinton, and don’t change the subject. We were talking about my best friend keeping a ginormous secret from me.”

“I wasn’t allowed to say anything. Darrel would have killed me.” The farmhouse rises in view and I pull my car behind the contractor’s vehicle.

“And you didn’t think *I’d* kill you for keeping secrets?”

“I hated lying to you, but I thought he was doing it for the good of the kids.” I pull my keys from the ignition. “Wasn’t he?”

“I don’t know. Both Alistair and I are totally stumped. Darrel isn’t exactly the father-figure type.”

“What does that mean?” He might be emotionless, but his actions speak for themselves. He really does care about Micheal and Bailey.

The contractor waves from the porch.

As much as I want to continue the conversation, I can’t. “Kenya, I have to go. I’m working on Darrel’s farmhouse today.”

“Wait,” my best friend stutters, “back up. Did you say that *Max Stinton* called you personally?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s crazy.”

My curiosity keeps me in the car. “Why is that crazy?”

“Alistair said Max is a major douchebag. Different from his brother, but not in a good way.”

Strange. The man who apologized sincerely to me didn’t feel like a douche.

“He’s cut-throat in business. Total ice king. You know how Alistair is all grumpy but he’s secretly sweet inside and takes care of his people? Max Stinton is cold all the time. He’s like... the male-version of Medusa.”

Her words run circles through my head. Did my intuition let me down? Did gratitude for getting my money back break my jerk-radar?

The contractor is staring into my car like he’s got laser vision. I’m reminded of the ticking clock and it’s like a poke in the butt. Dillydallying can seriously jeopardize this project.

As much as it kills me, I blurt out a hurried goodbye to Kenya, shove Max Stinton to the back of my head, and scurry into the house.

Dina is inside the living room. I’m shocked to see her and it must show on my face because she laughs that sweet, grandmotherly laugh.

“Darrel asked me to stick around and see if you needed any help.” Her smile is bright and friendly.

Mine shrinks to nothing. “You mean he wants you to babysit me.”

“What?” Her eyelashes bounce.

“Unbelievable.” I pull my hair up into a ponytail because I’m suddenly too hot. Darrel must really think I’ll sneak into his restricted bedroom and stumble over his horrible secret.

Or maybe he really does think I’m a thief.

Or maybe he wants Dina to report my every move so he can find one more thing to growl at me about.

Dina’s expression is slightly panicked. “Dear, I think you’re getting the wrong idea. I’m really here to just... be of help.”

“I know, Dina. It’s not your fault.” My eyes narrow. “It’s your deranged boss.”

Her jaw drops.

I don’t care. Dina works with insane people every day. She’s probably used to this.

“Uh... how about some coffee?” She runs to the kitchen so fast all I see is a plume of smoke in her wake.

Irritation makes my heart beat faster. I’m so done with Darrel Hastings, and now I’m even more determined to get these rooms finished in time. He’ll probably never let me live it down if I fail.

“Jenkins!” I call the contractor’s name, marching out to meet him. We discuss taking down the bathroom wall and, thankfully, there won’t be any complications with making an extra entrance.

All we need now is time.

“It has to be done today,” I tell Jenkins, rubbing my forehead. “The boys need their rooms ASAP.”

“No problem.” He rubs his nose.

“No problem?” It’s a huge problem. A near-impossible-to-accomplish problem. He should be a little more on edge.

“We got help.” He juts his chin at the door.

Through the entrance, I see two more pickups winding toward the farmhouse. The back of the trucks are nearly skating on the ground because there are so many workers piled in. I start counting and nearly faint. That crew is large enough to rebuild an entire house.

“Why is your crew so big?” I rub my eyes to make sure I’m not dreaming.

“Shanya called. Said to hire more men for this job. As many as I needed to get this thing done for you today.”

“Shanya did that?”

He nods and walks past me. “I’ll get started on the demolition. You might want to clear out.”

“I’ll be out shopping anyway,” I croak.

Dina appears behind me with a tray full of coffees. When she sees all the workmen pouring in, her eyes double in size. “Oh, I guess I’ll need to make more coffee.”

I give her a distracted smile and hurry to a quiet corner so I can call Shanya.

She answers immediately. “I’m assuming you saw my gift.”

“Thank you.” I honestly didn’t expect her to be so generous. “Is the client okay with this?”

“The client’s the one who made the request.”

I almost choke. “He did?”

“Yes.” Papers shuffle in the background. Shanya’s always in the center of activity. “Billionaires really are a different breed, darling. They don’t care about money. Only results. You know why you’re getting all this help, don’t you? We want the client to be happy. And he wants you out of his hair as soon as possible, understand?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” She hangs up.

My hand falls limply away from my face. I stare at the workmen who are wearing hardhats and carrying sledgehammers. A few are sectioning off to prepare the sheetrock for the new wall. My original design called for plaster, but it would take fourteen to twenty-one days for the plaster to dry. I didn’t want my design to be the reason Darrel was denied custody, so I changed my materials. With the special, more expensive sheetrock, we can erect the wall and get paint on it within a couple hours, and the contractor won’t waste as much time waiting for plaster to dry.

*The client wants you out of his hair.* Shanya’s words cling to me like chewing gum in my hair. I stumble through the door and go on a shopping spree. Normally, the joy of buying furniture, sheets, lamps and knickknacks would send a buzz through my veins, but I’m too enraged to enjoy myself.

Darrel sent Dina to spy on me.

Darrel told Shanya he wanted me out of his house. Which obviously means he wants me out of his life.

It shouldn't bother me that Darrel's taking his hatred to the next level. I've known for a long time that he doesn't like me and considers the very air I breathe to be toxic. Besides I don't care about him either. He's a cold and self-righteous jerk who only knows how to glare and snarl with those full pink lips.

So what if he doesn't want me around?

I...

I care. For some strange reason, the fact that Darrel Hastings detests me is really starting to tick me off.

\* \* \*

I PURCHASE ALL THE FURNITURE I NEED IN RECORD TIME. THEY'LL START arriving at the farmhouse within a couple hours.

Shanya was right. Money really does talk, and many of the services were happy to accommodate a rush order. I have to wait for the walls to dry before I can decorate Bailey's room, but I get started on Micheal's room right away.

It's late when I check my watch, and I don't have time to go home and shower like I want to. Instead, I stop in at a gas station, slide into a black dress and heels and leave under the lust-filled eyes of the gas station attendant.

The church where the funeral is being held is packed. I drive around the block twice to find parking.

I'm stunned when I see the crowd spilling out of the church. Since Micheal and Bailey had to be taken in by a stranger, I assumed their family wasn't well known.

Turns out, I'm dead wrong.

Wait, wrong pun.

I'm totally wrong.

I stand in the crowd outside, grateful for my height which allows me to see into the church if I stand on the tips of my toes.

Micheal and Bailey are in the front row. I know by the backs of their curly heads. They're wearing pressed black suits and their shoulders are stiff.

Darrel is beside them. I'd recognize that stately neck and thick hair anywhere. As usual, his shoulders are rigid and his back is ramrod straight, like he expects a bomb threat any minute.

The priest says a few words and then Darrel gets up to speak. It's hard to hear what he's saying as the church didn't set up any speakers outside.

*"Isn't that Professor Stein's prized student?"* the man in front of me whispers.

His friend nods. *"The Hastings guy, right? I remember he and Stein had this weird relationship."*

*"You think they were..."*

The other guy elbows him. *"Don't talk ill of the dead. Stein wouldn't cheat on his wife. I meant weird like he treated the guy like a son. They even included him in family pictures."*

*"That is weird."*

*"I remember it because Hastings was so much older than everyone else in class. He used to work in finance, you know? His family's loaded. No one could figure out why he was studying so hard when he's basically set for life."*

*"I heard he promised Stein he'd watch over the kids if the professor ever died."*

*"Maybe Stein knew he'd kick the bucket early and figured a rich guy would set his kids up for life."*

Darrel finishes his speech and lines up with the coffin bearers to wheel Micheal and Bailey's grandmother out of the church. The gossipers clamp their mouths shut and make way for the procession.

I grip my skirt tight, bite my bottom lip, and step back with the rest of the crowd. My mind is reeling. Did Darrel take in Micheal and Bailey because of his beloved professor? Why? I've had tons of great teachers in my life, but I wouldn't adopt their kids.

"Sunny!" A thin voice breaks me from my thoughts.

When I glance up, I notice the pallbearers are passing in front of me. Micheal and Bailey are frozen behind them.

"Sunny!" Bailey motions for me to come to him.



Everyone turns and stares at my face. I squirm from all the attention. Is joining Micheal and Bailey appropriate? People are already gossiping about Darrel. What will they say if I join the procession?

When I still don't move, Bailey tugs his hand away from his brother and runs toward me.

"Bailey." Micheal tries to grab him back.

The little boy dodges his brother and flies into the crowd. He stops in front of me, his chest pumping furiously. Bright blue eyes stare up in pleading. I *feel* the moment my heart phases out of my ribs and nuzzles close to him. How can anyone say no to a face like that?

"Okay." I curl my fingers around his palm and hold on tight. He gives me a bright smile that I can't help but return.

As I leave the crowd to join the family behind the coffin, I hear the gossipers from earlier.

*"Who is she?"*

*"Maybe she's their teacher?"*

*"Their nanny?"*

*"Hastings' girlfriend?"*

The wave of whispers rolls and swells with each step I take. I'm not a stranger to being stared at. Whether it's because of my exotic looks, my height or my presence, I've learned that I will never blend in. Ever.

And that's okay. I learned in high school that the key to confidence is faking it.

*Don't let them see you sweat.*

I hold my head up high, ignoring the speculation. This is not about me or the crowd or even Darrel.

It's about these precious little boys.

If they feel safer with me by their side, if that's enough to make the pain of loss and grief a little easier to bear, then hell, I'll walk with them all the way to Belize.

Micheal slants me with a relieved smile as if he wouldn't have been brave enough to ask me to join them, but he's happy I'm here.

I take his hand too because why not?

These are my boys. I'm not going to leave them hanging.

A fierce gaze from up ahead sends a shiver down my spine. I notice Darrel at the front of the coffin. He's looking back at me and the boys, eyes narrowed in the sunlight.

I can't interpret that expression.

Is he angry that I'm here?

*Well, screw you too!*

I'd scowl at him, but this is a funeral and I'm choosing to be respectful. We can call a truce until the boys have buried their grandmother peacefully.

The procession continues and both Micheal and Bailey hold my hand until their grandmother is buried.

After, they're bombarded with well-wishers. Bailey shirks against my leg, overwhelmed by all the strangers. Micheal keeps tugging at the collar of his tux.

I want to whisk them away from this place, but I know I don't have the authority to do that. Darrel's the only one who can help, but I've lost track of him. He was somewhere in the distance, getting attacked by another crowd of mourners.

"Hey."

I spin and fall into a pair of steely eyes. They're still green, but more like storm clouds rolling over the Caribbean Sea green than the emerald glass I'm used to.

"You guys look tired," Darrel says. He scoops Bailey into his arms and the little boy immediately places his head in the crook of Darrel's neck.

"I don't know any of these people," Bailey whisper-shouts.

"Me either, bud." Darrel adjusts the seven-year-old in his grip. For the first time, I notice the lines etched into his forehead and the wrinkles beneath his eyes.

"You look tired too," I point out.

His eyes drift to me and my stomach flip-flops.

"I'm hungry," Bailey whines.

"Oh, I have Oreos in my purse."

Darrel arches an eyebrow. "You keep snacks on your person?"

"Mom said a lady should always be prepared."

His lips twitch.

Wow. He must be really exhausted if he thinks I'm funny.

*Don't forget this is the guy who's trying to get you out of his life, Sunny.*

My shoulders get rigid again. "Here you go, Bailey."

"Bailey, what do you say?" Darrel coaches.

"Thank you." The little boy throws the words at me while ripping into the package.

“I have one for you too, Micheal.” I hand him a packet and then step back. “I should go check on the progress at the farmhouse.”

Darrel blinks. “You’re not staying for the...” He pauses and seems to stumble over the word, “party afterwards?”

“Party?”

“Grandma wanted a party,” Bailey says, pushing up his glasses.

“She wanted us to dance.” The wind gently blows through Micheal’s hair and sends his curls bouncing in the air. He looks much older than his eleven years with his tux and those somber brown eyes. “She wanted everyone to celebrate her life.”

“It was Ms. Jean’s wish,” Darrel agrees with the kids.

My mouth forms a round ‘o’.

Before I can respond, my phone rings with a call from the contractor.

“I’m sorry, guys. As it stands, I’ve been gone from the project long enough.”

Bailey pushes out his bottom lip.

Micheal’s eyes hit the tombstone just beyond me.

An ache rattles my chest and I blurt, “But I’ll have a surprise for you when you get home.”

“What surprise?” Bailey shrieks.

“The rooms can’t possibly be done by the time we get home,” Darrel mutters with a dark frown. “You’ll need at least two weeks minimum, even with all the extra help.”

No, we don’t. But I’m not telling him that. He’s already rushing Shanya to get me out of his hair. He’ll be doing heel kicks when I’m through with the rooms faster than he expected.

“I’m not talking about your rooms. I’m talking about another surprise. But you’re going to have to be good and attend your grandma’s party without complaint.”

“But—”

“Not a single one.” I lift a finger the way I’ve seen my mom do a hundred times.

Bailey bobs his head.

Micheal glances away. “It better be worth it.”

Darrel meets my eyes and does a subtle chin jut *do you have anything planned?*

I hate that I can interpret him that well. And I also hate the nervous flurries that fill my stomach when I realize I have no clue what I'm going to do. At all. Getting everything done for their rooms will take every inch of me. I don't have anything more to give. But it's not like I'm going to let Darrel Hastings of all people see me break down.

I smile. "Just wait and see. It'll be amazing."

On the way back to my car, I call Kenya and whine, "I need a surprise that'll cheer up two little boys and it needs to be amazing! Help me!"

"Whoa. Start from the top."

I tell her about the funeral, Bailey and Micheal's reluctance to attend their grandmother's party and the promise I made to have something waiting when they get home.

"Okay. Okay. They're boys, right? And they're older than Belle so... let me think?" She taps her chin. "What about camping?"

"Camping?"

"Yeah. S'mores, campfires, tents. Darrel's got plenty of land behind his farmhouse. They don't even have to go far."

"I love it. They can have a new experience tonight. Make happy memories to replace the sad ones."

"You're oddly excited about this."

"Kenya, I adore you. Bailey's going to love it. And I think Micheal will too." I chew on my bottom lip as I pull up in front of the farmhouse. There are several trucks from the furniture company parked out front. The sound of metalwork echoes in the air. "But I don't have time to organize all that right now."

"Leave it to me."

"Really?"

"I'll take Belle with me. She's full of ideas."

"If Alistair won't marry you, I will."

She laughs. "Not interested. You don't come with a Belle."

"True." I grin hard.

"I'll get all the stuff you need and drop them off soon."

I make a kissy sound into the phone.

She laughs and hangs up.

"Quetzal." The contractor waves me down when I enter the farmhouse. His expression is somber.

My heart jumps to my throat. The word ‘bad news’ is stomped all over his bearded face. There’s *always* bad news during a reno, especially when we’re against the clock like this.

“What happened?”

“The mud wall is going to take a lot longer to dry.” He gestures to the wall in Bailey’s room.

“Did you use the heating method I told you to?”

“Yes. And it did knock off a good set of hours, but we needed to reapply another layer and that’ll add more time.”

“How much more time?”

He rubs his head. “Three hours.”

I buck like someone stabbed me in the stomach with my grandma’s *macuahuitl*—a wooden club that she swore was used by a real-life Mayan chief.

“Some of the guys volunteered to work overtime. We *will* get this wall up and painted in the time you need.”

Yes, but if the wall isn’t ready then every other task on my to-do list will get pushed back as well.

I suck in a deep breath. “We’ll make it work.”

He gives me a dubious look. “You want to keep going?”

“Do we have any other choice?”

“Yeah, you tell the client he’s crazy to try and get this all done in one day.”

“The client is paying a whole lot of money so we’ll be out of his house and out of his hair quickly.”

“Money can’t buy us time.”

“He’s not buying time.” I tap my head. “He’s buying our knowledge.”

The contractor purses his lips.

“So we don’t have enough time? Okay. Fine. We can use our brains to think of ideas that will make the most of the time we’ve got. Understand?”

He nods.

“Good.” I slap my hands together. “Then let’s get to work.”

## CHAPTER 8

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# BEDROOM REVEAL

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## DARREL

DARKNESS CHASES THE SUNSET, sending purple blushes over an orange-stained sky. The car is quiet. Micheal's fighting to keep his eyes open, but Bailey's already fast asleep.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, fighting back a yawn. My throat is hoarse from all the talking I did during Ms. Jean's send-off. I need some chamomile tea and a twelve-hour nap. Stat.

The road blurs in front of me. I blink a couple times to maintain focus. Why do I feel so drained?

I'm not as resistant to social interactions as Alistair. My brother-in-law actively avoids shooting the breeze and finds small talk to be mindless. I'm no social butterfly, but I'm aware that social connection is good for the brain.

And I'm all about doing what's good for the brain.

Still, everyone has their limits. Mine was reached somewhere between the DJ Ms. Jean hired and the third keg of beer that started the congo line.

It's her funeral.

Literally.

Ms. Jean wanted people to celebrate but, I don't know... there's something that feels so empty about tonight's rager.

The two little boys who really loved Ms. Jean and will miss her greatly didn't get any benefits from experiencing that. The strangers who showed up today will drink her beer, dance in front of her pictures and then go on about their lives, not worrying about her or her family at all.

Maybe I'm overthinking it.

Okay, I'm definitely over-thinking it.

Which means I need a drink.

The farmhouse rises in sight. I chase away my dark thoughts and try to find a parking spot. There are at least five cars jammed into my driveway.

I recognize Dina's truck and Sunny's little car too. The sight of it sends a strange excitement down my spine. My exhaustion is replaced by thickening anticipation.



“We’re here?” Micheal asks, rubbing his eyes and lifting his hands over his head.

“Yeah, we’re home.” I know it’ll be a while before he calls this place ‘home’, but I hope he can do that eventually. “Wake your brother.”

“Bailey.” Micheal shakes his brother’s shoulder. “Bailey, get up.”

“What?” Bailey shoots to a sitting position so fast that his glasses nearly fly off. Blue eyes snap to the farmhouse and then brighten.

“Let’s go, buddy.” I pop my door open.

“We’re here!”

“Don’t be so loud,” Micheal scolds him.

“But Sunny has a surprise for us!” Bailey flails his legs and unleashes a giant smile.

I cringe inside. Earlier, Sunny didn’t seem too certain about her ‘surprise’. I hope she figured it out because Bailey has high expectations. I’m betting Micheal does too.

“Yoo-hoo!” A figure gestures to us. In the porch lights popping on one by one, I recognize Dina’s wrinkled face. She clutches a shawl around her scrawny shoulders and waves.

A car door slams.

Micheal and Bailey both scramble to stand next to me.

“Where’s Sunny?” His blue eyes dart back and forth as if his next breath depends on seeing her.

I didn’t realize how attached Bailey was to Sunny until the funeral. The way he reached for her nearly set my tears loose, and I’d been doing such a good job of keeping them restrained throughout the funeral.

“Sunny’s busy fixing up your rooms. She can’t come and see you right now.”

Bailey lowers his head and his glasses slide down his nose. He doesn’t bother pushing it back up. “Oh.”

Micheal sticks his hands into the pockets of his blazer. His eyes move to the house as if he can see Sunny in the distance.

“But,” Dina speaks in an extra-cheerful tone, “that doesn’t mean she forgot about your surprise.”

Bailey’s head whips up. “Really?”

“Follow me.”

I arch both eyebrows at Dina *what is it?*

She pushes out her bottom lip *you’ll have to wait and see.*

I sigh heavily. This is not the drink and power nap that I envisioned, but at least Bailey's skipping happily and Micheal seems intrigued. It's better than the alternative—Bailey in tears from missing his grandmother and Micheal bottling all his emotions inside until they explode.

Dina beckons with a wrinkled finger and leads us around the side of the house. I'm surprised we're not going inside. I thought for sure that Sunny's surprise would have been kitchen-related. She did promise us Belizean rice and beans, after all.

"Right this way." Dina steps briskly past the garage.

I can hear hammers knocking on wood and metal ringing. What time is it? Shouldn't the construction workers have gone home by now? And why are there so many of them?

I told Shanya to give Sunny all the support she needed, but I didn't expect Sunny to go all out. It's not because of the money. I can afford this and more. What I'm worried about is Sunny overtaxing herself.

The reason I went to Shanya in the first place was to keep Sunny from getting hurt. I could see her trying to drag heavy furniture and paint a full room by herself. She's crazy stubborn like that and illogical ideas like working herself to the bone just to accomplish a task is a normal day for her. I didn't want that to happen.

Maybe I should have been clearer when I told Shanya to give Sunny all the help she needed.

"This way, this way." Dina moves her arms in a circle when I lag behind the group. "No peeping into the house, Darrel."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are." She gives me a *you're busted* look.

Micheal smirks.

Great. Now the kids are laughing at me.

I clear my throat. "How much further are we supposed to go?"

"Not much farther." Dina turns on a flashlight and points it at the ground as we enter the grove of trees surrounding the property. "Sunny didn't want you to be too close to the house in case the noise disturbed you, but she wanted you close enough that you didn't feel scared." Dina bends down and taps Bailey's nose. "Especially you, little one."

"I'm not scared," Bailey announces boldly.

As if to test him, an owl hoots overhead. Bailey shrieks and runs to me, hiding behind my legs.

Micheal bursts out laughing.

My lips arch up.

Dina chuckles. "That was very convincing, Bailey."

"I-I did that on purpose."

"Yeah, right." Micheal snorts.

Bailey slants him a dark look.

"Hey, what's that?" I point ahead so the boys don't start fighting.

Bailey adjust his glasses with shaking fingers. Peering ahead, he bounces on the tips of his toes. "It's a campfire."

"Whoa," Micheal says under his breath.

I shoot a stunned look at Dina. "When did Sunny have time to set up all this?"

"She ran back and forth like a madwoman." Dina chuckles fondly.

"Kenya came to help. I pitched in too." Dina nods proudly to the giant orange tent. "I read the instructions while the younger ladies fumbled around trying to set that up."

I chuckle. "You worked hard."

"Thank you." She dips her head.

The boys descend on the camp site like rabid wolves.

"There's chocolate and graham crackers and marshmallows!" Bailey howls, tilting his head back and letting the snacks rain down on him like dollar bills.

"What's with the white sheet?" Micheal points to stilts that are holding a white canvas between them.

"Oh that?" Dina weaves around the campfire, drawing our eyes to a table with a laptop. When she taps the device, an image appears on the sheet. "It's a projector screen. It's hooked up to this laptop. You can watch whatever movie you want."

"Cool." Micheal smirks.

Tween approval achieved.

*Impressive.*

Dina waddles around the campfire and returns to my side. "Can we talk for a second?"

"Sure." I turn to Bailey. "Hey, don't get too close to that fire, Bailey."

"I won't!" he calls back in a sweet voice.

"Micheal, you choose the movie. We'll watch whatever you want."

"*Batman*," he says without hesitation.

I smirk. "I guess we're watching *Batman*."

"He always wants to watch *Batman*," Bailey whines.

I jog away from their sibling squabble. When we're out of earshot, I look expectantly at Dina, but she doesn't speak to me immediately. Instead, she gazes at the boys with an affectionate smile. "They sure do liven up the place, don't they?"

"They're... good kids."

"The best kids."

"And they had a good dad."

She nods. "I know they did."

"Professor Stein gave his all to his family." A pensive frown crosses my face. "He just... knew how to make a person feel accepted. I don't know how he did it."

"It's not a magic trick. You don't have to be born with some special gene to be a good father, Darrel."

My chest tightens. Studies show that sons are more likely to turn into their fathers and daughters are more likely to marry a man like their father. If that's true, there's no hope for me.

"I know what you're thinking." Dina sticks a finger in my face. "And you're wrong."

"The brain can only record and imitate what's in front of it."

"Professor Stein wasn't your biological dad, but he was a father to you. Imitate that." She squeezes my shoulder.

I'll give it my everything.

*But what if it's not enough?*

I push that thought away.

It comes barreling back. *What if you're just like the Major. What if you turn into the kind of man those kids want to run away from?*

Dina studies me and speaks in a low voice. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not used to people asking me that question."

"Just because you help others for a living doesn't mean you don't need help sometimes."

"I'm fine."

"Are you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I shuffle in discomfort.

"You attended a funeral today. It must have brought flashbacks of Claire."

I glance at her in surprise. "It... didn't."

"No?"

I rub my forehead, stunned to realize it. "Should I be concerned?"

Dina laughs.

"Attending Ms. Jean's funeral should have triggered a memory."

"But it didn't."

"No, it didn't."

A serene smile crosses her face. "Darrel, step back into your therapist-skin for a moment and assess yourself the way you'd assess a patient. Why do you think you were able to get through the day without breaking down with guilt?"

"Because I'm healing."

"And why are you healing?"

I glance at the boys. Micheal is helping his brother with the s'mores. Bailey hands him marshmallows and Micheal spears them on the stick.

"It might not be because of them. I took care of Alistair and Belle back then too."

"It wasn't the same. Back then, you were still raw with grief. You were still mourning. You intentionally used Alistair and Belle to hide from your own pain."

I hate when Dina has a point.

"This time, it was intentional. You genuinely cared more about the boys and how they were holding up. You were so focused on them, on the present, that you had no time to get lost in the past."

I frown at her. "Is this what it feels like to be analyzed? Maybe I should find another job."

"Very funny." She slaps my arm. "I'm proud of you, Darrel." Her eyes slide to the boys around the campfire. "And I think taking these boys in was one of the best decisions you've ever made."

I grunt.

Dina pats my back again and turns to leave.

I stop her with a hand. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Join us."

"Me?"

I shrug. "There's way more s'mores than we can eat."

"I'd love to." Her eyelashes bounce.

I stick a hand into my pocket. “What about Sunny? Maybe she’d like to stop in too.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You see what?”

She shakes her head. The smirk on her face is knowing, but in that annoying way. Like she sees something I don’t. “Sunny’s too busy to hang out right now, but I’ll be her stand-in.” Dina strides past me and pushes her sleeves up. “Make room, boys. Do you want to try the best s’mores in the history of the world?”

“Yeah!” Bailey bobs his head.

Micheal’s eyes glitter in the firelight.

Before joining them, I turn and slant a longing look back at the house. I hope Sunny isn’t overdoing it. And I hope, sometime during the night, she can pop in so I can see her face.

The boys would love it.

They’d...

Who am I kidding?

I’d love to see her, be it for a couple minutes or even just a second.

\* \* \*

UNFORTUNATELY, SUNNY DOESN’T SHOW UP DURING DINNER.

She doesn’t show up for a marathon of every Christopher Nolan *Batman* flick that Micheal can find.

And she doesn’t show when the boys conk out on the blankets, forcing me to carry them into the tent.

“Sleep tight,” I whisper, running my hand over Bailey’s hair. He nuzzles deeper under the blanket, his feet pulled up to his chest and his nose flaring with each breath.

Noticing that he’s still wearing his glasses, I wiggle them off his face and set them aside so he won’t accidentally crush them in his sleep.

I turn to Micheal next. He looks a lot less burdened when he’s in deep sleep. His face is smooth and free of those pensive frowns.

“You too, buddy.” I touch his head lightly.

Micheal snorts in his sleep, drawing out my smile.

“As long as I’m breathing, I’m going to take care of both of you,” I whisper.

It’s a promise.

Not to their dad.

Not to their grandma.

This time, I’m making a commitment to them.

Easing out of the tent, I stop short when I see Dina standing near the campfire. Her eyes cut through me. She opens her mouth as if she’ll say something, but she stops herself and shakes her head instead.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s getting late. You want me to walk you to your car?”

“Actually, I was thinking I’d hang out by the fire a bit more.” She moves to the blanket and sits gingerly. Stretching her legs out in front of her, she wiggles her feet. “Just in case you wanted to head inside the house or something.”

“I’m okay.” I walk to the blanket.

She stops me by throwing her arms out. “Wait.”

I freeze.

“You know what I *would* like? My jacket.”

“Where is it?”

“It just so happens to be wherever Sunny is.”

My eyebrows pinch. I try to make sense of her words. “Huh?”

“My jacket, Darrel. It’s cold.”

“Here.” I shrug out of my suit jacket. While the boys were ecstatic to tear off their funeral clothes and change into the pajamas Sunny and Kenya bought for them, I was less than inclined to walk around wearing monkey-print.

“No. I want *my* jacket, Darrel. Mine.”

“You don’t even know where it is,” I point out, mildly frustrated.

“Sunny will know.” Her stare is pointed.

At last, a lightbulb goes off.

Licking my lips, I pretend that I’m still clueless and speak brusquely. “If you insist.”

Dina laughs. I’d normally scold her for playing matchmaker but, this time, I really don’t mind.

“Watch the boys for me,” I say, hooking a thumb at the tent. “Bailey tends to get up in the night to use the bathroom. And Micheal doesn’t like the dark.” He won’t ever admit it because he’s eleven going on seventy-five, but I’ve seen him crack the door open so he can catch the hall light on multiple occasions.

“I’ll take care of the boys, Darrel.” She waves me off and pulls a blanket over her knees.

I trot through the forest, jogging past the foliage and ducking over low hanging-branches. My dress shoes crunch dry leaves and twigs as I get closer to the house. The sound of rumbling truck engines nearly stops me in my tracks.

Is Sunny leaving already? I listen keenly. That deep, guttural engine isn’t from her truck. Hurrying closer to the house, I notice the construction workers moving off.

I glance at my phone in shock. It’s the wee hours of the morning. I thought the workers left in the middle of our first Batman movie.

The trucks disappear down the road in a plume of exhaust. A lone figure remains on the porch steps. She’s bracketed by the lights from the house. Golden bulbs throw a soft glow on her shiny black hair, brown skin, and long, long legs.

Sunny turns on her heels and, for some ridiculous reason, I duck into the shadows to watch her. She raises graceful arms over her head and stretches. The move causes her T-shirt to rise and reveal a stretch of her toned stomach.

My heart thumps harder. Despite the sinking feeling in my gut that spying on her is a terrible idea, I devote myself to it and step lightly around the house.

*You’re an idiot.*

Rational brain has a point.

*Just walk up to her and ask for Dina’s jacket.*

Fuzzy, Sunny Quetzal-obsessed brain has other opinions.

*You know why Dina sent us to the house. It wasn’t for a stupid jacket.*

And now I’m arguing with myself.

Maybe Dina had a point. I *should* get professional help.

Sunny disappears inside while I stand in the shadows, deliberating whether I have the guts to go in there and talk to someone who shouldn’t be causing me this much agony but pulls it off with flying colors.



After a deep breath, I rise to my full height and march up the stairs. The door is locked, but I easily fish my key out of my pocket and let myself in.

“Sunny,” I call softly.

Nothing.

I clear my throat because I’m not a coward and bark out her name.

“Sunny.”

No response.

I step into the living room, cringing at the mess of boot prints, tools and the sofa that’s been shoved all the way into the corner so it doesn’t block the door.

*Don’t look at it, Darrel. Don’t look.* I corral my need for order and cleanliness, focusing on the search for Sunny instead.

“Sunny?” I bound up the staircase, scowling at the buckets of paint and plastic hanging from the doorways.

The dust lingering in the air makes me cough. Should have brought a face mask before I stepped in here.

As I pass Bailey’s bedroom, I notice paint on the walls and furniture already set up. I resist the urge to peek at the work that’s been done.

Sunny first.

Then snooping.

Something thumps in Micheal’s room. I hurry there and stop abruptly when I see Sunny Quetzal lying on the floor, her ponytail inches away from a flat container that still holds a bit of paint.

“Sunny?” I rush to her side. My heart is galloping at such a wild pace, I’m afraid it’ll shut down soon.

When I reach out to roll her on her back, Sunny flings an arm out and wraps it around my leg. “Black ceilings are cool. He’ll love them.”

I blink rapidly.

She releases my leg and rolls the other way, mumbling unintelligible words in her sleep.

I rest my arm on my bended knee and let out a relieved laugh. Only Sunny Quetzal would fall asleep on the ground as if it were a regular Tuesday.

“Sunny.” I shake her arms. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

“No.” Her words are slurred like she’s been drinking. I’m not surprised. Lack of sleep does similar things to the brain as drinking alcohol. It’s a

proven study and it's the suspected cause of Claire and Alistair's accident, so I know just how powerful exhaustion can be.

"Sunny," I keep my tone gentle but firm, "even if you don't want to go home, you can't sleep on the floor."

Sunny pries her eyes open. And then she smiles. It's a brilliant, crinkly-at-the-corner-of-her-cat-eyes kind of smile. The moment she flashes it at me, I'm reminded of how I fell for her at first sight.

"I need to finish this room," she blubbers, jutting a dark finger. "I have to work."

"Sh. Sh. No, you don't have to work. You have to sleep."

Her head bobs around like there's a spring loose. "Have to."

"Sunny."

Her palms connect with my chest and she shoves me away.

I stumble back, my mouth going round. *This woman.*

"You're just like Darrel." Her eyes are at half-mast and her hair is sticking up all over her head as if she just had a dangerous encounter with an electrical current. "You're annoying."

*She's the annoying one.*

*Does everything have to be difficult with you, Sunny?*

I let out a frustrated breath and approach her again. If she's not going to be coaxed to move, I'll just have to be a little more forceful.

"He thinks he's so perfect." Sunny sticks out her tongue. "Just because he's smart and hot."

Hot? That stops me in my tracks.

"So tired." She falls backward slowly, her eyes fluttering closed.

"Whoa." I spring toward her, wrapping my hands around her waist to keep her from smashing her head on the floor.

My panicked grab for her body wakes her up again. I stare into her face, my eyes wide.

She laughs and points.

"What? What's so funny?"

"Darrel."

"What?"

"I'm going to finish *everything* and be out of your hair."

I sigh so hard the world probably shifts a little off its axis. "No one is rushing you, Sunny. You can take your time."

"I can do it!" She smacks me with her fist. It barely makes an impact.

I see that arrogance of hers is alive and well. *Some things never change.* Sunny and cocky go hand in hand. Her frontal lobe is wired that way. She has no experience hearing the word no. What else can I expect from a woman who was adored by teachers, students, and parents alike for years? I'd have a big ego too if I were in her shoes.

"That's enough. I'm taking you to bed." I scoop her up by the knees and carry her bridal style. She starts to sink and I bounce her gently in my arms so I can get a proper grip.

Her fingers tighten around my shirt. "Bed?"

"Mm-hm." I kick the door of Micheal's room open and turn sideways so I can crab-walk out without slamming her head on the doorknob.

She nuzzles her cheek against my chest. I slide a glance at her. She's warm and soft in my arms. The T-shirt she's wearing is spattered with paint and so is her face. It doesn't do a damn thing to make her any less beautiful. In fact, she's even more attractive when she's asleep and not mouthing off at me.

I wonder if she'd let me tuck her into bed tomorrow too. Then I give myself a mental head slap. It's bad enough that Micheal connects with Sunny. And Bailey loves her more than marshmallow ice cream. She's also Alistair's future sister-in-law and Belle's new aunt. Sure, she might not be related to Kenya by blood but what the hell does that matter? She's every bit Kenya's sister as Claire was mine.

Getting involved with Sunny would be too problematic. I can't risk any more complications when my life is so chaotic.

Sunny's eyes flutter open when I set her on top of my covers. I wouldn't put her here if there was anywhere else to go, but the boys' rooms are under construction. Plus, I just changed these sheets. Once I hide all my high school photo albums and the John Hearst Yearbook, there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

"Darrel." Sunny smiles.

*Dammit.*

I can keep my crazy brain away most of the time, but not tonight, and not if she levels that smile at me.

Afraid I'll do something irrational and illegal—like kiss her until she wakes up properly—I push away from her tempting gaze. Push away from the bed. Push away from Sunny Quetzal.

Except I don't get far.

Sunny's arms wrap around my neck and tighten, halting my progress.

I jolt back toward her, a gush of surprise tearing out of my lips. She yanks me down again. To keep from squashing her, I shove my hands down into the mattress on either side of her body.

"This isn't how the dream is supposed to go," she whispers, her eyes still at half-mast and her words sloppy.

My eyes nearly pop out of my face when she scrambles for the buttons of my shirt. She's still in that half-awake, half-delirious space, so she's not getting a single button to loosen. But I recognize her intent.

"You're supposed to be... naked," she croaks.

I feel an electric jolt. My *nucleus accumbens* sends such a strong signal down south that my pants tighten on impact.

*Sunny Quetzal, don't you dare torture me like that.*

"You're supposed to be..." She flops back into the bed, but she's still hooked around my neck and she drags me there with her. "Mm." The crazy, infuriatingly beautiful woman fuses her body to mine as if she doesn't know what she's stirring up.

Sunny Quetzal has imagined me naked.

Sunny Quetzal dreams about me.

Sunny Quetzal is in bed with me.

These thoughts shoot rapid fire through a mind that's quickly being overtaken by non-rational instincts.

I'm out of my depth here. Logical thought functions on a higher plain. A different plain. And yet, with one tug of her perfect body, Sunny Quetzal is turning me into an animal.

*She's not fully awake. Her brain is malfunctioning due to lack of rest. Her inhibitions are low because the symptoms of exhaustion are similar to the symptoms of being drunk.*

"Sunny." I wrap my fingers around her wrist to pry her off.

That's when I feel soft lips press into my chest. It's a kiss that travels past my outer shirt, the vest under it, and the skin covering my ribs to make it all the way to my crazily beating heart.

I shoot her a shocked look. One by one, all the reasons I shouldn't get involved with her turn into ash.

*Damn, I still like this woman.*

And not the childish, starry-eyed puppy love I was hit with in high school when I saw the pretty girl walking by.

I'm talking something bigger and deeper that scares the crap out of me because it would require carving space out of my rational life to make room for her impulsive, off-the-wall, spontaneous kind of living. It would mean being illogical and liking it and thriving in it because Sunny Quetzal won't let me breathe.

I should have known this would happen from the moment I met her again in the furniture store last year. I should have known when I saw her looking out for Kenya like they were sworn-sisters. I should have known when she changed her mind about decorating the boys' rooms just because it would help me keep them. I should have known from the way she comforted Micheal and made Bailey laugh with glee on the day he felt the most fear and uncertainty.

*She won't let me breathe.*

"Sunny," I whisper.

"You never smile at me," she murmurs.

Hell. My body is hot all over and I could shove her hands away since I'm bigger and stronger than her, but that would wake her up and embarrass her and eliminate any other BS excuse I can find to make staying right here snuggled up with Sunny Quetzal okay.

"Smile at me, Darrel."

"If I smile at you, you'll just find your way into my heart again," I admit. Not that growling and quarreling and ignoring her did anything to stop that from happening.

She pats my chest and frowns. "What kind of dream is this?"

"It's not a dream."

"You're still not naked."

I almost choke on a laugh. "What kind of raunchy dreams have you been having about me?"

She smiles and I want to kiss her so badly that the veins under my skin begin to burn. And why the hell would I stop at a kiss? I need to feel the heat of her skin. Need to see the contrast of her dark to my light when I pull her into me. I need to stroke her face and her chest and embrace those willowy curves. Need to taste her in all the ways that'll make her moan and soak in the feeling of being irrational and stupid and crazy because I only get the urge to be those things with her.

I know it's a bad idea, but it's hard to care when she eases up and throws one leg over me like I'm a body pillow after a back injury.

She's smothering me. Crowding me in with her Caribbean-breeze scent and her long, silky hair that nearly drips off the bed and her thick eyelashes that can't seem to stay still because she's opening her eyes and sliding them shut constantly.

I've been avoiding thinking about Sunny Quetzal in any part of my future because, on paper, she doesn't fit. She never has. I won't even bring up our past, and how much that past shaped the way I approached women for years going forward.

She's bad for me.

For my sanity.

I'm not the kind of man who'll jump into a relationship without serious thought about compatibility in values and personality, but if it's Sunny Quetzal...

"Naked." She pats my chest again.

I smile. Then I dip my head. Angle in. Watch her body tense over mine as if she can sense what I'm about to do.

Closing my eyes, I brush my lips over her temple.

She blinks, makes another unintelligible sound and squeezes me even tighter.

"You're going to drive me crazy, aren't you?" I murmur into her hair.

"Mm-hm." She nods sleepily.

I smile down at her face.

Hey, at least she's honest.

## CHAPTER 9

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# BUN-UP FRY JACKS

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## SUNNY

DARREL HASTINGS WILL NOT TAKE his clothes off.

*Prick.*

If he's starring in my dreams *again*, he might as well make it worth my while. What's the point of imagining a grouchy, fully-clothed Darrel Hastings at three in the morning? I can just wake up and go toe-to-toe with Growly Bear in the flesh.

My fingers grapple for the buttons of his shirt so I can see some chest and we can get the party started, but my dream-hands are way less dexterous than my real-life hands.

*Stupid buttons.*

Why did I even dream up a shirt with buttons on Darrel? It's so inconvenient.

In the darkness, Darrel lowers his head. *Finally. Let's get some action here, buddy.* I pucker my lips and brace myself for a dreamy kiss. But there is none. Instead, he kisses my head and says something that I don't understand but must be mildly insulting because it's Darrel and he's not exactly the type who sings my praises.

My eyebrows twitch.

I want to grab him, but my arms are so heavy.

*Why do I feel so tired in this dream?*

Darrel disappears and the world goes black again until a loud sound jars my eyes apart.

It's still dark. I feel around my side before I can locate the vibrating alarm clock.

It's my phone.

Four a.m.

*Dang it.* I wanted to wake up at three. That means I slept through the first alarm.

I moan and rub the back of my neck. Feels like I spent three hours getting run over by a Mack truck. I can't imagine how traumatizing it would have been to do all that work by myself. Thank God Shanya hired that extra crew.

With their help, I set up the wall for the adjoining bathroom, painted the walls, and set up the furniture. We got a lot done, but I still have a few finishing touches to go before the rooms are fully ready.

It's a school day, so I have at most... a couple hours before they leave camp and trod back to the farmhouse.

A yawn wracks my jaw and I feel the pull of sleep again. Shaking my head, I think of the boys. How did they do last night? Did Bailey cry for his grandmother? Did Micheal worry about the future with that solemn expression of his?

I hope seeing their new rooms eases their hearts and makes this new arrangement with Darrel feel less like living in a stranger's house and more like being in a forever home.

When I first moved to America, we didn't have money to decorate our house, no matter how rundown it was. I would have loved the opportunity to live in a gorgeous new room. Still, in the grand scheme of things, home wasn't four walls, a leaky roof and neighbors who seemed to be getting it on like pigs at a greasy-hog fest at all hours of the night.

Home was my dad and my mom around the dinner table. Our weekly calls to family back in Belize. Soca music blasted in the daytime to drown out the sound of animalistic grunts upstairs. The tortilla mom baked on a hot *camal* fitted over a burner stove.

A brand-spanking-new room can't replace a family. Micheal and Bailey don't have their parents anymore. There's nothing I can do about that. About their sadness. About their pain. I can't imagine what that must feel like. How untethered they must be. But I do know that a room, a home... it means something. It can still be a refuge.

Sinking my hand into the mattress, I swivel my hips and prepare to jump off the bed.

Until I realize that I'm in a bed.

And it's not my bed.

And it's not my room.

And when the heck did I get here?

I jolt fully awake and survey my surroundings with wide eyes. Bare dresser. Closet. Balcony overlooking the tree line.

*Where am I?*

My gaze snags on the painting across from the bed. It's abstract art. The same kind of swirling style that I saw in Darrel's office.

*Darrel.*

My chest tightens.

Did I sleepwalk into Darrel's bedroom last night? I was so exhausted that I barely got the energy to set an alarm on my phone before conking out. I can totally see myself getting up in the middle of the night to find a more comfortable spot.

Horror seeps through my veins and I slap a hand over my mouth, springing off the bed with so much force I nearly trip on the carpet.

*What is wrong with you, Sunny?*

Not only was sneaking into Darrel's room a total violation of privacy, but he directly told me not to. In fact, Hastings left the therapy center and drove all the way here a few days ago just to keep me from seeing inside these four walls. Then he sent Dina to spy on me yesterday. Then he told Shanya he wanted me out of his house as quickly as possible.

After all that, I went and... what? Jimmied the lock so I could crawl under his covers, smell his pillows and have erotic dreams of him?

I moan into my hands. "I am an idiot."

*You're an idiot who needs to get moving or these rooms won't be done in time.*

I release my mortification in a sigh, fold up the remaining horror into tiny pieces and stick it in the far corners of my mind. So, I violated a client's trust just a teeny-weeny bit? It's not like Darrel was there to see me rolling around in his bed, right? It's not like he heard me begging for him to get naked.

"You're good, Sunny. You're good." I press a palm to my chest. My feet hit the cold floor and I almost skitter back. "Where are my shoes?"

A glance at the hardwood floor reveals nothing.

I check the other side.

Still nothing.

I go on the hunt for my footwear. I don't remember taking the sneakers off, but then I don't remember crawling into Darrel Hastings' bedroom either.

"Shoes? Shoes?" I drop to my knees, palms pressing into the hardwood floor as I call for the inanimate objects like they're stray cats. *Here, kitty, kitty.*

I'm wasting time snooping around looking for my shoes. There are curtains to drape, carpets to lay, beds to spread, toys to artfully arrange on

darling vanity dressers that I paid way too much for.

Getting frustrated, I crouch to my knees and glance under the bed. The duvet drapes the ground on either side. I push the comforter back. Are my sneakers within that dark abyss of shadows?

I grab my cell phone, flick on the flashlight and crawl closer to Darrel's bed. I'm looking for my shoes, but I'm also curious if the mysterious secret he's been trying to hide is tucked under here.

I stick my hand under the bed, waiting for a monster to bite my fingers. Instead, my hand knocks against a box.

*Weird.*

I drag the box out and notice several photo albums nestled inside. Somewhere in the caverns of my mind, I know I shouldn't be sniffing around Darrel's personal things, but I do it anyway.

The photo on the cover of the album is of a young Darrel holding a golden-haired baby in his lap. "That must be Claire," I whisper, pressing a finger to the photobook. Claire's green eyes are sparkling with life and mischief. *She's beautiful.*

I've always thought of Claire as 'Alistair's first wife'. She was a haunting melody. A beautiful, ghostly figure that was always hunkering in the back of my best friend's happily ever after.

It didn't really hit me that Claire was Darrel's little sister. I mean, I *knew*, but I didn't care how it affected him. All I cared about was how Alistair would take care of Kenya and whether he'd truly gotten over his first wife.

Watching a young Darrel with his arms around his baby sister, both of them beaming at the camera, shakes something loose from my chest. A quiet understanding. A glimmer of care for the man behind the grumpy face.

My fingers splay over the edge of the book and I move to turn the page, but something stops me. Snooping under Darrel's bed and looking at the cover of his photo album is already crossing several lines. I can't, as an ethical interior designer, flip through a client's photo album. Something inside just won't allow me to do that.

Glancing over the cover one more time, I lift the album so I can put it back in the box. Something slips out and floats to the floor. It's a loose photo.

I twist the cell phone so the light is shining on the picture. It's a photo of Darrel. I can tell by the green eyes shirking away from the camera. He's wearing a black hoodie. His hair is thick and shaggy. His skin is so pale he could disappear against a napkin.

*Darrel looks like the hoodie guy.* The thought jars me completely awake. I'll never forget the creep who messed with me in high school and got taught a serious lesson.

I stare at the photo again and shake my head. There's no way Darrel is the hoodie guy just because he's pale and wearing a jacket in this picture. Besides, if I'd publicly embarrassed him in high school, he probably would have mentioned something.

I shove the picture back into the photo album, kick the entire box back under the bed and locate my shoes. They're sitting neatly under the chest at the foot of the bed. I would *never* set my shoes so neatly on the ground. How did that happen?

Unfortunately, I have no time to unravel that mystery. I rush to the room across the hall. The dust settled overnight, but the smell of paint is still strong. I open the windows first and let the bedrooms air out. I don't want the boys getting headaches from the powerful scent.

Next, I inspect the wallpaper in Bailey's room to make sure it dried properly. When I'm satisfied, I put the finishing touches on my design. Lego Batman here. Bailey's stuffed monkey there. Curtains over hooks. Succulents—because every room could use a succulent. Paintings. Pillows. Color.

Yes! I'm practically twirling and dancing like a Disney princess. This part is my favorite. Seeing the way all the blankets, colors and furniture tie everything together makes my heart sing.

If I had more time, I would have done even crazier things like a custom-made bed that doubles as a ping pong table or glow in the dark paint for Bailey's room but, alas, they'll just have to be satisfied with two crazily fun yet sophisticated bedrooms instead.

The sun creeps over the horizon, leaping over the woven rug and the flowing blue curtains in Micheal's room. I adjust a picture frame just so and clasp my hands.

Done.

Everything is as perfect as I can make it.

The thrill of completing the challenge sends a tingle straight to my toes. I throw my arms up and stretch to the ceiling.

*I wonder what their reactions will be?*

My imagination takes over. I see Bailey's sparkling blue eyes behind clear, window glasses. Micheal's reluctant smile spreading over his face. Darrel behind them both, giving me an impressed look...

No, forget Darrel.

He's not in my imaginary victory lap.

This is all about the boys.

*Can they get here already, geez?* I feel like a kid waiting for his parents to wake up on Christmas morning.

Abuzz with anticipation, I turn my attention to cleaning Darrel's house. My mama always said that I should leave a place better than I found it. I've never, in my professional career, left a client's home dirty after I'm through with it.

Unfortunately, the construction guys left a mess and I'm tuckered out by the time I clean all the plastic, trash, and sweep up the dirt left from their treks in and out of the house.

I check my watch and run a hand through my hair. The boys should be getting up by now. When are they coming over?

Five minutes pass.

I tap my cell phone and consider calling Darrel. Then I reject it because I don't really want to talk to him right now. He's still the jerk who wants me out of his life. Why would I sign myself up for a fight this early in the morning?

Fifteen minutes pass.

I change the sheets on Darrel's bed and hope like crazy he doesn't notice or doesn't care.

Twenty minutes.

The couch starts looking mighty comfy and I force myself to pace up and down the stairs so I can remain awake. I've spent almost eighteen hours getting these rooms together. I have paint in my hair, on my skin and all over my clothes. I smell like sweat and drywall. That couch is too expensive for a stench like mine. I know. I bought it.

Eventually, I make my way to the porch where I sit on one of the chairs nestled around a beautiful table. I'll be able to hear the boys coming. Plus, I won't be stinking up any more of Darrel's expensive furniture. Win-win.

The sun climbs a little farther in the sky. Bursts of orange, yellows and reds stretch over clouds just puffing to life. Trees wave in a gentle breeze and I can't help but close my eyes.

Five minutes.

I'll sleep for five minutes. Surely, Darrel and the boys will be back by then and I'll get to see their happy reactions.

\* \* \*

THE SCENT OF BACON TICKLES MY NOSE. SINCE BACON IS BETTER THAN sleep, my eyes fly open. An ache in my head reminds me that sudden movements would not be in my best interest and I let out a breath as I try to reacquaint myself with reality.

After a second of groggy blinking and dry mouth smacking, I try to sit up. My back hurts, and I remember that I chose to nap in a chair that's bent at an angle perfect for torture.

Something salty runs down my face. Why am I sweating? I touch my neck and find even more sweat. The sun is sending laser beams of doom at my face and I jerk fully awake. How long was I sleeping out here?

This is not okay. I've been taking care of my skin since high school. I'm just as susceptible to damage as any other skin tone. Using sunscreen is a must when I'm hit with those UV rays. It's about beauty as much as it is about health. And I've been in the sun for... I check my watch and cringe. Gah!

Muffled laughter erupts from inside the house. Is that Darrel? My nostrils flare. If I start seeing dark spots on my skin after this, I'm going to send him my dermatology bill.

Pushing myself out of the chair takes effort because I'm tired, cranky, and starving. My stomach gurgles, urging me toward the scent of that delicious bacon. Whether or not Darrel Hastings gets a tongue lashing about leaving me to burn in the morning sun will be determined by how much bacon I can steal from him.

I open the front door of the farmhouse, pleased when it doesn't make a sound. Yesterday, I asked one of the workmen to oil the creaking joints. Best decision ever. It allows me to sneak into the house under the cover of silence.

Pots and pans clank in the distance. The scent of bacon gets stronger and I'm willing to forgive Darrel because I'm a decent human being and... is that coffee I smell too?

I stop in the living room that has an open view to the kitchen. My jaw drops when I see the swirl of activity.

Bailey is bent over the counter, fiercely rolling flour out with an empty glass of wine. Micheal is stirring a pitcher of lemonade. Darrel is at the stove. He places one of the flattened flour pieces into a pan of oil and jumps back in obvious fear when the oil crackles around the offering.

"What are you doing?" I ask, stunned.

The chaos in the kitchen scrambles to a stop. Three pairs of eyes bore into me—one green, one brown and one crystal blue.

Bailey shoves his glasses up his nose with a flour-stained finger. "Sunny!"

"Sweetie, what's..." My eyes dart to Micheal next. "What's going on?"

"We're making breakfast." Bailey fastens me with a little-boy grin.

"O-oh."

"Why are you so sweaty?" Micheal asks.

I hit Darrel with a scowl. "That's a good question, Micheal. I, too, would like to know why I'm sweaty?"

Darrel gives me an appraising look. *What?* He's never seen a half-black, half Mayan woman walking around two shades darker than she was yesterday?

"We're making fry jacks," Bailey announces. His blue eyes carry a sheen of pride. "We got the recipe from the internet."

"It was surprisingly easy to find." Micheal gives a non-committal nod. "Although I doubt it'll taste as good as yours."

I sniff. "Is something burning?"

"Oh, right." Darrel pounces on the pan and flicks the fry jack out of the oil. I try not to cringe too hard when I see the blackened, twisted morsels.

"Ta-da!" Bailey gestures to it with a flourish.

I pull my lips into my mouth because he's precious and adorable, but that is the ugliest fry jack I've ever seen in my life.

"Do you need some help?" I walk toward the kitchen.

Micheal hurries to stop me and throws out both arms. "Ah-ah."

I blink in surprise.



He meets my gaze with a firm stare. His curls are bigger and messier than they were yesterday, rising in soft, black spirals. He purses his cupid's bow lips. "You're not allowed in here."

"Why not?" I eye Darrel. Is this part of his 'keep Sunny out of the house' plan? Did he drag the kids into it too?

Micheal points to the table. "Sit down. We've got it."

I glance at the fry jack that Darrel flicks into a heap of equally burnt and hard-looking pastries.

"We're doing something nice," Bailey informs me, tightening his grip on the empty wine bottle.

"Oh, sweetie, I appreciate that." My fingers twitch. I so badly want to snatch the wine bottle away and replace it with a proper rolling pin. The fry jack dough will be thick if they don't use the right tools.

"Micheal said it wasn't fair that you were working all night while we ate s'mores," Bailey informs me. Bless his heart. He's still going to town with that wine bottle.

"Because it isn't," Micheal mumbles. From the quirk of his pink mouth, he looks pleased to be acknowledged for his part in the 'surprise Sunny with breakfast plan'.

"Mr. Darrel said we should make fry jacks." Bailey spins and pins Darrel with a bright look. "Right?"

He grunts and nods.

Basic Darrel Hastings communication.

"Really, guys. I appreciate it." I cringe when Darrel tosses the fry jack in the pan and darts back like a child under his mother's skirt. The man carries himself like a military sergeant but gets spooked by crackling fat. "As much as I love what you're doing, I can't just..." Micheal taste tests his lemonade and then pours a gallon of sugar into it. My hand levitates slightly. "Sit here and do nothing."

*Translation: please for the love of all that is good Belizean cuisine, let me into that kitchen.*

Bailey shakes his head, further snatching his curls away from gravity. I'm starting to think that the boys' rolled into the kitchen the moment they woke up. Darrel still seems a little groggy with sleep and the boys' hair is going in every conceivable direction but down.

"No school today?" I wonder out loud.

"We get to go in half-day."

“Because yesterday was grandma’s funeral,” Micheal clarifies.

The reminder of their grandmother sends a visible dark cloud over the room. The light in Bailey’s eyes sputters out and Micheal stares into the mug of lemonade like he’ll find the answer sheet to his year-end exams at the bottom.

I clear my throat and quickly change the subject. “What movie did you guys watch yesterday?”

Micheal pipes right up and starts talking about *Batman*. Bailey interrupts constantly, feeding off his brother’s excited energy.

I grin and rest my knuckles on my chin, listening to Micheal’s assessment of the movies and chiming in when I have a thought. He’s surprisingly well-read for an eleven-year-old. Not that it’s surprising me. He’s been through a lot, and he carries himself in a mature and reserved manner.

“Alright, boys. Wash your hands. I think what we have is enough for our meal.” Darrel swings the basket of fry jacks—can I call those abominations fry jacks?—to the table.

Micheal uses both hands to lug the heavy jar of lemonade over to me.

“Did anyone set the table?” Darrel asks.

“I’ll do it!” I raise a hand.

He glances at me, his stare prying and intense as if he’s trying to see my thoughts. I squirm. Why is he looking at me like that? He doesn’t know I broke into his room and slept on his bed, does he?

No way. Darrel wouldn’t have left the kids on their own in a tent out in the woods. He might be gruff and annoying, but he’s also overprotective. It’s the downside of being so darn *careful*. He overthinks everything. These poor kids are going to live with a border-line helicopter dad.

Another covert glance in his direction shows he’s still watching me. Certain that he’s just staring because he wants to know when I’ll be gone, I return his look with a scowl.

His eyebrows jump. What? He thinks just because he’s serving me fry-jack-shaped coal, I’m going to be nice to him? I’m not that desperate for friends.

After rolling my eyes as a non-verbal sign of my disgust, I stalk past him and open the nearest cupboard. Inside are a line of stainless-steel pans that look like they’ve never been used. I try the next cupboard and the next. *Where are the plates?*

“Over here,” Darrel says.

A defiant frown creases my mouth. “I would have figured it out on my own.”

Darrel’s lips quirk up. Did all those fry jack fumes get to him? What’s so funny?

I turn away from his heart-bustlingly sexy smile and reach for the plates in the cupboard. Without warning, he slides in behind me. His body hovers over mine and his deep voice growls, “Let me help you.”

The kitchen’s warm from all the cooking, but it just got flaming hot. “I’ve got it handled.”

“I’m sure you do.” His voice carries a tinge of amusement. Darrel grabs the plates, stretching his arms and caging me against the counter.

I turn slightly and get an eyeful of his glorious chest. He changed into a light blue shirt that shows off his flexing biceps. He skipped shaving and the scruff around his scrumptious lips is calling to me like the bacon.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. Memories of last night’s dream waft to mind. Snuggling into Darrel’s chest. Kissing his abs. Wrapping my hands around his neck and dragging him on top of me...

*Crap.* I duck under his arm and whirl away, my chest heaving violently.

Darrel gives me an innocent look. “You okay?”

I’m buzzing with adrenaline and attraction and he’s Darrel *Stinking* Hastings.

I cannot do this right now.

“Fine,” I spit out. “Where are the spoons?” I stomp around in search of cutlery, glad when Bailey and Micheal come traipsing back into the kitchen after washing their hands in the bathroom.

At least with the kids here, Darrel’s stare doesn’t feel so... sultry. *What is up with him?* It’s like his gaze changed overnight. Usually, his eyes hold a hard glint, like my very existence offends him. Today, there’s... I don’t know. There’s something different and it’s freaking me out.

“How did you boys sleep last night?” I ask as we all settle around the table and eye the unsavory mound of fry jacks. After a collective inhale of fear, in which we all pause and wonder who’ll suffer through the taste first, I share out one for myself and slip another into Bailey’s plate. “Wasn’t too cold, was it?”

“Bailey drooled. As usual.” Micheal’s teasing is quiet, but it gets the point across.

His little brother slants him a nasty look. “Did not!”

“You so did. I was swimming in your drool.”

“Shut up.”

“Bailey. Micheal,” Darrel warns in a low voice.

The boys pepper down immediately.

It’s sexy that he doesn’t have to raise his voice to calm them. It’s sexy the way he spears out bacon for Micheal and Bailey before he shares out the burnt, near inedible portions for himself.

And holy crap, I am not thinking about how sexy Darrel Hastings is right now while chewing a piece of fry jack that’s as hard as a biscuit.

Before the silence can get too thick, Darrel grabs the mug of juice and pours Bailey a glass. “They appreciated the surprise.” His eyes catch mine. “Thank you.”

My heart stops beating. “Uh...”

“Micheal, you want some of this?” Darrel diverts his attention to the eleven-year-old who nods.

I watch the juice fill Micheal’s cup and slosh against the glass rims. It feels like my insides are liquid too and I have no idea why I’m so flustered right now.

To feel normal again, I foolishly stuff my mouth with a fry jack and live to regret it. “Bwah, uh.” I stick out my tongue. When all the males around the table—including Darrel—look a little heartbroken, I cough. “I mean... yum.”

“Let me try.” Darrel bites into the fry jack and his eyelashes flutter like the fans of a submarine.

Bailey scrunches his nose when he bites into one and it disintegrates to black dust in his hand.

I grab a napkin and tap my mouth, so I don’t have to eat anymore.

Micheal is the first to laugh and it makes everyone jump a little. The eleven-year-old throws his head back and guffaws so hard that tears stream down his face.

“This is...” he gasps for breath, “so awful. Who made this stuff?”

Bailey’s carefree giggles join him. “We did.”

Darrel’s lips tremble. “I think there’s room for improvement.”

“Yeah, that’s...” I laugh so hard my stomach hurts. “That’s one way to look at it.”

After the fit of giggles passes, we swipe bacon into our fists and I lead the kids up the stairs to their rooms. Their reaction is everything I could want. Bailey makes a running leap at his animal-print bed and falls into it, grabbing his stuffed toy close.

“You fixed him?” Bailey gasps, holding up the new and improved orangutan toy.

“Nothing a little needle and thread couldn’t handle.” I smirk. Now, the monkey’s eyes are bright and alert. He no longer looks like he’s flirting with me.

When it’s time to show Micheal his room, I lead the boys through the adjoining bathroom and catch Darrel’s impressed look in the mirror.

*That’s right. I’m that good, Hastings. Don’t forget it.*

Micheal doesn’t say anything when he sees his room, but he doesn’t have to. His eyes take up over half his face and he stares at all the little touches—the Batman symbol pillows, the action figures, and the photo case—with his jaw falling open.

The black and yellow themed walls are the perfect balance of moody and bright. Plus, it’s the kind of design that can grow with him into his teenaged years without feeling cartoonish.

“This is really good, Sunny,” Darrel says, as if he’s surprised.

*I’m sure you’re happy that I’ll be out of your hair now.* “Thank you,” I respond instead. No need to show my petty side in front of the boys.

“Thank you.” Micheal gives me a look full of meaning. Like he’s not sure what he’s feeling, but the feelings are good.

“You’re welcome.” I give his shoulder a squeeze.

Bailey roars and races into his bedroom through the adjoining bathroom. “This is so cool!”

“That’s going to be fun,” Micheal grumbles sarcastically, but his lips arch up in a smile that he can’t control.

“Alright, buddy.” Darrel captures Bailey and swings him into his arms. “You need to get ready for school.”

“Already?” Bailey pouts.

“Just because you’ve got a half day doesn’t mean you should take it.”

“Boo!” I call.

“Yeah, boo!” Bailey yells.

Darrel slants me a hard look. It’s the exasperated, *can you just be quiet* look that I’m accustomed to getting from him. “Sunny, can you not

encourage the kids to skip school?”

“It’s not skipping school if they have permission,” I argue.

“What she said,” Bailey points at me.

Darrel shakes his head. “Bailey, Micheal, get ready for school.” His green eyes zero in on me. “And you.”

A shudder runs down my spine and heat pools in my belly. “What about me?”

“Wait for me. I’ll take you home.”

“I have my own car,” I answer sharply. He’s Darrel Hastings and he’s gorgeous, great with his two boys and his growly voice is doing crazy things to my insides. I need to be harsh right now because the alternative is nauseating.

Darrel narrows his eyes slightly. “I’m taking you home.”

“Why are you being so—”

“I don’t want you driving while you’re exhausted.” His voice is tortured. So are his eyes. “It’s dangerous.”

A heavy realization dawns. *He’s thinking about Claire’s accident.*

I stare into his eyes and weigh my options. I should argue. I should tell him exactly where he can take his gruff, barking orders.

Instead, I dig my fingers into my jeans and spit out, “Okay.”

## CHAPTER 10

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# THIRD WHEELING

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## DARREL

SUNNY QUETZAL DOES NOT REMEMBER FEELING me up last night.

Which would be fine if she wasn't also ten times colder to me this morning than she was while unbuttoning my shirt in bed.

I don't know why she's so on guard. She scowls when I make eye contact and prances back like a skittish horse when our fingers accidentally brush on the way to open the car door.

"I've got it," she grumbles, bouncing me aside in favor of ushering Bailey into the backseat. In a soft voice, she coos to him, "Careful, sweetie. Let's get your seatbelt."

I watch her fuss over Bailey, training my eyes away from her small, peach-shaped bum that's sticking out at me and begging for a little smack. *Behave, Darrel.*

Just because I've agreed to let the irrational side of me—the side that belongs to Sunny Quetzal only—have some freedom doesn't mean I've given it liberty to run rampant.

There are steps to the process. A ladder of priorities, if you will. These tasks need to be checked off before I can go around feeling Sunny Quetzal's perfect rear-end.

The first thing on the list is telling Sunny that I have feelings for her. A task she's making abundantly difficult as she stomps past me with a humph, slides into the front seat and slams the door closed.

I climb into the driver's side, trying to figure out how I upset her. We were having a good breakfast, weren't we? Well, 'good' being relative. There was absolutely nothing appetizing about the meal the boys and I prepared. In all honesty, Micheal's lemonade sucked too.

But we laughed about it.

Things were good.

I rack my brain for an answer. Perhaps I was a little too forceful when I insisted on driving her home? A rough tone is the absolute worst way to get people's respect. I've told Alistair as much a million times. Not that he listens to me. My brother-in-law still barks out orders to his employees, although Kenya's there to correct him if he crosses the line.

Maybe if I apologize to Sunny, she'll be in a better mood and I can announce my intentions. I turn to her, assessing my chances of success.

Sunny taps her foot on the floor mat. The snarl she sends my way is a warning.

I clear my throat and glance away quickly. Now is definitely not the right time to hit her with a love confession.

"I can't wait to tell my friends about my room." Bailey squeals. From the rearview mirror, I see his foot bouncing excitedly. He's changed into a clean white shirt and khakis. His glasses slide down his nose only to be shoved back up with his pinkie.

He's a cute kid. I'll admit that much.

Like the sun peeking from behind a cloud, Sunny's frown softens. "You should ask Mr. Darrel to arrange a play date so your friends can see your room in person."

"A play date?" My eyebrows hike. I already need to have a talk with Bailey and Micheal about their tidiness—or lack thereof. In all the years I've lived alone, I've never had dishes piled up in the dishwasher, a messy living room, or clothes thrown just outside of the hamper. The thought of the boys multiplying themselves and descending on my farmhouse to wreak havoc...

"Yes," Sunny speaks to me in slow, impatient tones, as if I'm hard of hearing. "A play date is when kids around the same age spend a few hours together doing fun things. You know fun, right? That thing you're allergic too."

My eyes narrow. "I know how to have fun."

"Prove it." She folds her arms over her chest.

I scowl. "I have no desire to prove something I already know is true."

"You don't present evidence because *you* believe in something. The point is to prove it to others." She stabs a finger in her chest. "Me. I'm 'others'."

"Micheal, tell Sunny how fun I am."

The young man pulls his lips in to hide his smirk. "Don't look at me."

I catch his eye in the rearview mirror. "Traitor."

Sunny turns in her chair and gives him a high five.

Micheal returns it with a hearty smack.

She's turned the boys against me.

Great.

Sunny raises her arms over her head and stretches. “I still can’t believe we got the renovations done in twenty-four hours. I’m going to head home and sleep for two days straight.”

“You can’t sleep that long. You have to come and see us,” Bailey says innocently.

“Aww. I wish I could hang out every day, but I have to work.”

“So we’re just... not going to see you after this?” Micheal asks. His eyes are intent on Sunny’s face as if her answer will determine whether he can breathe.

“I didn’t say that.”

Both the boys go silent.

Sunny undoes her seatbelt—an incredibly dangerous move that she doesn’t seem to care about—and turns fully to the boys. Climbing on her knees, she speaks low and clear, “Hey, I’m not going to disappear. I promise. You’ll see me around.”

I slow down for a red light and glance over at Sunny. Splatters of paint fall like twinkling constellations over smooth brown skin. Her hair is tied in a messy braid down her back and wisps of it frame her high cheekbones and sharp brown eyes.

The boys have nothing to worry about. As long as I have my way, they’ll be seeing a lot more of Sunny.

“Bring UNO next time,” Bailey says. “I want you to teach us how you and your family play.”

Sunny giggles and my insides rearrange.

*Oh man, I’ve got it bad.*

Horns start to blow and Sunny abruptly swings her head to face me. The smile that had been on her face turns into a glare that could melt granite.

“Hey,” she juts a finger at the road, “green light.”

*Damn.* I really wish there was. If a woman came with indicators like a stoplight, I’d know whether I should barrel straight ahead, slow down or come to a screeching halt.

Scratch that.

I don’t want ‘women’ to come with those signals.

I just want a way to read Sunny.

Because this woman is confusing the hell out of me.

Last night, when she was kissing my pecs and begging me to get naked, it was a giant flashing green light. In the sunlight, she’s all grumpy frowns

and sharp words. *What do you want from me, woman?*

"Hello? Darrel?" She waves a hand in front of me.

I've been staring at her too long. Reacting quickly, I slam my foot on the gas and the car lurches forward, causing Micheal and Bailey to yelp. Sunny rolls forward and almost slams into the dashboard.

"Sorry." I get the car under control and glance at her. Her hair's covering her face and she's breathing hard. Blinking rapidly, I mumble, "Are you okay?"

"You did that on purpose," she accuses.

I clear my throat and stare straight ahead.

"Are you sick or something?" Sunny slaps her hand on my forehead.

I fight the urge to set my hand over hers. Geez, she's hot to the touch. I don't know if that's the Caribbean in her or the spice of her personality.

"I'm fine." I grunt. Then I push her hand away. It doesn't matter if she's scowly Sunny or *smiley* Sunny. I can't concentrate when she's touching me and it's hard enough not to be distracted while she's in the passenger seat.

"I wasn't asking because I cared. I'm asking because you're driving."

"I said I was fine."

"You're not driving like you're fine."

I slant her a dark look. "Can we not fight in front of the kids?"

"We're not fighting," she answers back. Then she glances at Micheal and Bailey with a smile that could crush rocks. "We're not fighting, boys."

"Whatever." Micheal plugs his ear buds in.

Bailey looks between us as if he's not sure whether he should go along with the lie or point out the obvious.

I'm relieved when I slow the car in front of the boys' school. Now that they're leaving, Sunny and I can be alone and I can ask her what the hell is wrong.

I give the boys a salute. "Have a good day, Bailey. Micheal, no fighting."

"Got it," he grumbles.

"Bye!" Bailey waves his hand, blue eyes sparkling behind his glasses.

"See you guys later!" Sunny yells loud enough for the parents along the sidewalk to look our way.

One of the reasons Sunny was so popular in high school was because she's not afraid to call attention to herself. I was the total opposite. I'd

rather blend into the walls than stand out. I'm still more of an introvert than she is. It's yet another reminder of how different we are.

I start to drive off when Sunny yells, "Wait!"

I slam on the gas, my eyes widening.

Sunny pops her door open and barrels out of the car. Jogging through the throng of middle schoolers, she chases Micheal. He hasn't gone far, his sluggish steps only carrying him a couple paces away.

"Micheal!" Sunny's sprint down the pavement draws even more eyes. She doesn't seem to register any of it. And if she does, it's not like she cares.

Micheal pops his ear buds out, his gaze snapping to hers. He blinks a couple times as if in shock.

"Your laces." Sunny points to his shoes. The white strings are dragging forlornly on the ground. Without hesitation, she drops to her knee and picks up the shoelaces.

Micheal's mouth goes round. He stands with his head bent toward Sunny, not taking his eyes off her. He's not the only one stunned and staring. Middle school boys bump into each other, watching Sunny tie his shoes. Their eyes follow her as she rises to her feet and plants her hands on her hips, a proud smile crossing her face.

"There." She ruffles Micheal's hair. "Have a good day." She waves at him and sashays toward the car, her hips swaying lightly.

Micheal remains in place, still looking shaken. A pack of boys surround him, slapping his back. They're probably asking about his relationship with Sunny. I bet he'll be flooded with invitations to sit at the 'cool kids' table.

I was in middle school once, and I know that being seen getting chummy with a hot girl is insane street cred. Not that Sunny is a hot *girl*. She's all woman, but she also hasn't changed much since high school. The fiery set of her dark eyes, the slenderness of her body and the confident way she carries herself is ageless.

Micheal trods past the crowd and walks into the school, plugging his ear buds back into his ears. I hope none of the questions make him too uncomfortable. Especially since it hasn't been established *what* Sunny is to them yet. A friend? A confidante? A mother figure?

Sunny jumps back into the car.

"You could have pointed out that his laces were untied," I say before I've thought it through.

Her eyes swerve to me and narrow. "He would have shrugged and kept on walking."

"And then?"

She seems offended that I don't understand the gravity of untied shoelaces. "And then he could have tripped on the laces, slammed to the ground and broken his nose. And then the kids would have called him 'Bloody Nose Mike' for the rest of his life. And then he would come home crying and feeling like a total loser because kids are cruel and I know that better than anyone."

She does know that better than anyone.

I massage my throat and drive with one hand. Keeping my tone casual, I say, "Sounds like you have a lot of interesting stories about school."

She wrinkles her nose at me.

"Did anything... in particular happen back then that you regret?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

Images flash through my head. A loud pep rally. An ocean of laughing kids. Fingers pointing in my direction.

My heart tightens. "No reason."

"I..." Sunny sinks deeper into her chair. "I was awful to a lot of people. It would take too long to go through the list of all the things I regret." She stares at her shoes. "But it wasn't all bad. There were some parts of my high school self that I'm proud of."

"Like what?"

She eyes me as if she's trying to figure out whether I genuinely care. "The confidence I had. The fearlessness. You know? The things you lose as an adult."

"I don't think you've lost any of those things."

She smiles, but there's no brightness behind it. "You have no idea how much of that confidence is gone now." Her sigh is loud. "That's life, isn't it? And what's the use of talking about the past when you can't go back and change it?"

"If it affects your present, then talking about the past is the only way to move forward," I tell her.

She glances up.

"And..." I sweep my gaze over the road as my voice thickens, "I think being harsh on your past self isn't fair to you. I bet there were moments when you were kind."

A memory that I'd suppressed after leaving John Hearst rushes to the forefront of my mind.

*"WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL HIM?" SUNNY QUETZAL LOOMS OVER THE JOCK who's sneering at the janitor. A pile of garbage is on the ground. It went flying when the jock stuck out his leg and sent the cleaner sprawling.*

*"Hey." The jock eases off the locker with a smarmy smile. "Calm down, baby."*

*"Do I look like your baby?"*

*"You look like a freshman." He licks his lips.*

*"And you look like a shriveled-up rat with the brains of a worm."*

*His flirty smile changes to something hard and threatening. "You want to say that again?"*

*"I asked you first, you buffoon. Go ahead. Call him that slur one more time. I dare you."*

*"Little girl, you're going to get yourself—"*

*The crack of skin hitting skin echoes so loudly in the hallway that everyone, even the janitor, falls silent.*

I TAP MY FINGERS ON THE STEERING WHEEL AS THE PAST CREEPS INTO THE truck with us. Sunny Quetzal, the queen bee of John Hearst, was a menace who destroyed me on a whim, but there was more behind that poisonous smile.

And that *more* is what kept drawing me to her.

It's pulling me in right now.

There's something wrong with me.

Screw that.

There are many things wrong with me.

One, Sunny has no idea I went to high school with her and I'm actively hiding it so she never finds out. I'm a hypocrite for telling her to face her past when I'm struggling to admit my own secrets.

Two, Sunny and I are very different people. There's a high likelihood that our arguments will never stop because our brains work in totally different ways.

While I prefer order and quiet and not jumping out of cars just to tie shoelaces, she'll spring herself at the world boldly, loudly and follow whatever her heart tells her to do without thinking of the consequences.

On paper, we don't work.

Not a single bit.

So why do I want to kiss her like her lips are the only oxygen I'll ever need?

She folds her arms over her chest and eases back against the door as if she can read my thoughts. "Why are you so interested in my past?"

I stiffen. Can I admit my feelings for her and continue to keep our complicated history a secret? What would be the point of letting her know? To get an apology? I've survived this long without one. And maybe she wouldn't feel the need to extend an apology at all.

"You're ignoring me again."

"Put on your seatbelt, Sunny."

Her eyes sharpen and all the camaraderie between us shifts to tension. "Stop ordering me around. I let it slide when we were in front of the kids, but it's not going to work here."

"Seatbelt."

"There you go again. Growling at me."

"This is me talking nicely. You're just picking a fight."

She scoffs. "So now I'm the crazy one? Is that it?"

I pin my lips together because, no matter what I say, she'll still be upset.

"You know... I still don't get it. Why did you give me this decorating gig if you hate me so much?"

I adjust my fingers on the wheel to keep them away from her body. "I didn't. You forced your way in like you always do. Now seatbelt."

"I *do not* force my way into things." Her thin arms fall over her chest. "You get in my way like you always do and I have to find my way around you."

Tired of hurling instructions, I flick the indicator and drive the car to the side of the road. "You talk too much," I mumble.

"And you barely say anything to me. Unless it's 'get out, Sunny' or 'leave now'. If I didn't know better I'd think those were the only two words in your..."

I undo my seatbelt and push myself toward her. She cuts off her rant and presses into the chair as if she's trying to phase through her seat.



“If you’d take just a little of that energy you use for sassing me,” I slide past her cheek to grab the seatbelt, “and put it towards keeping yourself safe,” I yank the seat belt out of the holder until it’s stretched enough, “I wouldn’t have to worry so much.”

Her thick eyelashes flap.

Her mouth snaps closed.

I thrust the belt in until it clicks and then lift my gaze to hers. I’m close enough that I can make out the light brown flecks in her irises and the tiny mole against the side of her nose.

My eyes slide to her lips. They’re pink and look as sweet as strawberries. I watch her quick intake of breath as my hand falls on her face. Fingers trembling, I brush away a lock of her silky hair, pushing it behind her ear and letting my touch trail gently down to the slope of her jaw.

We stare at each other, not saying anything.

A phone starts ringing.

She ducks.

I blink.

And the car turns awkward while she fumbles with her purse to find the device.

Sunny pushes the phone to her ear and croaks, “Hey, mom. Oh, me? You know...” Sunny gives me a quick look from the corner of her eye. “Just chilling.” She pauses. Tilts her head. Then her entire face drops. “Mom, really?” Another quick look at me. “I’m tired. Because I’ve been working all night!” She rubs the bridge of her nose.

I wonder what her mom is telling her.

Sunny squeezes her eyes shut. “Yes. Yeah, *I know that.*”

We arrive at Sunny’s apartment.

“I’ll think about it, mom.” Sunny pulls the phone away and I can hear her mom shrieking from the speakers. “No, I won’t make any promises. I’ve got to go. I’m home already. Love you too. Bye.” She pockets the phone and stares straight ahead like the absolute last thing she wants to do is leave my car.

“Is something wrong?” I prod gently.

She looks at me and looks away again. “No, just... my mom being nosy. As usual.”

“Your parents live in the city?”

“No, they’re all the way across the country. Thankfully.” Her entire chest caves in a tired exhale. “I, uh, I should head up.”

“Let me walk you.”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“You worked for almost twenty-hours straight and you fell asleep twice —” I catch myself before revealing that I saw her sleeping on the ground in Micheal’s room earlier. “You fell asleep in a lawn chair with the sun blazing on your face. What if you fall asleep on your way up the stairs and get kidnapped?”

“That’s outlandish.”

“It could happen.” I’m grasping at straws and we both know it. I don’t even care. I want to stretch out the time I can spend with her.

“Whatever.” She climbs out of the car.

I join her up the stairs of her apartment. Sunny says nothing and I wonder if she’s thinking about that moment with the seatbelt. Would she have kissed me back if I’d planted my mouth on hers?

Her tennis shoes thud on the stairs. I have to slow my stride to match her. I wonder what her mom said to make her look so down.

I clear my throat. “Sunny.”

She stops and glances at me. Her upturned face is begging to be peppered with kisses. I suck in a deep breath and let it out.

*Should I tell her the truth or hide it forever?* I open my mouth.

“Sunny Quetzal?”

Both Sunny and I turn and look down the hallway. A man is standing in the middle of the corridor. He’s wearing a T-shirt and jeans rolled up at the cuffs. He runs a hand through his black hair, and it all falls perfectly into place again.

“Who are you?” Sunny tightens her eyebrows.

“I’m Gabor.” He approaches her, an excited smile crossing his tan face. “You’re Sunny, right? You look just like the pictures your mom sent me.”

Sunny smacks a palm against her forehead. “She did not send you pictures.”

“She sent your birth papers too, so I could check our birthdates against the Mayan calendar.”

“Oh no.” Sunny covers her mouth. “I am so sorry.”

Gabor ducks his head and smiles. He doesn’t seem to mind at all.

And now I want to slam my fist through plaster.

It's unlike me. Violence and logic rarely cohabitate except in situations like war where strategizing requires a great deal of mental skill. The brain muscles needed to focus on aggression can blind the synapses that form sensible thought, hence the term 'blind rage'.

But since this is not a war and Gabor seems harmless enough, the instinctive urge to sink my fist into his perfect teeth is one I should probably keep in check.

"Mom told me you were coming today, but she didn't tell me it was... you know," Sunny flails her arms, "now."

"It's the only time I could get a ride up." A wrinkle creases his forehead. "It's not a bad time, is it?"

*Stay out of it, Darrel.*

Sunny rubs the back of her neck.

*It's not your place, Darrel.*

Sunny shuffles on her feet.

"I kept her up all night." The words bounce around the hallway. They sound like they're coming from me. They definitely have a little hint of my voice on them, but I wouldn't say anything that petty. Or childlike. Or horrifyingly immature.

Sunny turns her head in slow motion and gives me a wide-eyed look.

Gabor arches a shiny black eyebrow.

"What he means by that," Sunny laughs nervously and elbows me in the side, "is that I'm just coming from a project *at his residence*."

"Oh, I can come back another time if you're tired," Gabor suggests.

I start to panic. Why would Gabor With The Perfect Hair and the Mayan-mom stamp of approval show up in front of Sunny again?

Sunny shoots a tired look at her cell phone. "You already went to so much trouble to be here today." She tosses her braid over her shoulder. "Besides, my mom would kill me if she heard I turned you away. She just called me to say I should look my best for you."

His eyes slide over her braided hair, paint speckled jeans and tennis shoes. I want to poke his eyes out with a needle.

Gabor grins. "Well, you certainly hit that nail on the head."

"Chic, right?" Sunny turns and shows off her back which has even more paint.

He laughs.

And I hate him even more than I thought I could hate anyone.

Sunny's eyes crinkle as she smiles at him.

This isn't flirting, is it? I've never been good at that ghastly social interaction, but I can smell a connection brewing between Sunny and Gabor, and I don't like it.

"To be honest," he runs dark fingers over his neck, "my mom called and pushed me to come here too. I'm preparing for my exams and I really didn't have time to travel all the way here, but..." His eyes, this time, regard her with a little more appreciation, "it makes me feel better to know you were just as reluctant too."

"Mayan mothers are something else, aren't they?" Sunny laughs.

I wish she'd stop laughing with him. I wish this guy would go away.

"You know what," Sunny waves a hand, "I can catch up on sleep later. You came all this way. It would be a shame if I didn't show you around."

My eyes bug. *What?*

Gabor shakes his head. "It's okay. I don't have time for a tour—"

I give him a silent nod of approval.

"—But I am a little hungry." He wraps his arms around his stomach. "How about we have lunch instead?"

Screw it. I take back my nod of approval. Gabor can choke.

Sunny walks forward and pulls her keys out of her purse. "Why don't you come inside and wait while I change?" She gestures to her outfit. "I know you already gushed about how amazing I look, but I'd prefer not to smell like paint and construction workers when we go out."

My eyes nearly pop out of my face. I launch forward and grab Sunny's wrist.

She stops short, turns and gives me a bewildered look.

"Are you going to let that guy into your apartment?" I hiss.

"Yeah." Her eyebrows meet in the middle of her forehead as if *I'm* the crazy one for seeing a problem with it.

"I know you want to believe that everyone is as honest and transparent as you, but that's not rational," I say earnestly. "Inviting some random guy that you just met into your house is extremely dangerous."

"Did you just accuse me of being irrational?" Her eyes light up with flames.

Really? That's what she's going to focus on? Not that she might be inviting a serial killer into her home? While she's in the freaking *shower*? Hasn't she ever seen *Psycho*?

“No, I did not call you irrational. I said that letting some random man into your apartment is irrational.”

Gabor chuckles nervously. “You, ah, you guys know I can hear you, right?”

I whip my head around.

Sunny does too.

Both of us growl, “Stay out of it.”

As one, we glare at each other again.

She sticks a finger in my chest. “I’m not one of your patients, Darrel. And I’m not Bailey or Micheal either. You don’t tell me what to do or dictate who I can and cannot invite into my apartment.”

“So you want me to sit back and watch while some guy chops you into tiny pieces?”

“My mom wouldn’t send a psycho to my door.”

“Who knows if this is the guy your mom sent?” My voice climbs because she’s driving me insane. “He could be an imposter.”

“You are such a drama queen. How do you come up with this stuff?”

“Did you just call me a drama queen?” I bark out a humorless laugh. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“Ehem, I can stay in the hallway while you shower.”

Sunny and I whip our heads around.

“We’re not talking to you,” I bark.

“Not right now, Gabor,” Sunny hisses. She turns back to me and slams her hands against her hips. “What are you even still doing here? Don’t you have work to do?”

“I’m taking a day off.”

“Again? You took yesterday off for the funeral.”

“I believe in taking the time to grieve,” I spit out.

She rolls her eyes. “Ms. Jean wasn’t even your grandmother. And you sent Bailey and Micheal to school even though they had an excuse to take a half day. Isn’t that a little hypocritical?”

I scoff but it’s not like I have a proper argument to that. She’s right. And I *do* have patients today. I have a backload since I’ve been missing so many days at the center while I get the boys settled in.

When I fall silent, Sunny grins like she won the argument and spins back to Gabor. “Come inside, Gabor. My home is your home.” She gives

me a pointed look over my shoulder. “Unlike *some* people, I don’t judge others based on my own paranoia.”

I grit my teeth. This woman is going to send my blood pressure through the roof.

“If he’s staying then I am too.” I stalk toward her apartment.

Sunny’s eyes throw knives at me. “You’re not invited.”

“Gabor,” I call without looking at him, “where were you going to take her?”

“I—”

“We’re going to a nice little Mexican restaurant called Salutes. It’s not a five-star restaurant like you and your rational mind might be used to, so I doubt you’ve heard of it.”

“Salutes is my favorite restaurant.” It’s not. “And I just so happen to be in the mood for Mexican today.” I stomp past Sunny. Stepping into her apartment, I plunk myself into her sofa. “Since breakfast was so long ago, I could work with some tamales.”

She snorts. “Gabor, can you believe this guy? Please un-invite him since he’s clearly not listening to me.”

“Well, I—”

“Oh, I’m starving.” I sling a hand over my stomach and bowl over. Peering up at Gabor, I ask, “Isn’t there some ancient Mayan adage about being kind to strangers?”

“The last time the Mayan were kind to strangers, they enslaved our people, raped our women, and destroyed our sacred temples,” Sunny grumbles.

“Gabor?”

“I guess I—”

“Perfect. I accept.” I fling my arms over the back of the chair and rest my leg over my knee. Slanting Sunny a look of victory, I nod. “See? Gabor doesn’t mind if I join you?”

Sunny shoots him a harsh look.

He grimaces. “I mean—”

“Fine. Do what you want. Gabor, I’ll be out soon. You.” She juts a finger in my direction. “This isn’t over.”

I wouldn’t dream of it.

Sunny gives me another look full of attitude, prances down the hall and slams the bathroom door so hard that the frames of the entire apartment

rattle.

Gabor gingerly sinks into the chair and clears his throat. “Well, this should be fun.”

Fun is not the word I’d choose.

Sunny’s going to claw me in the face if I keep pushing her.

But I’m willing to endure the pain.

This is a war for Sunny’s heart. And I’m not letting this perfect Mayan man steal my woman away.

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## CHAPTER 11

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# OFF THE LEDGE

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## SUNNY

I GOT three hours of sleep max, but I swear I'm not cranky because I'm tired. I'm on edge and flustered and way too disappointed that mom called *right* when Darrel was acting out a scene from last night's dream.

We fight like cats and dogs, but I wanted him to kiss me more than I've ever wanted anything. And no, not even our fight about Gabor dragged my hormones off the 'get Darrel naked' train.

Darrel walks close to me as we enter the restaurant. His knuckles brush mine and all the hair on the back of my neck stands to attention like he's a fifty percent off sale at my favorite furniture store.

I barely register the scent of freshly-made tortilla chips and guac. The low ranchero music filled with plucky guitar strings. The Christmas lights strung over windows and the photos of tan men in wide-brimmed straw hats.

Darrel is there. His hand is hovering at my waist like this is a date. Like I'm not on a blind date with another man.

And I'm fine with it.

In fact, I want to snuggle closer to him and ask if he's really been to this restaurant before or if he lied just to crash our lunch.

I'm being ridiculous.

I should be focusing on Gabor. He came all the way here to meet me, and he seems like a really cool person. Those clear brown eyes are trustworthy and totally *not* ax-murderer-like. I know how to recognize a psycho. I'm around Darrel all the time, after all.

Darrel's hand shifts to my other side, nudging me away from a waitress carrying a heavy tray of tamales, *salbutes*, and drinks. She slants him a grateful smile and successfully deposits her load at the right table.

I turn my head slightly and realize Darrel is staring at me. Green eyes drop to mine, piercing me the way that wooden skewer is piercing perfectly fried slabs of pork. I almost stumble over my own shoes.

Darrel is a distraction. A huge, growly, sexy distraction that I want to slap and smooch in equal quantities...

Coffee. I definitely need coffee.

And a chill pill.

“This way,” the cheerful Hispanic woman glides over the floor, her long red skirt swishing beneath her.

Darrel’s steps are sharp and tense. His sullen expression and sharp, pinstripe blazer seem especially out of place in the colorful Mexican restaurant.

I’m not the only one noticing how much he sticks out, though my assessment is probably harsher than the ladies whose gazes double back when Darrel stomps past them. Twitters, whispers, and clanking glasses of mimosa declare their approval of his sexy stride.

I want to warn them. *This guy is insane, ladies. Don’t waste your time unless you want King Grouch insulting you one minute and cradling your face like you’re the most precious thing in his life one second later.*

“Here you are.” The server points to a table fitted with a plastic sheet. Ketchup, salsa, and three different pepper sauces stand like eager soldiers in the center.

“*Gracias*,” Gabor says.

Darrel nods his thanks as well. His expression lightens in what he probably thinks is a smile but is more like a brighter frown.

“Ooh! They have the Dante’s Inferno pepper,” I squeal, jumping toward the table and grabbing a bottle.

Darrel snatches it away from me.

*Jerk.*

“Your stomach is too weak to handle that much spice.”

I shoot him a blistering look. “It is not.”

“Remember taco night six months ago? Belle served Alistair’s secret habanero sauce and you spent the rest of the night with your face in the garbage.”

I open my mouth in shock. “Excuse me. Belle accidentally gave me a giant piece of habanero that night. She basically tried to murder me.”

He narrows his eyes and scoffs in disbelief.

*Buzzkill.*

I’m surprised he remembers anything about me from that night. He spent most of our dinner grunting one-word responses and pretending I wasn’t there.

Gabor smiles at me. “You can’t eat spicy food?”

“Of course I can.”

“She can’t,” Darrel says matter-of-factly.

Gabor smirks. Brown eyes twinkle in my direction. “Why do I get the feeling you wouldn’t admit your weaknesses even if your life depended on it?”

“Look at that. He’s got you pinned.” Darrel nods in approval.

My fist clenches. It’s dying to make an appointment with his square and stubble-laced jaw.

Darrel ignores my fiery look and takes a seat around the table. He drags out the chair directly next to him.

I scowl, lift my nose and prance in the opposite direction. “This chair looks so much better.” Flopping into the seat next to Gabor, I make a big show of wiggling my butt and smiling. “I like being next to you, Gabor.”

Gabor chuckles and I’m not sure if he’s laughing with me or at me.

Balancing my chin on my fist, I turn fully to him. “This place serves amazing *arroz con pollo*. Oh, and for dessert, we can have flan. Let me tell you. You have not *eaten* until you’ve had the custard-cream flan. It’s—”

Darrel pushes his chair so hard that the legs scrape the ground. My head jerks around and my eyes fall on him. He rises smoothly, and it almost hurts my neck to maintain eye contact. This man is a giant. He just keeps going and going. Finally, he stands to his full height and steps calmly around the table.

I lean back. “What are you doing?”

Without so much as a how-do-you-do, Darrel grips the underside of my chair and yanks. My jaw drops as I’m lurched unceremoniously around the corner of the table. I lift my arms and grab his shoulders to hold my balance.

*Hello, sexy muscles.* Why does touching Darrel’s buff shoulders make me want to forgive him for being rude and overbearing?

I’ve been around cocky men all my life. My high school boyfriend was an idiot, and I knew it, but the kids respected him and I didn’t want to fight my own battles anymore, so I tolerated his presence.

Then I grew up and started dating more seriously. The egomaniacs seemed to multiply by the day. Especially in online-dating-land where most of the men who matched with me were pretty much all obsessed with themselves.

Darrel’s arrogance is different than anything I’m used to. It’s cold and intense, but there’s a layer of good intentions somewhere in the mix. It’s

just buried so far beneath his robotic expressions and muted disdain that I want to smack him even when I'm attracted to him.

"Are you out of your mind?" I hiss, glaring at the mere *audacity* of his actions. "Why would you do that?"

He points above Gabor's head where a huge industrial AC is buzzing. "There's a drip."

My eyes narrow in suspicion as I inspect the unit. He's right. There's a slow drip coming from the machine. It explains why the back of my chair is wet, but is that any excuse for him to yank me around like I'm his personal yo-yo?

"Ehem." Gabor grabs a menu. "Why don't we order? I'm starving."

I connect with Darrel's eyes *he just saved you from a butt-whupping*.

Darrel lifts his chin *bring it on*.

"The Mexican omelet sounds good," Gabor mumbles. "What about you guys?"

Grabbing one of the plastic-covered menus, I lift it to my face. "Not sure." All of a sudden, I'm not hungry anymore. Darrel annoyed my growling stomach into silence.

"*Panades*, maybe?" Gabor mumbles.

"Hm." I make a non-committal sound in my throat. Darrel's bicep is in line with my eyes and if I turn just so I could probably lick his skin. Which is a crazy thought and I hate that I'm excited by it.

Darrel leans back, not bothering to check the menu. He folds his arms over his chest and stares Gabor down with the intensity of a police officer in the interrogation room. "What do you do, Gabor?"

"I'm a student."

"What are you studying?"

"Agriculture."

"He's going to be a farmer," I pipe in proudly.

"Actually, I'm interested in politics but, to run for office, I need a bachelor's degree." Gabor flashes me a warm smile. "Agriculture was the only full-ride scholarship I could find."

"Well, there's no shame in that. An education is an education." I pat Gabor's hand.

Darrel glares at where my hand is.

"I studied Literature." I snort. "If you can believe that. I hate reading, but my mom wanted me to be a teacher, so..."

“Did you become a teacher?”

I shrug. “No.”

The server arrives with a mug of water, a plate of tortilla chips and spicy salsa. She sets them in the middle of the table, takes our orders, and then hops away.

Gabor scoops salsa onto a chip. “My mom believes that I’ll come back to the village with the ability to grow ten-foot-tall *maize*. I’m afraid she’ll be disappointed when she finds out that we’re not even studying corn cropping.”

“Can’t be worse than my mom.” I eye the salsa. I can smell the pepper from here, but it looks so tasty. “She wakes up every morning and prays that I’ll give up design work and find a ‘real job’. She won’t even tell the family back in Belize what I really do.”

Gabor laughs. “I have no idea what my mom will tell her family when she finds out I want to be a politician. She thinks all politicians are evil and the most I should strive to be is village chief.”

The salsa is calling to me. I give into the temptation and scoop a huge dollop of salsa-topped nachos on my plate. One bite and my throat burns with the flames of a thousand suns.

I blink rapidly and refuse to complain. A cough rakes its angry claws against my throat and I hold that back too. There’s no way I’ll give Darrel the satisfaction of being right. I *can* eat spicy food, dammit!

“I’ll work the land when I get back home. In a couple years, I’ll tell her about my ambitions.”

Darrel swipes an upside-down glass cup, sets it right and pours water into it. “Hiding your ambitions won’t solve anything.” He plunks the cup in front of me. “You’re an adult now. You don’t have to follow what you’re told.”

Grabbing the glass, I stick my tongue into it and sigh when the water cools my singed tastebuds. *So much better.*

“It’s more complicated than that. My parents had to fight to keep ownership of our land, land that belonged to the Mayans for thousands of years but suddenly was ‘government property’ when the politicians wanted to sell it off. The people who are constantly screwing them over are in politics. They have too many bad experiences.”

“And yet, you want to become the very thing they hate,” Darrel challenges.

“Because nothing is going to change if we just sit back and let other people decide our lives for us,” Gabor says. His eyes spark passionately and he looks kind of cute when he’s raging against Big Brother. “We can’t just talk about it anymore. We have to *do* something.”

Darrel leans forward. “I agree with your end goal, just not your method. You plan on infiltrating a system that is already stacked against you. You’ll need your family’s support. It’ll take too much energy to tiptoe around them.” Darrel hands me a napkin so I can dot at the water dripping down my chin and continues, “And you might be surprised. If you explain yourself clearly and calmly, your mother might not only accept your path, but she might throw her all into getting you closer to your dreams.”

Gabor stares thoughtfully at his salsa-stained hands, his shoulders slumped. “Maybe.”

Wait. When did this turn into a therapy session?

“Hey.” I tug on Darrel’s shirt. “Don’t psychoanalyze my date.”

Darrel pushes the salsa away from me, his eyes narrowing. “Who said this was a date?”

“I did. Just now. You’re being a third wheel.”

He purses his lips, but before he can say anything, his phone rings. I glance at the screen and notice Dina’s name.

“Excuse me. I need to take this.” Darrel gives me a warning look and then walks off.

While he’s gone, the server arrives with our plates.

Gabor hands me my *enchiladas*. “He’s cool.”

“Who is?” I set Darrel’s tamales in front of his empty seat. For a second, I consider slathering it in pepper sauce, but I reel myself back in. Playing with people’s food is a line I won’t cross. Instead, I unroll his knife and fork for him and pour soda into his empty glass.

“Darrel.”

I stiffen. “‘Cool’ is not a word I would apply to that curmudgeon.”

“Cur—what?”

“It means fun police.”

“Ah.”

I frown at the sauce slathered on top of Darrel’s tamales. That could get messy, and it wouldn’t be a good look to see patients with a stain on his shirt. Snatching a napkin from the dispenser, I set it under his plate. “He’s, like, the antithesis of fun. If fun were a person, he’d be the evil twin.”

"I see." Gabor bobs his head.

"A while back, I arranged this super fun prank on my best friend's fiancé. We took over his bachelor party and did a crazy dance routine. Super hype stuff. Anyway, you'd think Darrel would bust a vein the way he charged at us, trying to get us out."

"Mm."

I spear one of my enchiladas and put it in Darrel's plate because I remember that he's a huge fan of cheese. "And a couple months before that, Kenya invited me to this pool party with her and her soon-to-be daughter Belle. And Darrel was there. He refused to get in the water. He said chlorine is bad for the brain."

"Oh."

"Trust me. He's... a horror show."

"I see."

"The thing is, he's extra cold with me. Which totally baffles me because he's so chill with everyone else. You should see him with his niece Belle. He'll wear a feather boa and drink tea with her and he'll smile too. But with me?" I scrunch my nose. "Total hater."

"Mm." Gabor's eyes sparkle. "You know... you haven't stopped talking about Darrel since he left."

Self-conscious, I cover my mouth with a salsa-coated hand. "Sorry. He's just annoying. It gets to me."

"It's fine." He smiles. "And you're cute when you rant."

I smile back. "Not used to anyone calling me cute."

"Why? It's what you are."

"You're not so bad yourself." I mean, he's definitely a lot smilier than I'm used to, but he's not bad-looking.

Gabor's eyes crinkle. "If you weren't already taken, Sunny Quetzal, I think there might have been something here."

"What? Taken? Who's taken? Me?" I throw my head back and laugh. "No. You have the wrong idea. Please ignore Darrel and his childish behavior. He and I are not together."

"Not yet."

"Not ever." I punctuate my words with a firm nod, even as my stomach quivers.

Gabor's brown eyes bore through my skull like he's picking up my thoughts and inspecting each one. "A part of me wants to believe you, but



I'm not in the habit of lying to myself. Or starting fights I won't win." He wipes his mouth with a napkin and bends forward. "Not only does he like you. But you, Sunny Quetzal, like him a whole lot too."

Gabor's lucky I'm not drinking anything at the moment because I would have done a spit take and stained his face with cola. As it stands, I'm trying not to sputter too hard over my enchiladas.

"Me? *Like* Hastings? Like romantic feelings?" I hook a thumb over my shoulder as if it's the most preposterous thing I've ever heard.

Sure, *lusty* feelings are somewhere in my loins. I mean, come on? *Look* at that man. Green eyes like a Caribbean Sea tempest, muscles carved from granite, intimidating even in a stodgy business suit.

He's the hottest man I've ever seen. Who'd be immune to all that?

What Gabor doesn't understand is being attracted to someone and having feelings for that person are two completely different ball games. Sure, I *want* to get Darrel to open up and have more fun. And yeah, the fact that he's singled me out as the one who exclusively receives his scowls and glowers gets under my skin. And maybe I want to know more about what makes him tick, why he adopted the boys and how he's been holding up after losing his sister in that accident.

But that doesn't mean...

Gabor gives me a secret smirk and grabs his fork. He eats peacefully while I sputter and cough for another minute.

He's wrong.

He's *bonkers*.

There's no way I, Sunny Quetzal, would fall for a square like Darrel Hastings.

I'm okay. I'm good.

I hear footsteps thudding closer to us. Darrel returns to the table. He's carrying two to-go containers in one hand, his cell phone in the other, and has an aggravating frown on his face.

"Dina gave you an earful for playing hooky, didn't she?" My smile is serene because I like all thoughts of Darrel Hastings getting his butt handed to him. *Or maybe you just like all thoughts of Darrel Hastings.*

Ugh. My brain has been infected with a virus thanks to Gabor. Now I'm looking at everything through a 'do I like Darrel?' lens.

"I paid the bill." He slides his tamales into the container. "I have to head back to the center, but I'll give you a ride first."

"I can find my own way home." I bat my eyes at Gabor. "Gabor and I have a lot to discuss in private." My voice is syrupy sweet because I can tell that I'm getting on Darrel's nerves. *Good*. He should know better than to insert himself where he doesn't belong.

Darrel hands me a container. "Go home. You've been working all night."

"I'm aware of what I was doing all night, Darrel."

His left eye twitches. He stops, sucks in a deep breath, and then swoops into my chair. Big hands claw the handles and he stops a millimeter away from my face, causing a whole, yummy body-shiver.

"Do you want me to throw you over my shoulder again, Sunny Quetzal?"

My heartbeat is thumping so hard I can't even hear the ranchero music over my own pulse.

Darrel straightens, turns to Gabor and dips his head. "It was nice meeting you."

"You too." Gabor waves me away, his face stuffed with food. "Go on, Sunny. I have to head back to campus anyway."

"Now?"

"When I'm finished with this."

"I'll stay with you." I can feel Darrel's stare hardening on my back but so what? He doesn't control me.

"It's fine. Really. It sounds like you've been stretching yourself thin. Catch up on your sleep."

"I don't know..."

"Honestly, I'll use the time to study. I don't want to lose my scholarship because I was out chatting when I should have been in the books."

"Alright." I give in. Only because I want to protect his future. "But call me when you've finished your exams. I'll give you a proper tour of the city. And we can do this again." I shoot a dark look Darrel's way. "Without the interruptions."

"Sure." Gabor smiles.

Darrel scowls, but at least he doesn't say anything stupid. I scoop my enchiladas into a container and turn to him. His green eyes slam into mine and I swear I jolt like I've been hit with an extra charge of electricity.

*You like him too.*

No I don't.

I don't.

I won't.

There is no way I would be foolish enough to give my heart to Darrel Hastings when it's so clear he can't make up his mind about whether he wants to kiss me or ruin me. That push-and-pull might be hot now, but it can't sustain a relationship.

Not that I want a relationship...

*You like him a whole lot.*

I cringe.

"See yah, Sunny." Gabor waves the way I used to when my parents were picking me up from day care. Like he wishes I could stay, but he knows I have to go home.

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip. I really hope he's pushing me to leave because of his exams and not because of his silly assumptions about me and Darrel.

"Ready?" Darrel asks.

I nod.

Darrel grabs my take-out container and slips it into a plastic bag. He does that 'hand on the small of my back thing' again, and it makes me feel small and protected and I hate him. Why is he acting like a jealous boyfriend? Why do I find it amusing rather than repulsive?

I climb into the car and frown when Darrel starts driving. Scolding words roll to the tip of my tongue, but he gets a call from a client that completely changes his expression and I lose my chance.

"Alexandra, thank you for calling me." Darrel pauses and adjusts his ear buds. "I know. It's okay to feel these things. What's not okay is acting on them." His facial muscles become more and more tense as he listens to whatever his client is saying.

I study him, trying to figure out what's going on.

Darrel stares straight ahead. "It might feel that way, but remember it's not your fault. Your subcortical limbic system is different from other people. That's why you're taking medication—" He pauses. Sucks in another sharp breath. "Alexandra, remember we can use that language to acknowledge what we're feeling, but we can't dwell on it."

I lean forward, wondering how I can help him.

His fingers tighten on the steering wheel. "Alexandra, even if the make-up of your brain is different, it still doesn't own you. You still have power.

You are in control of the control center. Take deep breaths. Are you breathing?"

Through the earbuds, I can faintly hear someone struggling for breath. My heart beats faster and faster. What if this girl does something to hurt herself or others?

"Alexandra, answer me," Darrel says firmly.

A squeaking sound seeps from his earbuds. My anxiety flies through the roof. How is Darrel so calm right now? I'm freaking out and I'm not even the one responsible for keeping this chick safe.

"Alexandra, is there something you could do to quiet your thoughts until help arrives? Something like coloring or... yes, I know you don't think it'll work but... no, Alexandra. Don't climb over your balcony."

An idea pops to mind. I flick on the radio, connect it to my phone and start playing an upbeat Belizean song. It's by Stig the Artist, one of the biggest dancehall singers in the country. The song is about picking yourself up from the ground and moving forward.

Darrel flicks a panicked look at me. I gesture to the car's dashboard where the song title and artist is displayed. Darrel searches my eyes for a second before he shifts his chin down in a subtle nod.

"Alexandra, I'd like you to listen to this song. Focus on the song, okay?" Darrel drags out his earbuds and presses the speaker icon on his phone.

A girl's thick breathing fills the car. "W-what kind of music is that? I've never heard it before."

"That's a song from..." Darrel's eyes shoot to mine as if he's stumped.

"Belize," I whisper.

"Belize," Darrel tells her.

"*Where is that?*" Her tone holds a hint of wonder. Like a kid finding out about Narnia. I hope she doesn't think Belize is some country in the back of a wardrobe.

"You see how big the world is, Alexandra? There's so much of it that's waiting for you. So much that you haven't experienced yet."

I cup my mouth and whisper, "Ask her if she likes the song."

Darrel clears his throat. His calm and refined voice can barely be heard over the music so I turn down Stig the Artist a bit.

"Alexandra, do you like the song?"

"Um... yes."

I grin. She's got good taste.

"Tell her I'll send her a playlist later," I whisper.

Darrel slants me a scolding look.

I nudge his arm. "Tell her."

"Alexandra," Darrel licks his lips, "I have my friend with me. She says she'll send you the playlist later." The phone goes silent. Darrel presses. "My friend is from Belize. She has a lot of stories she can share with you, but you have to get away from that balcony first, okay?"

A commotion erupts in the background. Someone around Alexandra bawls out and a grunt echoes over the line.

I shoot Darrel a frantic look. "What is that?" I smack his hand and keep smacking as the noise gets louder. "What's happening?"

"Dina called Alexandra's parents," he says quietly. Anyone looking at his cold expression would think he was totally unruffled, but I notice the tremble in his fingers and the way he gulps. "They're closer to her than I am. They could get there before me and help her take her medication."

There's more rustling. More weeping. More shuffling.

Someone picks up the phone because it crackles and knocks against something hard.

"H-hello?" a new voice says.

"Mrs. Aldridge, I'm still here," Darrel responds.

"I..." It's the only word Mrs. Aldridge gets out before she breaks down and bawls.

My heart squeezes to the point of cutting off blood circulation. I feel something course down my cheek and realize it's a tear. Another one follows it.

This poor family. Mental health isn't something that's discussed often in my house or even in my community. I used to think that ignoring our mental issues made us stronger than other folks. Made us a little more invincible. *See? We're not crybabies. We don't break down. We're stronger than everyone.*

But how destructive is a culture that sweeps weakness and imperfection under the rug when every human is flawed, broken and capable of being worn out? How many breakdowns have people had because they were struggling to reach that impossible standard of 'having life all figured out'?

"M-Mr. Hastings, I..." She sniffs, "thank you for what you did today."

“Mrs. Aldridge, how long has Alexandra not been taking her meds?” Darrel’s tone isn’t accusatory, but it is firm and authoritative. He’s not growly Darrel or grouchy Darrel or fun-sucking Darrel. He’s a man with the responsibility of keeping fragile minds and overwrought families together.

“I don’t know. I—we thought she was taking her meds, but I guess she was throwing them away when we weren’t looking.”

Darrel slows the car in front of my apartment, but I’m so emotionally invested that I don’t leave. He doesn’t chase me either. I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t mind my presence or if he’s forgotten that I’m even there.

“She’s been acting fine lately. I... I never imagined she was having those thoughts again.”

Darrel squints at the sunlight.

“I don’t know what we would have done if she hadn’t reached out to you. I owe you my life for saving my baby girl.”

He shakes his head. “All I want is for Alexandra to be safe.”

I look at him, at the set of his jaw and the determination in his emerald green eyes and I know he means it. Darrel Hastings is somber, sullen and surly, but he truly cares. He doesn’t express that care in the loud, bubbly way that I do, but it’s no less present.

“I’m glad she still remembered the center’s number and we were able to help her this time,” Darrel continues, running a hand through his hair. “But today’s incident is indicating a much bigger problem. She needs to see a professional as soon as—”

“Can’t you fit her in?” Mrs. Aldridge begs.

Darrel rubs the bridge of his nose. “Mrs. Aldridge, I have other patients —”

“As dire as this one?”

“You had Alexandra seeing another therapist, remember?”

“You’re not holding that against us, are you?”

“Of course not. But my clients haven’t seen me in a few days. I can’t...”

“She didn’t call that other therapist. She called *you*. It means she trusts you. More than anyone else. I won’t be able to breathe until she sees you again.”

He checks his watch. Taps his fingers on the steering wheel. Lets out a breath. “Alright. Bring her around six.”

“Thank you. Thank you!”

Darrel hangs up and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Will you need help picking up the boys from school?” I ask.

He startles as if he hadn’t realized I was still in the car.

“I’ll get the kids,” I declare. I’m not asking this time.

He nods and sinks into his seat. He looks anxious. Shaken. Slightly nauseous.

A line carved by worry and exhaustion creases on his forehead. I have the privilege of seeing beyond the ‘always has an answer’ Darrel Hastings to the man who gets pale and shaken and relieved when a disaster is subverted.

“You okay?” I whisper, genuinely concerned.

He reaches out and grabs my hand. “Thank you, Sunny.”

“For getting the kids?”

“For suggesting the song, for being here with me. For everything.”

My mouth gets weirdly dry and I can’t seem to catch my breath.

I feel something stirring in me. The same affection I felt when I hugged Bailey after he was bullied. Except it’s stronger with Darrel. It’s scarier. It’s the feeling that my heart is no longer in my possession. It’s across the car, doing fancy pirouettes in the palm of Darrel Hastings’ big and burly hands.

## CHAPTER 12

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**SLOW AND STEADY**

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## DARREL

I'VE BEEN tired in the past, but tonight's weariness is bone-deep. I stretch my arms above my head and tilt my neck. That crackling sound can't be coming from my body. Hell, I sound like I'm part bubble wrap.

I turn my head in a circle. The slow rotation does nothing to lessen the strain in my muscles. It's been an extremely long day. To feel normal again, I'll need either sleep, coffee, or Sunny.

I choose the last option.

My pen rattles against my desk as I pick up the phone and video-call her. She's watching the boys. I have a perfect excuse to see her face.

While the little green icon vibrates on-screen, I run a hand through my hair and hope I don't look as worn out as I feel.

The line connects with a *ding!*

Sunny appears and my world brightens. Dark brown skin. Twinkling brown eyes. Silky hair falling over high cheekbones.

"Hey," I bring the phone down on the desk, "how are the boys?"

"Great! We're throwing a rager in the backyard. The tattoo artist says they have incredible pain tolerance."

I stiffen. "Sunny."

A smile spreads over her face and it nearly knocks me out of my chair. To call this woman beautiful would be a detrimental understatement. She is sultry perfection wrapped in dark brown skin and mischief.

Her face charged through my mind at least a hundred times today. I had to make an effort to focus on the clients and not on how much I wanted to check on Sunny and the boys.

Is that obsession healthy?

Probably not.

Nothing Sunny Quetzal makes me feel can be classified as 'normal'.

I thought I knew love. I really did. I thought that crush on Sunny in high school and the dalliances I'd had as an adult was that *thing*. The thing that sent women and men running into my office, begging for relief and healing.

I was wrong.

So wrong.

Love is big and rude and loud.  
Just like Sunny.

It's addictive too. Like a drug. It is a drug. A hit of dopamine that floods the brain and gets the host hooked.

That's what Sunny Quetzal has done to me. Never smoked a day in my life, yet she turned me into a drug addict.

"Relax. The boys are here." She swings the phone around.

Micheal and Bailey appear on screen. They're sitting in the living room. Bailey's flat on his stomach, scribbling in his homework book. Micheal has his back against the chair, reading a comic.

"Your house is fine. For now. Bailey and I still have to nag you about that play date."

"It's a no on the play date."

"I looked it up. Social connections are good for the brain. It develops teamwork building and empathy skills."

My lips twitch. "You did your research."

"You only respect brain science. I have to beat you at your own game."

"It's still a no."

"Come on, Hastings."

"Having too many kids in the house is messy and I don't have time—"

"I have time."

"Do you?"

"Okay, I actually don't, but that's not the point."

"Why are you so obsessed with this play date?"

"I want more people to see my work."

"The fact that you want validation from children is telling, Sunny."

"Please." She pushes out her bottom lip.

My heart melts like wax.

"Hey boys," Sunny gathers Micheal and Bailey around her, "do your best puppy dog impression."

Bailey jumps on-board without hesitation. Eyes wide behind his glasses, he sticks out his bottom lip until I can see to his gums. Micheal gives me a bored look and rolls his eyes.

Something in my chest snaps into place when I look at them. I don't know. It's like I'm staring down a vision of my future. Calling Sunny after a long day. Micheal and Bailey safe and cared for. A place to call home.

I've never had a longing for any other life before. All that mattered was keeping the status quo. Order. Routine. Self-discipline. My work was enough to satisfy me, and a clean and empty house was enough to bring me peace.

Now?

I want more.

I want these three people right here.

Sunny tilts her head close to Micheal. Her hair falls against her bare shoulder. The camera pans out and I see she changed into a tank top and shorts.

I stare at her in awe. She's long, long legs, graceful arms and red lips. The girl every man wishes he had on his arm. In fact, she could go out right now in that tank top and flip flops and men would still notice. Her magnetism is frustrating. If she wasn't so damn charming, guys wouldn't be hovering around her like fruit flies around an apple pie.

I cannot begin to express how panicked I was when I saw her connecting with Gabor today. Thankfully, Gabor picked up on something between Sunny and me. After that, he jumped on my team. The smiles he aimed at Sunny were more amused than flirtatious. His tone shifted too. And he was quick to shove Sunny out with me when I had to leave.

I'm not sure if he backed off for his sake or for mine, but I'm glad it happened. I would have turned into an even more immature and petty version of myself if not.

It's crazy that a random stranger saw my love for Sunny faster than she did. Why she's so blind to how I feel about her is beyond me.

"Tell him what you did tonight, Micheal," Sunny says, still pushing her head in Micheal's face.

He bats her hair away and sends a dour look at the camera. "I made something."

"What. Tell him what."

"Mac and cheese."

Sunny hollers loud enough to break my phone speakers. "That's right. Your boy, Mike here, made dinner."

"Was it any good?"

"Are you kidding? We couldn't even scrape the noodles out of the pan."

"There aren't instructions on how hot the flame should be." Micheal pouts. "That's false advertising."

“That’s common-sense, Micheal.” Sunny’s wry expression makes me want to laugh.

I pull my lips in. “Did you eat it?”

“I threw the entire pot away and ordered pizza.” Her sharp eyes lock on me. “By the way, I owe you a new pot.”

My shoulders lift and fall. “Never touched those pots much anyway.”

“Good.”

“It was edible.” Micheal sets his comic book aside. He spreads his legs in a fighting stance. “You two are overreacting.”

“It was awful, Mr. Darrel.” Bailey pushes his face too close to the camera. I can see all the way up his nasal canal.

“Worst thing I’d ever eaten in my life.” Sunny agrees.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Micheal defends himself. “Besides, the instructions were complicated.”

Sunny darts a disbelieving look at him. “Oh, *come on*. Who messes up mac and cheese?”

Bailey snorts.

“I told Micheal that, since he wanted to stand for something, he could have his mac and cheese while we had pizza. All of a sudden, he changed his tune.”

Micheal shrugs and then cackles. *Cackles*. “I wasn’t eating that.”

I’m stunned. Two days after his grandmother’s funeral and Sunny has the normally reclusive boy laughing.

She is incredible.

“Anyway,” Sunny rises and walks away from the boys, “we saved you some pizza. Actually, I had to cart it away and hide it because Micheal and Bailey were acting like they hadn’t eaten in three centuries.”

“Cafeteria food stinks!” Bailey cries out from the background.

Sunny rolls her eyes at the phone and then yells over her shoulder, “You should be grateful for food. There are little kids all around the world who have nothing to eat!”

I pull my fingers into a fist and cough to hide my laughter. Child hunger is not amusing at all, but Sunny’s disappointed sigh is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.

“Anyway,” she steps into the kitchen, “I asked Dina if you’d had dinner yet and she said you’d had back-to-back sessions. Since you’re probably running on caffeine and determination right now,” she points the camera

down on a beautiful plate of yellow rice, chicken breasts and vegetables, “I whipped up something a little healthier than pizza. I would have made some for the boys too, but they couldn’t wait.” She huffs as if to say *so impatient*. “According to them, they’d starve if they didn’t eat.”

My heart thumps in my chest. “You made dinner for me?”

“Whoa, whoa. Let’s not get carried away. I made dinner for *me*. American pizza is not my idea of a good time. I just...” her eyes dart away, “had some leftover.”

“Right.”

“Of course.”

“It was foolish of me to assume otherwise.”

“Exactly. Why would you do something like that?” Her chuckle is nervous. “Anyway, the boys are fine. The house is fine. I’m fine.” *Yes, she is*. “So focus on your work and come home when you’re done.”

“Sunny—”

“Bye.” The screen goes blank.

I pull the phone away and chuckle at it. My intuition was right. Sunny is far more energizing than sleep or coffee. She seemed skittish though, when we ended the call. I hope she doesn’t run the moment I get home. I hope I can convince her to stay a little longer.

Would she let me tuck her into bed again... without her clothes on this time? My heartbeat picks up as I imagine Sunny sliding her bra down her shoulder and successfully unbuttoning my shirt.

A knock sounds at the door. Dina pokes her head into my office and it’s all I can do to push that image from my mind.

“Were you on the phone with a patient?” Her eyes slash over my face. “Did they say something to upset you? Your ears are red.”

“Are they?” I pinch the lobe.

“Mm-hm.” She trots to the sofa and falls wearily into the corner.

“No, it wasn’t a patient. It was Sunny.”

“Oh?” Dina lifts a brow.

“She was updating me on the boys. Micheal made mac and cheese.”

“Is he any good?”

“No.” We need Sunny to train us on how to fend for ourselves in the kitchen. It’s a sad, sad day if Micheal can’t even conquer box mac and cheese.

Dina smiles. “They’re both precious.”

“And I’ve been away from them too long.”

Her eyes bug. “You’re going home?”

“Yes.” I flick the desk lamp off.

“But we have to input case notes.”

“It can wait until tomorrow.”

“You never put off doing case notes.” Her jaw drops.

“I already made notes in my recorder. I’ll transcribe it when I have time.” Shrugging out of my lab coat, I set it on the back of my chair. “Micheal asked me to help him with math and Bailey’s homework needs to be checked before he submits it tomorrow.”

Her eyelashes bounce up and down. “Look at you being a good dad. It’s like you were made for this, Darrel.”

My smile goes flat. I think of my father. *You’re a lazy punk. Is that the best you can do? Get up and run it again.* Rain or shine, dad pushed me to train until mom ran to intervene. *That’s too harsh. Can’t you see he’s bleeding? He’s just a child!*

A father.

A dad.

A nightmare.

My throat tightens and I swallow hard. “Dina.”

“Huh.” She looks at me with a smile.

“In the future, I’d like if you didn’t refer to me as their father.”

Her smile slowly disappears. “What?”

I grab my keys and march past her. My heart is tight and my stomach is roiling. There’s a scientific explanation for what I’m feeling. A link to my past that I need to unravel. Trauma that won’t heal even though my dad is gone.

I didn’t expect it to rear its ugly head, but then I didn’t expect that I’d be taking in two boys or that I’d grow to care for them so much.

It’s exactly *because* I care for them that I can’t call myself a father. I’m going to give the boys everything they need. I’m going to be there for them. And I’m not going to ruin their lives the way my dad ruined mine.

\* \* \*

THE HOUSE IS QUIET WHEN I WALK IN. THE TELEVISION'S ON. IT'S TURNED to a home decorating network. Sunny's in the couch alone, a glass of wine on the coffee table and her feet propped up. There's a laptop on her thighs and a wrinkle between her brows as she stares at it.

When I shut the door, she jumps and her eyes dart to me. "Darrel."

"Hey," I say quietly. My conversation with Dina is still weighing on my mind. Thinking about my father always puts me in a foul mood. And now Dina knows.

Well, she always knew *some* things—a few nights after Claire passed, I hinted at my troubled relationship with my father—but now that she realizes it's a lot more serious, she'll be concerned and worried about me. And that's the last thing I need.

Sunny pulls her feet off the coffee table and stands. "The boys are in their rooms. I asked them what time they should be in bed. They gave me different answers, so I made an executive decision."

"They're sleeping already?"

"Bailey is." She covers her yawn with a fist. "Micheal is still up reading, but it's not like I'm going to punish him for loving books. That's ridiculous." She waves a hand.

"Right."

"Right." She bobs her head.

"Good."

"Good."

We both get quiet.

Sunny clears her throat. "Oh, I wanted to ask. How's Alexandra?"

"She's okay."

"That's good."

I suck in a deep breath and just... stare at her. My heart, that was dragging behind me the entire ride home, bounces to life again. It's like she recharges me. Everything about her. It's pure energy and its contagious.

"Are... you okay? You look," she tilts her head in thought, "like you were living underground for fifty years and you're about to get kidnapped by zombies."

"Nice use of imagery."

"I did study Literature for four years. Something was bound to rub off."

Quiet settles around us again. I should say something. Thank her for picking up the kids. Thank her for making dinner. Thank her for being



sunshine and flowers and a refreshing breeze in the desert that is my life.

But all I can do is stare.

She blinks rapidly. “Let me say bye to Micheal real quick before I go.”

I want to follow her, but that would be creepy and annoying. I pace the living room while she’s upstairs. My fingers sink into my tie and yank. Then they race into my hair and tussle.

There’s still so much I need to settle in my life. Micheal and Bailey are here under emergency custody and their social worker isn’t a fan of them living with me. I need to find a nanny. I need to figure out how I’ll fit extracurricular activities, school trips and parent-teacher conferences around my full docket of clients.

Then there’s the soul-deep issues. The ones I always encourage my patients to sort out before they enter a new relationship because it’ll cause problems down the road.

My father.

My last conversation with Claire.

My history with Sunny—something she still doesn’t remember.

There are steps. I had steps to this and it should go in order because order is life. Anything out of order can damage the perfectly built walls I’ve erected around me.

But when Sunny appears in the living room again, wearing a tank top with her creamy-brown shoulders exposed, her hair in a ponytail and her brown eyes unsure and solemn, I know that I wouldn’t be able to keep my feelings to myself if I tried.

“Guess I’ll leave now.” Sunny picks her purse off the handle of the chair and squeezes it.

I take a step toward her.

She swallows nervously. “I was only kidding about the play date. If you really don’t want it to happen, I won’t bring it up again.”

My steps get faster. I’m halfway across the living room now.

She flutters her eyelashes. “Shanya told me you wanted me out of your hair. You could have told me that yourself, but it’s fine. I get it.”

“Sunny, please stop talking.”

She shakes her head. “I’m finished with the rooms now, so you don’t need to see me anymore. Although I really would like if I could pick up Micheal and Bailey from school sometimes. Maybe take them for ice

cream? Once a month. Okay, twice a month. It would free up your schedule and you could—”

I grab Sunny Quetzal’s chin, tilt her head back, ignore that wide-eyed surprise shimmering in those beautiful brown eyes and lower my mouth.

The kiss I drop on her trembling lips is only to shut her up. Kissing isn’t communication, as much as I wish it was. And Sunny is just the type of woman to miss what I’m saying entirely if I don’t make myself clear.

Words. I need words. I have all intentions of using words. Really great, romantic words because women love romance and she’s the kind of woman who deserves all of it.

But one soft touch of my mouth to Sunny’s is not near enough. I taste the wine on her lips and the world starts swimming around me in a dance of pleased shock. I can’t stop. Why the hell would I stop?

I reach for her hips and slide my arm around it, dragging her so close to me that not even air particles can get between us.

Her hand slides up my back and into my hair. The way her nails scrape against my scalp is torture and pleasure and everything I didn’t know I was missing.

She’s kissing me back.

Holy...

Her mouth. Her tongue. She’s my one addiction and it’s coming to a head tonight because I won’t be able to control myself. Not even slightly.

We’re moving. I’m not sure if I’m the one pushing her or if she’s stumbling backward, but the world is spinning in one persistent direction. I don’t care or recognize why until we hit the wall. Her body bounces toward mine and I steady her. This time, my grip is lower on her hip and I’m basically palming the back of her shorts. It’s not intentional. My hands are just that big.

I shift my palm away. “Sorry.”

Sunny grins and pushes my arm down until I’m doing what I’ve always dreamed of—squeezing her rear end tight. I swoop in and devour her mouth again, swiping my tongue over her bottom lip as a reward. The noise that bubbles from the back of her throat—a desperate, needy little whimper—turns my blood so hot that I’m worried she’ll get burned from being this close to me.

Too much. She’s too much. I’m buzzing everywhere. Coming apart like my skin is made of play dough. Something that can be stretched and yanked

in every direction.

Her fingers trail my cheek and slide down my neck until they're inside my shirt. She's *inside my shirt* and damn, I might as well find a supernova because I'm pretty sure I'm nothing but energy and pure, raging need.

A door upstairs slams and little footsteps pound in the distance. I hear it dimly, but I'm somewhere outside my body and can't be bothered. Sunny has a much better reaction time than I do. She stiffens and pushes me away, turning so her back is to the second floor banister. A moment later, Bailey appears at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Darrel!" He bounds toward us.

I have to swallow three times before I remember how words are formed. "I thought you were sleeping, Bailey."

"I heard Sunny tell Micheal goodbye. I was waiting for her to come to my room, but she never did." The little boy points accusatory eyes on Sunny.

"Uh... sorry, Bailey. I thought you were sleeping, and I didn't want to disturb you."

"You have to say goodbye." Bailey marches up to her, his eyes serious and solemn. "You're not allowed to leave us without saying goodbye."

My heart wrenches.

Sunny crouches to his level, which is another, instinctively caring thing that she does. "I'm sorry, Bailey. I give you my word. Whenever I leave, I'll let you know first."

He bobs his head.

She offers her hand to him. "Walk me to my car?"

"It's cold out there." I frown. "Let me get your coat, Bailey." I adjust myself on the way to Bailey's room and try to cool down so the little boy doesn't notice how flushed I am.

When I return, Bailey and Sunny are at the front door. Bailey's talking excitedly and I have serious doubts that he was sleeping all this time.

Sunny is listening to every word, her head turned toward him and a patient smile on her face. Looking at her makes me want to throw her against the wall and continue where we left off, so I divert my attention to Bailey.

"Here, bud." I open the coat.

He sticks his little hands in without skipping a beat of his story. "And the new girl at school was being bullied by Ebenezer and she was crying

and I helped her.”

“Mm-hm,” Sunny says.

I watch Sunny intently as I help Bailey with the coat.

“And then I shared my chocolate with her and she told me she wasn’t crying because she was scared. She said she cried because she was angry. Can you believe that?”

“Sounds... like an interesting little girl.” Sunny accepts Bailey’s hand. She’s not looking at me. Why isn’t she looking at me?

“Her name is Beth. That’s short for Elizabeth. She said her mom is a mechanic. She fixes cars. She said her mom told her that boys are silly. I told her I wasn’t silly...”

“Mm-hm.” Sunny lifts her car keys.

Bailey keeps talking. “So I want to invite her to my play date,” he finally concludes. “Because she’s cool.”

“Alright, buddy. We have to talk more about this play date idea.” I lift him into my arms. “And Sunny has to go home.”

“Does she *have* to go home?” Bailey frowns.

“I don’t know.” I arch an eyebrow at Sunny. “Should we ask her to stay the night?”

Her eyes widen and she blinks rapidly. “Sorry, I can’t stay.” She doesn’t look sorry at all. She looks jittery and frantic. “I need to come up with concept art for a new client tomorrow, so I have to go.”

*Look at me, Sunny. Give me an indication that you understood what that kiss was about.*

“I’ll see you and Micheal later, okay?” Sunny’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes. With trembling fingers, she tries to open her car. The first thrust of her key goes a little too far south. The second sends the key spiraling out of her hand.

I bend to pick it up and she does too.

Our hands brush.

Sunny drags her fingers back as if she’s allergic to me. “Thanks,” she mumbles to the ground.

This time, she gets the key into the lock. Sunny jumps into her car, and backs out of my driveway so fast I’m surprised she doesn’t mow down my mailbox. My eyes follow her car until she fades from sight.

Bailey stares at my face. “Mr. Darrel, are you wearing lipstick?”

“Huh?” I swipe the back of my hand over my mouth and it comes away red. “No, I was just...” *Sucking on the sweetest pair of lips in the city.* “Eating something sweet.”

“When I eat the blueberry lollipops, my tongue turns blue. See?” He shows me his tongue.

“That means you didn’t brush properly, champ.” I cart Bailey inside the house and help him get ready for bed again.

When I’m back in my bedroom, I pick up my phone to text Sunny. Through my notifications, I see she already sent a message. My heart picks up speed. I think about our kiss again. How soft she’d been in my arms. How she’d arched her chest against me. How she’d guided me to palm her...

*Sunny: Tonight was a mistake.*

My heart deflates.

I read the message twice.

*Mistake?*

Dread pours through my veins.

This woman. She’s determined to make this difficult, isn’t she?

I start to type out my response when I realize that delivering my feelings via text is a sure way to one, not convey my thoughts in the right tone and two, leave her doubting whether I truly value her.

*Darrel: Let’s meet tomorrow.*

She doesn’t respond.

I go to sleep dreaming about Sunny and, when I wake up the next morning, she’s the first thought on my mind. I grab my phone and notice she texted back some time in the middle of the night. Was she unable to sleep because she was thinking of me too?

*Sunny: I’ll see you at the dance session tomorrow. Let’s not make it weird.*

I wrinkle my nose. What the hell does ‘make it weird’ mean? I have feelings for her. I can’t stop thinking about her. And she’s got feelings for me too or she wouldn’t have kissed me back the way she did yesterday.

I run a hand through my hair and it reminds me of the way she slid her fingers over my scalp last night.

My chest expands on a tortured breath. “Sunny Quetzal, what am I going to do with you?”

Feeling restless, I stumble out of bed and take a cold, cold shower. After, I get dressed and head across the hall to wake the boys.

Bailey is easy because he's a morning person. I'm almost certain his *sympathic pathways* are most active with the sunrise. Micheal is the opposite. I have to beg and then threaten him to get ready for school.

When both boys are awake, I head downstairs to make toast. As I pass the living room, I look at the wall where Sunny and I kissed. Memories of her flood my brain and I hurry to make coffee so I can keep myself in check. I don't have time for another cold shower. The boys are running late as is.

Breakfast is toast and scrambled eggs sprinkled with shells because I haven't prepared a morning meal in over a year and I'm a little rusty.

Next, I herd the kids out the door and into my car where I drop them off at school.

"Have a good day, guys."

Micheal nods.

Bailey waves enthusiastically.

On the way to the therapy center, I call Alistair.

"If you're calling to back out of tonight's dance session, it's too late. I've already put your name down. You and Sunny *will* perform this number with us or I'm moving my office into your therapy center to bother you all day."

I frown. "That's an effective but unnecessary threat. I didn't call to cancel."

"Oh." His voice thickens in confusion. "What do you need?"

"A nanny for the boys."

"That's easy. Ms. Hansley can take care of them."

"I love Ms. Hansley. She took care of me and Claire."

"I know."

"But she's getting older. Watching Belle and my boys might be too—"

"Whoa," Alistair gasps.

"What?"

"You just called them 'my boys'."

"Did I?"

"You did." He sounds excited. "You called them 'my boys', Darrel."

I clear my throat. It's not a big deal. The boys are my responsibility. Everything that comes with taking care of and protecting them belongs to

me.

“The point is, I need someone to pick them up from school, help them with their homework and watch them while I’m caught up at the center. I was wondering if you have any recommendations.”

“I don’t. But until you find another nanny, I know Ms. Hansley would love to watch them. Bring them over tonight during dance practice. Or better yet, Ms. Hansley can go over to the farmhouse with Belle if you think the boys would be more comfortable in their own space.”

“Have you told Belle about Micheal and Bailey already?” I flick the indicator and turn left.

“Kind of.” Alistair coughs. “Her only play fellow is Ms. Hansley. I knew she’d be excited about having cousins.”

“Alistair.”

“I know. I know. We don’t want to rush the boys into anything. But come on. We didn’t know they existed for a year. Kenya’s already planning barbecues. Belle’s got a list of Christmas presents for them. We want to meet them. Get to know them. They’re a part of the family now.”

Family.

Bailey, Micheal and I are family. And by extension, they’re a part of Alistair and Kenya’s family as well.

It rings true.

It feels... right.

Alistair hesitates. “Would you have preferred I kept it a secret from Belle?” He sighs. “You’re right. Maybe sharing the news with Belle was a little premature. I’ll talk to her. Try to calm her down. She’s really excited about having cousins, but the boys might not be used to the idea yet.”

I swallow hard. I’m still stuck on Alistair’s first statement.

Family.

“Darrel?”

“You’re right. They are family.”

“Huh?”

My mind relaxes for the first time since the boys came to live with me. I’m overthinking the ‘dad’ label. Family is simple. Family is showing up for someone and giving your all because it’s what you do. Because you’re connected in a way that shows priority.

I smile.

Sunny.

Sunny is family.

“Hello? You still there?”

“Uh, yeah.” My eyes refocus on the road. I tap my fingers to a steady beat. “You know what? I want the boys to meet all of you. How about we gather at the farmhouse before dance practice? I’ll order food. Call it a game night or something. I’ll introduce you, Kenya and Belle officially.”

“Yeah. I’d love that. Belle would too. And Kenya,” he chuckles like a man in love, “probably already has an outfit planned. Oh, I’ll send the name of a reputable nanny recommendation service too. They’re like Make It Marriage, but for caretakers.”

“Thanks, Alistair.”

“No prob. You heading to work now?”

I make a U-turn and slam my foot on the gas. “I’m going to clear something up with someone.”

“Is this someone tall and talkative and loves furniture?”

“Shut up, Alistair.”

He laughs. “Good luck with Sunny, man.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. I’m gonna need it.



## CHAPTER 13

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# A MAYAN BEATING

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## SUNNY

DARREL'S KISS ruined me for life.

Not because his lips were warm and scrumptious. Or because he handled that kiss like he'd been waiting years to taste me. Or because he was solid as steel and who knew Darrel Hastings could be a gentleman who'd want consent before going to second base?

No, I'm ruined because I'm in my couch, twelve hours later, reliving that kiss and trying to pretend that everything is fine.

It's not fine.

*I'm not fine.*

I have work to do. I'm supposed to be drafting a concept for a potential client. I need to wow this family because I have no other job lined up, and I'm desperate to jumpstart my fledgling business.

I should have already emailed this draft, and the fact that I'm here daydreaming is not cool. The rent, electricity bills and gas prices don't care that I'm still reeling from Darrel's sexy mouth.

*Focus, Sunny. Focus.*

Interior design is an art. Like painting or writing or dancing. I can't go through the motions or it'll reflect in my concept.

Unfortunately, my brain cells are stuck on the kiss. It's running on a loop in my mind and it refuses to leave me alone.

This is my fault. I shouldn't have kissed Darrel back. Or guided his hand over my body so he could feel me up. Or stuck my fingers under his shirt and scratched his lean, golden muscles with my nails. And I definitely shouldn't have waited as long as I did to clarify that the kiss meant nothing.

A big fat lie, of course.

Darrel Hastings made me forget who I was, who he was and how, for over a year, he's been treating me like the town leper. I'm an idiot for indulging in him. We've been at odds since the day we met. Now that my tongue got intimately acquainted with his throat, I'm suddenly jumping on the Darrel-train?

I pick up my laptop and scrape the digital drawing pen over the screen, waiting for inspiration to strike.

Instead, Darrel's face appears in front of me, those green eyes dark and disarming. I remember his voice growling, '*stop talking, Sunny*' and a shiver runs down my spine. He got me to stop talking alright. I couldn't say a single word after that kiss.

My phone rings in the silence.

Glad for a new distraction, I pounce on it and answer. "Hello?"

"It's me."

I straighten when I hear Shanya's voice.

"Did you receive the payment?"

I pull my laptop close, maneuver to my bank and check the accounts. With a sigh of relief, I answer, "Yes."

"Good." Shanya speaks in a dry, *I couldn't be bothered with this conversation* tone. "I have another project for you."

My eyelashes flutter. "What?"

"I can email the drafts or you can come in to pick them up. Which would you prefer?" In the background, papers shuffle and an intern whispers, '*Shanya, we need your approval on these wallpaper choices*'.

"I don't remember saying I'd come back to work for you." My voice holds a hint of annoyance.

Something clatters. It's probably Shanya, whipping her glasses off her nose the way she always does when she's exasperated. "Sunny, darling, let's not do this whole 'I'm an independent woman' song and dance."

"Shanya—"

"I was young once, you know. I know what you're feeling."

"And what am I feeling?"

"Invincible." She sighs. "But guess what, Sunny. The world is a cold and hard place. After the Stinton Incident, you probably understand what I'm talking about."

"For your information, I solved the Stinton Incident."

She laughs. "No, you didn't."

Fine. Technically, *I* didn't solve the Stinton incident, but somehow Max Stinton returned my money and made everything okay. Why is Shanya throwing that in my face like it means something?

"Honey, Max Stinton was *threatened* into returning your money. You think they care that much about you? You're a blip on their radar. They have much bigger things to worry about. You weren't even on the list."

I gulp. “No, you’re wrong. I asked my friends if they intervened. Alistair didn’t—”

“Darrel Hastings.”

I freeze.

“Darrel Hastings is a friend of Max Stinton. He made the call.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know?” She laughs softly. “I guess you didn’t. My dear Sunny, it seems your exotic little face has caught the eye of a powerful man. You know Hastings, right? The client who slid me a blank cheque and told me to give you everything your little heart desired. He didn’t want you lifting a finger, you sweet thing. Chivalry really isn’t dead.”

My eyelashes flutter. “You told me he gave us that cash because he wanted me out of his hair. Now I’m supposed to believe that Darrel—”

“Did I say that?” She laughs.

My heart burns like flames are licking at the edges of it. “You lied to me?”

“Made my own interpretation is a more apt description.”

“Shanya!” My stomach quivers.

“The thing is, Sunny, you could easily jump off the treadmill and become a trophy wife for someone like Hastings. It wouldn’t be a bad gig. He’s from a good family. Military father. Heiress mother. A professional career that’s nothing to sneeze at. And he’s willing to spend on you, darling. It could be worse.” She pauses. “But I don’t think that’s what you’re interested in.”

“How do you know that?” I spit. I’m confused and frustrated and angry that we’re even having this conversation. “Maybe I want to be Darrel Hasting’s trophy wife.”

“No, you don’t.” She pauses. “Do you know why I hired you?”

“Because I’m damn good at designing.”

“Because I look at you and I see a little of myself.”

“Then you know why I can’t go back to working for you.”

“Oh, on the contrary. I could be the...” She smacks her lips and I imagine her fluttering her tan fingers as she searches for the right word, “sprawling mahogany tree under which your little branches will flourish.”

“Relying on you is the same as relying on Darrel, isn’t it? You’re using one argument to cancel your own point.”

“I’m showing you that no one gets ahead in this world without help. You thought, in your utter naïveté, that a conglomerate as big and influential as Stinton Group cared about *little old you*.” The amount of sarcasm in her words could choke me. “Now, you’re hit with the hard reality. The truth, dear Sunny, is... if a rich man didn’t want to screw you, you’d still be in the same desperate predicament. You’d still be scrambling to pay your bills and losing credibility in the business.”

My fingers coil into fists. “You’re crossing a line, Shanya.”

“I’m giving you the wake up call of your life, Sunny. Running your own business and being an entrepreneur might seem glamorous on the outside, but you can’t look at those social media stars taking pictures on yachts with bottles of champagne and think success *just happens*. You need someone to propel you. You *need* me. And yes, you can continue your little excursion into being your own boss and squabble around in the shadows, flailing your way up the ladder only to be kicked down again. Or, you can stick a middle finger to the system, join hands with me, and become someone great.”

“Is there an Option C?”

She laughs. “That wit of yours. I’d forgotten how... outspoken you could be.”

“I’m not coming back to work for you. My dream is to design the way I want and build my own brand. That can’t happen if I’m working for someone else and building *their* company instead of my own.” My voice rises passionately. “I know this isn’t going to be easy, but I signed up for that. I’ll stand by the words I said when I walked out of your office, Shanya. I will conquer the interior design world. And I’ll do it by my own hands, not because of who I’m sleeping with.”

“Well, you’re certainly full of fire.” She yawns. “I’m bored. Call me when you’ve gotten off your soap box.”

“I won’t.”

“There will always be a place here for you.”

“Thank you. I know you don’t mean to sound like you care for me, but it’s still nice to hear that I’ll always have a job.”

“On that warm and fuzzy note, I’ll say goodbye, Sunny.”

I hang up and release a shaky breath. My old boss’s words settle on my chest. *He didn’t want you lifting a finger*. It’s possible she misunderstood Darrel’s intentions. He needed the boys’ rooms completed for his own reasons. That part might have nothing at all to do with me.

What I can't explain is why Darrel got involved in my Stinton Investment troubles. He had no reason to do that and got no benefit from it at all. He wasn't even looking for a thank you. He kept it a secret, and I never would have found out if it hadn't been for Shanya.

My heart thumps faster and faster. Does that mean... did he go to all that trouble because he likes me? And maybe the kiss last night wasn't just crossing the thin line between hate and lust? Did it mean something more?

A knock at the door jerks my head up. I blink as another knock shakes the foundations of my building. It sounds like a heavy fist beating a drum.

"Darrel?" I whisper. My feet carry me to the door before I realize that I'm in an oversized T-shirt, pants with period stains on them, and my hair is a mess.

*I can't let him see me like this.*

More knocks shudder the door.

"Just a minute!" I yell. Skittering backwards, I race into my room and tear through my closet.

I don't want to keep Darrel waiting too long, but I also can't figure out what to wear. What outfit says 'I think I like you too; can you kiss me again' without being too obvious?

I finally grab a knitted, green body-con dress that looks casual enough for lounge wear but is tight enough that it shows off my best assets.

I tear my ponytail holder out of my hair, cry out like I've been scalped when I see all the long, dark strands that escaped with it, and then run a brush through the entire mess until it shines.

Makeup. I tap my fingers against my chin. Do I go all out or... No, I don't have time for that. I settle for spritzing perfume on my wrist. Then I pause to dab it behind my ears because I want Darrel smelling something good when he growls in there.

Gloss is the last thing I grab. I scrape it over my mouth and make a mad dash for the front door. *Pause, Sunny. Breathe. You don't want to look too eager.* I close my eyes and take deep, calming breaths until my chest stops pumping up and down like an inflatable balloon. When I'm ready, I open the door and fix my lips into a sultry smile.

"Hey, I wasn't expecting... *gah!*" I jump back when my eyes collide with a five-foot-two Mayan woman with shiny black hair, a flared nose, and a crooked scowl. "Mom? What are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here?” She stomps into my room like an ancient chief barging into a temple for the yearly sacrifice. “What am I doing here?” Her voice is louder this time. A little more shrill.

“You’ve repeated the question twice, but you still haven’t answered,” I point out.

Mom slants me a dark look that all Caribbean mothers know and wield with confidence. I shirk back. Usually, I wouldn’t be this mouthy with my mother, but the words escaped because of shock.

And, if I’m honest, a little disappointment too.

It was supposed to be Darrel. Why is mom showing up without warning?

“I had to see for myself.”

“See what?”

“If my daughter’s lost her mind!” Mom’s eyes bore into my skull. “How could you let Gabor walk away?”

“Mom, you travelled all this way just to scream at me about Gabor?” I want to roll my eyes, but I also want to live to see my thirties, so I restrain myself.

“No, no, no.” She waves a tan finger. I step back. When the finger-wagging starts, it’s time to duck because slippers and hands will be flying next.

I keep going until I’m a safe distance away. “Gabor was a great guy.”

“Even more reason to secure your relationship.”

“Mom, no one ‘secures a relationship’ after one date.”

“That’s the problem with you young people. You want to date around and jump from one relationship to another. It wouldn’t be like that if you were back in the village. You and Gabor would have already been betrothed before either of you had a say in it.”

“And both of us would have been miserable.”

“You don’t know that, Sunita.” Her lips fade into a thin line. She’s scowling so hard that all her wrinkles are tightening to form the lines on a treasure map. “You said yourself that Gabor was a good man.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to get married to someone just because they’re a nice guy. There’s more to it than that.”

“What *more*? You want a nice Mayan man who knows how to work the land and pass the culture down to your children. That is the ultimate goal.”

“What about love, mom?”



“Love?” She bursts out laughing. “Do you think love is feeling giddy around a man? You think it’s when the heart picks up speed and you want to jump into bed with him every time you see him?”

If it is, then I’m definitely feeling that way with Darrel. Had he walked through the door instead of mom, one of us would have had our clothes off by now.

“No, Sunita.” Mom breaks into my risqué vision of Darrel whipping his shirt off. I know I’ve got it bad if I’m thinking inappropriately about Darrel in front of a parent. “Love is staying committed even when the heart cools down, the adrenaline rush flees, and your breasts are saggy. Love is stretch marks over your stomach, enduring hard times together, and building your community in a way that only *you* can because you both know what it is like to be different.”

“You know what love *isn’t*, mom? It’s not forcing myself to marry a man because he’s Mayan or because my mother really wants me to.”

“I have seen the men you pick on your online dating sites, Sunny. It is a joke. You don’t have any luck finding the right partner. I am trying to help you.”

“You are trying to control me. And the problem is, mom, you can push me towards a Mayan man all you want. But at the end of the day, you won’t have to live with him. *I* will. So shouldn’t I have a say?”

Her eyes narrow in annoyance. “Gabor was a good man. I spoke to him myself, and I was impressed. He’s charming, handsome, smart. You both have a lot in common. What is the problem?”

“Maybe he’s too perfect, mom. Ever think of that?”

“Too perfect? You’re just as perfect as he is. You’re... you’re perfect together.”

“We wanted different things.” *Like... I wanted a whole other man and Gabor didn’t want the drama.*

“That makes no sense.”

“I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Tell me what the *real* problem was, Sunita.”

I suck in a sharp breath. Gabor didn’t tell his parents I brought a non-Mayan man to our date. If he had, mom wouldn’t have been so calm during this discussion. And yes, *this* is mom being calm.

I owe him big time for not ratting me out. Unfortunately, my mom isn’t easily fooled. I don’t know what to say to get her off the scent.

“Mom, I...”

Thankfully, her phone rings.

She glances at it and a few of her wrinkles smooth out. “It’s your father. He asked me to call him when I arrived, but I was so upset I forgot.”

“You can talk to him in my room.” I point down the hallway.

She gives me a stink eye. “Don’t think about going anywhere. I’ll be right here after I take this call.”

“I wouldn’t dream of running away, mom,” I mumble. She’d track me down and drag me home to marry a perfect Mayan guy before I could board the plane.

Mom hooks two fingers at her eyebrows, juts them at me, and then picks up dad’s call. “Hey, honey. Yes, I got here safely.”

Hopefully, dad can calm my mother down. He’s always on my side, although he’s quiet about it because he doesn’t want mom to get upset.

*‘You marry any man you want to, Sunita. Doesn’t matter what his color is or where he’s from. That’s what I did. I fell in love with a woman from a different culture, and it was the best decision of my life.’*

With a weary sigh, I trudge to the door. It’s been hanging open ever since mom arrived. Great. Now all my neighbors know my business. *Thanks mom.*

I fling the door shut, but a hand slides into the crack just before it closes.

It’s Darrel.

His chest pumps up and down in violent movements. His hair’s a mess and sweat is trickling down the side of his face.

“Darrel? What are you...”

“Sunny, I have something to tell you.” He places his hand on my shoulder. I’m not sure if he’s doing that because he needs a physical connection or because his knees might give out any second. “For so long, I’ve been trying to ignore the way I feel about you. I told myself I hated you, but that wasn’t true. I hated that I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I hated that I looked for you every time you stepped into a room. I hated that you were still in my heart no matter how hard I tried to get you out.”

“Darrel.” I cast a nervous glance over my shoulder. Mom is still in my room, but she won’t be on the phone with dad forever. As much as I want to squeal over Darrel’s love confession, the fear that mom will discover us is pressing around my skin. “Now’s not the—”

"I know it might not seem like the right time. You're right. You are. I haven't been granted custody of the boys yet and I'm still adjusting to being a guardian. There are some other things I need to work through. Trust me. I'm aware. But I couldn't go another day without telling you that you're—"

"*Alright, honey,*" Mom croons from the hallway. "*I'll tell her.*"

My panic reaches a boiling point when Darrel *steps into my apartment*. His green eyes fasten on the hallway and he blinks. "Is someone here?"

"Yes. My mom." I plant my hands on his back and shove him at the door.

"Your mom?" He lights up. "Should I say hi?"

"No," I hiss. "You should definitely not say—"

"Sunita, your father wants me to send his love. He wanted to be here too, but he couldn't take the time off from teaching. You know, teachers don't get the respect they deserve, chained to a classroom for so many days on end. Summer and winter breaks really aren't enough."

"You're right, mom," I call back. Then I shoot Darrel a frazzled stare. "*Go!*" I windmill my arms and point to the curtains. "*Hide!*"

Darrel scurries around the couch and ducks behind it just as mom pops out of the hallway. She stops short when she sees me, her mom-antennas twitching as she studies my face. I sweat so hard it feels like there's a rain cloud over my head.

Hoping my voice sounds casual and relaxed, I ask, "What's up?"

"Why is the door open, Sunita? Was someone here?" Her eyebrows pinch.

"Someone? No. *Noo*. Who would be here?" Certainly not a burly billionaire who just confessed to not being able to stop thinking about me.

I would be melting and smiling and kissing Darrel right now if mom wasn't here, making me fear for my life every time she so much as flicks her eyes to the couch. He's such a giant man that I can see his back. Wasn't his dad in the military? He should be able to hold a better plank than that.

"Sunny, what do you keep looking at?" Mom twists her head in the direction of the couch.

"Ah! Mom!" I step forward and grab her face.

She jumps as if I mauled her. "Why are you shouting, Sunita?"

"I'm not shouting. I'm just," I choke out a laugh, "so glad to see you. You never visit."

“I can say the same to you. The train goes in both directions, you know.”

“You’re right. You’re always right, mom.” My gaze darts to Darrel again. “How about you and I go to my favorite brunch place, huh? We can chat over fry jacks.”

“I make better fry jacks than them.” Mom humphs.

She’s right, but I can’t have her in the apartment right now. “They have a lot of other Caribbean food on the menu. They have Johnny cakes, Belizean tacos, and meat pies. You know you love meat pies, mom. And it’s hard to find a decent meat pie place here.” I step a little to the side, my fingers digging into her shoulder as I twist her around. “You can have as much as you want.”

“I already had breakfast.” She brushes my hand off her shoulder.

“Then.... Then,” I yelp. “Dessert!”

“What?” Her nose scrunches and her eyebrows dip.

“I’m suddenly craving something sweet.” I rub my stomach. “How about we go get jam rolls from a cafe?”

“Sunita, don’t think you can distract me with food. I came all the way here for one reason only—to set you back up with Gabor.”

Darrel makes a disgruntled sound.

Mom’s head whips in his direction.

I slam a fist to my mouth and start coughing like I have a terminal disease. Slinging a hand over my stomach, I shake my head. “Sorry, mom. I’m just not feeling well.”

“Sunita,” she speaks in a low, firm voice. “What is going on? Why are you behaving so strangely?”

“Mom, I’m fine. I just don’t want to talk about arranged marriages anymore.”

Mom’s jaw drops as if she’s personally offended. Her voice is a frustrated shriek, “I am *not* arranging a marriage. You have all the choice to marry or not. What I’m doing is arranging a date since you don’t seem too interested in taking control of your own love life.”

Darrel pokes his head out from the corner of the chair. His eyes collide with mine *how long do I have to be back here?*

*Get back.* I punctuate each silent instruction with a wave of my hand. Then I catch mom watching me and lift my hand to fan my face. “Whoo. It’s hot in here, isn’t it?”

“Sunita,” Mom has to rise slightly on her tiptoes to grip my shoulder, so I bend my knees to make it easier on her, “you are not getting any younger. Soon, you will be thirty and no Mayan man will want you. Women who choose their career over a family tend to regret it. I don’t want that for you.”

I sigh heavily. “Mom, lots of women *do* have a career and a family later on in life. When you’re older, you’re more mature and you know more about yourself, about your value, and about how you want to be treated. I want someone who...” I gesture with my hands, “supports me but isn’t afraid to challenge me. I want someone who chooses me even if I’m different and loud and a little crazy sometimes. I want someone who’s taking care of two little boys because they need a home and he made a promise.”

“What? Children? No, no, no. You don’t want any man who has kids, Sunita. Why would he make kids with another woman and expect you to take care of them? That might be okay for Kenya, but not for you.”

“Mom.”

“I’m tired.” Her eyelashes flutter. “Tired of your arguments and your excuses. So far, you have not given me *one* good reason for rejecting Gabor. Now I’ve confirmed that it was your Westernized ideas driving him away. I’m going to fix—*aaah!*”

Mom’s wail of terror catches me off guard and I nearly jump out of my skin. She digs her fingers into her purse. “Sunita,” her voice drops to barely above a whisper, “don’t be alarmed.” Mom edges closer to me. The rough fabric of her skirt itches my skin. “But I think there’s someone in the house with us.”

If my heart flogs my ribs any harder, it’s going to crack something. I grab my mother’s hand. “You must have seen wrong.”

“I did *not*,” she hisses. Eyes glued to the back of the chair, mom whispers, “Sunita, call 9-1-1.”

I hold her back. “Mom, there’s nothing—”

She shakes me off again. “Do it.”

I pull out my phone. I’m not just panicking right now. I’m full-out losing my mind.

Mom grabs the measuring stick that I keep tucked behind my china closet in the living room. Gripping the ruler with both hands, she slowly approaches the couch.

Cracking under the pressure, I lurch at her. “Mom, wait!”

“Burglar!” Mom screams like a banshee and brings the ruler down so hard on Darrel’s back, the giant man crashes to the floor. “Burglar!” Another wallop. This time, he sprawls out like a crushed cockroach.

“Mom, stop!” I jump on her hand to keep her from murdering an innocent man.

She wrestles with me. Damn. This woman is strong for her age. I barely manage to snatch the ruler away from her.

“Mom, mom. He’s not a burglar. He’s not!”

Darrel groans and slowly pushes up on his hands and knees. Green eyes swim with pain and his lips tremble slightly. He places a hand against his back as if he can still feel the ruler cracking over his skin.

I meet his eyes. *I am so sorry.*

He blinks rapidly and climbs to his feet, using the back of the couch to prop himself up.

“If he’s not a burglar, what is he doing in this house?” Mom yells.

“He’s...” I hesitate.

Her sharp eyes swerve to me. “Sunita Quetzal, why do you have a man creeping around your house. Are you insane?”

“Hi, Mrs. Quetzal.” Darrel extends his arm. “I’m Darrel Hastings. And I’m...” His gaze glides to me. “In love with your daughter.”

Mom’s jaw drops.

Then she makes a grab for the ruler as if she wants to beat Darrel again.

“Mom! Mom!” I wrap my arms around her. “It’s not his time to die yet.”

“Only God knows when we’re supposed to go. And He told me, today was this punk’s day!”

Darrel flinches, but he stands his ground. Impressive. That courage deserves a kiss. If he makes it past this day, of course. I’m not kissing a corpse.

“Sunita.” Mom stops fighting. I let her go, still keeping an eye on her. Shoulders hunched, she flares her nose like a bull and glares at me. “Explain.”

“Mom, Darrel is Alistair’s brother-in-law. Remember Alistair? Kenya’s fiancé?”

“Yes, I know him.”

“He’s... we’re... this is...” I slant Darrel a panicked look.

"I don't care what this is." Mom points at Darrel. "Tell me. Is he the man you were going on about? The one who challenges you?" Her eyes widen. "The one who has two kids?"

"They're... um.. yes." I cringe.

Mom slaps a hand to her forehead and moans. "Ay-ya."

"They're really special boys, mom. Their names are Bailey and Micheal. You wouldn't believe how intelligent they are. I—"

"Enough." Mom lifts a hand.

I exchange another look with Darrel.

He steps forward. "Mrs. Quetzal, I've known Sunny for a long time and I can assure you that the feelings I have for her are the kind that don't go away. I'll treat your daughter preciously and I'll love her for the rest of my life. That's a promise."

Mom scoffs and glances away. "You think a promise means anything?"

"I know we've just met, ma'am. But once I make a promise, I keep it no matter what."

"My daughter is *not* getting involved with a man who has two kids. She has her whole life ahead of her. But you? You see her dark skin and her Mayan eyes and her Mayan nose and you think she is someone you can push around. Someone you can turn into your prostitute and your babysitter."

Darrel shakes his head. "Ma'am, I don't think there's a living soul who can push Sunny around."

Mom makes another annoyed grunt.

"She's more precious to me than you could imagine." Darrel glances at me, his eyes soft. "She's the most beautiful woman I've ever met." He returns his attention to mom. "I don't really know your culture, but I respect it. I respect Sunny. She's... the boys and I, we don't just want her. We need her." His voice gets rough. "She's family."

I send heart eyes in Darrel's direction.

Mom goes deathly silent. "I've seen enough."

"Wait. Mom, where are you going?" I follow her as she marches to the door.

"I'm going to pretend this conversation never happened." She gestures between me and Darrel.

"Ignoring it isn't going to change the facts, mom."

“Fine. Do it your way. Date this man all you want.” Her eyes darken.  
“But when it is time to marry, you must marry a Mayan man.”

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## CHAPTER 14

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# ALMOST ROAD KILL

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## DARREL

“IT DIDN’T BREAK THE SKIN,” Sunny murmurs to my back. She opens the first aid kit and pulls ointment out of it. “But it’s extremely red and...” She touches my skin and I flinch, “sensitive to the touch.”

“Your mom is surprisingly strong.” My words are muffled by the pillow in Sunny’s couch. After Mrs. Quetzal accused me of being a burglar, slammed down the letter of the law on my back, and then explained—in no uncertain terms—that I should not be having long-term thoughts about her daughter, she stormed out.

In the silence that followed, Sunny stiffly disappeared into her bedroom, returned with the first aid kit and told me to lie on my stomach.

Now, I’m sniffing her perfume that’s trapped in a frilly blue pillow and eyeing the ruler that probably left a permanent mark on me. It’s lying on the floor, still long and wooden. With all the force Mrs. Quetzal used, I’m surprised that thing didn’t snap in half.

“I’m so sorry.” Sunny pours a balm on the tips of her dark fingers.

“Don’t be sorry. I should have hid better or gone out the back door.” In the moment, when Sunny was gesturing for me to get out of sight, I found two potential hiding places—it was either the couch or the filmy white curtains.

Since I’m a big guy and, sadly, I’m not skilled at camouflage, the curtains were a no-go. But the couch didn’t work out either. Maybe it would have been better if I’d jumped out the window and took my chances with the ground three floors down. Probably would have hurt less than Mrs. Quetzal’s brutal spanking.

“No, I’m sorry you had to hide in the first place.” Sunny gently rubs her fingers against my injured skin. It feels good, but it stings a little too. I clench my jaw so I don’t bawl out like a baby.

“I understand.”

“What part of this is understandable?”

“Your mom wants the best for you.”

“You’re being gracious. Mom only wants the best for our community.”

“The Mayan community?”

She nods. "I think she feels guilty for leaving the village and coming to America." Her touch is whisper-soft. Like butterfly wings. It's soothing and warm. "Growing up, she turned our house into a mini-Belize. We celebrated every Belizean holiday like we'd get a citizen's award for it. And if there was a Mayan kid anywhere in our neighborhood, she foisted them on me and forced us to be friends."

"Your mom is only acting out what her brain is wired to do."

"Do not defend her behavior with your brain science, Darrel, or I swear I'll grab that ruler and smack you again."

I turn my head to the other side so I can look at her. "Is that a Mayan thing?"

"Threats?"

"Assaulting men with measuring equipment."

She snorts. "Fine. Give me your brain science."

"You want to hear?"

"You're going to tell me whether I agree or not."

I press my hands into the pillow. "The amygdala is a component of the limbic system in the brain..."

"Here we go."

"It controls our emotions, perceptions of threats and fears..."

"Wow." Sunny removes her hands from my back.

"... Perhaps when your mom sees someone who could be a threat to her culture or her community, the amygdala gives a more intense electrical charge..."

She caps the balm and puts it back in the first aid kit. "I'm so interested in this."

"... it could explain why she has a visceral, negative reaction to the fact that I'm crazy about you."

Sunny moves in front of me so I can see her face. "Don't do that."

"I'm trying to explain why I understand."

"You are sexy when you go full nerd. But you're injured. My mom is pissed. I still have work to do. Now isn't the right time to jump on you. I need to control myself."

"No, you don't."

She gives me a stink look.

"And I'm not a nerd."

“Geek? Is that the proper term? I always get those two mixed up.” Her eyes are dark and her skin is glowing and she’s sparkly. I’ve never seen a human being sparkle as much and as brightly as Sunny Quetzal.

*Damn, she’s stunning.*

“*Nerd* refers to someone with a high IQ and propensity for academics,” I inform her. “*Geek* is usually reserved for someone who’s enthusiastic about something, not necessarily what they’re good at. Like a history buff. Or someone obsessed with slasher movies.”

“See?” She whips her hand through the air. “One and the same.”

My lips quirk up. “They’re different.”

“Must everything be an argument with you?” Her eyes narrow, but her tone is amused.

“Our brains function differently. For us, arguing is inevitable.”

“Then you should run now because I don’t like to be wrong. I’m... allergic to it.”

“What if I’m right on occasion? Can’t you accept that?”

“No, because even when I’m wrong...”

“You’re right?”

Laughter resounds in her voice. “Hey, maybe I will give you a chance.”

I smile.

Sunny doesn’t. She wraps her arms around her knees. Her shoulders slump and her eyes dim like the sun leaving because of a storm. I feel the loss of her smile keenly. I’d do anything to put it back on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Stop apologizing.”

“You got whipped by my mother.”

“And I’m whipped for you. Figuratively.” I eye the ruler in mistrust. “I’d like you to burn that thing.”

She laughs and then leans forward and kisses my forehead. “I heard the thump your head made when it hit the ground. Sounded painful.” Leaning forward, she kisses my head again. “I hope it stops hurting soon.”

“I smacked my cheek too.” I point there.

She kisses my cheek.

“The other side got dinged pretty bad.”

She chuckles and presses her lips to just above my jaw. “Did you really have to tell my mom you were crazy about me?”

“I didn’t want to lie to your mother and make a bad impression.” I capture her wrist when she tries to lean back.

Her smile makes my heart flip. “Yeah, you definitely avoided making a bad impression.”

“I agree. I think she likes me.”

Sunny bursts out laughing. “You’re funny. I didn’t notice until recently.”

“I wasn’t being funny earlier.” I stare intently at her until the twinkle leaves her eyes and I know she’s hearing what I’m saying. “I meant what I said to her.”

“You said a lot of things to her. I think she got angrier with every word that left your mouth.”

I slide my thumb over her cheek. “I didn’t mean to make her angry, but I did feel the need to declare my intentions. I don’t know how we’re going to convince her, but I’ll put all my effort into it.”

“You’ll never be Mayan.”

“I can learn everything I can about it.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s not going to stop matchmaking me with men like Gabor.”

“Then I’m not going to stop attending your blind dates with you.” I shrug. “The first one worked out really well.”

“What?”

“Gabor was a nice guy. We follow each other on social media now.”

Her jaw drops. “You didn’t.”

“He shares great farming tips. It’ll help me level up my gardening skills.”

“Darrel.”

“I’m glad we went on that date with him.”

Sunny laughs again. “You’re insufferable.”

“I love it when you show off your vocabulary.”

“At least I have *something* to show from studying Literature for four years.” Her eyes flick to my lips. Her elbows are staked into the sofa and she’s so close I can see the flecks of brown in her eyes. “Unlike some people who studied business and then went back to school to study science. Such slackers.”

“I’d be ashamed if I were them.”

She chuckles and leans closer.

My breathing slows. I rub my fingers over her knuckles.

Sunny traces my lips with her finger. "Are we really doing this?"

"Kissing?"

"Dating. A few months ago, we hated each other. Now, we're—"

"In a relationship."

"Right."

"A relationship with an end goal." I study her eyes because this part is important. "It's me and the boys. We're a package deal." I tilt my head, recalling her mother's valid concerns. "You're still young. If that's too much for you—"

She places a finger to my lips. "I love Micheal and Bailey. The deal is sweeter because of them."

My heart squeezes.

If I don't taste her lips *right now*, I'm going to combust.

I lean over and press a kiss to her mouth, loving the way her breath hitches and her eyelashes flutter like they can't hold themselves up anymore.

"I don't break my promises." I wrap my arms around her waist. "You're stuck with me now."

"Sounds like delicious torture."

I hoist her on top of me, forgetting that I got walloped with a stick and my back isn't ready to be thrusting into couches yet. The full weight of Sunny presses me down and I hiss without meaning to do so.

Sunny gets frantic. "Darrel, your back."

"Give me a second," I growl. I let the wave of pain pulse over me and then I get myself together. There's no way I'm giving up an opportunity to kiss Sunny Quetzal.

Flipping her over, I settle her on her back and push myself up so I'm hovering on top of her perfect body.

"This is the benefit of dating a nerd." She locks her hands around my neck. "You're all about problem solving."

"Not a nerd."

"I find nerds hot."

"Hello, my name is Nerd."

She laughs. "That is so lame."

I smile.

She touches my cheek and tilts her head, her eyes glistening with awe. "I haven't seen you do that much."

“What?” I turn her wrist over and press a kiss to it.

“Smile at me.”

My heart tugs painfully. I spent so much time trying to convince myself that I hated this woman—first for the things that had gone down in the past, and then for the way she kept butting heads with me in the present.

“Sunny, I—”

She jerks me down and glues her mouth to mine. Easing back, she breathes, “Less apologizing. More kissing.”

Sounds like a good deal to me.

We smile as we lean close again. Our lips meet in a sweet, forever kind of kiss.

I feel as light as a damn feather. My body. My mind.

My fingers cradle her cheek as we kiss. I let her set the pace at first. Let the moment stretch out because I don’t want it to end. Then I get impatient.

I grip her chin and tilt her head so I can deepen the kiss. My hungry hands rake over her body, stroking up her thighs, over her belly and chest, and back down again.

My heart elevates until I hear alarm bells. Even then I don’t stop touching her. I want to be acquainted with every nook and cranny of her. Every part of her that makes her sing or grunt or gasp for mercy.

She hooks her leg around my waist. With her foot hoisted up, her skirt scrunches and gives me access in a way I’ve only dreamed of.

My hands lock around her knee and scrape upwards, tugging at the hem of her shapely, green dress. The fabric is soft to the touch and it glides smoothly over her thighs.

Sunny’s hands rove my chest and down to my pants that are straining against her. Her hands are hot and heavy. I’m about to explode from the mere friction of our bodies writhing on the couch.

Clothes. I need clothes off.

Hers first.

I need to see her. Feel her.

My hands slip under her dress and scrape against her upper thighs. I feel lace and my head gets dizzy.

Sunny Quetzal is wearing lace underwear.

I scrape my knuckles over it.

She whimpers.

“Sunny,” I grind out.



She curses. "It's so hot when you growl my name. Do it again."

"So demanding," I murmur, kissing her neck and plucking the lace so I can work it down her legs.

An unwelcome gust blows through the room as the front door bangs open and footsteps pound the ground. "Girl, you will not believe—*eep!*"

That high-pitched squeal sounds familiar, but I can't place it because my brain is too busy tilting off axis.

*Must get Sunny naked. Must ride Sunny into the sunset. Must have her for dinner and dessert and breakfast.*

I force my thoughts away from Sunny's intoxicating body, trying to find the will to scramble off her. That choice is taken away from me when she bucks like a wild donkey and kicks me off the couch with so much force, I land on my back. The pain that rattles my body makes me groan.

Sunny scrambles toward me. "Darrel, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do that. Are you okay?"

"What is going on here?" Kenya demands. She's facing the door, her hands propped over her eyes.

"I'm fine." I hold a hand out to Sunny so she stops worrying. "I'm fine."

"Sunny! Explain!"

"I can't believe I forgot to lock the door."

Kenya whirls around and plants her hands on her hips. Despite her tightening eyebrows, a smile flirts with her mouth. "That's what you're worried about? I have a key. I would have caught you either way."

"Dang it. She's right." Sunny pushes the skirt of her dress back down and smooths her hair. "I can explain. But first I'll need my key back."

"Why? You plan on doing this more often?"

"I certainly do," Sunny says.

My frontal cortex is being overloaded with hormones. It's sending way too many jolts of electricity to my pants.

"I'm still waiting for an explanation." Kenya looks expectantly at me. "Are you two hooking up now?"

"We're dating," I say simply.

Sunny shoots me a stunned look.

I nod at Kenya and rise to my feet as calmly as I can. Her eyes dip to my pants and then her smirk widens. "Dating?"

I clear my throat. "That's correct."

“Don’t you hate her?” Kenya points between me and Sunny. “And isn’t it the same on your side, Sunny? A few days ago, you spent three hours ranting about how Darrel was an emotionless robot—”

Sunny pounces on her best friend and covers her mouth. “Darrel, you should head out now.”

“*Mmf mmf mm!*” Kenya’s brown eyes widen and she flails her arms.

“I can spare a few more minutes,” I say easily.

“Your patients are waiting.” Jutting her chin at the door, Sunny mumbles, “I’ll call you later.”

As I leave Sunny’s apartment, I hear Kenya sputter and then yell, “Ew! Darrel-germs. Girl, I don’t know where your hands have been!”

I laugh and close the door softly behind me.

\* \* \*

DINA GIVES ME A STRANGE LOOK IN THE OFFICE AND IT’S ONLY THEN I realize that I’m humming.

“You okay, Hastings?”

“Never better.”

Her eyebrows hike, but she doesn’t ask any more questions. We discuss the schedule for the day and I pretend not to notice her concerned glances.

I know she’s worried. I know *why* she’s worried too. The last time we spoke, I had a mini-breakdown when she suggested I call myself a father.

Not a good look. I’ll work on that.

But for now, I’m going to celebrate my wins.

Sunny Quetzal is my woman.

I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I’m going to bask in it for as long as I want.

The first client arrives and I focus on the session. As soon as they’re gone, I grab my phone and send Sunny a text. She texts back, letting me know that she shooed Kenya out of her apartment and she’s working on a new design concept.

A knock on the door announces the second client. I answer Sunny quickly and then set the phone away. It continues like that all day until the last client leaves.

Dina pokes her head through the door and delivers the case notes.  
“Darrel, do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” I say distractedly, looking at my phone. “But just a minute.”

“I want to talk about our conversation yesterday.”

My heart freezes.

“You shared a bit of what you’d been through with me, but I think you should consider telling someone the full story. Alistair or Kenya or even a professional.”

My fingers curl into fists. “Tell them what? That I have a problem with the word ‘dad’?”

“That you had an abusive father.”

I stiffen.

“You don’t want to call it that. Fine. In a way, you still look up to him and respect him for what he accomplished when he was alive. That’s okay too. But you’re internalizing the hurt you experienced as a child. It’s all bubbling out now that you have children of your own. It’s going to affect the way you raise them. The way you see yourself. And the way you approach fatherhood in the future.”

I open my mouth.

She lifts a hand. “Yes, Darrel. They are *your* children now. Just like I consider you as a son. Perhaps it’s even more intense than that, as you want to be legally responsible for their welfare.”

“It’s different.”

“You insisting that it’s different is concerning.”

“I’m not going to hurt them.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“I’d die first.”

“Exactly.” She juts her chin down. “I don’t want you to have that kind of intense emotion when it comes to parenthood.” Her fingers curl over my shoulder. “Because parenting doesn’t come with a handbook. We’re going to make mistakes no matter how hard we try because we’re human. We’re flawed. We’re fragile. We break and then we find a way to put ourselves back together again. I want you to give yourself grace, Darrel. You deserve that.”

I swallow hard, her words knocking solidly against my chest.

My phone rings.

I lift it, glad for an excuse to cut the conversation short. "It's Sunny." I show her the screen as if I need to provide evidence.

Her smile is gentle. "I like her for you."

"Because she acts first and thinks about it later?"

"Because she gives herself the grace to try even if it means making a mistake. You can learn from each other." Dina pats my hand. "I'll start taking off my computer and locking up. Something tells me you're going to leave work *right* on time today."

I close the door behind her, lean against it, and put the phone to my ear. "Sunny."

"Wow." She exhales through the phone. "I used to hate the way you growled my name, but now it drives me crazy."

"I'm not growling."

"You don't even know you're growling. That's ten times hotter."

I smile, but it's muted because I'm still thinking about my conversation with Dina. "Did you finish the design concept?"

"Yes. Barely." She pauses. "The boys should be finished with school around now."

"I'm going to pick them up. You want to come with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

I stop by a Caribbean bakery for some jam rolls and coffee before swinging by Sunny's apartment.

She's waiting downstairs, looking like summer personified in a red and green top and shorts that show off her long legs. Her hair's falling around her shoulders except for one section that's held back in a clip.

She bounces into the car before I can open the door for her. "Hey."

"Hey." My eyes drop over her body. I don't know what to focus on first. She's just that distracting.

"You ready for this dance class tonight?" She grabs her seatbelt and tugs.

"Uh..."

"I love to dance. I used to drag Kenya to all these different salsa clubs when we were in college. The music speaks to me. It's similar to a kind of Mayan sound called... Darrel?" She waves a hand in front of my face. "Are you listening?"

"Yes." I cough.

Her smile is mischievous.

“What?”

“You’re checking me out.”

“Am I?”

“And making it painfully obvious.” She chuckles. “It’s cute how awkward you are.”

“I’m not awkward.”

“You’re a nerd with, like, five facial expressions. If that’s not awkward, I don’t know what is.”

I release my seat belt, propel myself over to her side of the car and hover over her. “Call me a nerd again. I dare you.”

Her eyes go dark and she visibly swallows, but she doesn’t follow my warning. Pushing out her lips, she whispers, “Nerd.”

I attack her side with my fingers, tickling her so hard that her hands flail and her long legs coil up.

“Darrel!” She pants, laughing and squirming.

“Scientists found that being tickled stimulates the hypothalamus.” I duck when she swipes at my head and move my hands down to her belly. “That’s the area of the brain in charge of your emotional reactions.”

“I’m going to... *ha!* I’m going to kill you.”

“Did you know that when you’re tickled, you laugh because you’re having an automatic-reflex response? It’s not necessarily because it’s—*oof.*” My explanation is cut short when her elbow collides with my jaw.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry!” She freezes.

I test my jaw and, thankfully, nothing feels shattered. “You Quetzal women are just... intent on beating me up today, aren’t you?” I frown.

“That’s why you shouldn’t mess with us.”

I groan loudly. “Isn’t this the second time you’ve elbowed me in the jaw?”

“Kiss and make it better?” Sunny grabs my face, but the kiss doesn’t last long because she smiles and I end up puckering up to her teeth.

She laughs. “Sorry. You’re just... cute.”

“It’s better than being a nerd.”

“True.”

“And you’re wrong about one other thing.” I start the car.

“What?”

“I have six expressions.”

She throws her head back and laughs.

I smile, slide my fingers in hers, and drive to pick up the rest of my family.

\* \* \*

“WHERE’S MICHEAL?” I TAP MY WATCH. MIDDLE SCHOOLERS FLOOD THE pick-up lane where I’ve been parked for a few minutes. I search their faces, looking for a particular head of curly hair.

“He’s usually here,” Bailey says, peeking out from the car window.

“Let me call him.” Sunny, who’s still in the front seat, plucks her phone out of her purse.

“Oh, look! I see him!”

I glance in the direction Bailey’s pointing and notice a small boy shuffling through the crowd with his head down. He’s got a hoodie on and he looks like he’s fighting to blend in.

I get a flashback to my own high school persona and my instincts send up alarms. Something’s wrong. It’s hot out here. Why is Micheal all covered up in a jacket and hoodie?

Sunny must have that same question because she shoos me aside and climbs out of the car. “Hey, Mike. You okay?”

“Yeah,” he murmurs. Sticking his hands into his pockets, Micheal stares at the ground so the hood of his jacket covers his face.

“You sure?” Sunny insists. Her voice is light, but I can see the way her eyes are narrowing.

Micheal nods.

“Then what’s that on your shirt?” Sunny points to his jacket.

Micheal glances down and Sunny uses that opportunity to drag his hoodie back. Ice crawls through my veins when I see the bruises on Micheal’s face. My eyes lock on the split in his lip and a surge of protective instincts rushes over me.

I control the rage because I have more practice doing so.

Sunny... does not.

“Who did this to you?” Sunny asks in a low voice. Her eyes are black marbles, gleaming with murderous intent. Tension coils her shoulders and she cracks her neck from side to side. “Who, Micheal?”

Micheal quickly flings the hoodie back on his head. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing?” Sunny grabs his chin and tilts his face up. “You call this nothing? You were obviously in a fight.”

“Sunny.” I touch her elbow. We’re in a public setting and Micheal is clearly uncomfortable exposing his injuries—or the story behind them—to us. Reason dictates that we take him home and address this in a more controlled environment.

Sunny sucks in a deep breath through her mouth as if she needs more oxygen than her nostrils can provide for her. Eyes sliding closed, she whispers, “Micheal, I’m going to give you three seconds to explain, very clearly, what happened today.”

“It’s nothing.” Micheal kicks at a rock. He’s speaking in the angsty middle-schooler grumble that forces me to lean forward so I can hear.

“The truth, Micheal,” Sunny hisses.

Micheal does a hard, obvious swallow. “Ebenezer... cornered me by my locker today.”

“You fought with him?” Sunny asks, her voice tight.

“No.” Micheal lifts his head. Brown eyes lock on Sunny like a lost puppy. “I remember what you said. I made a choice.”

Sunny recoils. Fingers trembling, she clips the bridge of her nose and rubs briskly. “Micheal, I didn’t mean that you shouldn’t defend yourself. Did you just stand there and let him beat you up?”

Micheal glances away.

Sunny’s face hardens. With slow, measured movements, she scoops her hair up and ties it back in a ponytail.

“Where is he?” Sunny asks quietly.

I hurry to her and grab her arm. “Sunny, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to find Ebenezer and I’m gong to beat the snot out of him. That’s what I’m going to do.”

Micheal whips his head up.

Bailey gasps.

I release Sunny’s hand and then immediately grab it again. I’m torn between being the voice of reason and holding her purse while she kicks Ebenezer into the dirt. He’s a minor. Violence is an outlandish response to the situation, but anger is clouding my judgement.

I thought my irrational side was preserved for Sunny alone. I was wrong. Logic is flying out the window now that one of my boys are hurt.

“Where is he?” Sunny barks, her fingers curling like claws. “Where is the little bully?”

Micheal shakes his head.

“He’s over there.” Bailey chirps, pointing out a lanky kid with spiky hair and braces. He’s running across the field, his jersey shirt flapping against his back.

Sunny takes off in Ebenezer’s direction.

“Sunny!” I scramble behind her. *Stop her from committing a crime, Darrel. You’re the one who’s supposed to be thinking rationally.*

So why do I want to see the little twat get his just desserts?

*Rational thoughts. Rational...*

Ebenezer jumps into a fancy sedan before we can get to him. The car moves out of the parking lane, the indicator flickering. They’re driving away. We’re too late.

But Sunny doesn’t slow down. She *speeds up*.

Her arms pump at her sides. Her legs kick up dust behind her. She runs pell-mell until she skids in front of Ebenezer’s car and throws her arms out. The driver stomps on the brakes and the tires make a loud screeching sound before they come to a stop inches from Sunny.

My heart drops to my toes.

*My woman is insane.*

Scowling, Sunny trots to the driver’s side window and raps her knuckles against it.

“Are you crazy, lady?” A woman with long black hair and red lips pushes her head out. “I could have knocked you over.”

“Are you Ebenezer’s mother?” Sunny demands.

“Yes, so what?”

Sunny lowers herself to the window, crowding the woman’s space and forcing her to inch back in fear.

“W-what are you doing?”

I join Sunny at the window. Ebenezer is looking on from the backseat, watching in confusion and a little fear.

In that moment, I realize he’s just a kid too.

I want to pull Sunny back, stop her before she does something out of emotions rather than logic, but I trust her. I trust that, even if we go about things in a completely different way, she’s not going to do anything that compromises the values we both treasure.



So I step back. Not too far away that she can't reach for me if she needs me, but making it clear that she can take the lead and I'll have her back.

"Today, your son beat up my friend Micheal." Sunny's voice is crisp and cutting, but it's low. She's not shrieking or throwing hands. It's taking an effort to remain calm. I can see the vein pulsing in her temple, but it doesn't show in her voice. "I don't know what's going on at home that Ebenezer thinks this violent behavior is acceptable. What I *do* know is that Micheal is no one's punching bag." Her eyes slide to Ebenezer and he trembles. "Treating people like garbage might feel good right now, but one day, your son is going to wake up and realize that he hurt someone. He'll feel empty inside because he has no way of making it up to them. I don't want that for him." She leans closer. "And I'm betting you don't want that either."

The woman swallows so hard I can hear it like she's got a microphone to her face.

"So," Sunny straightens, "let's not make this happen again, or we'll be getting the police involved." She smiles, but there's an edge behind it. "And we wouldn't want little Ebenezer to go through that, would we?"

The woman shakes her head 'no'.

"Great." Sunny hits the car three times on the hood and both the mother and son jump. "You two have a great day!"

"Crazy..." Ebenezer's mother hurls an expletive as she winds her window up and drives off.

I'm the one who wants to chase after her sedan and bang on the window now, but I can't. Sunny is extending her hand to me. I grip her fingers and realize she's not reaching for me out of affection but because she's trembling.

"You did good," I whisper, running my hand over her hair.

"I wanted to choke her."

"I know."

"He hurt Micheal."

"I know that too."

Tears mist in her eyes, but only a fool would think it's because she's sad. "If he hurts Micheal again, I won't restrain myself."

I kiss her temple and sigh. "I know."

If Micheal gets hurt again, I won't restrain myself either.

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## CHAPTER 15

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**CAN'T STAY BURIED**

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## SUNNY

MICHEAL ISN'T SPEAKING to me.

Which could be because he's angry I made a scene in front of his entire middle school. Or because his lip's busted and it hurts to talk. Either way, I feel like a screw up.

I coil my fingers into fists and stomp to the farmhouse ahead of Darrel and the boys. Unfortunately, I don't have a key, so my angry march is cut short right at the screen door.

Footsteps pound on the porch steps. I stare at the sky and the trees waving around the acreage. Blues and greens and fluffy white clouds. It all blurs in front of me.

My jaw clenches so hard, I'm afraid I won't have any molars left in old age.

Darrel slants me a quick glance while opening the door. He hasn't said much either. I'm not sure what he's thinking right now. That I'm crazy for throwing myself in front of a moving vehicle? That I shouldn't have addressed Ebenezer's mom the way I did? That I'm a bully for wanting to beat up a kid?

*You're a bully, Sunny.*

A frightening shudder runs down my spine. Guilt crawls deep under my skin, spreading sticky webs everywhere. Spawning darkness and regret. Making me want to jump under the shower and scrub until my skin is raw.

*You're a bully.*

I know what it's like to walk a school hallway and feel like I have power. I know what it's like to use that power to spit on other people. To hurt them simply because they opposed me. It's hard to accept that, in the past, I was an Ebenezer to someone and now that karma is coming back to bite the people I love.

I stumble to the kitchen, grip the edge of the sink and suck in a deep breath. My shoulders are hiked to my ears, and I'm trying not to slump over.

I push the memories of the old Sunny from my mind. Dragging it out now will send me into a downward spiral of anxiety. And I can't be caught

up in myself when Micheal needs me to be the adult in the room.

Bailey's watching, his worried blue eyes trained on me. His little mind is turning. I can feel him teetering on the edge of confusion and fear.

Chair legs scrape the ground as Micheal takes a seat around the table. It surprises me. I didn't think he'd be mature enough to sit down for a discussion. Darrel must have given a quiet instruction.

Another chair leg scrapes the ground. I don't have to turn and look to know it's Darrel. His presence is... it's like a blanket of calm. It's as soothing as the balm I spread on his back after mom smacked him.

Just knowing that Darrel is here, behind me, waiting for me... it makes my heart slow down from the crazed pace. It makes my thoughts fall into order until I can pick them up with my hands and piece them together again.

I turn slowly and my heart jumps to my throat.

The boys are sitting around the table.

They're silent.

They're waiting.

For me.

I let out another breath. My emotions are riding high and I can feel the tears pressing the backs of my eyes. Why am I crying? It's not like Micheal won't recover. It's not like I lost him.

*You're a bully, Sunny.*

This is my fault. I let my own guilt about my past, about the way I used to treat people, cloud my advice to him. Because of me, Micheal just stood there, small and helpless, while someone mistreated him. While someone hurt him. Because of that, I'm just as guilty in today's incident as Ebenezer.

Darrel turns to me. I used to think he was expressionless, but I'm learning more and more than I was wrong. Darrel shows his emotions, but they're not exaggerated. They're subtle. Like the way one of his eyes is slightly narrowed. The way his jawline is much more pronounced, indicating that he's clenching his teeth ever so slightly. And the eyebrows that are hovering a little lower over his somber green eyes.

His gaze softens when he looks at me and some of the tension in my body leaves. He pulls out the chair next to him as if he can't start without me. A blanket falls on my shoulders, warm and snuggly. The feeling that I belong. That I belong *here*. With them.

I take a step toward the chair. And then another. And another. Until I'm sitting next to Darrel and facing Bailey and Micheal.

Both of the boys are sober. Their lips disappear into their mouth. Neither of them look up and it feels like Micheal isn't even blinking.

"I asked to have a family meeting," Darrel says softly and slowly, "because I'd like to discuss what happened today."

I swallow hard.

Darrel plants his hands on the table, palm up. "First, I'd like to make one thing clear. We're bringing up Ebenezer's behavior with the school."

Micheal's head flops up. "Why?"

"Because what he did was wrong," Darrel folds his hands together.

"But Sunny already dealt with it," Micheal grumbles. "Ebenezer would be stupid to bother me again."

I blink rapidly. Did he... just acknowledge that I helped?

Relief pools through my veins, but I don't let it get to my head. "Micheal, what I did today was out of emotions and impulse. Yelling at someone doesn't mean there will be lasting change." I glance at Darrel who gives me a little nod of encouragement. "Different situations call for different approaches."

"Everyone will find out."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" Darrel asks calmly. "If you do, I'm open to hearing it." He waits and lets the silence thicken.

The strategy is effective. Micheal slumps deeper into his chair and shakes his head.

Darrel's voice remains gentle, as if he wants Micheal to know that this isn't a punishment nor is he trying to make the situation worse. "I believe it's the right thing to do."

"How can it be? You'll turn me into the school laughingstock."

"Bringing this up with the principal can not only help all the kids who've been afraid of Ebenezer, but it might also help him too. Maybe he doesn't know what he's doing is wrong. Or maybe he's acting like that as a cry for attention because he needs more professional help."

My own past rises from the grave where I buried it. Regret piles up until it's a physical throb in the pit of my stomach.

"Darrel's right," I croak.

Micheal's eyes dart to me.

"If it's a known fact that Ebenezer bullies other kids, we can't let it continue. We'll have to take it up calmly and intentionally with the principal so no one else gets hurt."

“That means we’ll need to discuss exactly when and where today’s incident took place.”

Micheal folds his arms over his chest. “I’m not a snitch.”

“Okay.” Darrel lifts his hands. “That’s fine.”

I whip my head around. *How is it fine? We need Micheal to cooperate if we’re going to resolve this.*

“No one’s going to force you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, Micheal.”

The eleven year old squirms.

I glance at Bailey. “What do you think?”

“Me?” His eyes widen.

“Yeah.”

Micheal tilts his head, listening.

“I think... it’s not snitching.” Bailey fidgets with the hem of his shirt. “It’s like being a superhero.”

Micheal frowns.

“You’re doing the right thing even if it’s hard.” Bailey nods. “That’s cool.”

The brothers stare at each other for a moment. Then Micheal’s gaze softens. He lets out a deep breath. “Fine.”

Darrel gets a pen and paper. “You want to tell me what happened?”

I hold my hands tightly under the table and force myself not to react with anger or frustration or any other emotion as Micheal recites what Ebenezer did. Darrel remains much calmer than I could ever be under these circumstances. He jots down everything Micheal says about the incident. After, he snaps a picture of his notes because he’s aggravatingly meticulous and then he sends the picture as an email to himself.

“I’m proud of you, Micheal,” Darrel says, folding the note into a square and slipping it into his pocket.

The eleven year old looks up with shiny brown eyes. His hair flops over his forehead and he blinks rapidly.

“Today, with Ebenezer, you made a hard choice and you stood by that choice even if it meant getting hurt. It takes a very strong man to do that.” Darrel leans forward. “However, there’s one thing I want you to remember. Violence is never the answer but, sometimes, being silent and taking hits isn’t the right answer either. I hope that, going forward, you won’t get hurt anymore.”



Micheal's bottom lip trembles. "I won't."

Darrel gives him a small, encouraging smile.

I glance down and tug at the hem of my shirt. "I don't want you to get hurt anymore either, Micheal. When I gave you that advice, I never meant for you to... to be in pain."

Micheal nods. I want to crush him in my arms when I see him quietly swallowing our words and not throwing tantrums. Whether his maturity comes from losing everyone in his life at such a young age or whether he really is just an old soul, I feel the urge to protect him so he can be a little kid for longer.

Darrel leans back. "You guys can head to your rooms now. And make sure you do your homework early. We're having guests over."

"Yes, sir," Bailey says.

Micheal walks with his brother up the stairs.

Darrel glances at me, but I don't want to meet his eyes. He's going to analyze me. See right through the 'nothing can hurt me' front I put up. And then he's going to know that I'm fragile and guilt-ridden and uncertain about almost everything even though I act like I'm the total opposite.

Moving to the cupboard, I open the door and try to keep my voice casual. "Do you think we should still go to the dance class tonight?"

I hear the chair legs scraping the ground as Darrel rises.

Pretending that I'm too engrossed in finding the bag of flour, I shuffle through the cupboard. "Micheal and Bailey may not be in the mood to socialize. It's been a tough day. I think I'll make some brownies for them before I go home. You guys can enjoy something sweet and have a quiet night."

There's still no audible response from Darrel, but I feel him getting closer. He's oozing confidence. Some kind of magical aura that makes me want to be closer to him and maybe cry a little on his shoulder.

It's no wonder he's always so busy at the clinic. His patients probably sense that reliability in him. He's this big, serious man with a poker face and the strength to listen to their problems and help them solve it. Of course they'd chase him down.

I set the flour on the counter. "If we're going to cancel, I need to let Kenya know now. She's really excited about this dance class and about meeting the boys. And Belle... Kenya said Belle's bringing all her puzzles and board games. I almost feel bad for—"

A pair of strong, brawny arms close around my waist. I stumble, and I'd probably smack my belly into the counter if not for the grip Darrel has on me. He presses his body into mine and tucks his head in the crook of my neck.

Warmth envelops me and my heartbeat speeds up. I drop my fingers against his knuckles, lightly scraping the rugged skin.

Still holding me from the back, Darrel whispers, "Why does today bother you so much?"

"What do you mean?" I breathe out. It's hard to think right now. Mostly because Darrel is touching me and thinking about him is ten times easier than letting the reminders of my past run rampant.

"Do you regret confronting Ebenezer and his mom?"

"Of course not," I croak.

"Then?" His breath fans against the side of my neck and my knees lose their strength. We're having a serious discussion. The boys are upstairs as we speak. Micheal's upset. Bailey's overwhelmed. Heat shouldn't be pooling between my thighs and swirling in my stomach right now.

*Get yourself together, Sunny.*

"Is it because," Darrel nuzzles his nose into my neck, "you feel responsible for what happened?"

Ice replaces the heat in my veins. "Aren't I? A little?"

"Explain that."

"It's obvious."

"Not to me." He shakes his head.

"I shouldn't have acted like I know how to parent someone. I shouldn't have told him not to fight. If he had, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

"Do you know why I disagree with you?"

"Because our brains are different and arguing is inevitable?" I murmur, recalling his words from earlier.

"No." His grip on my waist tightens and he turns me around. Our eyes connect and I feel a thrill go down my spine. Darrel leans his forehead against mine. "We can't control what the world does to him. We can't protect him from all the harsh realities he'll have to face. But we can let him know that he has somewhere to come home to. He has people who will keep him safe."

The tears I've been trying so hard to hold back break free. One slips down my cheek.

Darrel gently scrapes it away with a crooked finger. "He talked to us. He trusted us. That counts for something."

"It still feels like my fault."

His voice is as gentle as his touch. "We don't know if fighting back would have resulted in Micheal getting hurt even worse. We don't know the impact fighting back would have made on the way he thinks and solves his problems. You told him he *could* make a different choice. And he did. You didn't fail him, Sunny. You inspired him."

Two more tears hit my cheeks. *Dammit*. I'm not a crybaby. I don't remember the last time I've blubbered like this.

"I just... I want him to be okay."

"I know." Darrel hugs me. His warm embrace fills me with peace.

My arms tighten around him and I hide my face in his chest until I've gotten those stupid tears under control. There's absolutely no reason I should be crying right now. It's ridiculous.

He leans back and chuckles. "I don't think I've ever seen the great Sunny Quetzal lose confidence."

"It happens to the best of us."

"Don't let it happen too often. If it does, tell me. I'll be the first one to remind you of how amazing you are." He kisses me gently. "Also, I won't say no to canceling dance class."

"I changed my mind. We're going."

He frowns. "Why?"

"You want to be the one to tell Belle she can't meet her cousins tonight?"

He tilts his head and seems to think it over. "How about you tell her and I provide moral support?"

"Very funny." I push him off me. He's making it hard to concentrate and I can't throw him into bed right now, so he might as well give me some space. "Go see if Bailey needs help with his homework while I get these brownies whipped up."

Darrel kisses my nose. "Call me if you need help."

"I will."

His lips curve up in a half smile. He steps back, but he continues to hold my hand and doesn't let go until our fingers drift apart. I watch him as he mounts the stairs to take care of the boys.

*Family.* My heart swells and pulses like it's been hooked up to extra batteries. I know why mom doesn't want to take my relationship with Darrel seriously, but this is... it doesn't feel like anything I've ever experienced.

That man and those two little boys—they're changing my life. The more time I spend with them, the less I want to leave.

\* \* \*

ALISTAIR, BELLE AND KENYA DESCEND ON THE FARMHOUSE WITH COOKIES, gifts, and more excitement than a college freshmen at her first music festival.

"This room is *awesome!*" Belle squeals, staring wide-eyed at Bailey's wallpaper. She's glittering in a pink shirt, pink tutu and angel wings. It's a creative fashion choice that's so stinking cute. "Whoa! Look at that, daddy!" She points at the bed and the pillows in the window nook. Little feet scurrying, she hurries to the bookshelf next. "It's so cool!"

"It's incredible," Alistair agrees.

"My best friend is amazing at what she does." Kenya loops her hand around my elbow and slants me a proud look. "I can't believe you got this done in twenty-four hours."

"Insane." Alistair nods, impressed.

I soak in their praise and I don't bother hiding how much it pleases me. Yes, I love compliments. Who doesn't? I know what I went through to get these rooms together, and I'm still shocked we managed to pull through.

Darrel stands in the doorway, his eyes trailing me. He doesn't say anything, but the curve of his lips screams his delight. It's almost as if he's getting high on this 'Heap Sunny With Love' moment. As if he has a personal stake in seeing me thrive.

The gang oohs and ahs over the bathroom and then turn back and head straight to the living room since Micheal's door is locked.

Bailey and Belle spread out the board games. A few minutes later, Micheal comes down. I assume the noise and laughter drew him, until Darrel quietly informs me that he threatened Micheal with brownies, warning him the treats would be all gone if he didn't move downstairs.

As the kids play, I get to observe—firsthand—what happens when two shy little boys meet an adorable princess in a pink tutu and angel wings.

“That’s cheating!” Bailey bellows, his eyeglasses tipping so far down his nose that it’s going to hit the stack of UNO cards in the next three seconds. “You can’t pick up from the deck more than once.”

“Yes, I can,” Belle says, her pretty brown eyes dancing with mischief.

“You’re wrong.”

“Prove it.” She tips her chin up. That’s definitely Kenya’s attitude rubbing off on her.

Micheal clears his throat. “Guys, let’s play fair.”

“Okay.” She chirps. “In the *next* game.”

Micheal’s jaw drops.

Bailey throws his hands up.

Kenya glances at me and we both smother our laughter behind our hands. Belle has her two older cousins in a headlock and she’s doing it so casually too.

The kids go another round.

Belle ends up taking the game.

“I’m not playing anymore.” Bailey throws his cards down.

Belle pushes out her bottom lip. “But we only played two games. You promised you’d play at least five with me.”

“I know but…”

Belle does the puppy-dog face and fluttering eyelashes combo.

Bailey glances desperately at his older brother.

Micheal shrugs as if to say ‘don’t look at me’ and then grabs for another brownie. When he first arrived in the living room, he exchanged awkward hellos with the beaming family of three who kept staring at the bruises on his face like they had questions. I’m glad that he’s looking more comfortable now.

Ms. Hansley, a plump older woman with greying hair and orthopedic pumps, flutters around the kids. “Micheal, would you like some milk with your brownies?”

“Yes, please.”

She hands him a cup with a smile.

He accepts it and gulps the drink down.

Ms. Hansley waits right there until he’s finished and then takes the cup back to the kitchen where she washes it immediately. That woman has not

stopped flitting about since she arrived. I've left my perch in the couch several times to ask if she needs help and she's shoved me out as if offended.

*No, no. You go enjoy your time with your friends, dear. I've got the kitchen.*

"Belle," Alistair calls from the other end of the sofa where he's stroking the leg Kenya has slung over his lap, "you can't play dirty when you're around your cousins. Save that for when it's just us."

"Okay, dad," Belle grumbles.

Kenya smiles at Bailey. "She's going to follow the rules now, Bailey. She doesn't want you boys to stop playing with her." My best friend arches an eyebrow. "Right, Belle?"

"Yes, ma'am," she grumbles, huffing as she reaches for the cards. "I'll shuffle, okay?" Belle slants hopeful eyes at Bailey. "Can we go again?"

"Alright," he huffs.

Micheal stuffs his face with brownies and lifts a sticky hand. "Deal me in too."

"You guys want to play?" Belle asks. "Aunt Sunny?"

"Sorry, babe." I check my watch. "We need to head out now."

"Is it that time already?" Kenya checks her phone and her eyes bug. "I was having so much fun watching them play that I lost track of time."

Alistair stretches and then extends his hands to her. "Ready, Miss Jones?"

"Oh yeah." She takes his hand, allows him to drag her to her feet and then giggles when he spins and dips her.

"Boo!" I call.

Kenya sticks her tongue out at me. "Don't be jealous just because we have moves and you don't."

"Girl, Darrel and I can dance circles around you."

"Sunny," Darrel tugs on my shirt, "maybe don't raise your expectations that high."

"Relax. How bad can you be?"

Alistair barks out a laugh. "I'd suggest you wear steel-toed shoes if you don't want your toes crushed, Sunny. He's as rigid in dancing as he is with everything else."

Darrel grunts his displeasure as his ears turn pink.

I jump to defend him. “Hey, no smack talk. *I’m* the only one who’s allowed to make fun of his bad dancing.” I stick a finger in my shirt. “Know your place, Mr. CEO.”

“And where’s my place exactly?”

“Not beside him.” I cozy up to Darrel. “That’s my spot.”

Kenya pretends to hurl.

Belle giggles.

Micheal rolls his eyes.

Bailey’s too focused on the game to care.

“Remember the days when they used to hate each other?” Alistair tells Kenya. “I liked that better.”

Kenya laughs.

Darrel remains close-lipped, but there’s a hint of amusement in his green eyes.

“We really do need to go.” I tug him out of the sofa and he stumbles reluctantly behind me.

We wave goodbye to the kids and then pile into our cars—Kenya rides with Alistair while I jump into Darrel’s front seat and subject his ear drums to soca music until we arrive at the dance studio.

My heels tap loudly on the wooden floor. I turn in a slow circle, observing the room filled with mirrors. The only wall in the entire space is painted purple and has hideous stick-on letters spelling out ‘*nobody puts Baby in a corner*’.

Darrel sticks close, his hand on my waist and his jaw set in a pensive frown. He’s not looking forward to this.

“Loosen up,” I whisper, elbowing him in the side.

He grunts in a slightly lower frequency as if to say *thanks, that’s very helpful*.

I know I’ve got it bad if I’m beginning to differentiate between Darrel’s annoyed grunt and his sarcastic grunt.

“Hello, beautiful humans.” A voice booms from the doorway. A man wearing a sparkly black shirt and loose slacks sashays into the dance studio. He’s gripping the arm of a svelte and trim older woman with greying hair coiffed into a bun.

My eyebrows jump when I see him.

“Oh, you finally got your maid of honor and best man to join us.” The dance instructor glances at me. Then his eyes double back. “Sunny? Sunny

Quetzal?”

“Rex?”

“Sunny!” Rex demolishes the distance between us and sweeps me up in his muscular arms. “Sunny, girl. You have not changed a day.”

“You know each other?” Kenya asks.

“More like he hung around my ex-boyfriend, and I had to tolerate his presence,” I tease.

“Speaking of your ex, have you heard? Eric is getting married.”

“Really? I didn’t know.” He wasn’t that great of a guy or a boyfriend. I broke up with him to reinvent myself and he moved on quickly. Obviously, it was no big loss.

“He doesn’t really talk to me that much either, so I was surprised when I got the wedding invitation...” Rex’s eyes stray to Darrel and linger. “Who is this?”

“Rex, this is Darrel. Darrel, this is an old friend from high school.”

Rex peers at Darrel, perusing his face with such intensity that I wonder if something’s wrong. Darrel gets stiff and broody. He stares straight ahead as if the sight of Rex makes him want to punch something.

Rex tilts his head to the side. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be weird, but you seem familiar. Have we met?”

“No.”

“Oh. Maybe I’m mistaken. It’s just... you look exactly like this kid from high school—”

Darrel sucks in a sharp breath.

I step forward. “Rex, Darrel didn’t go to high school with us. If he did, I definitely would have remembered.” A guy as handsome as Darrel would have gotten all the girls at John Hearst twittering and I would have been at the front of the pack. “He’s an accomplished neuropsychologist. Maybe you read about him in a magazine or something.”

Rex chuckles. “My bad. Which high school did you attend?”

“None of your business. Are we going to start this lesson or what?” Darrel snarls.

I narrow my eyes at his rude tone and then smile at Rex to smooth the awkwardness. “Please excuse him. He barks but doesn’t bite.”

“I see.”

I lean close to Rex and whisper loudly, “Darrel isn’t a fan of dancing.” Or fun in general. But I’m not going to mention that in front of strangers.



Darrel already seems to be in a weird mood.

“No problem. This dance is easy to learn. We should get you both up and running in no time.”

“Great.” My smile fractures as I tighten my hold on Darrel and slant him a scolding look. *What is your problem?*

He drags his hands away. *Nothing.*

I wrinkle my nose. *You’re being a jerk.*

He glares a hole in the wall.

Rex chuckles nervously. “It’s my fault for prying. I’ve been that way since high school. Not sure if Sunny remembers, but we got into all kinds of trouble back then.”

I do remember and it makes me a little sick. I’m not proud of all the decisions I made in high school, but lamenting it won’t change the past. All I can do is focus on the future and make better choices. Choices that don’t hurt people. Choices that are good for the soul.

Rex gestures to me. “Why don’t we get into formation? The bride and groom can rehearse what they’ve learned with my assistant, while I teach the maid of honor and best man the basics.”

We start the lesson, but I’m too heavy on my feet to flow as lightly as the romantic dance calls for. Darrel is even worse than me. Rex is ready to tear his hair out by the time we’re done.

“No, no, Darrel. You put your foot forward first and then back. It’s a simple one-two-three step!”

Darrel’s hold on me tightens. He gives Rex a murderous glare which makes the other man shirk back.

“I mean... you’re doing fine. Dancing off-beat is a style too.”

I frown up at Darrel. “Are you okay?”

He just grunts.

Great. We’re back to Neanderthal communication now.

Rex coaches us through the routine again, but Darrel and I just aren’t in sync.

“That was great!” Rex declares after forty-five minutes of re-thinking his choice to teach amateurs the art of classical dancing. “The bride and groom are ready but, if you don’t mind, I’d like to work with these two a little more.”

“I’m in,” I agree.

Darrel folds his arms over his chest. “Not interested.”

I touch his wrist. "Please?"

He glances away. "No."

"For me?" I bat my eyelashes.

He sighs so hard his chest caves in.

I brighten. "I'll take that as a yes."

Alistair approaches us. "Stay here and practice for a bit longer if you want. We rented this place for another half hour."

"I'll take Belle home and ask Ms. Hastings to watch the boys until you get back. Don't worry about how long it takes to get the routine." Kenya squeezes my hand. "I really want you two to dance with us."

"We'll keep trying," I assure her. She's my best friend. How can I *not* try my best for her?

Kenya and Alistair leave, holding each other's hands and whispering until the door closes behind them. I glance up at Darrel. Something in his expression makes me pause. He looks... tortured. As if this moment is taking everything out of him.

*He must really hate dancing.*

I open my mouth to comfort him, but Rex beats me to it. "Dancing can feel hard at first, right?" He folds his hands behind his back. "Here's the secret. Dancing is about honesty. There's only so much you can fake before it all starts to fall apart."

A thought line appears in the center of Darrel's forehead. His lips tighten and he seems to struggle even more with whatever's on his mind.

Rex motions to us. "Darrel, please take Sunny's hand."

Darrel lifts his arms woodenly and grips me.

We start from the first eight count, his hand on my waist and my hand on his shoulder.

We step forward. Back. Forward again.

I sigh into his neck. "You seem upset."

"I'm not." He doesn't crack a smile. Or a scowl. He's barely looking at me.

We stumble over each other, right ourselves and start the song from the top. As I dig my fingers into his shoulder and move to the rhythm, I prod him. "What's wrong? You got super weird the moment Rex walked in." I spin out and then spin toward him, stopping against his chest. "You're not jealous, are you?"

He scoffs as if such an emotion is beneath him.

“That’s right.” Rex bobs his head. “Look at that. You’re getting better.”

Darrel moves back. Pauses. Moves forward. Pauses.

I follow his lead, wishing he’d just tell me what’s wrong.

After a while, Rex allows us to take a break. “You’ve improved tremendously. If you need a drink of water, go ahead and do that now. I’d like to go over the steps one more time before we call it a night.”

“Thanks, Rex.” I follow Darrel as he marches over to the bench and grabs a bottle of water. His hand trembles slightly. The way his eyes dart to the door suggests that he’d like to leave. Immediately. “What’s gotten into you?” I insist. “You’ve been tense all night.”

He sighs and turns to me. “It’s—”

“Hey, Sunny. You have a minute?” Rex asks, wiping his hand on the side of his pants.

I tear my gaze away from Darrel’s troubled expression.

“Over here.” Rex points to a spot a few paces away from the bench.

I follow him there. “What’s up?”

“You remember hoodie guy?” Rex asks.

My eyes dart up, and an annoyance I thought had died a long time ago jumps to the front of my mind. I was a menace to many people during my time at John Hearst, but the hoodie guy was one of the few who deserved it.

“That guy...your dance partner.” He juts a chin at Darrel. “He looks a lot like him.”

“What?” I shake my head at the mere suggestion. “Don’t be ridiculous. Darrel isn’t the hoodie guy. Like I told you, he never attended John Hearst. And second, he’s not a creep.”

Darrel’s head whips around as if he heard me.

I frown at Rex, keeping my tone at a low hiss. “Do you remember what that guy did to me?”

Rex chomps down on his bottom lip and glances away.

I forge on despite his lack of encouragement. “That crazy pervert photoshopped pictures of my head on top of a bunch of naked bodies. He slipped it into my locker and then acted all innocent.” I shake my head, my temper spiking. “Darrel would never—”

“Here’s the thing, hoodie guy didn’t actually put those pictures in your locker,” Rex blurts.

My eyelashes flap. I stop breathing for a second. “What did you just say?”

Rex's gaze jumps to Darrel. I turn too and realize Darrel is standing close to us, his eyes so intense I'm afraid both Rex and I are about to be singed.

Rex cringes. He looks genuinely afraid of what Darrel will do to him. My mind is whirring, and I couldn't care less that Darrel is closing in on us because I'm too busy trying not to hyperventilate.

Rex swallows hard. Voice trembling, he backs up. "Forget I said anything."

I advance on him. "Continue, Rex. I want to know what you meant by that statement. You know it was hoodie guy who put those pictures in my locker."

"I don't think I should—"

"Start. Talking," I snap. "Now."

Rex licks his lips and runs a hand through his hair. An expletive slips out of his mouth. He squeezes his eyes shut as if he's in physical pain.

On pins and needles, I lean forward to hear what he has to say. Back in high school, I made it my mission to destroy hoodie guy. I became a nastier, meaner version of myself in the name of revenge and fighting the good fight.

If it turns out that hoodie guy is innocent...

That would make me the bad guy.

And that would mean I ruined someone's life... for nothing.

## CHAPTER 16

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# GREAT INTERRUPTIONS

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## DARREL

THE SECOND REX CONNORS recognized me, I felt the walls around my secrets crumbling.

The truth is beginning to unravel, and it's different from what I'd understood it to be.

I overheard some of Rex and Sunny's conversation. They're talking about illicit pictures. Sunny seems bewildered and I'm just as stunned. Who put those pictures in her locker and what do they have to do with the incident that scarred me for life? Most importantly, where will Sunny and I stand when the dust settles and we're standing on either side of the truth?

Rex looks at me again, and his eyes shudder with fear. He licks his lips, sticks a hand into the pocket of his pants and leans back. He's stuck between me and Sunny. He's not running anywhere.

"The pictures that you saw," he blinks rapidly, "Eric staged them."

Sunny grits her teeth. Nostrils flaring, she asks sharply, "Why would he do that?"

I fold my arms over my chest. I know the answer to that question, but I keep my mouth shut.

"Eric caught hoodie guy slipping a note into your locker. He asked me to crack your lock so he could get inside. Turns out, the guy left a love confession."

It's hard to keep from flinching. It's hard to keep breathing. Rex is pulling a scene straight out of a nightmarish time in my life and rolling it out for Sunny to inspect. I could interrupt now. I could say my piece. But I don't.

"Eric thought it was hilarious."

"Hilarious?" Sunny's voice turns shrill. "He thought it was funny to replace a regular love note with..." She sputters. "R-Rex, I—" She snaps her mouth shut. Eyes burning, she growls, "You know what I did after I found those disgusting pictures. You know we... what we did to that boy. You're saying Eric knew the truth the whole time and watched me get revenge... for what? A laugh? A story to share with the buds?"

"I'm sorry, Sunny."

Sunny seems out of it. Dazed, she turns to me and mumbles, “What have I done, Darrel? What have I done?”

I know the answer.

I was there.

On the receiving end.

Sunny hunches her shoulders. The confidence she so naturally exudes is replaced by trembling hands and hitching breaths. “You’ve heard me say that I wasn’t... the best person in high school. I stepped on a lot of people, but the worst thing I ever did was to the hoodie kid.”

“The hoodie kid?” The words escape raspy and choked. Sunny doesn’t notice. She’s too wrapped up in her guilt to hear it.

Her eyes dart back and forth. “That’s what everyone called him. No one knows when he started school. He just kind of... appeared one day. He walked around with this hoodie and was always lurking around me. I saw him a couple times, watching me, but he never spoke.”

I wince. A memory of that day swells in my head. *He’s such a freak. Why would I ever go out with him?*

“I thought he was harmless.” Sunny’s voice is getting tighter and tighter. “Until one day, I found some really disgusting pictures in my locker. There was a note. It said ‘from Hoodie Guy’.” Sunny slaps her forehead. “I’m such an idiot. Why would he sign it like that? He would have signed it with his own name. I should have known something was shady from that moment.” Her eyes throw daggers at Rex. “Someone should have spoken up.”

“Hey, no one forced you to do what you did next,” Rex points out.

“I wouldn’t have done anything if...” Sunny stumbles back. “I thought I needed to teach him a lesson. I didn’t think—” She crouches over and holds her knees. “I set him up...”

As she speaks, the memory returns to me in startling clarity.

*“HEY.”*

*“Me?” I point a finger in my jacket.*

*“Yes, you.” Sunny Quetzal beckons with a smile that sends fireworks through my body. Did she get my note? Is she going to respond so soon?*

*I stumble toward her, keeping my head down because looking her in the eyes feels like a privilege I have to earn.*



*“Are you going to the pep rally tomorrow?”*

*“I didn’t plan to.”*

*“You should come. Sit with me.”*

*“Really?”*

*“Yes, really.” Her voice is as smooth as silk. “Maybe after, I’ll even let you take me out for a milkshake.”*

*“DARREL, I...” SUNNY’S VOICE IN THE PRESENT IS THICK WITH SHAME, “I publicly embarrassed him...”*

*“SUNNY SAID YOU SHOULD SIT HERE.” REX CONNORS WEARS A BIG GRIN AND points to a spot on the bleachers.*

*I stumble to my seat. My knee is jittery and my mouth is dry. I can’t believe Sunny asked me to sit with her. I can’t believe she read my note and wants to go out with me.*

*The auditorium is filled to the brim. The entire student body showed up and they’re all chatting loudly. I can’t see Sunny anywhere. When is she getting here?*

*Suddenly, a giant projector screen rolls down from the rafters and everyone goes silent. A picture of the football team rolls onto the screen. Eric’s at the front, smiling in his uniform. I scoff. He’s a jerk. I’ve thought for a while that Sunny should dump him.*

*The picture on the screen changes.*

*A recording of Sunny’s voice blares through the speakers. ‘Who is the hoodie guy?’ My picture appears on screen. ‘A creep’. Footage of me looking at Sunny in the hallway plays.*

*Everyone around me laughs.*

*‘A freak’.*

*Another image plays. This one of me in the boys’ locker room after P.E. Someone had stolen my clothes. I was stomping around trying to find it and slamming my fist against lockers when I couldn’t.*

*My face heats up. I had no idea someone was filming me. I thought the locker room was empty.*

*Now the entire student body is laughing at my naked body wrapped only in a towel.*

*More fingers point in my direction.*

*More laughter.*

*More ridicule.*

*‘He actually thought I would date him?’ Sunny’s pre-recorded laughter shreds my ears until they bleed. ‘I would never be with someone like him. Never in a million years. So go away, hoodie guy. And don’t even look at me again.’*

“HE LEFT THE SCHOOL BECAUSE OF ME.” SUNNY’S HARDLY ABLE TO SPEAK between gasps. “He was terrorized after that prank at the pep rally. He lasted, maybe, three days max before he dropped out of school. And now, I’m finding out... the reason I did that was because my ex manipulated me. I destroyed someone—” She sinks to the ground.

I breathe in deeply. My emotions are chaotic. Jumping from one thing to the next. Swinging between anger and pain to sympathy and concern.

The truth is here.

And it’s time to face it.

I glance at Rex. “You. Out.”

His eyebrows jump. “What?”

“I need the room.” Jutting my chin at his bags, I growl. “Take your things and leave.”

Sunny lifts her head. Tears shimmer in her eyes. She looks exactly like the queen bee of John Hearst. The girl who made me believe there was a chance I could be with her. The girl I was willing to risk public shaming for.

Yeah, I knew something like that could happen.

I knew Sunny Quetzal suddenly being into me was too good to be true. Still, I attended the pep rally because I liked her so much that just the *chance* of being with her was worth it.

“I’m sorry, Sunny.” Rex hurls the words over his shoulder. The door bangs shut as he disappears from the room. I see his head bobbing in the distance before he finally turns the hallway and leaves my sight.

“Sunny, get up,” I say stiffly.

She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

I slip my hand under her elbow and tug her to her feet. She stumbles against me and I wrap my arms around her. “There’s something you need to know.”

Her body quakes against me. “Not right now, Darrel. I can’t... I can’t look at you right now. I’m too ashamed.” Head still bent toward the ground, she mumbles, “I think I should go home.”

“No.” I tighten my grip on her.

“Darrel, didn’t you hear me?” Sunny explodes. “I’m a bully. I’m a terror. I don’t deserve to...” She swallows the rest of her words with a warbled cry. “I don’t deserve your comfort right now. And I can’t accept it. You weren’t there. Okay? You don’t know how *awful* I was to him.”

“I was there,” I whisper.

She turns her head to me, and I meet her gaze without flinching. As the silence stretches, I absorb her guilt and regret. I take in everything. Then I let it disperse softly because I’ve had time to come to grips with the Sunny she used to be and the Sunny she is now.

“What?” Sunny searches my eyes desperately.

I should have told her from the start. It was the right thing to do. The mature thing.

And I didn’t.

But how could I tell her I was the guy in the hallway, staring at her as she glided through the school with her posse and her pretty smile and her hair that shimmered with every step? How did I tell her that the day we spoke for the first time was the day she showed me the most cruel part of herself?

I don’t know how to fix this. I have a ton of practice fixing other people, but I don’t know where to start tonight.

She covers her mouth in shock as she makes her own deductions. “Is that why you didn’t want me snooping around your room? In case I found your high school yearbook?”

“And the photo albums.” I glance aside. The breath I take in is so painful that it squeezes my chest. “I look different today than I did in high school. And I have a much better understanding of who I am now and how to be confident. Most John Hearst kids don’t recognize me when they see me.”

She stumbles back. “The evidence was right in front of me this entire time. I had no idea.” Eyebrows tightening in distress, she whispers, “Darrel,

what... how long have you known who I was?"

My pulse speeds up until it's sprinting.

Her brown fingers slip over my arm. She leans forward, her eyes imploring me.

"I recognized you the moment we ran into each other in the furniture store last year. You looked... *exactly* as you did in high school."

Her eyes turn hazy. "That's why you didn't want to shake my hand."

It wasn't dislike that made me ignore her hand. It was shock. Micheal and Bailey were coming to stay with me for the first time while Ms. Jean did her treatments. I was stressed about accommodating them. When I saw her, the girl who stole my heart and then crushed it all those years ago, I did the immature thing. It's not a moment I'm proud of.

She trembles. "I can't believe this."

"I should have told you earlier."

"I can't..." She paces away from me and sinks into the bench.

"I thought you were the same person that you'd been in the past. I thought that if I just scowled at you and ignored you, everything would be fine."

Sunny is silent for a long time.

I plod to the bench and sit beside her. My knee is jittering. My fingers curl against it to stop it from moving. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" She swallows. "Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who's sorry. No, I'm more than sorry. I can't even look at you because I'm so ashamed." She makes a pained face. "It must have been sickening to see me. I didn't know that I'd done that to you, and I intentionally picked fights with you every time we met."

"You never made me sick, Sunny. In fact, it was the opposite." I'm unloading the truth. It's pouring out of me like a mountain wave that's strong enough to topple houses and lampposts. "It didn't take long to realize how much you'd changed. You were kind and genuine and determined. You went out of your way for your friends. I was attracted to you even more than when we were in high school. I panicked at first. I didn't want to be drawn to you all over again, but I started having feelings for you and they kept growing even though I fought it."

She hops to her feet and starts pacing. "You could have told me."

I shake my head. "I know. I wasn't trying to lie to you."

“You knew...” her steps slow, “oh my gosh, you knew and you still hired me to decorate the boys’ room.”

I blink rapidly.

“You knew and you still went up against Stinton Group to help me.” She looks at me with such a fierce expression that I wonder if she’s going to slap me. “You knew and you still told me you loved me.”

The knots in my stomach are squeezing so tight I can barely breathe. “Sunny.”

She takes giant steps toward me, her long arms swinging. Without warning, she throws her arms around my neck. I almost crash off the bench.

Sunny holds me tight, not caring that we both almost toppled to the ground. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness.” Her eyes squeeze shut. “But I’m going to ask for it anyway.” She eases back and stares into my eyes with her soulful brown ones. “I’m so sorry, Darrel. I’m sorry I led you on that day. I’m sorry I showed that private footage to the entire school. I’m sorry I was so cruel to you. And I’m sorry that it took me this long to find you and say these words to your face.”

“It’s okay.”

“It is the opposite of okay.”

I cradle her chin. “Sunny, we were so young back then.”

“It doesn’t matter. I knew better.”

I detect the guilt in her eyes and feel an overwhelming urge to comfort her. “I won’t lie. What happened that day left an impression.” She cringes and I smooth out her frown. “But it also taught me to be stronger. I had a choice to fall apart or be more confident. I chose to turn my life around so that no one could bully me again.”

“That’s not a lesson any child should have to learn, Darrel. I should have been kinder. Instead, I was a monster to you. You left the school—”

“That wasn’t because of you.”

“Don’t even try to make me seem like a decent human being.”

“I didn’t leave the school because of the pep rally, Sunny. I mean it.”

She gazes up with tear-filled eyes. “No?”

“No.” I rub her back soothingly. “A few months into the school year, my dad got another assignment. I knew we were going to leave. That’s why I gathered my courage and wrote you a letter.”

“I never got to see it. What did it say?” She holds her breath.

“That I loved you.”

Her eyes widen.

“There was also a brain scan,” I add sheepishly.

“A what?”

“The teenage-me thought it was cool.”

“Seriously? A brain scan?” Her lips wobble as if she doesn’t want to give herself permission to smile, but she’s amused anyway. “Like an actual picture of your brain?”

“Yes.” I’m glad she’s laughing. I’m glad those dark days can be dragged into the light and feel like a funny memory. I don’t hold what happened in the past against her. Sunny’s here. She’s holding my hand and she’s apologizing and she’s looking at me as if she wants to go back in time and throttle her younger self. I never imagined that I’d end up meeting her again or falling for her or finding out the reasons behind her cruel prank.

“Tell me why,” she presses, wiggling in my lap.

My body rises to attention, but I force myself to focus on the conversation. “I’d been interested in science and neuropsychology since I was a kid. I went to one of my dad’s friends at the hospital and I asked for an MRI scan. You shouldn’t be able to do that, but I used my mom’s money to pay for it and they were happy to accommodate me.”

“That’s still not a ‘why’, Darrel. Why did you think a brain scan would convince me to notice you?”

“I didn’t want you to notice me. I wanted to show you the evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“The way you made my *medial insula* light up.”

“Translation.”

“My... pleasure sensors.”

She shakes her head. “Wow.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time. And I had nothing to lose. I’d be leaving school in a few days anyway. I slipped the brain scan and a note in your locker. I didn’t think anyone had noticed me but, clearly, I was wrong.”

“I can’t believe Eric swapped out your message.” Her lips get firm. The smile drips away from her face. “I’ll punch him in the neck if I ever see him again.”

Rubbing my fingers over her hands to calm her, I add, “It was a really long time ago.”

“He should still apologize. I know I don’t have an excuse. I was wrong for what I did. Even if you *had* sent me those nasty pictures, it didn’t require shaming you publicly. But at least I had a reason.”

“Eric had a reason too. I was creeping on his girlfriend.”

Sunny rolls her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“The weird hoodie guy, the one you remember, he—I really was watching you back then. I changed classes just so I could spot you walking down the hallway. I looked for you when you were hanging with your friends in the cafeteria. Seeing you was the highlight of my day.” I rub a hand over the back of my neck. My face is heating up and I don’t have to check the giant mirror to know my ears are getting red. “Saying it out loud makes me sound like a creepy stalker.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Be honest.”

“Okay, a little.” She interlocks our fingers and it makes me feel a little better about her opinion of the teenaged-Darrel. “Maybe it was a good thing you never talked to me. I would have been rude to you. I wouldn’t have been able to appreciate the amazing guy you are.”

“Or maybe we would have been together sooner.”

“I was too superficial. I... I would have ruined it.” She tries to climb off my lap, but I hold her fast. Sunny’s voice breaks. “Darrel, how can you even look at me after what I’ve done?”

“How can I not look at you?”

“I ruined your life.”

“That’s being dramatic. Which isn’t unusual coming from you.”

“Don’t crack jokes.”

“I’m not.” I hug her to me. “I’m relieved.” She’s not mad at me for hiding the truth from her. She’s not running away. I can finally breathe easily. “You could have gotten angry at me.”

“Angry?”

“That I didn’t tell you.”

“How can I be angry at the victim?” She frowns. “That makes no sense.”

“Hm.”

“I’m not the same person I was in high school.”

“I know.”

“You were the one who got hurt. I should spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

“Mm. I like the sound of that.” I nuzzle her cheek with my nose, enjoying the full glow of her presence. Who the hell knew honesty was so refreshing?

“Why did you always wear a hoodie?” Sunny asks, pressing her fingers against my face.

“Growing up, my sister and I moved around a lot. I knew I wouldn’t be attending John Hearst for long, so my only aim was to be invisible. I didn’t want anyone to notice me and I didn’t want to notice anyone.” My eyes scour her face. “Until I saw you. I couldn’t stop looking at you.”

“Darrel.” Her sigh is regretful.

I study her face. See the flash of regal strength in her cheekbones. The guilt still thick in her eyes. The resolve firming her plump lips. She’s strong and vulnerable and flawed and perfect. She’s everything.

“After I met you, I didn’t want to leave John Hearst. It was the first time I fought with my dad.”

“You had an argument?”

“No.” I clear my throat. “We had a fight. When I told him that I wanted to stay, he said I could... if I took him out in hand-to-hand combat.”

Sunny’s eyes widen. “Are you serious? That doesn’t sound like a healthy parent-son interaction.”

A moment of silence passes as Sunny looks expectantly at me and I build the courage to be honest with her. My insides knot and the words just won’t come out.

Sunny cradles my face between her warm brown hands and whispers, “Did he hit you, Darrel? Your dad? Did he... is that the real reason you always wore a hoodie?”

“No. It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

“My dad planned out my life from the day I was born. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps, so he had me doing drills since I was five.”

“What kind of drills?”

“Army drills.” I glance away. Push against the memories of training as a kid while my dad looked on and called me a ‘pathetic loser’.

“Did he have you training all the time?”

“Yes,” I say simply.



A dark look flashes in her eyes. Like the approach of a thunderstorm.  
“Why?”

I squeeze her hand. “He thought he was making me strong. He thought my mom was coddling me.”

“Did he do that to your sister too?”

“No.” I swipe the sweat gathering at the back of my neck. “Girls should be protected and men should be the protector. That’s what he said. I couldn’t protect anyone if I couldn’t fight.”

“How long did it continue?”

“Until I was fifteen.”

“Did Claire know he was treating you like that?”

I pause.

“Darrel, did she know?”

“She did.” I blink rapidly. “We never talked about it. Until the night she died. Claire called asking me to go with her to visit dad’s grave. I told her I wouldn’t. She asked me why I was being so stubborn when dad loved us so much.”

I expect Sunny to make a sarcastic remark, but she doesn’t. She just looks at me.

“Claire and I couldn’t agree. I called her a pampered princess. Told her she would never get it. I hung up on her.” My Adam’s apple bobs. “I regret it with every breath.”

Sunny wraps her arms around my neck. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s... it’s not like anything can change now.” I pat her back and stare unseeingly at the wall. “Dad might not have gotten the military son he wanted, but I knew how to throw a punch.”

She gasps. “That’s why you threw me down at the bachelorette party.”

“I’m sorry about that. It was instinctual.”

She waves away my apology. “I never knew your side of the story. I never knew ‘hoodie guy’ was going through so much. Yet, I piled it on by making fun of you and treating you without the decency of a human being.”

“We can’t change it, Sunny.” I close my eyes, suddenly weary. A side effect of unloading decades worth of secrets, guilt and shame is feeling extremely tired after.

Something grazes my knuckles and, when I focus on Sunny again, I realize she’s taking my hand in hers. “I was not ready for you when I was younger. And I think, Darrel, that maybe you weren’t ready for me. But I’m

glad we found each other again. I can't imagine... I can't imagine being with anyone else. I really am sorry to you. And I'm also grateful that you can look at me without hating me."

"I tried to hate you. I really did. And I failed so hard." I brush away a strand of her hair from her cheek. All the empty places are being filled by her. By sunshine and Sunny and everything I didn't know I'd been missing.

"I love you," I whisper.

Sunny blinks rapidly. "I—"

She lets out a surprised little gasp as I pull her close and claim her mouth. My lips move insistently over hers, drowning out the sound of my roaring heartbeat and the pulse down south.

My hands press her closer. Closer still. As if I won't be able to breathe without feeling her skin. My mind goes blank except for Sunny. The softness of her body. The silkiness of her hair. The fragrance of her skin.

She yanks her mouth away, leaving me yearning for more. I hear her sharp intake of breath, see the dazed look in her eyes, and reach for her hand. Her rushing pulse easily matches mine.

"You never let me finish, dammit." Her lips curl up. "I would like to speak to the hoodie guy."

I bark out a laugh even though my head is spinning and I need her naked yesterday.

"The hoodie guy?"

"Mm-hm." She jumps to her feet.

"Uh..." I glance back and forth. She interrupted our kissing to role-play? I don't know if that's a good sign or a bad sign.

"Hi." She juts out her hand.

I stare at it.

She pushes her hand further toward me until I take it. Then she wraps her long, elegant fingers around my palm and shakes. "I'm Sunny. I've noticed you watching me in the hallway for a few months now."

I lick my lips. "I'm Darrel."

"Darrel." She tests my name on her tongue and I want to rip her clothes off immediately. "Fits you. Much more than the hoodie guy."

"Cute nicknames are welcome."

She laughs. Her eyes sparkle at me. "You're funny."

"Not particularly. But if you think so..."

“I do think so.” She leans forward. “Darrel, I want to tell you something.”

I nod. Gesture for her to continue.

“I’m going to do something really awful to you. Across all the crappy things that I’ve ever done, what I’ll do to you is the worst. When I find out the truth—that you were innocent and I hurt you when you’d been nothing but sincere to me, it’s going to tear me up inside. I’m going to live with the guilt like it’s a tumor.”

I blink slowly.

“But,” she sighs, “in many years—I’m not going to say how much—you’re going to run into me in a furniture store...”

I chuckle.

“... And you’re going to rudely ignore my handshake.”

“Idiot.” I grunt.

She shushes me with a look. “And then we’re going to spend the next year dancing around each other, either arguing or ignoring one another until you decide to adopt two little boys.”

The pressure in my chest gets worse.

“And I’m going to tell you something else, Darrel-Not-Hoodie-Guy. You’re going to be an amazing father to those kids. You’re not going to be anything like your dad. In fact, those kids are going to be so comfortable with you, that they’ll run to you when they’re sad and they’ll talk to you when they’re bullied.”

A lump of emotion presses against my throat.

“I’m going to fall for you *so hard* when I see the way you are with those boys. And I’m never letting you go because, somehow, you were crazy enough to fall for the mean girl from high school. Again. And I don’t ever want you to realize how insane that is.”

“It’s not insane.”

“That’s another thing I forgot to mention. You take the long route to becoming a brain nerd. Congratulations.”

“Sounds like a dream.”

“It’s reality.” She leans down until she’s bent at an almost perfect ninety-degree angle. “Okay.” Leaning close, Sunny whispers, “Can I have the present-day Darrel back? I can’t do the things I’m thinking of with a minor.”

I laugh, spring to my feet and then I crash my mouth against hers. Her fingers drift into my hair, scraping my scalp and sending all my nerve endings crackling like they're being hooked up to a generator.

I can't remember ever being this happy.

I can't remember ever feeling this free.

Sunny's here.

She's touching me.

She's kissing me.

I'm not sure what I did to be so lucky, but I'm not letting this chance pass me by.

I want her.

*I need her.*

So I lift her by the backs of her thighs until she's wrapping her long, ballerina legs around my waist. Taking three steps across the room, I push her against the nearest wall of mirrors and I kiss her.

I've lost my mind.

That's the only explanation.

Oh, but insanity never felt so good.

Her lips taste like chocolate brownies and coffee. I suck harder. Deeper. Devouring her until she fuses herself to my body like we were always meant to be one person. Her fingers slide against my face. The way she grazes my ears, my scalp, my neck with that magical touch, sends my world up in flames.

She bucks her hips and I ram her against a surface of glass.

Bad idea.

The mirrors tremble.

Sunny doesn't care. She makes a soft noise from the back of her throat as she kisses me and strokes my back.

*More. Sunny.*

My body has reverted to caveman instincts where the only pressing needs are for survival and a warm woman.

This isn't enough.

Mouth fused to Sunny's neck, I slip my hands under her shirt, graze her toned stomach and scrape my fingers against her back. I feel her full-body shudder right up against my skin and I muffle my groan into her throat.

I keep stroking her skin, moving my hands higher and higher until—

There it is.

Her bra isn't lace. It's some silky material that feels smooth against my fingertips. I run my hand over it and let the flames skitter from my palm all the way down to my toes. She sputters, squeaks and makes a breathy moan that sends my head spinning.

Scraping my thumbs over her, I breathe out, "Any cameras in here?"

"I have no idea," she pants.

"Maybe we should move this somewhere else."

I can't believe my mouth had the audacity to say that. Stop? Why would I stop when I finally have a moment of uninterrupted bliss with Sunny Quetzal?

I don't want this to end. I want to yank her pants to her ankles and rake my tongue over her—from her head to her toes. I want to suck and nip and pinch until she screams so hard the entire dance studio, no the entire city, hears how good I'm working her.

I've only experienced that moment in my dreams, in the visions I rarely allow myself because the only thing worse than pining after Sunny Quetzal is torturing myself with thoughts of *being* with her.

Her thighs clamp around my waist as she roughly tugs at my shirt.

Damn. No part of my imagination was as sweet as this.

"If we leave and..." She breathes out, her lips moist and glossy, "we're interrupted again..."

"Good point." I press my thumbs harder against her and her eyes slide to half-mast.

She parts her lips and her head falls back. Her neck is exposed in all its creamy-brown temptation. I can't resist it. *Impossible*. I bite her neck just enough to make her cry out and she rewards me with a sweet, sweet bump of her hips that sends a puff of white-hot energy between us.

It's a good start, but it's not enough. I need more of her clothes off. I want to *feel* her. All of her. Skin to skin. There are too many layers in the way.

I fumble to get her shirt over her head, but she pushes against me and attacks my mouth with her own. My brain completely shuts down and all logical thoughts misfire until I hear someone rattling the door.

*What the hell?*

I come back to myself and slide Sunny down my body, not stopping until her feet touch the floor. A quick glance into the mirror makes me cringe. Our sweat left smear marks all over the glass. At least we didn't

break the thing. Given how hard we were bucking against each other, that's more of a testament to the strength of the glass than anything else.

The door opens and old women wearing colorful bandanas, T-shirts and tights flood the room. They stop when they see us, welcoming smiles passing over wrinkled faces.

"Oh, I didn't know this room was still occupied." One granny marches toward us. "We came a little early so we could warm up."

I'm about to burst out of my jeans and Sunny's bra is hanging from the hem of her pants like a tail, but yeah, we can totally put a pause on our activities to accommodate some nice old ladies.

"Uh..." Sunny steps out from behind me. "We were just leaving."

The granny smiles and glances down. Then her face turns crimson and she chuckles. "Oh dear. I guess we should have dropped in a little later."

I snatch Sunny's bra from where it's hooked in her pants, roll it into a ball and stuff it into my pocket.

"Have a good practice," I mumble, nodding to the old ladies.

"You two kids have fun." She waves and then winks mischievously.

As I usher Sunny out of the room, I hear the old lady sigh, "*What a beautiful couple. But why didn't they lock the door?*"

We stumble into the hallway. My face is on fire and Sunny looks just as flustered. I wasn't ready to stop and my body is protesting every second. My walk is an awkward waddle as we pass the lobby of the dance studio.

The women around the front desk smile and nod at us before they tuck their heads together and whisper loudly. Shoot. Maybe there *were* cameras in there. Maybe the security guards were popping popcorn to enjoy the show.

*Thankfully, we didn't give them too much of one.*

I shake my head and glance at Sunny who's thrilled smile tells me she's still running high on adrenaline. This woman. She's the only one who could make something so illogical feel so enjoyable.

I grab her hand. "I don't want to call it a night."

"Me either." She follows me to the exits. "But the kids."

Right. Micheal and Bailey. Homework. Responsibilities.

We step into the balmy night and I open the car door for her. She jumps in and waits for me to climb in too before mumbling, "Rain check?"

"How about I sneak you in?"

“And risk getting interrupted again?” She runs her hands down my chest. “I wish I could say yes.”

I want to tell her we could finish the night in the backseat. Or drive to a hotel. Or I could fling her into the nearest bush and make it worth her while. But the moment has passed and she’s right about the boys.

Ms. Hansley wouldn’t mind watching them overnight, but she didn’t sign up for that. She’s been working all day and deserves to have time to herself.

*You have responsibilities, Darrel.*

Sometimes, I hate that I’ve tuned my logical side so well.

I bring Sunny’s hand to my mouth and kiss it. “We’ll have a do-over.”

“At the dance studio?”

“Why not?” I feel her pulse leap and it makes me smile. “Next time, I’ll lock the door.”

“It’s a date.”

I lean forward and kiss her temple. “It’s a date.”

\* \* \*

THE NEXT MORNING, I GET UP EARLY AND TAKE ANOTHER COLD SHOWER. IT feels like my body hasn’t touched hot water since I met Sunny again.

I really wish we could have continued last night, but at least I got a consolation prize. My eyes drop to the smooth black bra in my bathroom drawer.

Before she left last night, Sunny kissed me, told me to keep the bra and promised me the other piece of the set. I could barely see straight on the way home. It’s a miracle I didn’t run right into a ditch.

Today’s a brand-new day. Later, I’m going on a date with Sunny—a proper date at a nice hotel. I’m going to hire someone to watch the kids, and we’re going to have a long, uninterrupted night. I’ll make sure of it.

After dressing in a button-down and slacks, I head down the hall and wake both Bailey and Micheal. It’s much tougher to get them out of bed as they were up playing with their cousin until way past their bedtime.

“Come on, boys!” I yell up the stairs, checking my watch as I slather two slabs of bread with peanut butter and jelly. “You’ll be late.”

Micheal trudges down the stairs first. His hair looks like he rolled out of bed and didn't bother to run a brush through it. But at least he's semi-smiling. And the cut on his lip is healing well.

"PB&J! Yeah." He snatches the plate in front of me.

Bailey soars down the stairs next. "Yes!"

I shake my head in amusement. These kids get excited for the simplest things.

After breakfast, I drive Micheal and Bailey to school.

Bailey hops out first, giving me a bright smile and yelling, "Bye, Mr. Darrel!"

I wave at him.

Micheal reaches for the door handle.

"Wait, Micheal." I stop him before he leaves the car.

He looks over his shoulder at me.

"I made an appointment with the principal."

His shoulders slump. He nods.

"But I'm not going to talk about Ebenezer."

Micheal's eyes jump and hope fills them. "You won't?"

"I thought about your concerns and your discomfort with being ridiculed. While I don't agree with keeping silent all the time, I think your feelings are valid. I'm not going to get the school involved. *This* time. But if Ebenezer doesn't heed Sunny's warning, I'm going to—"

"Thank you!" Micheal pounces to the front seat and wraps his hands around my neck. "Thank you, Mr. Darrel."

My heart rearranges in my chest. I blink a couple times to keep my voice level. "I still think bringing it up to the authorities is the right decision, but I'll back off. Just this once."

Micheal nods so enthusiastically that his curls fall all over his eyes.

I nod to the door. I'm getting choked up, and I'm not sure why. "Have a good day at school."

"I will." He bounces out of the car.

I drive to the center feeling oddly joyful.

My phone rings on the way.

I tap my ear buds twice. "Hello?"

"Mr. Hastings."

"Ms. Bennet." I stiffen. "I was going to call you soon. I'd like to get the paperwork started for legal custody—"



The social worker's voice is flat and chilly in my ears. "Mr. Hastings before you continue, I'm calling to inform you that I'll be picking the boys up from school this evening."

"Why would you do that?" I flick the indicator.

"Because I'm taking them to visit a potential foster family."

My foot rams on the brakes. "What?"

"They were only placed in your care temporarily. The terms of your emergency guardianship are almost up."

I grit my teeth. "The boys are staying with me."

"I'm the one who'll be deciding that."

"You can't just rip them away from the only stable home they've had since their gran passed."

"Stable?" Her tone rings with disapproval. "Who decided that you are the most stable home for them?"

"I..."

"The boys will be meeting their potential foster parents this evening. I'll return them to the farmhouse when we're done."

"No, you can't—"

The line goes dead.

She hung up on me.

## CHAPTER 17

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# THE CARIBBEAN VILLA

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## SUNNY

FINDING out the truth about Darrel yesterday made me realize two things: one, if anyone ever invents a time machine, I'll be the first to volunteer so I can meet my high school self and slap her into the next century; and two, I don't deserve good things.

It's a sensation that presses around me when I wake up the next morning to a thousand likes on my blog, delicious coffee at my door and a text from Darrel telling me not to beat myself up about what happened in high school.

I know that in *theory*, I was young and stupid and easily manipulated. Eric was a little too eager to submit embarrassing footage of Darrel and help me organize the pep rally.

Looking back, I can see how clearly he was pulling the strings. I considered myself such a smart, untouchable figure and yet I was being taken for a ride without even realizing it. If the high school me knew that I'd eventually fall hard for the hoodie guy, I would have investigated those pictures a little more.

*Idiot.*

I press my forehead against a wall and moan. "Why were you such a fiend in high school, Sunny? Why couldn't you have been nicer to people?"

My phone rings at that moment.

It's my client.

I don't want to answer, but I force myself to take the call and listen as the client gushes about my design concept.

"I'm glad you liked it," I murmur dryly.

"We love it! Oh, your mother was so right about you, Sunny," the client chirps. "I'm sure you're going to make it big."

I blink rapidly. My mind snaps into sharp focus. "Did you just say... my mother?"

"Yes, didn't my husband tell you?" She laughs gently. "Of course he didn't. He's a man and he's clueless. This is why I told him *I'd* liaison with you from now on. I can't let him do anything on his own, you know."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Your mother was the one who recommended you to us."

I nearly fall out of the chair. If she told me they'd found evidence of aliens living among us, it would have surprised me less. My mother doesn't even believe that designing is a real job. I'm stunned that she'd talk about my work like it actually mattered.

"She overheard us chatting about our villa in Belize and we struck up a wonderful conversation. She knows all about Belize and we're in love with the place. The country's like a second home to us, so we knew it would be perfect for us to retire."

"You're retiring... in Belize?" My eyes widen. "The villa is in Belize? This job is in Belize?"

"Oh dear. My husband didn't make that clear either? Yes, our villa is in Belize. The construction should be finished soon and we're *eager* to get you started on the interior design."

"You want me to go... there?" I picture the sandy beaches, turquoise waves, and coconut trees of Belize. It's a beautiful country. It's *my* homeland, but I didn't expect to get a gig there.

"Yes, we'll pay for everything, dear. Everything. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. I just... didn't expect this."

"My husband, that old hag, he's not good with details. Here's the thing, Sunny. Shipping furniture from the US to the Caribbean is *such* a headache. Dealing with transport and customs and pesky paperwork—oh, just thinking about it makes my greys pop out, you understand? That's why I was hoping you'd be able to oversee all that."

"Uh..."

"All I want is to hire you, sit back and then come home to see the amazing results."

"Oh."

"Is that a problem?"

"The thing is..." I think of Micheal, Bailey and Darrel, "I wasn't planning on leaving the country any time soon."

"You only work in the city?"

"No, that's not... I mean, Belize is so far away." Sure, I could be convinced to leave the city for a job. There are only so many people in need of my interior decorating services here. But flying all the way back to my homeland? To oversee a giant island villa from start to finish? That'll take months.

“We understand. You must have a boyfriend, don’t you? Someone as pretty as you. But here’s the thing. If he really loves you, he won’t hold you back, hun. He’ll support you all the way. And it’s not like you’ll be gone for years.”

I swallow hard. “Thank you for considering me but—”

“We’d be so disappointed if you said no, Sunny. One of the reasons we chose you is *because* you’re from Belize. You look like one of the locals and they’ll treat you like one too. They won’t gouge you with inflated prices assuming you’re foreign and don’t understand how things work.” She laughs. “You’re perfect for this.”

“I-I have my best friend’s wedding in a couple days.”

“No worries. We have to arrange things on our end anyway. It’ll take at least a week. That should be enough time for you to prepare for the move, right?”

My heart thumps painfully. “Can I have a few more days to think about it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Sunny. This opportunity isn’t going to stick around for long. We need to finalize some things so we can work out our own details, you know.”

“I understand. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“Alright. You have forty-eight hours.” The client giggles. “That sounded quite strict, didn’t it? I just don’t want you to drag your feet and reject us. It’ll leave us in a bad spot.”

“I won’t do that. You’ll hear my answer by then.”

“Fabulous.” She hangs up.

I drop into the sofa so I can catch my breath. Of all the things I learned during that phone call, the hardest to believe is that my mother complimented my career path. Unbelievable.

I have to call her and let her know about this.

The phone rings for a long time and I wonder if mom is going to ignore me.

Finally, she answers. “Sunita.”

“Mom.” I lurch forward, sitting straight up in the chair as if she’s in the room telling me not to hunch so much. “Hey.”

“What do you want?” Her tone is impatient. It hasn’t been that long since she stormed out of my apartment. Of course she’s still upset about Darrel.

“I just got a call about designing a villa in Belize.”

“Hm.”

“I heard you were the one who recommended me.”

She falls silent.

“Mom?”

“Kenya told me you were going through a bit of trouble getting money that was owed to you. I got worried.”

“Aww...”

Mom clears her throat. “I wouldn’t have to worry so much if you’d put your Literature degree to good use. Teachers don’t have to scramble around getting clients because a big corporation stiffed them.”

There she goes. “Mom, every job comes with risks.”

“The risk is much bigger when you work for yourself.”

Her scolding isn’t mean-spirited. It’s just her way of showing love, and I’ll take it in the spirit that it was meant. “Thank you for recommending me to those clients, mama.”

“Thank me? For what? I just had a chat with a stranger. That’s all.” I hear fabric rustling. Mom is probably smoothing down her embroidered skirt, a nervous tic of hers. “Have you thought of what I said, Sunita?”

“About what?”

“That white boy.”

I cringe. It’s true that Darrel is white, but he’s definitely not a ‘boy’. It’s jarring to hear her call him that.

“Now would be the time to break up with him,” mom adds.

“Why would I do that?”

“You’ve gotten a wonderful opportunity to travel and do what you love at the same time.”

“Yes, but—”

“If you take the job in Belize, I can come with you and stay for a bit. We can visit your cousins and your great grandmother in the village. I’ll make sure they have some nice young men to introduce you to. My future son-in-law doesn’t even have to be a farmer if you’d prefer another profession.”

“Mom, I’m not going on any more blind dates.”

“Why not?”

“It would be disrespectful to Darrel.” My fingers curl over the phone. We were *just* having a moment. Why did mom have to ruin it with this ‘you

must marry a Mayan man' thing? "I'm not going to date other men while I'm seeing him."

"Sunita, you have to think about your future."

"I am." My throat tightens. "All I can think about is the future." Darrel Hastings is written in every tomorrow from here until I'm old and grey and even beyond that. He's a poker-faced, rough-mouthed, sometimes grumpy, sometimes sweet, sometimes hilarious, extremely gorgeous human-sized drug.

The fact that he's the hoodie guy from high school just endears him even more to me. I really wish I could have gotten to know the younger him. I really wish I could make up for that stupid prank.

"No, Sunita, you are not thinking about the future. You are thinking about that man's broad shoulders and green eyes and his privates. You think I don't know you?"

I gasp. Not because she's wrong but because she's my mother. "Mama, don't say things like that."

"Do you think he actually loves you?"

"I know he does."

"Why? Because he says you're pretty? Because you're 'different than any of the women he's been with before'? Of course he would say that. You are Mayan. You come from a long line of powerful men and women. Of course these white men would be drawn to you, just as they were drawn to us when they colonized our lands."

"Darrel isn't going to 'colonize' me, mom. What we have is real."

"Because you feel tingly and excited when he touches you? Please." She snorts.

"Because he's brilliant and kind and supportive. Because he has every reason to hate me but he doesn't."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's the boy from high school, ma. The hoodie guy."

"Ay-ya? Who is that now?"

My chest rises and falls with a harried breath. "Mom, remember when I got in trouble for interrupting a pep rally in high school, and I never told you why?"

"Yes."

"I did something *horrible* to someone at the pep rally. That someone was Darrel."



“Are you sure?”

“I am.” My voice climbs as I battle a mixture of gratitude and regret. “After all that, he’s still willing to see the person I am now. Isn’t it clear that he loves me, mama?”

“What’s clear is that he has a reason to get you back.” Mom’s voice is as thin as a leaking balloon.

“He forgave me, mama. He doesn’t hold it against me anymore. He’s a good man. The best man. He took in Micheal and Bailey all because of a promise he made to his professor. That’s the kind of person he is.”

“Honey, I know this is an emotional discovery, but I don’t want it to blind you to reality.”

“Blind me to *what*, mom?” My voice cracks as I erupt into slightly unhinged laughter. “That I don’t deserve Darrel? That he suffered at my hands, yet he’s willing to forgive me and love me? What part of this can’t you wrap your head around?” I yell.

“What if this is all just his revenge?”

Every muscle in my body goes still.

“You heard what he said that day. Darrel is the kind of boy who makes a promise and keeps it no matter how crazy it is. What if he made a promise all those years ago to get back at you?”

I scoff. “Have you been watching telenovelas again? Do you think real life is as wild as what you see on TV?”

“Honey, real life can be stranger than what’s on TV.”

“Darrel isn’t trying to get back at me.”

“Think about it. He could have been biding his time, waiting for the perfect chance. Perhaps he wants to bring you to the highest point of happiness and then he’s going to strike.”

I blink rapidly. That’s crazy. Darrel would never... he wouldn’t. Right? No. I trust him. He’s a good man.

“Mom, don’t be ridiculous,” I sputter. I grasp at any explanation that would soothe her and quiet the doubts she stirred inside me. “If that was Darrel’s revenge plan, he wouldn’t have waited an entire year to implement it. We ran into each other all the time because of Kenya, Alistair and Belle. He could have acted interested from the start, but he never did.”

“Maybe he’s been planning this for a long time and he was waiting for the right moment.”

“I’m going to hang up if you keep talking like this, mom.”

“Sunita, all I want is for you to not get hurt.”

“Darrel won’t hurt me.”

“Fine, maybe he won’t hurt you intentionally, but do you know what kids will do to your life? To all the opportunities you *could* have had? They’ll take over everything. Once you have a family, there’s no more taking off at the drop of a hat to pursue your dreams. You have to weigh everything against your responsibility to them. It’s a huge burden.”

“That’s my choice to make, isn’t it?”

“What if this was his plan all along? To pretend to be in love with you, saddle you with two children and force you to take care of them for him.”

“Mama!” She jumped all the way into Crazy Town and is making herself at home. “Would you stop talking nonsense?”

“Women are natural caregivers. You’re going to throw your all into pretending to be a mother to those kids just like you give your all to anything you do. He’s going to sit back, throw his legs up and let you work yourself into the ground. It’s diabolical.”

“We’re not getting anywhere. All I wanted to do was thank you for the referral. I’ve done that.”

“Sunita, *promise* me you’ll be careful. If you were so awful to him, why would he turn around and treat you well? He must want something from you.”

“Darrel isn’t trying to exact his revenge on me, mama. He *cares* about me.”

“You could be right. Or you could be wrong. He might not *mean* to ruin your life for what you did in the past, but it could still work out that way. How many single women would volunteer to take care of two kids in their first year of marriage? You won’t get to enjoy each other. You’ll always be stressed and worried about everyone but yourself. Your life will *end*, do you hear me? It’s something that not even mothers to biological children can sometimes handle. It’s not fair to you, Sunita. Think hard before you agree to anything with him.”

“I’ll call you later, mom,” I mumble.

Ten minutes. That was the length of our phone call and yet it feels like I’ve been running on a treadmill for a year. My limbs are heavy and my mind is spinning in random directions.

*What if mom is right? What if Darrel’s been secretly plotting his revenge for years?*

Ridiculous.

I pounce to my feet and pace the living room. I can't let mom get to me.

*Are you ready to be a mother to boys who are already heading into their tweens?*

I shake my head and pace the other way. I love Micheal and Bailey. They're good kids. And it's not like Darrel is asking me to marry him. I can slowly get used to the idea of being a mother and figuring out how I'll juggle my career and my home life. The boys are family. People make room, rearrange their schedules and compromise for family.

I force myself to settle down and update my blog. It's been so busy with Darrel, the boys, and preparing for Kenya's wedding that I haven't shared with my followers in a while.

In the middle of my work, I get a call from Darrel.

My eyes widen and I snatch the phone up. "Hey," I say before he can get a word in, "I was starting to get worried. You didn't answer my text."

"I'm sorry. I've been talking to a lawyer all morning."

"A lawyer? Is something wrong?" I lean forward.

"It's Micheal and Bailey. Their social worker wants them to stay with a foster family."

"What?" I lurch forward.

Darrel's voice cracks with weariness. "Sunny, I... I think there's a real chance the boys will be taken away from me."

\* \* \*

I SHOVE MY PURSE OFF MY SHOULDER AND DRUM MY FINGERS AGAINST THE crowded office table.

When I walked into the government office a few minutes ago, the frazzled receptionist asked me if I had an appointment and then she pointed out Ms. Bennet's cubicle and told me to wait there.

It's been five minutes already. Plenty of time to observe the giant desk calendar, count the number of pens in her 'Protect Children From Trafficking' cup, and debate whether I should wake up her blank computer monitor by tapping the keyboard and mouse.

From all the crowded notes and appointments on her desk, I gather that Ms. Bennet works passionately to protect children. That's good. The

problem is that she's stark crazy if she thinks what's best in *this* case is tearing Micheal and Bailey away from Darrel.

Footsteps pound the tiles behind me and I glance around, stiffening when Ms. Bennet appears in the doorway of her cubicle.

She's wearing a grey shirt that matches the grey in her hair. Her skirt is sharp with not a wrinkle in sight. Her lips remain in their perpetually downturned state as if she couldn't be bothered to even fake a smile at the sight of me.

I don't want to smile either, but I do because she didn't have to agree to this meeting. If she'd rejected me, I would have spent my afternoon camped outside the building, demanding an audience and making noise until security carried me away.

"What was your name again?" She sinks wearily behind the desk. The chair creaks, protesting the sudden burden.

"Sunny Quetzal." I'd offer her a business card if I carried those around anymore.

"And you're here to discuss..." She rubs the bridge of her nose with one hand and sets the other on top of her mouse. Shaking it twice, she types on her computer.

"Micheal and Bailey."

The exhaustion on her face gives way to a glint of defiance. "You? How are you involved with those boys?"

"I'm..." I falter because I didn't quite think this far. "I'm a family friend," I stutter.

"A family friend?"

"Yes."

Ms. Bennet sucks in a sharp breath and flings her eyes to the ceiling as if she's looking for some patience. "Ms. Quetzal, I'm incredibly busy today and I don't have time to—"

"What do you have against Darrel Hastings?"

She clamps her mouth shut and stares at me.

I don't look away. Leaning forward, I speak low and firm. "I'm not familiar with your line of work, but I do know there are far more children in need than there are families willing to take them in. Darrel is a man with solid references, an amazing farmhouse, stable income and the blessing of Micheal and Bailey's grandmother. I heard Ms. Jean wanted him to take care of them. Not just for today. Not just for a week. For life. Darrel's

willing to make that commitment and yet you seem hellbent on fighting some kind of invisible battle against him.”

“An invisible battle, you say?”

“I have no idea what your personal grievance is. Maybe Darrel’s father dumped you in high school. I don’t know.”

She barks out a laugh.

I ignore it and forge on. “I’m asking you to do what’s right for these kids.”

“And you think I’m not?”

“I think you’re letting your own bias complicate a situation that is very straightforward. Just because you have the power to make Bailey and Micheal’s lives more difficult does not mean you should do it.”

Ms. Bennet folds her arms over her generous chest. “Are you done?”

“Not even close, but I’m willing to listen if you have something to say.”

Her smile is hard and it tells me she’s not amused.

Fine. Neither am I.

“How much do you know about Mr. Hastings?” Ms. Bennet asks, sliding her fingers together and setting them on her desk.

I have no idea where she’s going with this, but I mimic her stance. Folding my hands together, I set them on the desk and lean forward. “Enough to know that he’s a great dad to these kids.”

“I’m going to break this down for you because I’m not sure if those pro-Hastings glasses you’re wearing will keep you from understanding me.”

I scoff at the dig.

“Before any social worker is comfortable with officiating a guardianship, they do several checks for placement. We check their medical report, their previous employer, their previous long-term partners. We also check their parents.”

“And?”

“Major Benedict Hastings.” She tilts her head and arches an eyebrow. “Decorated army soldier. Celebrated vet.” Ms. Bennet digs through her files and slaps something in front of me.

I refuse to touch it. “What is this?”

“These are the overindulgence and excessive use of violence cases that were covered up by the Hastings family.”

My heartbeat pounds in my chest.

“The little secret about the Major treating people like crap went with him to the grave. Not because his victims didn’t try to come forward but because the Hastings family had all the money in the world to protect their status in public.”

My fingers are trembling and I shove the file back to her. “Did Darrel participate in these illegal bribes?”

“There’s no... evidence of that.” She screws her mouth like she really wishes there was.

“Then I don’t see what this has to do with keeping custody of Micheal and Bailey.”

“This, Ms. Quetzal,” she sprawls her fingers over the document, “is proof that the truth can be manipulated if there’s enough money. This is proof that mistreatment was shoved under the rug and accepted by that family. Not only does Mr. Hastings have his mother’s inheritance fattening his bank account, but he also had a thriving career in finance before he randomly chose to change paths.”

“Being rich is not a crime,” I argue.

“Yes, but it does make you wonder. Why would a man with that kind of wealth and power want to take in kids that are not even mildly related to him? And what will he do to those kids given the example his father set? Will those kids be safe in a family that thinks the truth has a price tag?”

“You’re grasping at straws.”

“I’m pursuing the truth.”

“The truth is that Darrel is keeping his promise to a dead man.” My words hold the heat of a thousand suns. “After his professor died, he could have easily said ‘screw this. No one is alive to force me to keep my promise’. Guess what? He did the opposite. He was there for the professor’s mother and the professor’s kids all because of that one promise. A man like that doesn’t deserve your conspiracy theories. He deserves your respect.”

“Respect is earned, Ms. Quetzal. And I’m not convinced of Mr. Hastings’ intentions. The truth of the matter is that he’s a bachelor, which is already a count against him. Given the other evidence I’ve dug up, I don’t think he’s ready for this responsibility.”

“Then why grant him emergency guardianship if you think he’s such scum?”

Her eyes dart away. “I didn’t want to separate the boys. They’d been through another traumatic loss and I felt they were better off together than

sent to different group homes.”

“So leave them with Darrel. The boys are happy there and that’s partly your fault. You agreed to the emergency guardianship and now Darrel is attached to them. Just leave them be.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“That’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? You don’t care that he’s rich or that his father was a prick. You don’t really care that he’s a bachelor either. You just don’t like him.” I throw my hands up. “How can they have someone so jaded sitting behind that desk? You bring your bias to everything you touch and now the kids are going to suffer for it.”

“Lower your voice, Ms. Quetzal,” she snaps.

I snap my mouth closed, but my nostrils are flaring and I’m battling the urge to swipe everything off her desk.

Ms. Bennet raises her chin. “I’m not sorry that I’m fighting to protect Micheal and Bailey. I’m not sorry that I, personally, prefer a household where both a mother and a father are present. Where the husband doesn’t have a history of making rash decisions at random. Where the support consists of more than a brother-in-law and a few distant relatives.”

I grab my purse and launch out of my seat. “This is not the last you’ve seen of me, Ms. Bennet. Darrel and I *will* be bringing this case to the attention of those above you.”

“Oh, I’m sure Mr. Hastings will use all his money and connections to twist the circumstances into his favor.”

I huff and whirl around, intending to storm out.

“I’d advise you to be careful, Ms. Quetzal.”

I blow out a stunned breath and turn to face her slowly. “Are you threatening me?”

“No, consider this some... sisterly advice.”

“You are not my sister.”

Her smile is amused, like she’s a teacher with a tantrum-throwing student. “I can see that you’re very much in love with Mr. Hastings. Even if you weren’t here to defend him, I’d know. It’s all over your face.” She licks her lips slowly. “Whether Mr. Hastings shares your passionate feelings is something I can’t say, but I do know that a man like him is willing to do anything to get what he wants. And he might use your love for him and for the boys, to manipulate you in ways you wouldn’t expect.”

I want to flip her off so badly that my fingers jump. Curse words launch to the tip of my tongue and I'm pretty sure steam is pouring from my ears.

"Desperate men are not afraid to use the love of a woman to achieve their own goals, but once they have what they want, they rarely remain devoted. Remember that."

I squeeze the strap of my purse. "And remember this. I'll make sure your boss hears about how prejudiced you are. Don't be surprised if you're removed from this position."

"You can fight me. Go ahead." She taps on her computer with a shrug. "But I wish you luck."

I storm out of her office because if I remain in that cubicle for one second longer, I'm going to turn her desk over and stomp on her stupid calendar.

The door crashes as I march outside. I nearly stab myself in the eyeball when I try to put my sunglasses on with my trembling fingers.

In the car, I pluck my cell phone out of my purse and call Darrel. The phone rings and I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, already frustrated. If he doesn't pick up, I'm driving to where he is and dragging him out.

Thankfully, it doesn't get that drastic.

"We need to talk," I blurt.

"Now? Sunny, I'm with the lawyer outside—"

"I just talked to Bennet."

He pauses. "Is anyone... hurt?"

His hesitant tone makes a smile pop out on my face. "I thought about it, but I kept my hands to myself."

"Good." He lets out a breath. "The last thing I need is a social worker pressing charges against my girlfriend."

My heart skips a beat. "Girlfriend?"

Someone whispers to him in the background. Darrel must have shushed them because they stop talking immediately. "What did you think this was?"

"I'm not getting distracted."

"Of course not."

"I want someone else to handle the placement of the kids. Bennet's already decided to screw you over."

"I'm handling it."

"How?"



“I have Ms. Jean’s letter of intent. That should count as evidence to prove that staying with me is what’s best for the boys.”

“Will that be enough?”

The lawyer is trying to get Darrel’s attention again. I hear his words a little more clearly this time. *‘We have to go in now.’*

“Just give me a minute,” Darrel says to him.

Guilt spears me. “I’m sorry. You’re dealing with this in your own way and I’m here stressing you out.”

“You’re not, Sunny. In fact, you’re doing the opposite. It feels good to know that you’re on my side, fighting with me. Although I wish you wouldn’t go toe-to-toe with anyone until we figure this out.”

“I promise I won’t beat anyone with my purse until the boys are safely and legally a part of your family.”

He lets out a breath. “Not gonna lie. I was nervous before you called.”

“Don’t be nervous. Just be honest. You are the best thing for those kids.”

“Thanks.”

“Go to your meeting. And then stop by my apartment the minute you have a free moment. I set beans last night so I’ll make you a big Belizean lunch. You can tell me what the plan is going forward.”

He chuckles. “I love you.”

I smile and open my mouth to say the same, but I remember the job offer from the client and I stop short. *We’ll need you to go to Belize and handle everything from there. It’ll be a few months.*

Darrel hangs up while I’m hesitating. I listen to the dial tone and feel my heart pull in a million different directions. This is not the right time to bail on Darrel, Micheal and Bailey. They need me here.

*But what about what you need?*

I squeeze my eyes shut.

*Your whole life will revolve around that family. Do you want that, Sunita?*

There will be other opportunities. It’s not like a paid trip to Belize to do what I love is such a big deal.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel as I wrestle with myself. The truth is that I shouldn’t be having all these doubts. If I’m going to be a permanent part of Micheal and Bailey’s lives, I have to learn to put them first. Prioritizing them should be easy. It should be like breathing.

*It's not like breathing.*

I bite down on my bottom lip and start the car. The client gave me forty-eight hours to figure myself out and give her an answer. That means I can worry about the job in Belize later. Right now, I'm going to focus on what I *can* control, which is working on my design concepts and waiting for Darrel to come home.

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## CHAPTER 18

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# RING POP

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## DARREL

“THE GOVERNOR COULDN’T HELP?” Alistair asks, swooping the tail end of his necktie over the knot.

“No.” I hold still as the tailor fusses over the hem of my pants. He’s slanted me several dark looks already and the last time, he accompanied his glare with a slight jab of the pin. I’m not moving an inch until he’s finished with me.

“But he was friends with your family. Why wouldn’t he intervene?”

“He said it’s not a good look this close to elections. He doesn’t want any scandals, and intervening in a family court case is, apparently, ‘not the right message’.”

“Makes sense,” Alistair says, shrugging into his tuxedo jacket.

I scowl at him.

He sees me in the reflection of the mirror but doesn’t even blink. “It’s best if you know the truth. That’s the only way you can fight back.”

“I’m not the bad guy.”

“They called you that out loud?”

“They made it seem like I’d be perfect if I wasn’t male and single.”

“The nerve.”

“Is it that strange? Me taking in two kids?”

“A little.”

I frown at him.

“To be fair, they work with abused children and see jerks who hurt kids all day. I’m sure that messes with their heads.”

“I wouldn’t hurt the kids.” The thought makes me physically ill.

“I know. Your intentions are pure. But the world isn’t. It’s not fair that you have to suffer for that. I understand.” He fixes his collar so it’s lying flat. “Is there no other way?”

I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “I thought I could convince them with Ms. Jeans’s letter of intent, but she died before she could file the guardianship papers. The letter has no legal grounds. The most I can use it for is a character reference.”

Alistair makes a sympathetic sound in his throat.

“It feels like I’m not holding up my end of the deal.” My voice gets quiet as the memory washes over me. “On his deathbed, Professor Stein was only thinking about his family and how they’d carry on without him. I told him I’d protect them. I told him he could leave in peace.”

“What exactly did he do to make you so loyal to him?” Alistair pauses. “Does it have anything to do with why you quit working and went back to school to study psychology?”

“It did.” I rub the back of my neck. “I never told Claire because she didn’t like hearing any ill talk about dad, but the truth is I only worked in finance because dad told me to. He said if I wasn’t going into the army, I might as well learn to handle mom’s inheritance. I did what he wanted, but it suffocated me. I’ve always loved studying the brain and how it affects people, but I didn’t have the courage to pursue it. I felt trapped.”

“Is that when you met the professor?”

“It was by chance. One of his patients ran in front of my car. She was throwing herself into moving traffic because she wanted to end it all. I got out of my car to help her, but I didn’t know what to do. Then the professor showed up. He talked her through the darkness. I followed him back to his therapy center and he did the same to me. He took a personal interest in my life, checking up on me and encouraging me. When he found out I was interested in neuropsychology, he pushed me to go for it. He became my support system. He changed my life. I’d still be trapped if it wasn’t for him. I’d still be suffocating. And maybe it would have gotten so bad that I would have made a choice I regret. Instead, I get to do what I love every day. I owe him for that.” My fingers curl into fists. “Now Micheal and Bailey are about to be taken away from me. I’m letting him down.”

“They may find a good home somewhere else,” Alistair points out. “You don’t know.”

“Or they may end up getting separated and bouncing from one foster home to the next.”

He lifts both hands. “Darrel, I’m not saying you wouldn’t be great with those kids, but every door is shutting in your face. Maybe you should start to consider what keeping your promise to your professor looks like with the boys gone.”

“What if it were Belle?” I challenge him.

Alistair gets serious. He turns to me, his eyes narrowing. “What about Belle?”

“If you and Kenya passed on, and I wasn’t around, would you want some stranger taking care of Belle? Or would you want her to stay with Ezekiel, someone who considers her his granddaughter and would die for her.”

Alistair considers it. His eyebrows tighten. “But Ezekiel thinks of Belle as his granddaughter. It’s different.”

“Why the hell is it different?” I bark.

“Do you think of Micheal and Bailey as your sons?”

I freeze as my heart picks up speed.

“You consider them your responsibility, sure. And you think of them as a promise to your beloved professor. That’s great. But the last time we spoke, you couldn’t even call yourself their father.”

I breathe out slowly. He’s got a point, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. “I’m not going to lose them, Alistair.”

“You won’t.” He approaches me. “You know I love a challenge. I’ll make a few calls and see if we can get someone to intervene.”

*“If you find yourself a wife, your problem will be solved,”* a new voice whips through the air. The curtains in the changing room slide open and Max Stinton peers at us with crystal blue eyes.

He’s wearing a grey suit and a shiny Rolex. The steps he takes toward us are confident as if he knows he owns the room and wants the world to acknowledge it. He was dubbed ‘Ice King’ by all the broken-hearted girls at our college. I don’t see the appeal, but I’m clearly not a part of the demographic who thinks Stinton is worth the fuss.

“Stinton. You were there the whole time?”

He slides a hand into his pants pocket. “You two were deep in conversation. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Alistair frowns as Stinton walks closer.

I extend my hand to him. “I didn’t know you were in the city.”

Max accepts my handshake. “I’m here to out the fires that my brother set off.”

“I thought that was handled?”

“I wish. We bought over a chain of auto stores and planned on rebranding them with the Stinton name, but the bad press is hurting the bottom line. I’m here to beautify myself before the dog and pony show starts.”

“More interviews?”

“I have to remind them that Stinton Group is much bigger than Trevor’s nonsense.”

“I heard he still hasn’t been found yet.”

“Or maybe that’s what they want us to think,” Alistair adds darkly.

“He’s missing.” Max slants Alistair a hard look which my brother-in-law returns in full. “He’s probably hiding out on a private island in the Bahamas right now. It’ll take some time, but we’ll find him. When I get my hands around the little twat, we’ll settle this properly.”

“I hope you sort that out soon.”

“Same with you.” Max adjusts his cuff links. “Family court can be a headache. Find yourself a wife and this all looks a whole lot better to the judge. Trust me. Trevor had his share of pregnancy scares. I learned a lot about the court and the state guardianship laws because of it.” He strides past me. “Think about it, Hastings.”

Stinton must have put some kind of spell on me because I can’t stop mulling on his advice. I end up thinking about it for the rest of the fitting, on the way to Sunny’s apartment and as I walk up the stairs to her front door.

“Hi.” She throws the door open and steps back. “Come in.”

I give her a once-over before I move. She’s wearing a simple T-shirt with the words ‘Interior Designers Work Miracles’ tucked into a pair of loose shorts. Her feet are bare and the polish on her toes is a light blue.

*I wouldn’t mind spending forever with this woman.*

She’s my total opposite and we quarrel about silly things at least once a day, but I love disagreeing with her. I love agreeing with her. I love that she scrunches her nose when she knows I’m right but won’t admit it. I love her obsession with interior design, her dedication to her work, and her crazy stubbornness.

I stare at Sunny, and all the disappointment I felt today rolls down my back, disappearing with the wind. She’s that place I can run to that doesn’t have to make sense. It doesn’t all have to fit perfectly. I don’t need all the answers because I already made the best choice I could—loving her.

I stumble forward and wrap my arms around her.

Sunny returns my hug, squeezing me tight. “Any good news?”

“No.” I tilt her chin up and press my mouth to hers. “But I don’t want to talk about it.” I kick the door shut with my foot and pepper her mouth with kisses. “Let’s not talk at all.”



I'm frantic and it's coming out in my sloppy caresses. My hands slide over her shirt, tugging it out of her shorts.

"Whoa, Darrel." She pulls her face away, her eyes searching mine as if she's trying to find the key to a lost city.

I want to smile, but it falls flat. I want to tell her that I'm okay and I'll fix it and everything will be perfect, but those would be lies. And I really don't like lying to Sunny Quetzal.

*Would she say yes if I asked her to marry me?*

Damn.

Would she?

The chaos flooding my veins is new. I don't live in this place of irrational thoughts and impulsive feelings. This space, this chasm in my heart, only appeared when Sunny came and ripped the roof off my perfect, orderly life.

Rules. There are rules and steps to a proposal. A ring. Something romantic. Violins and flowers and a restaurant reserved just for us.

My brain runs through all the reasons proposing now would be a bad idea.

"Darrel?"

I meet Sunny's concerned brown eyes and I realize that rules don't matter. Not with her. It's never mattered with her.

My hands cup her cheeks and I wrench her back to me, kissing her until that anxious look fades from her face and her mouth is too occupied with mine to frown at me.

*Would she say yes?*

I can't process any other thought now. Every time I picture my future, she's in it. She's there. She's standing at the door of the farmhouse in her T-shirt and shorts and her bare feet. She's flitting around the kitchen, face dotted with flour as she makes fry jacks for me and the kids. She's laughing in my office, cuddled in my lap while I record case notes and try to ignore her tantalizing sea breeze scent.

Was this falling—this insanity, what all those songs were about? The desperate lyrics that I could never relate to? That felt so overblown and needlessly dramatic? There was a grain of truth in them. They were probably written about me and Sunny.

I press her body to mine and devour her mouth, waiting for the noise in my head to subside and realizing that it's only getting louder. Why would

love come to torture me now when my life is in such upheaval?

*Would you say yes, Sunny?*

“Darrel,” she pants, “the stove is on.”

“Take it off.”

“My clothes?”

“The stove,” I growl. “There’s been a change of plans.”

Her eyes get dark and hazy. “The rice needs thirty minutes to simmer.”

“Thirty minutes won’t do. I’ve waited for you for *years*. I plan on taking my time with you.”

She presses her lips to mine again. I almost taste the surprise in it. The guilt. The shame that still clings to her because she can forgive others easily, but she finds it nearly impossible to forgive herself.

I don’t need her shame right now. The past is only a tiny piece in the tapestry of our lives together. I need her to see me now. To see the present and the life we could have.

My hands continue to tug at her shirt. The fabric slides up, revealing her stomach and then up over her head. It gets caught in her hair and we both pause, breathing hard to take stock of the problem.

Sunny wiggles her arms while I tug her head through the hole of the shirt. She’s free and I toss the shirt aside, marveling at her stunning body.

She’s freaking perfection.

I thought I could control myself. I thought I could shove everything that didn’t fit into a box and stuff it far away from me. But the box is out and it’s open. Chaos. Insanity. Fear that my world is unravelling at the seams. My need for her is about to split me in two.

Our bodies collide again. Her long arms wrap around my neck and I hoist her up, holding her by the thighs and digging my fingers into her legs each time she tilts her head to change the pace of our kiss.

She smells so good. Like Caribbean spices. Thyme and citrus and something uniquely Sunny. Familiar and smooth. Overwhelming. The way she tugs my hair makes me want to absorb her into myself until we both disappear.

I stumble to the kitchen while kissing her. I’m not looking at all, and I almost trip over a chair around the table. I catch my balance quickly, holding her tight to me just in case we hit the ground.

But we don’t.

I stabilize my feet and Sunny acts like the near-fall didn't happen. She runs her fingers through my hair and breathes out, "The food will get cold."

"Let it." My smile is sharp. It's distracted and smitten and drunk.

She smiles and slides her hands down my back, scratching me gently. "I've never seen you like this." She grips my shoulders. Her lips are slightly parted and her eyes bore into me. "I've never seen you like..."

With every breath, her chest swells in my vision and it's all I can do to keep myself from burying my head there. "Like what?"

"Like you're throwing off restraint."

That means something, doesn't it? That means I'm changing. And maybe she's changing too. Maybe she won't be the Sunny that makes crazy, impulsive decisions with me today.

*I need you to say yes to what I'm going to ask you, Sunny.*

My hands don't hold her—they grab. My open mouth runs trails across her body, tasting the wet and the dry places. Clawing at the parts of her that make her scream.

I inhale her sweet, sweet groans and it's still not enough. Her mouth crashes into mine and the flames behind us have nothing to do with the heat flushing my skin. Heart frantic. Teeth clashing. I moan before I realize how much of her is filling my mouth.

I nip her and she arches her neck. She shudders. She scrapes my scalp like she wants to leave a scar of her initials beneath my hair.

From somewhere outside me, I smell something burning.

The stove.

"Which burner?" I growl, separating my mouth from Sunny's chest only by an inch.

She trembles. "Uh..."

"Sunny," I growl. "Which. Burner."

"The rear one."

I flick the right button and then I shove her against the counter. Wild and fast. My thoughts. My body. My blood pounding through my veins.

I'm jittery and nervous. Like the time I tried to guzzle a gallon of energy drinks to complete my thesis. It calmed me for a few hours then the side effects hit and I was so on edge that I decided I wouldn't have another energy drink for the rest of my life.

I shove my fingers in the hem of her shorts and push them further down. I need her thighs opening wider and the pants are getting in the way.

Her shorts slide over her perfect brown skin and I let my hands follow suit, marking a trail from her upper legs to her ankles where she kicks what's left of her clothes away.

My shirt is gone and it was her hands that did it, but I didn't even notice because I was too busy drawing a line down her stomach with my mouth. Her hands move to my pants, but I smack them down.

*Say yes when I ask, Sunny.*

I go lower and lower, teasing her and kissing her until her fingers grip my hair and threaten to tear every follicle out of my scalp.

More.

She screams and the air leaves my body in a woosh.

I explode. I tear into a million little pieces, falling apart at her hands. At her sweet, sweet touch. At the way her body shudders and the tears run down her face when she falls apart.

She slumps against my body, her hand on my shoulder, her thighs spread and her hair falling into her face, the strands lifting slightly with every labored breath.

I pick her up, gather her to my chest and march to her bedroom.

"Darrel."

"We're not done yet," I growl.

*But when I am done with you, Sunny, you won't have a choice but to say yes.*

\* \* \*

I DIDN'T SPEND EVERY DAY AT JOHN HEARST PINING AFTER SUNNY QUETZAL so I could rush through the sight of her back arching off the bed, her thighs clamping around my ears, or her lips forming my name in urgent supplication as if I hold her life in my hands. As if I'm the only one standing between her and sanity.

She wants to feel guilt and I won't encourage it. She's precious. She's beautiful. She's everything. She's not begging for mercy so I can scrape her conscience clean. I won't allow that.

I teach her until she learns to call my name without the threads of shame. I caress her until her lips slacken and my name shifts to garbled

moans of pleasure. I move with her until the stars that are bursting behind her eyes are exploding behind mine too.

I have her.

She's mine.

It's different. It's more.

Because I love her.

My eyes open wide and she's there on the pillow next to me, sunshine falling over bruised lips and brown skin reddening where I bit her. Her hair sticks out over her head and her mascara dried in a river of tears down to her chin.

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

We breathe together. Take in a huge gulp of air that's meant to calm our hearts and the desires that roar to life again at just the slightest touch or smile or word.

I've pushed her to the very limits of her strength. I can feel it in the leg that's thrown over mine. It's still shaking a little, still limp and heavy. Her pulse is racing, the hand I have over her heart tells me she burned calories equal to running a marathon.

I kiss the top of her head to help her recover, but it only makes me crave her more. Not just physically. In every way that I possibly can have her. I want her in my bed every morning and again before I go to sleep at night. I want her tomorrow and a year after that and a hundred years after that.

I raise my arms to pull her body into me, pushing her stomach until she's curling into herself. Until I can curl my legs under her so we fit together like organized spoons.

My heart is bursting. I can feel all the terror, the uncertainty, the desperation mixed in with my need for her. It hits me all at once.

Sunny snuggles against my chest. Her hair tickles my chin and the sweat sliding against her body mingles with the sweat on mine.

"I'm so tired," she murmurs, her lips barely forming the words.

"Oxytocin."

She mumbles. "What?"

"It's a hormone produced by the hypothalamus. It causes excitement, but after it subsides, it can leave you feeling exhausted. It's also known as the 'cuddle hormone' because it lends itself to snuggling against your partner."

She laughs and looks up at me with sparkling eyes. “Are you trying to start me up again?”

“Can you handle that?” I ask, grazing my tongue across her neck.

“Not so fast. Let me catch my breath first.” She puts her head back on my chest. “Darrel, your heart is beating so fast.”

“Adrenaline and dopamine.”

“I know that one.” She lifts a finger. “Dopamine hits when we do things that feel good.”

“Right. Which perfectly describes what happened here.”

She laughs.

I want to smile too, but time is slipping away. She’ll want to get up and find food. She’ll want to talk about what I discussed with the lawyer. She’ll leave behind the haze of satisfaction to return to the real world and I’ll miss my window.

Sunny interlocks our fingers. She pulls my hand towards her lips then kisses my knuckles all the way up to my elbow. “What are you thinking, you curmudgeon.”

“Curmudgeon?”

“I can practically hear the gears in your brain turning, Hastings. We should be sleeping or flirting or... I don’t know. But you’re thinking as hard as possible and spouting brain science at me. So this is either how you are post-intimacy or something’s on your mind.” She peers over her shoulder to make eye contact. “Spill it.”

“I...” I slide my hands over her side. Over the dip of her waist and the flare of her hips. Over her stomach. Over her chest.

She moans softly. “Don’t distract me, Hastings. Use your words.”

“Sunny.”

She sighs softly. “No growling allowed. I’m trying to focus.”

I lick my lips, bury my head in the crook of her neck and whisper, “Marry me.”

She goes stiff.

My arms tighten around her. She smells like me. Like us. Like every dirty thing I did to her on the counter and against the walls and on this bed.

I can’t see her face. Did she hear me? Am I being rejected? Was this a big mistake?

My analytical mind barges into the spotlight, beating me down and trying to suck the words back. I stubbornly resist it and cling to my Sunny-

brain, the part of me that doesn't need something to make sense before I give into it.

"Sunny," I push myself up on my elbow and look down at her, pulling her body slightly so I can see her face, "do you hear me? I want you... to be my wife."

"This is sudden, Darrel."

"I've thought about it. If we get married, we can keep the boys."

Her face goes blank.

"Sunny?"

Her lips tremble.

I start to panic. Did I break her? "Sunny, say something?"

"Are you serious right now?" She scrambles to a sitting position.

I blink. "I can get you a ring later."

"A ring?" Her mouth opens and a humorless laugh drops out. "You think this is about a ring?"

Alarm bells go off in my head. I try to usher my analytical brain back in the driver's seat, but it's gone missing. In fact, everything in my head has gone into silent panic mode.

"Was that proposal your idea or was it your lawyer's?"

"Actually, Max Stinton suggested—"

Sunny curses and scrambles out of bed. She reaches for her clothes on the ground, remembers that I tore them off her in the kitchen and then stomps to the closet.

"Sunny." I spring out of bed. Thankfully, my clothes are in the bedroom.

Stepping into my pants, I follow her to the closet. She pulls on a cherry-red silk robe. It falls against her skin like a waterfall and I want her again, even though my plan to propose is crashing and burning in real time.

"Sunny."

"Don't call my freaking name." She hauls the ties of the robe and cinches it tight. The movement only accentuates her waist.

I force my gaze to meet her eyes. "Why are you upset?"

"Do you seriously not understand why I'm upset right now? You? The man who knows the answer for everything? The man who thinks he's right about everything? Why don't you tell me how you screwed up, Darrel?"

I stare at her, my mouth falling slightly open.

She scoffs and barges past me, hitting my shoulder in the process.

I capture her hand. “Sunny, I can’t fix it until you tell me what I did wrong.”

She whips her hand out of mine. “Don’t touch me again.”

“Sunny. Wait.”

Her footsteps thump as she stomps out of the bedroom and heads into the kitchen. I follow her desperately, scrambling to make it right.

Pots clank as Sunny violently hauls the food on the stove, pops her trash can open and dumps it inside. I watch savory rice and beans fall like rain into the garbage and my heart balloons in horror.

“What are you doing?” I snatch her wrist. “Sunny, what the hell? If you don’t want to marry me just say that.”

“I don’t want to marry you!” she yells in my face.

My heart shatters and my world goes dark at the edges. I stiffen. I grind my teeth together. I clench and unclench my hands as a popping sound goes off in my ears.

“Fine.” I spit the word out and it bounces against the walls.

She laughs. I’ve never heard a more shrill, unhinged sound in my life. “Yeah, it’s fine for you, isn’t it, Darrel? Now that you know I’m not going to marry you, you can just skip off to the next woman willing to open her legs for you. I’m sure that’ll go down better.”

“Why are you talking about other women, right now? You’re the one who rejected me. I said it was fine. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to *not* propose to me while we’re in bed, Darrel.”

“You’re telling me that if I’d asked you in a restaurant with your mom and dad around, you would have said yes?” I don’t believe that for a second. She’s getting pissed off at me for no reason. “Well, I’m sorry for thinking that I’d love to spend the rest of my life with you, Sunny.” My voice climbs with the weight of my annoyance. “Next time, I’ll be sure to keep that thought to myself.”

“Oh, screw you.”

“What is your problem?”

“Don’t use that condescending tone with me! You act like you’re the most mature person in the room but, deep down, you’re the one who needs to grow up!”

“Me? Who’s the one throwing food away and yelling?”

“Don’t you dare try and blame this on me when you’re the one at fault.”

I throw my hands wide. “How? How exactly did I offend you, woman?”



She purses her lips. Black eyes, that had softened as I licked her into a puddle right there against the counter, now harden with anger. “I can’t do this.”

My eyes widen. Panic sets in, pushing out the annoyance and the blood oozing from my bruised pride.

“Sunny.”

“Don’t say my name.” Her voice is shaking. She takes a breath and it’s so deep that her entire body balloons with it. She lets it out slow and steady. “I don’t want to hear you say my name right now, Darrel. You’ve said enough—done enough... today.”

My cheeks flush. My eyes shift to the ground.

“I don’t think there’s anything more that we need to discuss.” Her throat bobs as she swallows. “I have work to do.”

“Sunny.” I step forward.

She recoils against the counter. “Go.”

I hear the pain leaking out of her voice and I wonder how I hurt her. I wonder what put that shattered, frightened look in her eyes. That wasn’t my intention at all. She’s the first girl I’ve ever loved. The only woman that’s occupied my heart. I didn’t come here to bring her pain.

I take a step back. “When you’re calm, we can talk about this—”

“No, you don’t dictate when I’m calm and when we’ll talk. I’ll do that. When I’m ready to speak to you, I’ll call you. Don’t—” she lifts a hand, her eyes squeezing shut, “stay away from me until then.”

If she slapped me, it would have hurt less. If she drove a knife through my gut, I wouldn’t have bled this much. If she’d told me to give her every red cent in my bank account and hand over the keys to my farmhouse, it would have been easier than that frightening trek out of her apartment.

She follows me, keeping five paces away. Her arm is slung over her waist and her eyes are on the ground.

I want to run to her. I want to drag her into my lap and kiss her forehead and tell her that I’ll propose again. Properly this time. Or better yet, I want to go back in time before I asked her to marry me. I’d hold her close and inhale her scent and let that be enough.

But she doesn’t look at me. Her body is stiff and her jaw is clenched and her fingers wrap around the door knob. She slams the door in my face when I turn back to look at her.

I feel the absence of her keenly. Like I left a part of myself in her apartment. My heart or my lungs or both kidneys. The vital organs that I need to survive. How am I expected to walk away without them?

The drive to my farmhouse is quiet. Quieter still when I get my keys to pick the boys up from school and then stop when I remember that they're going on a trip with Ms. Bennet to meet another foster family.

My lawyer advised me not to interrupt, so I force myself to stay seated and release them to the system—a big, overworked machine that has no clue Micheal likes to sneak Oreos into his room, sit by the window and sketch. Or that Bailey jumps on his bed with his socks on, but only after setting all his pillows and stuffed animals on the floor in case he falls.

They'll both be confused when they come home. They'll have questions. I can't be focused on my heartbreak when the boys need me more than I need to sulk about Sunny.

Bennet's car swings into my driveway after seven. The boys trudge past me without a word. Bailey looks like he's been crying. Micheal looks at me like I betrayed him.

My heart tightens. "Boys." I scramble from my chair. "How did it—"

"Save it." Micheal scowls. He takes his brother's hand. "Come on, Bailey. Let's go upstairs and enjoy our rooms until we're kicked out of them."

I swallow hard.

The boys trudge up the stairs and the silence gets louder.

They're kids. They don't understand.

I pace the living room. I order pizza. The boys don't come down.

I pace some more.

Sunny said she would call. I wait for it. I need to talk to her. I need to make it all better.

Logic isn't swooping in to save me this time.

Night comes.

Morning comes.

My phone stays silent.

Sunny doesn't call.

## CHAPTER 19

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# THE FEMALE MECHANIC

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## SUNNY

IT'S FOUR AM, and Kenya's bridesmaid shoot is in two hours, but all I want to do is curl into a ball and sleep.

Selfish of me, I know.

*Today is not about you, Sunny.*

I poke Kenya gently. "Girl. Wake up."

She pushes out her bottom lip in resistance. "Five more minutes."

"Don't blame me if you're late for your own wedding," I mumble.

Her eyes burst open and she shoots to a sitting position. In the darkness, her brown skin fades into the shadows, but the whites of her eyes are clearly visible as she freaks out. "I'm getting married today."

"Did no one tell you?" I pretend to gasp.

She laughs and throws her arms around my neck. Her bonnet—a big orange mushroom that was a gift from Alistair—flounces. "Sunny, I'm getting married today."

"Yup." I pat her back.

I'm the world's worst best friend. It's Kenya's big day and I can't even fake a smile for her. Thankfully, her chin is dipped into my shoulder and she's not staring at my face. If she was, I'm pretty sure she'd jump back in horror and ask me who died.

The answer, of course, would be me. I died somewhere between Darrel claiming every inch of my body and him proposing out of the blue.

*It's not about you today, Sunny.*

By the time Kenya pulls back and grins at me, I've got my facial muscles under control. "I'm excited."

Her grin slowly fades. She blinks a couple times and peers at me like she's trying to figure something out.

"What?" I cup my face. "Are you disappointed you won't be seeing my beautiful mug when you wake up in the morning?"

"Are you okay?"

"Why would I not be okay? My best friend is getting married. I'm ecstatic."

That much is true. I'm over the moon for her. She and Alistair belong together. Kenya's the only person on the planet who can bring the bossy CEO down to the real world and Alistair is so invested in Kenya's happiness that he'd tear down anyone standing in her way.

"Hm."

"It's going to be a great day." I stretch my arms over my head and hope that my nervous chuckle distracts her.

"I can't see your eyes."

"It's dim in here." I continue to avoid her gaze.

"But I feel like your vibe is off."

"My vibe is protesting waking up at this obscene hour. Even the birds know no one should be up this early." I give an exaggerated yawn to prove my point. "The only person who wakes up chipper in the morning is you."

She sighs in frustration. "You'd tell me if something were wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Girl, re-lax. You have a hundred activities on your agenda today and not one of them is stressing about me and my imaginary problems."

Kenya hefts a manicured finger. "So you're admitting that there's a problem."

*Darrel asked me to marry him. Not because he loves me. Because all he wants is custody of the kids and I'm the most convenient way to meet that goal.* "Nope. No problems here."

Lying is bad. I learned that at the tender age of four when I stole a Belizean-style powder bun from my mom's baking basket and got a swift clap to the knuckles with a half-burned rubber spatula. However, I do believe there are times when the truth is more damaging than helpful. And this is one of those moments.

"Girl, stop looking at me like that." I force another laugh past my trembling lips. "Are you sure you're picking up weird vibes from me? What if you're the one having cold feet?"

"Not a chance." She raises her chin.

"How do you know?"

"I couldn't imagine *not* marrying Alistair. Without me, he'd just go out and terrorize the world. You could even say I'm doing humanity a favor."

My lips twitch. "You really love him, don't you?"

"I never thought I'd find someone who would love me unconditionally. I never thought that kind of love *existed*. Alistair shows me that it does.

Every day.”

Her expression smoothes out and the excitement returns to her eyes.

My heart breathes a sigh of relief.

I love giddy Kenya.

Giddy Kenya is so much fun.

“Come on, you dork. Let’s enjoy your last day of freedom with some breakfast.”

“Fry jacks?”

“Girl, please. Did you think I’d serve anything else?”

“Let me brush my teeth first.”

“Go on. I’ll get started.” I climb out of bed and pad into the hallway, stopping short when I get to the kitchen. The memory of Darrel pressing me into the counter barrels through my mind.

I can still feel the slight bruise at the small of my back. I can trace the tiny indents where his fingers dug into my thighs as he spread my legs apart.

My heart quivers and bawls out for him. I grab tape and gag that particular organ so it stays quiet.

I’m angry.

I’m hurt.

I won’t let Darrel take over this moment. I won’t lament on the things I can’t change. Today is not about me and my relationship problems. It is one hundred percent going to be the best day for Kenya. She deserves it and more.

I put my all into the fry jacks. Then I play loud soca music while I help Kenya pack her suitcase for the honeymoon. We end up bumping and grinding on invisible dance partners as an energetic soca artist bawls out, “*Wave yuh flag! Wave yuh flag!*”

We sweat so much after our impromptu dance party that we have to collapse on the sofa, bring the standing fan close enough to kiss our faces and cool down.

It’s in that quiet moment that my phone buzzes with a new message.

My heart lifts to my throat, thinking it’s Darrel.

It’s not.

*Mom: Tell Kenya I love her and I’m sorry I won’t be able to attend her wedding, but I wish her the best.*

I pat my best friend on the side. “Hey, my mom sent this.”

She takes the phone from me. Her fingers skim the screen and a slow smile crawls over her face. "Aw. Tell her thanks."

"I will." I accept the phone from her.

"Oh, I meant to ask you, Sunny." Kenya stakes her elbow in the chair and rests her chin on her fist. Eyelashes flapping, she studies me. "Did you tell your mom about you and Darrel?"

"I didn't tell her. It's more like, uh, she found out."

"Did she find out the way I did?" Her eyes balloon in horror as if she's getting flashbacks of Darrel kissing me in the couch.

I sputter. "Ugh. No. Goodness no. She found him crawling behind my sofa and tried to kill him. That's how they met."

"What?" Her jaw drops.

"Nothing." I shake my head and flop back into the sofa. Talking about Darrel is painful right now.

"Hey, don't be upset." My best friend crawls closer to me and squeezes my shoulder. "Your mom wants you to marry a Mayan guy, but I don't think it's only because she wants you to produce babies for the culture. I think she wants you to be with a man who understands you and appreciates you for who you are and all you've been through as an immigrant and a Mayan person. In her mind, only a guy from your culture can connect with you on that level." Kenya smiles. "Some of my friends had the same concerns when I got with Alistair."

"You never told me that."

"Because their opinions weren't valid enough for me to share." She shrugs. "The point is, Darrel is someone who'll appreciate you, be faithful to you, and protect you for the rest of your life. When your mom sees that, she'll accept him."

I swallow hard, take a deep breath to stop myself from crying and then pop out of the chair. "What are we doing lounging around here? We need to get you to that hotel. We told the bridesmaids to be there at six. The glam squad should have set up by now too." I check my watch. "We need to go."

Kenya stares at me as if she's trying to figure out if I'm brushing her off for a deeper reason.

"Hello? We don't have time to stare." I grab her hands and tug her out of the chair. "Let's go. Let's go." Hands on her back, I usher her into the bathroom so she can shower.



The moment the door slams shut, I press a hand to my chest. My heart is expanding painfully, obsessing over Darrel, cringing at the memory of his contract-like proposal, and rehashing our argument.

I waffle between missing him and hating him. How could he think popping the question in bed was a good idea? How could he just admit that it was a suggestion from Max Stinton, of all people? Why did he think marrying me was the only way to keep the kids?

*He doesn't really love you.*

The thought hits hard and fast. Maybe mom was right. Maybe this is Darrel's complicated revenge plot coming into effect. Or maybe he didn't have feelings for me from the start.

I mentally trace the timeline of our relationship. Darrel spent over a year of our acquaintance growling at me and looking absolutely annoyed whenever I came around. The moment Ms. Jean died and the kids came to live with him, he softened up to me. Was it because he saw me as the love of his life or because he saw how much I loved Micheal and Bailey and thought he could use that to his advantage?

I wrap my arms around my knees. My thoughts are going in circles. I push myself off the ground and re-fold Kenya's clothes for the honeymoon. She was so excited, she just shoved them into her suitcase. We'll have to sit on that thing if we want the zipper to go around.

I'm almost finished folding the last of her dresses when Kenya pops out of the bathroom, fresh-faced and smiling. Her brown skin glistens and I finally understand why the phrase 'blushing bride' exists. Kenya's skin might be too dark to show the red flush of excitement, but anticipation is practically glowing from her skin.

"Whoa. You folded my clothes for me?" She prances to the suitcase and peers in.

"Gotta get my practice in since I might be packing my own bags soon."

"Practice?" She tears her shower cap off her head and tight curls spring out in all their voluminous glory. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I got a job offer to design a villa in Belize," I tell her. Marching across the room, I grab my towel and body gel.

"And you're *going*?" Kenya sounds bewildered.

"I haven't decided yet." I give her a small smile over my shoulder. "But I'm thinking of saying yes."

Kenya leans forward as if she wants to discuss it more, but I hurry into the bathroom.

The client was very clear about the deadline. I have to tell her whether I'll take the job in Belize or not by the end of the day. If I don't make a choice, the opportunity will be taken away from me.

I turn the water on and sink to the ground. The thought of leaving the boys now, when their custody is up in the air, wrenches my chest. Abandoning them would tear my soul to little pieces. But how do I face Darrel when I know he's only with me so he can keep the kids?

The water falling down my cheeks is definitely from the shower. Not a single drop comes from my eyes. I dry myself off a few minutes later and venture out into the bedroom.

I half-expect Kenya to pounce on me, but I'm saved from her questions and prying brown eyes when she rushes into the room with a smile.

"Bernard is in a limo downstairs."

I laugh. "He is not. Does Bernard know how to drive a limo?"

"I have no idea."

We both run to the window and peer at the parking lot where Alistair's beloved chauffeur is leaning against a white stretch limo.

"The excess." I roll my eyes.

Kenya's widening grin is enough for me to stuff my more sarcastic remarks deep down and just enjoy the moment with her.

We gather everything we packed for the day and greet Bernard downstairs. His eyes tear up when he sees Kenya and I step back, giving them a moment to hug each other.

Finally, he looks at me and nods.

I wiggle my fingers. "Bernard."

"Ms. Sunny." His eyes crinkle in welcome. "I brought along my nephew." He gestures to a gangly boy. "Alistair wondered if you would prefer to drive back as it will be hard to get a cab after the reception."

"Oh, I would love that." My eyebrows rise in awe. No wonder Alistair is so wealthy. He really thinks of everything.

I hand my car keys over to Bernard who tosses it to his nephew.

"Come on!" Kenya giggles and drags me into the limo.

We drink champagne and take selfies and marvel at all the amenities in the limo. As we inspect the car further, Kenya finds a love letter from

Alistair. She cackles when she reads it and I, being the nosy best friend that I am, launch over her shoulder to find out what's so funny.

I scrunch my nose. “*To Ms. Jones. From Alistair. Subject: Wedding Assignment.* The heck? Why'd he print out an email?”

“Because he's insane.” My best friend doesn't look like she's complaining though. She squeezes the letter tight and lets out a sigh. “Can this day hurry up already? I want to walk down the aisle.”

I feel another pinch in my heart when I see her smiling and happy. Alistair is sending love letters and I can't even get a text.

*You told him not to contact you, Sunny. What did you expect?*

The little voice in my head is right, but that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it.

We get to the hotel and meet up with all the bridesmaids. What happens next is a lot of squealing, hugging and ugly-crying—mostly from Kenya. However, everyone tears up in the next hour when Kenya tries on her dress.

It's a gorgeous and sophisticated creation with diamonds and lace and everything a queen like Kenya deserves. The makeup guy has to touch up my face three times because every time I *think* I have my composure together, I realize that I don't.

“Let's get a photo with the groomsmen's first look at the bride,” the photographer announces.

I stiffen immediately. My feet don't want to move, but I'm carried away by the crowd as all the women march outside to greet the men.

Alistair's groomsmen are wearing sharp tuxes. They're all tall, broad-shouldered and sexy—which explains all the twittering from the bridesmaids. But my eyes go straight to the man in the middle of the line.

Darrel's green eyes collide with mine too. My heart jumps to my throat and I quickly avert my gaze, although I can't seem to focus on anything but him.

The tux hugs his shoulders like a second skin. His hair is brushed back and away from his stunning face. Jawline sharp and lips firm, he looks like a prince from a fairytale.

*Don't let him mess with your head, Sunny.*

I avert my eyes and start to stomp past him when the wedding planner sprints toward us. It's time to line up for the wedding march.

A hand darts out and wraps around my wrist.

It's Darrel.

I know because my heart is telling me even before I've turned around.

"Sunny." His eyes are on me. They're intoxicating and beautiful and so, so sad.

*Don't let him mess with you.* I steel myself against those eyes and settle my fingers in the crook of his elbow.

What's worse than realizing a man only wants you so he can use you? It's walking down the aisle with that man and pretending everything is totally fine.

Newsflash: *it's not.*

None of this is fine. Not Darrel constantly sending me those longing looks. Not Micheal and Bailey, sitting in the front row with their curly hair and somber expressions more fit for a funeral than a wedding, and not my own conflicted heart that wants to stay and wants to leave at the same time.

I don't know how we get through the dance at the reception later because holding Darrel's hand makes my mind go blank. To my surprise, he doesn't step on my feet once. Has he been practicing? I have no idea.

I don't know anything anymore.

As soon as the music ends, I release his hand and clap for Kenya and Alistair.

Alistair looks dapper with his hair combed back, his fancy tux, and his giant smile. I notice that his usually intense hazel eyes go soft whenever he gazes in Kenya's direction.

My best friend is beaming. Her hand is always reaching for Alistair, his shoulder, his back, his fingers. They can't seem to get enough of each other.

Their happiness only emphasizes my misery. I would have loved to share a moment like that with Darrel in the future. I would have loved if he asked me to marry him because he loves me and can't live without me.

But that wasn't the reason...

*Don't think about it.*

The best part of the reception is that Darrel keeps his distance. He's standing on the opposite end of the room, a hand in his pocket. He looks sexy and broody and it's catnip for all the girls at the wedding. I've seen no less than four women ask him to dance.

Not that I'm counting.

Darrel turns them down every time.

I pretend not to notice that either.

"Sunny!" a boyish voice calls.

I whip my head around, my mood lifting all the way up when I see Micheal and Bailey trotting toward me.

Bailey is holding a plate and balancing a tower of cake on top of it. The crumbs on his face tell me this is not the first time he's dipped around the dessert table.

I laugh and brush the crumbs away. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes!" His cheerful energy makes me smile. Genuinely this time.

Micheal shuffles toward us. His sullen expression is in such direct contrast to his brother that I can't help but squeeze his shoulder. "You okay, bud?"

"Is it true that Mr. Darrel wants to get rid of us?" Micheal whispers.

"What?" Annoyance claws at my skin. "Is that what Ms. Bennet said?"

Micheal just shrugs.

I crouch to his level and speak earnestly, "Micheal, Darrel is doing everything he *possibly can* to keep you two." Even proposing marriage to me out of sheer necessity. "I don't know what will happen and where you two will end up, but I do know this. Darrel won't stop fighting until you two are where you belong." I glance between both of them. "With him."

"What about you?" Bailey asks.

My eyes jerk to the little boy.

"Are you coming to stay with us too?"

A ball of guilt lodges in my throat.

*You have forty-eight hours to decide.*

"I..." My lips are numb.

*Are you going to give up this amazing opportunity?*

"Boys..." I gather them close.

Bailey wraps his little arms around me.

Micheal doesn't hug me back, but he doesn't step out of my arms either.

*Tell me if you'll leave us.* It was the first thing the boys asked me to do.

I force the words out. "I might be taking a job far away."

Micheal's eyes widen.

Bailey's glasses slide down his nose. "Where?"

"Um... it's an island off Ambergris Caye... in Belize."

"Belize? Isn't that where you're from?" Micheal points out.

"I haven't said yes yet." The words pooling in my brain aren't getting out of my mouth fast enough. "But I want you to be prepared if—"

"Don't go, Sunny." Bailey's bottom lip trembles.

“Forget it.” Micheal grabs his little brother’s hand. “She’s going to leave anyway.”

“Wait, Micheal...”

“Come on.” He tugs Bailey past me and they both disappear into the crowd.

I run a hand through my hair and lean against the table. I feel like a turd. Not even the human kind. The dog kind. No, worse than that. A turd that came out of a dog, then got licked up by another dog and then got vomited out. That kind.

Kenya’s laughter trails the air. She’s having a fairytale night and I love that for her. I really, *really* do. But I can’t be here anymore.

I turn on my heels and stalk to the parking lot. I’m extremely grateful Alistair suggested I bring my car to the wedding because I cannot fathom having to wait for a taxi right now.

Footsteps kick loose earth and grass behind me. I tense, wondering if it’s Darrel that followed me out.

When I turn, I realize that it’s not.

“You’re...” I stare at the teenager, trying to place him. “You’re Bernard’s nephew, right?”

“Yeah. Hey, sorry to bother you, but are you planning on driving right now?”

“I didn’t drink.” *Too much*. I’m not tipsy or anywhere close to drunk.

“No, it’s not that.” He rubs the back of his neck. “My uncle told me not to tell you until the mechanic came but...”

My eyes narrow. “Did you crash my car?”

“I didn’t. I swear. Your car lurched while I was driving and—”

“Oh.” I release a breath. “It always does that.” I had to sell my luxury vehicle to hold myself over while I established my interior design business. The clunker I replaced it with gets me from Point A to Point B and it has more than enough space to carry some furniture. I don’t have any complaints.

“We were worried about it. Uncle said your car could shut down at any point. He called a mechanic he knew.”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I smile at him, but I’m certain it looks more like a grimace because he recoils. “I’ve got it.”

When I'm close to my car, I turn back and look at Kenya's wedding. I hope she's not too upset when she can't find me later. I'll send her a text wishing her a safe trip and an enjoyable honeymoon. Hopefully Alistair keeps her occupied so she doesn't have time to worry about me.

At that moment, I spot Darrel stepping out of the reception hall. His head swivels back and forth as if he's looking for me. I curse and swing around to my car. Panic makes my hands shake. I drop my keys twice before finally getting the door open.

Darrel spots me. His long legs close the distance between us as he makes a mad dash for the car. Heart slamming against my ribs, I crank my engine and slam my heel on the gas pedal, tearing out of the parking lot like I'm running from the cops.

Darrel gets smaller and smaller in the mirror until, finally, he disappears. I let out a deep breath. I made a successful getaway, but I feel no joy. What is there to celebrate? The kids' lives are in utter turmoil and I stupidly told them I'd be leaving in the middle of it.

*I'm an idiot. I don't deserve to be in their lives. Maybe Darrel will figure that out too. Maybe he'll find a young, hot nanny and marry her instead.*

My head pounds and I press my foot harder on the gas. To my surprise, my car slows down when I want it to go turbo.

"Come on, come on." I grip the steering wheel tighter and stomp the pedal to the floor.

The car coughs and then crawls to a stop.

"You've got to be kidding me," I murmur.

Great. This is just great.

Since screaming in frustration won't miraculously get my car to start, I reach for my phone and then stop when I realize I don't have it. It's in the hotel room where we spent most of the morning getting ready.

I smack my forehead against the window. *What do I do now?*

As if the heavens are taking pity on me, I notice a pair of taillights moving in my direction. The reception is being held at Alistair's private estate and the road isn't well travelled. I can't miss this chance.

Popping out of the car, I wave my arms desperately while yelling 'help'. The vehicle slows down and, in the faint moonlight streaming through the trees, I see the name of an auto repair company on the side. The driver's door opens with a creak and a pair of boots drop to the ground.

“Thank you so much for stopping,” I say, stepping forward. “I was scared I would...” My words fade when I realize the driver is a woman. She’s petite too. Maybe even smaller than Kenya. Her hair is in a tight afro puff and her skin is a beautiful obsidian, like she was dipped in black ink and set out to dry to perfection.

“No problem,” she says. Her voice is light and melodic.

“Um...”

“I was called out for another job, so I don’t have a lot of time.” She pulls up the sleeves of her navy jumper and checks her watch. “But pop the hood. I’ll see what I can do to help.”

I blink rapidly.

She glances up, arches an eyebrow and gives me an exasperated look. “Lady, do you want help or not?”

“Yes. Help. Help is good. Thanks.” I scramble back into my car and pop the hood.

She sticks her head in.

I ease around to watch her. She reaches inside the truck like she actually understands what all the wires and nuts and bolts are for. I can’t help the way my jaw slackens in awe.

Finally, she straightens and faces me. “Looks like you’ve got a clogged fuel filter. Shouldn’t be too much to change it.”

“Oh.”

The woman watches me with sharp brown eyes.

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry. I haven’t seen many...”

“Female mechanics? I know.” She shuts my hood. “Unlike unicorns, we exist.”

“Right.” She has a sharp tongue and an appreciation for sarcasm. It makes me want to stick my hand out and ask if we can be friends.

Her phone rings before she can say more. She fishes it out of her pocket and answers. “Pierce speaking.” Her eyes scan the star-studded sky. “The car left the wedding already?” Her eyebrow arches in my direction. “Say, was the driver wearing a fancy dress, has straight hair and doesn’t know it’s rude to stare at people?”

My cheeks warm and I glance away.

“Right.” Pierce bobs her head. “Don’t worry. I think her car will be fine.” She stuffs her phone into the front of her jumper. “By any chance, are you Sunny?”



“Yes.” I peer at her. “You’re the mechanic they called to fix my car?”

“I’m filling in for Jenkins, but yeah. You can say that’s me.” She bobs her head. “I’m Dawn.”

“Dawn.” It’s such a feminine name and she’s got such a dainty and regal face. Those cheekbones and full lips and piercing eyes seem more suited to a model than a mechanic.

“Why’d you try to drive a car that wasn’t working?” Dawn asked.

“Huh?”

“The car.” She gestures to it. “I thought they told you it needed fixing. Why’d you still drive it?”

“Because I had to leave.” I lean against the vehicle and huff out a breath. “I’m not surprised this happened. Everything in my life is breaking down, so my car might as well do it too.”

She sets her toolbox on the side of the road. “Man trouble?”

“Maybe.” I tilt my head. “Is this what you do? Fix cars and listen to people talk about their troubles?”

“It helps to pass the time.”

I look at her and then I decide *what the hell*. She’s a stranger which means she can be objective and it’s not like I have anything to lose. Without missing a beat, I tell her everything about Darrel, the boys, and the job opportunity in Belize.

Dawn finishes with the fuel filter long before I’m finished vomiting up all my crap on her.

She dusts her hands and squints into the distance. “Sounds... complicated.”

“Which part? The part where the man I’m in love with just sees me as a way to gain favor in front of a judge? The part where I already love these kids so much that I can’t bear to leave them? The part where I got an amazing opportunity, but I’m hesitating about taking it because it would make me feel like a jerk?”

“Yes, yes and yes.”

I chuckle.

She smiles too and it makes her eyes sparkle. She looks ten years younger when she loosens up, which is probably why she goes for the prickly female mechanic act more than the smiley one. I don’t think men would take her seriously if she was always this warm.

“I can’t help you with the relationship part.” Her eyes float away from mine and I see a glint of darkness pass through them. “I’m horrible at picking the right guy. In fact, I tend to exclusively attract the jerks.” She clears her throat and tugs the collar of her jumpsuit away from her neck. “But I do know a little something about kids.”

“You have a kid?”

She nods. The smile that crosses her face this time is affectionate. “Seven years old. But sometimes, she acts like she’s older than I am.”

“I bet she’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, well, she was born out of not-so-beautiful circumstances. It was a one-night stand and her father wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. If that wasn’t bad enough, next thing I knew, guys in suits were knocking on my door asking me to sign contracts and get myself down to a clinic.” Her scowl is just as poisonous as an ancient Mayan dart. “Point is, my life changed the moment I decided to have her. The situation wasn’t the best, but I wouldn’t trade her for anything because she’s the best part of my life.” Dawn stares into my eyes. “She pushed me to go to school. She pushed me to fight for a better life. She pushes me every day. I made it because of her. My daughter is my strength, not my weakness.”

Her words move me to the pits of my soul.

“Your heart is with these kids. If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t be so conflicted. You can take that job in Belize and you’ll probably do great, but will it mean anything if your heart is somewhere else?”

“So I should say no?”

“I didn’t say that.” She lifts a dark finger. “I told you. I had the courage to fight for my dreams because of my daughter. I didn’t give up. It was hard. It was tough. I’m not going to lie to you. It would have been easier to let my dreams go. But I didn’t. Couldn’t. I wanted my daughter in my life and I wanted my dreams. I decided I’d have them both.”

“Both? Is that possible?”

“I don’t know.” She straightens and levels me a challenging stare. “You’re the one who decides that.”

## CHAPTER 20

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# MISERY LOVES NO ONE

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## DARREL

I SHOULD HAVE DRAGGED Sunny somewhere quiet right after the wedding. She glared at me the entire time, but it's not like I could take my eyes off her either.

She looked stunning in her maid-of-honor gown. Her hair fell over her face like a waterfall, wavy and full. Her lips were a sultry red and her body was draped in an elegant floor-length dress.

Every part of me wanted to hold her, kiss her, promise her that rings and proposals could wait as long as she stayed next to me.

But I didn't. She kept frowning at me. Kept scowling. She pulled her hand away as soon as we were done with the wedding march. She was stiff in my arms during the dance at the reception.

Even so, I could have pressed her into the shadows. I could have pinned her there. Told her everything that was on my mind. *It's not what you think. I don't want to marry you because I want to keep the kids. I love you. I'm in love with you, you crazy woman.*

Words. Would words solve this? I didn't have a chance to find out. Sunny took off in a split-second. By the time I realized she was headed to the parking lot, it was too late. She'd already disappeared.

I pace up and down my office. It's been two hours since Alistair and Kenya waved goodbye under a sea of bubbles and entered the limo that would whisk them to their honeymoon.

Before he got into the car, Alistair gripped my arm and whispered to me. *'I got ahold of a friend. He's agreed to make some calls and bring your case before a family judge sooner rather than later.'*

*'So I won't have to tussle with Ms. Bennet?'*

*'Ms. Bennet will still testify,' Alistair said, 'but she won't block you from the opportunity. It's up to you to make your case before the judge. The problem is... if the judge denies custody, you may never get legal guardianship of the boys.'*

It's a chance I have to take. There's no way the jaded social worker will allow the boys to stay with me if I go through her. I'm willing to fight above her if it means I can get a different outcome.

I slip a hand into my pocket and pull out my phone. The background is a photo of Sunny and the boys at the ice cream store. I have no idea when they took this shot. Sunny sent it to Bailey and Micheal a few days ago and I asked them to forward it to me. The best decision I ever made was getting those boys new phones.

My fingers graze over Sunny's smiling face. Her eyes are warm enough to heat my skin. The more I stare at her, the more my heart throbs like I stubbed it on the coffee table.

This is torture.

Damn. How long has it been since we fought?

I miss her.

Space. She asked for space. I hate that word. I want to crumple it into a ball and toss it from the English language. Tonight was torturous enough. Being so close to Sunny at the wedding and not being able to talk to her stung more than the time I drank eight shots of straight vodka at a college party.

The light on my desk flickers.

The clock is at an obscene number.

I should probably be sleeping. Or at least preparing for the hearing.

Instead, I'm here walking up and down my office. Missing Sunny. Wishing Sunny were here. Wondering how to make it up to Sunny.

I tap my message icon.

Then I exit it.

Then I open it again.

*Darrel: I'm going before a family court judge in two weeks.*

There's no response.

I should have expected that.

She told me not to bother her. Told me with fire sparking from her eyes and lips pursed, that I shouldn't even say her name until she calls for me. Using the boys' situation is cheating, but I also want her to know about this desperate chance I'm taking. Sunny is just as invested in their wellbeing as I am.

My heart pounds when a bubble appears.

Sunny's texting back.

*Sunny: Okay.*

I wait for another message to roll in. My feet pound the floor as I march to one end of the room and back.

My phone remains blank.

I grit my teeth and resist the urge to fling it at the wall.

They say time flies when you're miserable. Whoever 'they' are, I wish they'd jump out a window.

Time has slowed to a crawl.

No, it is *currently* crawling.

Over rusty nails.

And a hot bed of coals.

Unable to stand the silence, I pull out my phone again.

*I don't want to make you uncomfortable, so I'm not going to reach out again, but I want you to know that I love you too much to give up. I only know how to fight for the things that matter to me. That includes you and the kids.*

My thumb hovers over the send button. In the end, I erase it all and toss the phone on my desk. She asked me not to bother her. It's late. I want to show her that I've grown since my days as the hoodie guy who spied on her in the hallway.

I head to bed. The mattress welcomes me with open arms, but sleep isn't so accommodating. I toss and turn. Sunny's face keeps floating through my mind. Her sweet kisses. Her hot caresses. The sound she made when I had her on the edge.

My hands rake over my face and I make a garbled groan of frustration. Sitting up, I stare at the darkness. The shadows laugh at me. The empty side of the bed belongs to Sunny and I feel that truth keenly. How do I get her back?

My mind goes blank.

Somehow, I fall asleep but when I wake up, it's to the same unease. The parts of me that got left behind in Sunny's apartment are calling to me. My insides are hollow. I'm walking around with something vital missing. And no amount of shuttling the boys to and from school, overloading my docket with patients, interviewing certified nannies, or exercising like a madman in my home gym makes the emptiness go away.

Learning how to make fry jack doesn't help. Mindlessly scrolling Sunny's blog—which she hasn't updated in a while—doesn't help either. Sleeping, for sure, is a thing of the past.

I'm up one night, glasses on my nose, laptop open and the bones of my speech—which I've changed fifty times already—open before me when

there's a knock on the door.

"Bailey." I welcome him with a dip of my head. "Why aren't you sleeping, buddy?"

He steps into the room, clutching his stuffed orangutan. He's wearing the monkey-themed pajamas Sunny bought for him when she arranged the campfire. The lamp on my desk casts a yellow sheen on his pale and freckled skin.

"I couldn't sleep."

"You have school tomorrow." I clear my throat and turn my chair around, preparing to get up. "But if you really can't sleep, then I can warm up some milk."

To my surprise, Bailey marches past the sofa, past my desk and scrambles to sit in my lap. My eyes bug and I help him, slipping my fingers under his armpits and hoisting him to my leg.

I'm surprised that he's so comfortable with me. Both boys seemed to withdraw into themselves after the wedding. I gently let them know that I was around to listen and be there for them, but I didn't push and they didn't take me up on my offer.

The past few days, Micheal hasn't said much to me. He still watches me like he hates the world and the fact that I'm in it. He trudges past me when he gets home in the evening and barely mumbles a greeting when I drop him off at school in the morning.

Bailey hasn't been as angsty, but he's definitely chosen to follow his brother's lead. He's been extremely quiet around the dinner table and watches everyone with worried blue eyes.

I glance at him. "What's wrong?"

He clutches the orangutan close. Curls floppier than ever, he rests his chin on the teddy bear's head. "I miss Sunny."

"Me too, buddy." I let out a sigh that could compete with a leaking balloon. "But you know that her not being around has nothing to do with you and Micheal. She's crazy about you two."

"I know."

"Good."

"I mean I know why she's gone." Bailey tugs on the monkey's ear.

"You do?" My eyebrows hike. Sunny didn't discuss that marriage proposal with the boys, did she?

"Yeah." Bailey pushes out his bottom lip. "She went to Belize."



I freeze in my seat. “I’m sorry. *What?*”

“Sunny’s in Belize. She got a job. She told us.”

“She told you *what?*”

“Belize, Mr. Darrel.” Bailey sighs as if he’s disappointed I’m this dumb. “It’s a country in Central America. Sunny comes from there. She says her people built the Mayan temples and—”

“Bailey, wait. Wait. When did Sunny go to Belize?”

He shrugs.

My eyes zip over the room. I suck in a deep breath to keep the panic at bay.

“Here. I can prove it.” Bailey turns the phone over. “We made a group chat.”

“You and Sunny?”

“Me and Sunny and Micheal.” He shows me. There’s a picture of Sunny, smiling into the camera. Behind her is a giant house that’s under construction. Men in hardhats swarm the building. There’s more to the background too. Coconut trees. Lots of sand.

*Damn.* Did Sunny run off to Belize and *not* tell me? Is this her way of breaking up with me?

The breaths I pull into my lungs get more and more unhinged.

“Mr. Darrel?”

“Bailey, you should head to bed now. You can’t be sleeping in class.”

“Okay.” He hops off my leg, waves and scurries out the door.

I run my fingers through my hair and try to make sense of Bailey’s revelation.

Sunny left the country.

Sunny left the country and didn’t tell me.

Sunny left the country, went all the way to Belize for who knows how long and didn’t tell me.

I pick up the phone to dial Alistair before I remember that he and Kenya are on their honeymoon. If I know my brother-in-law, the last thing he wants is for me to bother him unless it’s an emergency or it’s about Belle.

My shoulders are getting tense. So are my thighs. Even my knees. I didn’t know knees could get tense, but here we are.

I flip through my phone.

Advice. I need...

I don’t have anyone else to call.

My circle is that small. Or maybe I'm just that closed off.

*Curmudgeon.* I can hear Sunny in my head. I can practically see that mischievous smile of hers that always makes my heart skip a beat. *You don't know how to loosen up, Hastings. A man should have more than five expressions.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and make a fist on my desk.

*Curmudgeon means fun police. It's like... the opposite of fun.*

Screw this.

If I don't call someone, I'm going to call Sunny and I'm going to beg her like a lovesick fool to come back to me. Or maybe I can move the kids to Belize after the hearing. Or maybe...

No. Unhinged Darrel is way worse than Sunny On the Brain Darrel.

I scroll to Dina's number and call.

"Hello?" Dina croaks.

I open my mouth, but no words can get past the lump in my throat.

"Hello? Darrel?"

"Dina." My voice cracks.

"Oh, you poor thing." She tuts before I've gotten another word out.

"You need to talk, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Meet me at the therapy center. We're going to have ourselves a session."

\* \* \*

DINA MAKES HORRIBLE COFFEE. UTTERLY ATROCIOUS. I'M ASHAMED OF THE fact that a brew like this exists and that it came from our coffee machine.

But at least the bitter taste is enough to calm my thoughts and get me to focus on one thing. It's a trick used in neuropsychology. We try to engage the analytical side of the brain so the emotional side takes a break and allows for rational thinking.

Right now, I'm wondering if I should throw out all the mixed coffee powders and replace them with tea.

"It's weird, isn't it?"

My eyes flit to Dina.

She smiles. The room is dim and her eyes are bathed in shadows, but I can still see the wrinkles gathering like tiny brackets on her cheeks. “It’s weird being the one sitting in the chair.”

I clear my throat. “It’s uncomfortable.”

“Because you’re so used to controlling every situation you enter.”

“No, because the couch is worn out. I should buy a new one.”

“Darrel Hastings, did you just make a joke?”

“I’m being utterly serious.”

“Let’s not change the topic. Are you uncomfortable losing control of the session?”

“I wouldn’t say I have a problem with control—”

“Trying to make sense of every emotion by stuffing it into a neat little box—that falls under a need for control.”

“I usually let my patients talk a bit before I analyze them.” My eyes narrow.

She laughs. “It’s harder for a doctor to receive treatment than it is for a regular person. I’d rather not waste time.”

My eyes stray to my phone. I asked Ms. Hansley to watch the boys for me. Which she was happy to do. But I do feel bad that she had to wake Belle. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have bothered her in the first place.

“You’re anxious.”

“I’m worried about the boys.”

She clasps her fingers over her knee and studies me with a wry grin. “You were in so much turmoil that you left them to be here.” She pushes her glasses up with a finger. The way it slides right back down her nose reminds me of Bailey. “Why?”

“I…” I lick my lips. “Sometimes, getting an outside opinion is the best way to solve a problem.”

“That’s a textbook answer.”

“It’s the right answer.”

“Why did you call *me*, Darrel?”

I press my lips together. “This center,” I glance at the wall, “it’s my life. I spent more time building my professional career than I did building close relationships.”

“Your closest friend is your brother-in-law and that’s only because you feel like you owe it to Claire to look out for him.” She tilts her head. “Your second closest relationship is with me because we work together.”

My lips flatten. "I'm supposed to be discovering things on my own."

"If you were capable of doing that, you wouldn't be in that chair."

I frown.

She motions to me. "You've covered familial and platonic relationships. That means your problem is with your romantic relationship." She leans forward. "Sunny."

"I'd like my money back. This session isn't helping."

"Sit down, Darrel. Stop running from hard conversations and being afraid of things you can't explain with your fancy degree and your overly logical brain."

"Now you're straight up insulting me."

"I'm laying out the facts." She presses her shoes flat on the ground. "What did you do?"

I scowl. Then I glance away. "I asked her to marry me."

Dina's eyes nearly pop out and smack her glasses. "I did not expect you to say that."

I grunt.

"And her answer was..."

"She said no."

"Why?"

"I..." I blow out a breath. "I think she got the impression that I wanted to marry her because of the kids."

Dina arches an eyebrow. "And why would she get that impression?"

I pull my lips inside my mouth.

"Maybe because you *did* ask her to marry you so you could keep the kids?"

I yank my collar away from my neck. "Next question."

"That's not how we do things."

"Your style is too aggressive."

"Well, it's a good thing I'm just a nurse and not a psychologist then, isn't it?"

I swallow hard. My eyes drop to the floor. "I love her."

"A given."

"I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

"You'd be dumb if you didn't."

I glare at Dina.

She smiles serenely and motions *continue*.

“I messed up.”

“And why haven’t you told her that?”

“She asked for space.”

“And?”

“And I’m not going to make her uncomfortable.” I rub the back of my neck. “I have a... history of doing that.”

“I’m not suggesting you should disrespect her and chase her around after she asked for space. I’m asking what you’ve done while you’re waiting.”

My throat bobs. “Huh?”

“Sunny loves you. Anyone with two eyes and a brain can see that. But you broke her trust. You gave her the impression that you only want her for the kids. You put a question in her mind that shouldn’t be there.”

“She misunderstood. I do love her. I do want to marry her.”

“Misunderstandings.” She drums her fingers against the chair. “It’s the tiny things that snowball. And you know that.”

I glance away.

“You and Sunny have two very different communication styles.” Dina picks up her coffee, tastes it and sets it back down with a grimace. “You’re a man who sees things as black and white and she’s a woman who sees in color. To you, proposing marriage is perfectly logical *because* it solves all your problems. You love each other. You want to be together. And it keeps the kids with you. Win-win.”

“Right.” *Finally* someone gets it.

“But,” Dina presses her palms flat on her knees, “to her, you only see her as a means to an end. You only think of her as a business transaction. Something you need to get what you want. You diminished her value.”

I open my mouth.

She lifts a finger. “You’re not the therapist here, Darrel. You’re going to listen.”

I snap my mouth shut.

“You put a question in her mind. A question of ‘does he really love me?’ And instead of *doing*, not speaking or chasing or being creepy,” she gives me a sidelong glance, “but *doing* something to answer that question, you’re sitting here feeling sorry for yourself.” Dina scoots to the edge of her seat. “Here’s the thing, Darrel. You’re not the victim. And if you’re asking a young lady to rearrange her entire life to accommodate you and the two

kids that *you* signed on to take care of, you'll need to be a lot more sensitive and a lot more humble than you're being right now."

I gulp and avoid Dina's fierce gaze.

"She needs to see that you're capable of loving her. That'll take time and yes, I agree, that'll take space. Here's the good news." A light glints in Dina's eyes. "You have an opportunity to prove your love to Sunny in a way that she'll never ask *that* particular question again. So the same energy you're putting into proving to the judge that you deserve to have those boys," she pauses, "put that big brain of yours to use and find a way to prove that you deserve to have that woman." Dina glances at her watch. Her eyebrows jump. "Look at that. Time's up."

She picks up my untouched cup of coffee and waddles to the door.

"You're good at this," I call at her back. "Scary but good."

"Some people need more professional help. I'm not qualified for that." She shrugs. "But some people just need the truth all in one dose."

I rise to my full height. "I appreciate it."

"Don't thank me yet, Darrel." She tilts her chin up. "Just show me how you're going to make things right."

\* \* \*

I START WITH SUNNY'S MOTHER.

Why?

Because I might not be able to woo Sunny back, but I sure can work on winning her parents over. I'm going to marry her. Her family's important to her. So they're important to me too.

Besides, it won't hurt to get Mama Quetzal on my side.

The Quetzals live in a colorful house smack in the middle of a dull cul de sac. The way they stand out makes me smile. I bet their brightly painted home is responsible for a whole lot of complaint letters at the local homeowners' society.

An American flag and a Belizean flag wave cheerfully on their front porch. Hibiscus flowers grow profusely in a small garden in the front yard.

Sunny's dad is a big, warm man with dark skin, shining eyes and a smile that—given the laugh lines around his mouth—is probably never far from his whiskered face.

He lets me in immediately when I introduce myself. “Honey, isn’t this Sunny’s boyfriend? That Darrel man you were yelling about a while back?”

“He dared to come here? Does he have a death wish?” Mrs. Quetzal charges down the stairs. Her shiny hair is tied back in a ponytail. She’s wearing a red skirt, and I get flashbacks to the ruler smackdown.

I cringe.

She hauls to a stop in front of me. “How dare you show your face here?”

“I didn’t come to bother you, ma’am.”

“If you’re here to ask for Sunny’s hand in marriage, you can’t have it.” She flits her wrist in a stubborn *go away*.

“I’m not here to ask that.” I gesture to the open door where my pickup is sitting prettily on the street. In the back of it is my brand-new lawn mower. “A few months ago, Sunny mentioned that her dad hurt his back, and it’s been tough to cut the grass.” It wasn’t a conversation she’d had with me. She’d been talking to Kenya, but I’d been listening to every word from her mouth. “I’m here to handle the lawn.”

“We don’t need you.” Mrs. Quetzal shoves me. “We have someone who comes and cuts the yard every month.”

“Ah, ah.” Her husband grabs her. “No violence, honey. We talked about this.”

“Go away,” Mrs. Quetzal huffs.

“I’ll leave when the yard is cut, ma’am. I promise.”

Her eyes darken at my response.

I tip my chin to Mr. Quetzal. “It was nice meeting you, sir.”

“You too.”

I leave the house and shut the door behind me. Then I unpack the lawn mower and spend fifteen minutes trying to figure out how it works. Finally, I hear the engine pattering and I attack the grass.

When I’m done, I pack up and leave. On the long drive home, I take consultation calls, discussing cases with other therapists.

After my talk with Dina, I decided to implement more changes to my professional life. I’m taking a break from client consultations because it’s just too unpredictable and I have a hard time keeping boundaries when someone needs help. Now, my hours are more flexible and I can be there to pick up the boys from school every evening.

I return to the city and park in front of the middle school just as the bell rings. Minutes later, Micheal and Bailey approach my car.

Bailey waves excitedly. "Mr. Darrel!"

"Hey, Bailey." I smile at him when he bounces into the car. "Micheal."

He just grunts.

"Bye, Beth!" Bailey presses his face to the window and waves at a small girl with tawny skin, wiry curls and hazel eyes. Beth lifts her hand in a lukewarm greeting and then marches toward a tow truck.

My eyes widen when I see her expertly cling to the handle and swing herself into the giant rig. *Is that safe?*

"Beth's mom is a mechanic," Bailey says excitedly. "Isn't that cool?"

"Mm-hm."

Bailey continues to chat about his best friend Beth as I drive them home.

A sweet smell greets us when we enter the farmhouse. Ms. Hansley is in the kitchen making something scrumptious. It's the first time I've seen Micheal brighten up like that since Bennet took them to meet another foster family.

"Hey, boys. I made apple pie." She gives us a ruddy-cheeked smile.

Micheal and Bailey charge to the kitchen.

"Wash up first," I yell at them.

"Yeah!" Bailey yells back.

Ms. Hansley's kind eyes meet mine. "They remind me so much of you and Claire when you were younger."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Her smile gets bigger. She wipes her palms on her apron. "Have you found a nanny yet?"

I blow out a breath, my amusement fleeing. "No. I've interviewed almost every candidate the agency sent. No one felt... right."

"It's hard to trust someone with your children."

*My children.* I suck in a deep breath and let it out. "You're right."

"Darrel." She clears her throat. "What do you think about me taking care of the kids?"

My eyes widen.

"I know I'm getting up there in age but, honestly, the boys aren't toddlers. I won't be chasing them around trying to keep them from eating anything in sight or sticking their fingers into electrical sockets."



“Aren’t you... taking care of Belle?”

“That’s just until Alistair and Kenya return from their honeymoon.” She wrenches her hands. A line appears in her forehead. “Belle is attending school now and she’s in all these clubs, so I’ve got nothing to do for most of the day. Even when she’s home, Kenya is her new mommy. They spend a lot of time together.” Her eyes widen and she waves her pudgy hands. “It’s not that I’m not happy for that, but I’m... they don’t need me as much anymore.”

“Kenya’s different from my mom,” I agree. “Her nurturing side is dialed up to ten. But that doesn’t mean they don’t need you, Ms. Hansley.”

“I’m too old not to see the truth in front of me. Kenya’s got that family handled. Oh, I’ll still be around, helping with Belle and stuff. They’re family. But you, well, it feels like you need me a little more.”

I stare at her and excitement grows in my stomach. It feels right. Ms. Hansley was the one who took care of Claire for most of her childhood. She’s like family. I wouldn’t trust anyone else the way I trust her.

“I would love that.”

“Really?” Her eyes shimmer.

“Yeah.”

“Mr. Darrel, you’ve *got* to taste this apple pie.” Bailey charges into the room, carrying a plate. “What did she put in this?”

“Way too much sugar.” I muss his hair.

Micheal leans against the wall. His quiet eyes zip to me. “It *is* really good,” he says hesitantly.

I smile at him, walk over and tousle his curls too. “Glad you like it.”

“You’re acting like you’re the one who made it,” he mumbles, but his lips arch up as he turns away.

We eat pie that night and then I order Bailey to do his homework. He wails about how much he hates homework and I tell him he has to do it anyway. I check Micheal next and threaten to hide all his comic books if he doesn’t finish his project for school. He mumbles under his breath—he’s becoming really good at saying something just low enough that I can barely make it out—but he rolls out of bed to start his work.

I escort Ms. Hansley to her car and watch her drive off to pick up Belle from ballet school, before heading back inside and working on my speech.

The hearing is next week. I need to consult with my lawyer tomorrow, get a suit for Micheal who’s old enough to attend the custody case, and

finalize exactly what I'll say to the judge.

There's so much to do, yet my thoughts all swerve to Sunny. I wonder what she's doing. If she's having a hard time in Belize. If she's getting enough sleep. If any of the construction workers are flirting with her. That last thought has me clenching my fists in irritation.

Absence does not make the heart grow fonder.

In this case, it makes the heart obsess, wail, and throw a tantrum. I pick up my phone and then toss it back down.

*Space. Give her space and prove that she can trust you.*

After the weekend, I make the drive to Sunny's parents again.

"You're back?" It's Mrs. Quetzal who greets me at the door.

"I saw that the porch was looking a little weathered so I brought paint."

Her jaw drops.

I nod. "Go inside, ma'am. I won't get in your way."

Mrs. Quetzal remains inside until I'm done painting. I ram my knuckles on the door, tell her to be careful while the paint dries and make the drive back home.

I'm just in time to pick up Micheal and Bailey. As usual, Bailey has a million things to say, but Micheal butts into his brother's chatter to announce he got an A on his project.

We celebrate with ice cream, which doesn't feel the same without Sunny, and then head home.

Ms. Hansley is there with Belle in tow. Bailey lights up when he sees her and even Micheal hangs around, asking if she brought UNO.

"No UNO," I say, shaking my head. "You get too rowdy."

"We won't, Mr. Darrel. Please!" Bailey begs.

I sigh and allow it.

The game gets so heated that Bailey starts crying and Micheal sulks all the way up to his room.

"Belle," I scold her, going into the living room and seeing her surrounded by cards.

"Losing is a part of playing fair." She blows her nails. "That's what Kenya always says."

I stare at her. The little munchkin looks so much like Claire, but she's slowly becoming Kenya's daughter.

"Oh, Uncle Darrel, Bailey told me Aunt Sunny is in Belize. Did you know that? They said she'll be there for *months*."

“I know.” A familiar pain strikes my heart again. I soothe it by going to the Quetzals a few days earlier than planned.

Mr. Quetzal throws the door open. “Darrel.” He welcomes me in. “You’re back.”

“I am.”

“What did,” Mr. Quetzal nervously licks his lips, “what did you come to fix this time?”

I lift my toolbox. “Last time I was here, I saw that your roof was—”

“No, no, no, no!” Mrs. Quetzal flies out of the kitchen, her tan hands waving and her head bent. “You are not going on the roof. Do you want to get yourself killed?”

I blink in shock.

“Why do you keep doing this?” She plants her hands on her hips. In that moment, eyes wide and nostrils flared, she looks so much like Sunny that I want to give her a hug.

“Uh...”

“Aren’t you a billionaire? Isn’t that what the google said? Why don’t you let someone else do it?”

“Honey.” Mr. Quetzal places a calming hand on her shoulder.

The fight doesn’t leave her eyes, but she does step back.

“I could hire someone,” I agree. “But there are some things that money can’t buy.” I readjust my fingers on the toolbox. “I want you to see that I’m willing to pay for those things with my time, my energy, and my sincerity.”

“Oh my go—” She smacks her forehead. “I’d rather you paid someone.”

I jerk back. “What?”

“Look at our yard.” She shoves a hand at the open door. “It’s patchy. Lower in some parts. Higher in others. You’ve never mowed a lawn in your life, have you?”

“Uh...”

Mr. Quetzal pats her arm. “Honey.”

She shrugs him off. “And the porch. I can still see the brush marks. And the paint you chose was for an exterior finish, not woodwork.”

“Oh.” I blink rapidly. “I’m sorry. I’ll do it again.”

“No! No, no, no. You will not do anything else. And you most definitely *will not* climb on the roof so you can break your neck. I’ll have to explain to Sunny why her boyfriend is no longer with us, and she’ll blame me for sure.”

My lips quirk up. It's her first time acknowledging me as Sunny's boyfriend.

She frowns at me. "Don't smile."

"Sorry." I fix my expression.

She looks me up and down. "You know what I still can't figure out? Why did you take in those two boys?"

"I made a promise to their father."

"You sure do love making promises, don't you?"

"I don't love to make them, but I do anything to keep them," I admit.

She purses her lips. "You think my Sunny deserves to lose her youth being a mother to two random kids?"

I choose my words carefully. "I think that's ultimately Sunny's choice. But I do know the boys love her and talk to her every day." Not that they'll let me into the group chat. No matter how much I beg. "She'll be an amazing mother."

"And you? You think you're ready to be a father?"

My smile drops. I swallow hard. "No, not even close."

Her eyes narrow.

"I didn't have a good father," I admit. My words are shaky. So are my hands. "I still find it hard to call myself a father even now."

She snorts. "How can you parent children if you can't even handle one word?"

"You're right." I let out a breath. "That's why I've chosen to work on it. To make different choices. I'm fighting to be a good father to those boys because doing any less means I don't deserve them."

Her eyes soften a smidge. "You're intense, aren't you?"

I don't know if that's a compliment or not.

"But so is Sunny." She gives me another once-over and sighs. "Put the toolbox down. Have you ever had fry jacks?"

I give her a bewildered stare.

"*Follow her*," Mr. Quetzal mouths to me.

"Ah, yes, ma'am. Sunny made it for me and the boys."

"Oh, Sunny learned how to make it from me. Let me show you what a real Belizean breakfast tastes like."

I follow Sunny's mother into the kitchen, sit at her table and eat the best fry jacks of my life.

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## CHAPTER 21

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**HAVE IT ALL**

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## SUNNY

“THAT’S A PRISTINE PERSIAN RUG. If a drop of water so much as *touches* a bristle, I’m going to send it right back and demand compensation from the shipping company. Do you understand?”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Quetzal. We’re the best in the business. We’ll handle everything.”

I slide my sunglasses to the top of my head. “I’m counting on you.”

After hanging up, I drag the sun visor down. In the tiny mirror, I push out my lips, apply another coat of gloss and fix my collar.

I’m wearing a pinstripe jumpsuit with flowy trouser legs and an oversized jacket. My heels are six inches tall because I’m prepared to tear them off and use them as weapons if need be. And my hair is pulled back in a high ponytail.

*Just breathe, Sunny.*

My hands shake slightly when I grab my purse and step out into the sunshine. The courthouse looms in front of me, big and intimidating.

I take more sharp breaths and mount the stairs, ignoring the men who stop and watch me as if I’m Elle Woods in a pink tiara in the middle of Harvard Law School. *Have you never seen a woman before?*

Thankfully, no one approaches me and I’m spared from having to throat-punch anyone who makes me even later than I already am.

My heels click on the tiles as I hurry down the hallway, trying to find the right room. *What was it again?* Frantically, I fish around my purse for my cell phone and navigate to the message Dina sent me.

Before I can locate the text, I hear a familiar voice cry, “But I wasn’t planning on saying anything.”

My eyes widen. *Micheal?*

I sprint toward the sound, my heart slamming against my ribs. Turning the corner, I skid to a stop when I see Ms. Bennet hovering over Micheal, her lips pursed and her hand on his shoulder.

I want to smack her arm away from him, but I remove my sunglasses from my head and neatly tap it against my palm instead. My heels *tap-tap-tap* loud enough that both Bennet and Micheal look up.



The little boy notices me first and his eyes brighten like a Belizean sunrise. “Sunny!”

“Sh.” I place a finger to my lips. “Court’s in session.”

“Sorry.” He hangs back.

I crouch to his eye level and spread my arms out. “Come here.”

He grins, sprints toward me and wraps his arms around my waist. He’s wearing a black shirt with a Batman symbol. His jeans don’t even look ironed. *What has Darrel been doing.*

I press a kiss to his curly hair. He smells like baby shampoo and a little sweat. Not that I blame him. It’s hot out here. I might have to ditch my jacket. Even if it goes well with my outfit, I’m not about to stink up my Valentino just to impress... *someone.*

“Let me look at you,” I coo. Sandwiching his chubby cheeks between my hands, I smile. “You’ve gotten taller, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Something’s different. I can tell.”

“Nothing’s different. You just haven’t seen me in a while.”

“You’re right.” I purse my lips because I really have missed them. “It’s been too long.”

“What are you doing here?” Micheal steps back. Brown eyes widen slowly. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Belize? Did you come back for good?”

I laugh and nod. “I still have to fly back and forth a few days a month to oversee some things on the island but, yes. You can say I’m back for good.”

“Sweet.”

Definitely sweet.

As I stare at Micheal’s pale face, my mind drifts to the conversation I had with the client the morning after Kenya and Alistair’s wedding.

“*WHAT WILL IT BE? ARE YOU GIVING UP THIS OPPORTUNITY OR WILL YOU SAY yes to the best offer of your life?*”

“*I’m going to make you a counteroffer.*”

*She laughs. “That’s unexpected. I’m intrigued.”*

“*You’re right to choose me for this project. I’m a damn good designer and I can handle overseeing all aspects of the interior decorating—from ordering the furniture to shipping it to Belize and moving it to the island.*”

*“Okay...”*

*“But I can’t disappear for six months. I have important people here. People who need me. I’m not prepared to abandon them for this job.”*

*“Hm.”*

*“So here’s what I propose. I’m willing to manage this project. You won’t have to lift a single finger or work out any kinks. We’ll stay within the budget and deliver exactly what you want. In exchange, I want to work from home.”*

*“Can you do it all from so far away?” She sounds worried.*

*“Not alone. That’s why, for the next two weeks, I’ll go to Belize, get familiar with the process, and pick a team that I’ll oversee virtually. That team will be my hands and feet.”*

*“I don’t know.”*

*“In exchange for putting your trust in me, I’ll work to cut the project time in half.”*

*“Really?”*

*“Yes.” I lean forward. “Barring any unforeseen shipping disasters, your villa will be ready in three months.”*

*“That’s a very ambitious goal. You don’t know how unpredictable shipping internationally will be.”*

*“And you don’t know how determined I can be when I put my mind to something. Do you really want to give up an opportunity like this?”*

*She laughs. “I didn’t know you were such a negotiator, Sunny. I’m impressed.”*

*“I want this job, but I don’t want to give up anything to have it.”*

*She laughs. “I like a woman with gumption. Fine. It’s a deal.”*

THE PAST TWO WEEKS HAVE BEEN A BLUR. I HIT THE GROUND RUNNING THE moment I arrived at the Belize City airport, working like a madwoman to form a team and create an efficient shipping process.

It was tough. Fourteen days of non-stop work, little sleep, and haggling with locals wore my body down. However, I was desperate to get everything squared off within that specific timeframe.

Why?

Because those were the two weeks Micheal and Bailey would be staying with Darrel for sure. After the court hearing, the boys could be lost to me. I

didn't want them to disappear without seeing me again.

Ms. Bennet steps forward, her sensible pumps entering my field of vision. I lift my head, drawing a line from her tight socks, her scraggly knees, her long skirt, tucked-in blouse and all the way to her disapproving stare.

I pull Micheal closer to my side and give her a stiff nod. "Ms. Bennet."

"Ms. Quetzal."

"Should you be out here? Aren't you supposed to be in court?"

"I have a representative inside."

"I see."

We both assess each other.

I tilt my head. "Since you're out here, I'm assuming you already made your remarks?"

"I did."

"I bet it was riveting." There shouldn't be so much sarcasm in a court of law, but I can't help myself.

"I only told the judge the truth. I've inspected the home environment and decided it's not the right fit."

"Based on what?"

"Common sense and caution. Men are disproportionately responsible for the neglect and abuse of children. I'm sure I don't need to spell it out to you." She frowns. "It is our responsibility, as guardians of innocent children, to be careful. There are some things we just can't allow."

My fingers clench into fists, but I force myself not to react too visibly to her words. Instead, I squeeze Micheal's hand and look into his tiny face. "We're not on opposite sides of this fight." Glancing up, I meet Ms. Bennet's stare. "You want to help these boys and keep them safe. You want it desperately. So do I. We just differ on the ways of going about that."

She laughs. "That's a very different tune than the one you were singing when you barged into my office and threatened my job, Ms. Quetzal."

"Was that an office? It felt more like a cubicle."

She glares at me.

I glare back.

So much for trying to offer an olive branch.

"I recently learned that you and Mr. Hastings are... involved." Ms. Bennet glances at Micheal. She lifts her lips in a smile, but her eyes remain

hard. “How can I expect you to think objectively when you’re too busy trying to please him?”

My smile is cruel. The Sunny from high school rears its’ ugly head because the situation calls for it. “Do you want to throw those stones, Ms. Bennet?”

“Excuse me?”

“I recently learned that you and Major Hastings dated in high school. Major Hastings is, of course, Darrel’s late father.”

Her eyes widen and her jaw goes slack.

I hold her stare, my chin rising incrementally. Ms. Bennet’s dislike of Darrel felt so personal that I had to investigate further. On my downtime, I did some digging into her background, found an old high school mate of hers and learned about her relationship with Major Hastings. The contact sent me pictures of their yearbook, proving that Ms. Bennet and Major Hastings were an official couple all those years ago.

I arch an eyebrow. “Could that be why you have such an issue with his son?”

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish gaping for air.

“Look, I think you dodged a bullet, so I’m hoping genuinely that you’re not still caught up on a man who’s long gone.” I step closer to her. “But if you’re trying to punish Darrel for the sins his father committed, I suggest you rethink your motivations while I still have a modicum of respect for your mission. The people who exact personal revenge under the guise of helping innocent children are the ones who make me sick.”

She stumbles back, a hand to her chest and her eyes darting all over.

I stare her down, waiting for her to try and defend herself.

She avoids eye contact and smacks her mouth shut.

*Should have done that a long time ago.*

The door of the courtroom creaks open, shattering the tension.

A clerk pokes his head out. “Micheal, ah, there you are. Have you decided if you’re going to speak yet?”

“No.” Micheal stares at the ground.

“Why are you pressuring him?” I ask, ready to go full mama-mode.

The clerk frowns. “Ms. Bennet said she wanted to ask him questions before the judge.”

Of course she does. I’m sure those questions would be twisted in a way to make Darrel seem like an awful parent.

Micheal shakes his head. "I don't want to go up there, Sunny. Do I have to?"

"No, you don't." I lift my chin. "He doesn't want to do it."

The clerk casts a look at Ms. Bennet.

I turn and stare at her too.

She glances away. "I don't have any further questions."

I lead Micheal toward the clerk. "Look at that. It turns out you don't have to go up there at all."

"Then why are we going back in?"

"We'll just sit and listen, okay?"

"Do you think I should say something?"

"It's up to you." I squeeze his hand. "All I know is that whatever happens, Mr. Darrel and I will always be in your life. Nothing they say today will change how much we care about you."

I escort him into the room. It's surprisingly small and drab. The judge is pale and thin-faced with a hook nose and auburn hair. Her sharp eyes seem to take in every detail of our entrance as Micheal and I walk in.

We settle into the hard benches at the back of the room. I glance around and freeze when my eyes land on a familiar head of hair.

Darrel?

My heartbeat picks up speed. I haven't seen him since the wedding, but that doesn't mean I stopped thinking about him. Missing him almost drove me insane. I was happy to bury my crazed thoughts in my work. It was the only way I could fall asleep at night without dreaming of him.

I tuck Micheal close to me. "Relax, bud."

He nods and blows out a breath.

"Mr. Hastings," the judge gestures to Darrel, "your final remarks."

I hold my breath, watching intently as Darrel rises to his full height. His hair looks like he ran his hands through it several times already and his eyes—*oh gosh*, he's nervous. The closed-off neuropsychologist is wearing his emotions on his sleeves.

"Your Honor," he says quietly. "I've already stated all the sensible reasons why I am well-equipped to have custody of the boys. That includes my financial position as well as the live-in nanny that I recently hired. I've made my case, in all the ways I can think of, to prove that the boys will be safe and protected."

The judge purses her lips and looks him over.

I do the same. He's wearing a pressed button-down and simple trousers. His hands are shaking slightly. He looks worn out. Bags under his eyes. Shoulders slumped. Skin weary.

Is it just because of the boys or is some of the weariness because he misses me?

*What if he didn't miss you at all?*

I push all those thoughts aside. The problems between Darrel and me don't matter right now. He was willing to marry me to keep these kids. I may not be sure what he feels for me, but I know for certain that he cares about Micheal and Bailey. More than anything, I want the outcome to be a good one.

"Go ahead, Mr. Hastings," the judge says.

Darrel opens his mouth. Closes it. Breathes hard before speaking. "My father didn't set a good example for me. He was," he licks his lips, "hard to please and had his own ideas about the type of man I should be. I resented him to the point that I was terrified of becoming him. Because of what he stood for, I ran from the thought of calling myself a father. I actively fought against calling Micheal and Bailey my sons."

The judge shifts in her chair.

My eyes widen. *Darrel, what are you doing? Why are you admitting that right now?*

"I watched over them as mere obligation. Their father was the professor who took me under his wings and gave me the courage to change career paths. I owed him, and I always pay my debts."

Micheal hangs his head. I would too if my stand-in dad called me an 'obligation' in front of an entire courtroom.

I slant an angry look in Darrel's direction. *Darrel, what the hell are you saying?* If he keeps talking nonsense, I'm going to jump over the boundary between the onlookers and the rest of the court and I'm going to choke him.

"I thought I was doing the kids a favor by taking them in. I didn't think there was anything they could teach me, anything I could gain from having them in my life. I believed I already had everything I needed. I didn't lack for money. I had a thriving practice. And I had no time for close connections. What could they possibly offer me?"

Micheal slowly lifts his head.

I hold my breath a little longer.

“I was wrong. Extremely wrong. I didn’t know what I was missing until Micheal and Bailey came to me. The farmhouse was just a couple walls until they filled it with their laughter and their presence. My life turned into something meaningful. And I... I turned into someone who gets up in the morning with a purpose beyond myself. I go through the day worrying about them and wondering if they’re okay. I rearrange my schedule because I love picking them up from school and helping them with their homework. I’m fulfilled at the end of the night when they’re safely in their beds after conquering the day with confidence because they know they can run to me if anything goes wrong.”

My chest tightens and I fight against the swell of emotions rising in me.

“Micheal and Bailey give me peace. They give me hope that the world can be a better place, and *my* world is a better place because they’re in it. They challenge me to accept my past and reconsider what really matters in the present. My fears about being a father pale in comparison to how much I love having them around. It’s an honor to protect them, to provide for them, and to care for them. I don’t care how tough it gets, and honestly—I don’t care what this court decides. Nothing will change the fact that they’re my home. They’re my family. They’re my sons.”

The judge looks down and rubs a palm over her eyes. “Thank you, Mr. Hastings.”

Darrel nods and returns to his seat. On the way, he looks at the back row and his electric green eyes collide with mine.

I feel a jolt all the way to my toes.

His lips twitch and he mouths, “*Hi*.”

“*Hi*,” I mouth back to him.

Darrel glances at Micheal and nods. The little boy pulls his lips in, tears shimmering in his eyes.

I realize, in that moment, that I have no idea if Darrel Hastings really loves me, but I know one thing for sure.

I love him.

More than I’ve ever loved anyone.

Despair swells in my chest. How do I survive if Darrel Hastings doesn’t love me back?

\* \* \*

“CONGRATULATIONS!” AN EXPLOSION OF CONFETTI RAINS OVER OUR HEADS as we walk into the parking lot.

I jump back when I see a crowd of familiar faces.

“Mr. Darrel!” Bailey takes off like a rocket. Tennis shoes pounding the pavement, he launches himself at Darrel. “Is it true? Are we really staying with you?”

“That’s right, bud. You’re staying with me.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Bailey pumps an arm. His glasses almost clank to the ground because of how excitedly he’s jumping around.

Micheal rolls his eyes, but a slow smile is spreading on his face. I think hearing Darrel’s true feelings about them took a load off his shoulder. I hope, going forward, that he can rest easy and just focus on being a kid.

“How did you two know about this?” Darrel arches an eyebrow at Kenya and Alistair.

“Are you kidding? Did you think we’d miss this moment for anything?” Kenya chirps.

“She had our bags packed from last night.” Alistair scowls. It doesn’t last long though. His lips arch up again.

“I wish we could have arrived earlier, but our flight got delayed.”

“It’s okay.” Darrel nods. “I’m glad you made it.”

“We’re glad you’re officially a dad.” Alistair slaps Darrel’s back. “Congratulations.”

Darrel accepts his words with a nod.

“How should we celebrate this occasion?” I ask Belle.

“Ice cream!” the kids yell in unison.

I smile in Darrel’s direction. My heart takes up permanent residence in my throat when he smiles back.

OUR RELATIONSHIP IS STILL IN LIMBO. WHAT WILL HE SAY WHEN WE’RE finally alone? Where do we go from here?

Our intense staring contest is broken when Bailey takes Darrel’s hand as he chats with Belle. It’s such a casual, automatic gesture of trust and love, and it reminds me of the judge’s speech when she ended the session.

*“You don’t have to be related to be a positive influence. Little boys especially need a good male mentor, and I’m glad Micheal and Bailey have one they can count on.”*



“Ice cream!” Bailey yells, making me jump. The little boy pushes Darrel toward the car.

Kenya laughs. “Someone’s impatient.”

“I’ll meet you guys there,” I say, swinging my keys over my finger. It hurts to walk away from Darrel and the boys. It hurts to get into a vehicle alone. It hurts to drive in silence when I *know* Darrel’s car is probably alive with conversation and laughter.

I get to the ice cream parlor first. A line of fancy cars pull in behind me. The kids descend on the shop with loud chatter, lots of laughter and enough energy to fuel a tire factory.

Kenya loops her arm in mine as we step into the store. “You okay, girl?”

“I’m good.” I give her a squeeze.

She rests her head against my shoulder. “Need me to kick Darrel’s butt?”

I never told Kenya about the proposal fiasco, but she knows me too well. “Not right now, but I’ll let you know in the future.”

She laughs and we settle around a table.

Ms. Hansley tucks herself into a chair and flounces her skirt. Mouth curving up, she teases Darrel. “Your first act as their legal guardian is giving them ice cream.” The older woman tuts. “They’re going to be on a sugar high until eight.”

Ezekiel, Alistair’s executive assistant, pats her hand. “Let the kids celebrate. They’ve earned it.”

Ms. Hansley blushes and nods shyly.

“How was your honeymoon?” I ask Kenya.

“It was amazing.” My best friend dives into a story about her romantic trip, and my eyes stray to Darrel.

He’s bobbing his head as Belle talks his ear off about her ballet recital. As if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns his head slightly. Those piercing green jewels flash my way.

I whip my head back to Kenya. “Oh, that’s so interesting.”

“Is it?” She scrunches her nose.

“I mean... that’s awful.”

Kenya snorts. “You’re not hearing a word I’m saying, are you?”

My eyes shift to Darrel again. This time, he’s locked in conversation with Ezekiel. They’re discussing something about Belle’s Beauty.

“Uh...”

My phone chirps.

Glad for an excuse to look away from my best friend's probing gaze, I snag my phone from my purse and check the notifications.

*Mom: How did the hearing go?*

I gasp.

Kenya leans over my shoulder and spies on the screen. "What is it?"

"How does mom know about today? Did you tell her?"

"No." Kenya purses her lips.

I glance up.

Darrel runs his hands through his hair and looks my way too.

I quickly avert my eyes.

Alistair slings an arm over his wife's shoulder, brings her ice cream close to his face and takes a chomp out of it. "Mm. What are you two chatting about?"

"Get your own." Kenya lovingly smacks him. "And it's none of your business."

He laughs, kisses her hand and returns to the conversation with Micheal. They're arguing about whether Batman can hack computers.

My phone rings again.

I assume it's mom, but a glance at the screen shows an international code. "501," I mutter. "That's the country code for Belize." Hiking to my feet, I excuse myself from the table and hurry outside to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Sunny, there's a huge problem. The shipping company is saying we didn't attach the bill of lading for the first shipment. I gave them the evidence that we did, but they're still insisting." Her frantic voice makes my head spin. "That shipment has the Phase One furniture in it. It's, like, the *foundation* of the design. We can't do anything without it."

"First, you need to calm down. Did you speak to the shipping company?"

"I did, but they're saying it's the Port of Belize's fault. Oh, it's a mess."

She complains some more and then ends the call. I massage my forehead. This problem doesn't sound like something I can untangle virtually.

A sigh builds in my chest and bellows out in a loud whoosh.

"It can't be that bad."

I turn and Darrel is there with his broad shoulders and his green eyes and his poker-face that gives nothing away. I want to wrap my arms around him. I want him to rub my hair and tell me I took on too much and what logical person would promise to tackle a project this size in only three months? I want to argue with him that I can do it and watch the sparkle in his eyes energize me and push me to test my own limits.

I missed him. He snuck into the cracks of my heart when I wasn't looking and now all the reasons I hated him before are the reasons I want to hold on.

"There's an emergency in Belize. Progress will screech to a halt if I don't..."

"If you don't go and save the day?"

"Right."

"Will you be gone for long?"

I hear the yearning in his words and hope that I'm not imagining it. "I'll be back as soon as I sort everything out." A tired laugh bursts from my lips. "Although I don't know how long that'll be. I just left them this morning and there's already an emergency. Maybe forming this team wasn't the best idea."

"You'll figure it out," he says confidently.

A smile touches my lips. "How do you know?"

"Because you're Sunny Quetzal. You were born to be great."

My heart skips a beat.

He looks down at me. "Sunny, I—"

"I know we..."

Our words overlap.

I smile.

Darrel's lips twitch.

"Can I go first?"

He gestures for me to speak.

"Two weeks ago, I left without telling you." The way my body leans toward him is beyond my control. Like all my muscles and bones and veins are straining to be as close to him as possible. "I don't like leaving things unsettled. Can we talk? When I get back?"

He nods.

My phone vibrates again. It's another call from Belize.

I huff out a breath. "I need to go."

“Be safe.”

I take a step back, unwilling to look away from him. “Can you tell the kids...”

“I’ve got it.” He juts his chin at the parking lot. “Go.”

I leave my heart at the ice cream shop. I feel the emptiness keenly when I catch a flight to Belize and watch the clouds through the airplane window.

When I arrive, the sun is still shining brightly overhead. Coconut trees welcome me back by waving their fronds. The humidity digs into my hair and makes sweat roll down my face. The people who stamp my passport look like me or look like someone I’m related to. It should be home. And it is.

But it’s also not.

Because passing two little brown-skinned boys at play reminds me of Micheal and Bailey.

And the sprawling Caribbean Sea glittering beneath the boat that carries me to the private island reminds me of Darrel.

More than anything, I want to iron out the logistical issues so I can get back to them. Unfortunately, nothing goes to plan. Complication after complication pours in, smashing any hopes I have of returning in less than a week.

“Are you having fun?” Bailey asks during a video call one night. I have to raise the volume on the phone so I can hear him. Nocturnal creatures are belting out a song to the moon and mosquitoes are buzzing around the cabana.

I lift the phone higher so my face is at a better angle on the screen. “Yeah, it’s a lot of fun. It’s tough though. I wanted to be back home with you guys.”

“Will you be back for my birthday tomorrow?”

I bite down on my bottom lip. Things have been so hectic around the site that I forgot about Bailey’s birthday. He’s been mentioning it in the group chat, dropping all kinds of emojis and gifs. *How could I have forgotten?*

Blinking rapidly, I stutter, “I-I’m not sure, buddy.”

“Oh.” His crestfallen expression is a slam to the gut.

“How about this? When I come back, we’re going to have an epic celebration. It’s almost like you get to have two birthdays instead of just one. Isn’t that cool?”

"I guess." He pouts.

"Stop making her feel bad, you dork," Micheal says in the background.

Bailey's eyes narrow. "Don't call me a dork."

"It's what you are though."

"Boys," I keep my voice calm, "don't fight. Especially in front of me. It makes me sad."

Micheal clears his throat as he appears on screen. His solemn brown eyes peer at me. "When are you coming back? Mr. Darrel keeps trying to sneak into our group chat."

"He is?" I laugh.

"He tries to bribe Bailey for pictures," Micheal mumbles. "The kid's a weak link. He's always showing off."

"I don't mind if he shows Darrel my pictures." My smile widens as I imagine the surly therapist casually trading extra cups of ice cream for my photos.

"You sure? You were pretty clear when you said you didn't want him in our group chat."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't add him." Micheal shrugs. "What is that saying?"

I clear my throat. "Aren't you eleven years old? Why do you sound like an old man?"

"Maybe because you and Mr. Darrel are acting like you're younger than me." He rolls his eyes. "He brings you up at least twice a day, you know."

I laugh. "Does he?"

"You do the same thing." He hurls accusing eyes. "You ask how Mr. Darrel is doing every time we talk. As if you don't have his number."

I lick my suddenly dry lips. "Would you look at the time? It's late here in Belize, so that means you two are supposed to be getting ready for bed."

"We've still got an hour, Sunny," Bailey primly informs me.

"Well, it's my bedtime then."

"Don't you want to talk to Mr. Darrel?" Micheal asks.

I'm not sure if he's serious or if he's just teasing me, but I freeze. "Is he around?"

"Mr. Darrel!" Bailey grabs the phone and bounds out of the room. The footage on the screen turns shaky and blurry. Bailey enters Darrel's office and shoves the phone at him. "Tell Sunny goodnight. She's going to sleep now."

My heart flops in my ribs as I watch the emotions play over Darrel's face. It's subtle, but I'm so in-tuned to every flicker in his expression that I can read him now.

First, it's surprise—an upward jump of his eyebrow and a parting of his mouth. Then it's happiness—the curve of his lips and the softening of his eyes. Then a yearning that makes me sigh gently.

"Sunny," he breathes.

"Say goodnight!" Bailey yells, shaking the phone.

"Goodnight," Darrel whispers.

Heat floods my stomach and I croak out a 'goodnight' of my own before hanging up and staring at the ceiling.

The sound of Darrel's voice follows me into my dreams, and I can't stop thinking about him as I go to work the next day.

"Alright, watch me while I fill out this ordering sheet," I tell Anita, the beautiful dark-skinned local who'll be managing the site for me. We're sitting on the beach, our documents held down by stones so the strong Caribbean wind doesn't tug them straight into the water. "No matter what, you're getting this today."

"You're in a rush, Sunny," she says in that delightful accent that I wish I hadn't lost. "Where are you going?"

"Home." I shake my hair out of my face. "No matter what, I'm going home today so I can at least catch the tail end of Bailey's birthday."

"You miss your kids a lot, don't you?"

"How do you know I have a family?"

"You're always calling them and snapping pictures of the view for them. Everybody calls them your imaginary friends because we never see them, but they're always with you."

I shake my head and close my eyes. "I've been away from them too long. Sometimes, I can even hear their voices."

"Sunny!"

"Like right now." I inhale deeply. "I feel like I can hear Bailey calling my name."

"Uh..." Anita draws away from me.

"Sunny!"

"And that sounds like Micheal." I rub my temple. Yeah, I'm definitely booking a ticket home today. I'm starting to go insane from missing them.

"Sunny!"

Darrel. My bones turn to mush.

I miss him so much.

“Sunny,” Anita shakes my shoulders and my eyes burst open, “I think you have some visitors.”

“What?” I spin.

And then I gasp.

And then I start to cry.

Because, on the beaches bordered by the Caribbean Sea, my little family is running to me.

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## CHAPTER 22

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# STEEL PAN KISS

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## DARREL

THE FIRST TIME I saw Sunny Quetzal, I thought I was having a heart-attack. She was beautiful, but it was more than her outward appearance that gripped me. She was... unreachable. Something a little supernatural. Something I couldn't explain.

I fell for her without really understanding what love is. Without understanding the way it takes you and twists you and turns you upside down. The way it scrapes your soul down to the dregs and tears your heart right out of your ribs, only to demand more.

The second time I met Sunny, I expected love to make a little more sense. I was grown. A man. I'd had experience living and dating and figuring out who I wanted to be in this world. Surely, she wouldn't be as magical as she was in high school.

Turns out, I was wrong. Sunny clung to my brain like a burr and no matter how much I tried to shake her off, she refused to budge.

It took me a long time to give up. To admit that, sometimes, there are no earthly explanations for why people are drawn to each other.

Sometimes, love and logic just don't mix.

I could run down the list of brain patterns and hormones. I could dive deep into the history of attraction and its necessity for the survival of mankind. But it wouldn't be able to define everything I feel for Sunny Quetzal.

My eyes devour her as she and the boys collide on the beach. Her dark, silky hair flaps all over her face, getting into her plump mouth and covering her nose. She bats it away with a dark brown hand, elegant fingers tucking the strands behind her ear.

The T-shirt she's wearing flaps in the breeze and her pants stop at just before her ankles. I remember her in T-shirts and shorts. Barefoot because, somehow, she can never find her slippers. I remember her arms wrapping around me and the way it felt like home.

Her eyes lift to mine and I wonder if a heart can take this much happiness.

"Hi," she says.

“Hi.” I lift a hand.

The boys jump around her, demanding her time and attention. I let them have their moment, content to hang back and watch the smiles on everyone’s faces.

“Can we go see a Mayan temple, Sunny?” Bailey asks. “I want to see one.”

“We’re on an island, sweetie. There aren’t any Mayan temples here.”

“I booked a hotel in Cayo,” I announce, knowing that I’m butchering the name. “If you don’t mind giving us a tour, we can head to the Mayan temple before we check in.”

“Now?” Her eyebrows hike.

“When you’re finished with your work,” I say.

Another woman pops up. I hadn’t even noticed she was there because my eyes were so focused on Sunny.

“I’ve got it here. You can go with your boys.” The woman wiggles her eyebrows at me. “And your super-hot husband.”

“Oh, he isn’t my husband.”

Yet. But I keep that thought to myself.

“Let’s go,” Sunny says, reaching a hand out to Bailey and Micheal. The boys walk beside her. Their curls are going crazy in the wind and I can already tell I’ll have to reapply their sunscreen in another thirty minutes. If I don’t, they’ll be as red as lobsters by the time we get home.

“Did you think I was really disappointed last night?” Bailey asks Sunny.

“I thought you were heartbroken. I felt so sad that I couldn’t be there for your birthday. Now, you’re here! I still can’t believe you guys showed up in Belize.”

“Mr. Darrel’s been planning this for a while,” Micheal says.

I cough self-consciously.

Sunny’s eyes collide with mine again. “Did you?”

I shrug.

Her lips curve up and I take that as a good sign. She asked me for space and told me not to contact her until *she* reached out. Then, at the ice cream shop, she told me she was ready to talk. I immediately started putting our surprise together.

“I’m so happy you’re both here.” Sunny squeezes them tight.

“We have to get a move on if we’re going to make the boat ride.” I check my watch.

She laughs when she stumbles on the luggage discarded in the sand like old pirate treasures. The boys and I threw them aside when we caught sight of her on the beach.

“You’re lucky no one stole these.” Sunny points down.

“Mr. Darrel would have just bought us more clothes. Did you know he’s rich?” Bailey asks.

I snort.

“Yet he lives like a regular guy,” Micheal mumbles. “Actually, he lives like a total miser.”

My eyebrows pull together. “Hey, I’m not a ‘total miser’ just because I don’t want to buy you the latest gaming console.”

“I didn’t say anything about the console. That sounds like your guilty conscience talking.” Micheal gives me a mischievous look.

I laugh. Since I’ve gained legal guardianship, he’s been a lot more relaxed. Which is fine. But Micheal ‘acting his age’, unfortunately, comes with side effects. Like lots of snide comments and tween-age demands.

“We’ll see how you handle chores and then we can talk about the console. Okay?”

“See what I mean? He could hire maids for that stuff.”

“We have Ms. Hansley,” Bailey points out.

“She’s not a maid, doofus,” Micheal says.

“Don’t call me doofus!”

Micheal sticks out his tongue.

“Boys!” Sunny rolls her eyes. “You just got here. Can you not embarrass me in front of everyone?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Sorry.”

I pull my lips in to keep my laughter at bay.

Sunny glances up and gives me a *can you believe them* look.

I want to kiss her in that moment like I never have before.

The boys settle down on the boat ride to Belize City. As the waves lap on either side of the boat, Sunny sits beside me and stares at Micheal and Bailey. I place my hand over hers and she turns her head. Sunlight reflects in her sharp brown eyes and plays in the corner of her smile.

“I missed you.” I lean my forehead against hers. It’s as much of a confession as it is a fact.

She inhales sharply. “Me too.”

I frown. "But I'm going to have to find a way to get you back."

"For what?"

"Not adding me to the group chat."

She laughs. "Are you kidding?"

"I'm genuinely hurt."

"I'm glad you can acknowledge that you get hurt too, Hastings, but I'm not going to apologize for kicking you out of the group chat."

"Do you know how traumatizing it was when the boys were laughing over an inside joke with you?"

"You would have flooded our group chat with links to brain science articles and sudoku puzzles."

"Hey, sudoku puzzles are good for the brain."

She laughs, a bright and magical sound that competes with the waves slapping against the boat and the light twinkling on the horizon.

"Next time," I whisper close to her ear, "we're going to form an adults-only group chat. Just the two of us." My fingers brush her shoulder. "Then we can have inside jokes of our own."

Sunny trembles under my touch.

I glance at her, straightening. "What do you say?"

My heart does a backflip when she leans against me, puts a hand behind my head and pulls me so close that the baseball hat I'm wearing nearly falls off my head. Her soft pink lips graze my cheek and move against my ear with a warmth that turns my insides to mush.

"I'll see how you behave today and then I'll decide."

Words can't even describe how much I want this woman.

"Look!" Bailey gasps and points at the water. "I think I saw a dolphin!"

"Where?" Micheal cranes his neck.

Sunny turns her attention back to the boys, but I keep my eyes on her. Even the back of her head is stunning to me. She pulled her hair up so it wouldn't slap her in the face, but tendrils of silky black hair fall against her neck, creating an almost artistic design on her skin.

I want to press a kiss there.

I glance away instead.

*Behave, Darrel. Wait until you can talk to her first.*

The boat arrives safely in Belize City, and we take a private car to the Mayan temple in Cayo.

"Be careful, boys!" Sunny yells.

We both watch as the kids charge up the pyramid that was so well-built it withstood the test of time.

She turns to me. "Have you been talking to my mom?"

"Why?"

"She called me the other night. Said you brought the boys over to help her clean out her garage."

"Did she?" I rub my chin.

Sunny folds her arms over her chest. "When did you and mom get so close?"

"Well, she offered to make us fry jacks. Once I told the boys that hers tasted better than yours well, they were happy to do it."

"That's called child labor, Darrel."

"We didn't pay in cash. So technically it isn't."

She rolls her eyes, but her smile grows.

I take her hand and squeeze. "Ms. Hansley is at the hotel. She wanted to get some rest before the activities later this evening."

"What's happening later this evening?"

"The boys will be attending a Belizean folklore competition. There'll be a campfire and s'mores and scary stories."

"Oh?" She leans toward me. "And where will the adults be?"

"Out."

"Hm."

"Can I take you out, Sunny?"

Her eyes dart to my lips. "I would really like that."

\* \* \*

HOURS LATER, I ESCORT SUNNY INTO THE HIGH-END RESTAURANT. ALL THE other tables are empty and the hostess smiles nervously at me as if such a thing has never happened before.

My fingers press steadily against the small of Sunny's back as I guide her to a table with a perfect view of the steel pan players. I could have gotten a string quartet, but the steel pans felt more authentic to the Caribbean. The fifteen well-dressed musicians create a fairy-like sound when they hit their sticks against the pans. For drums that are so big and bulky, the music is light and tinkling.

“Whoa.” Sunny’s eyes take up most of her face as she observes the restaurant. “Why did you choose this place, Darrel? It looks like no one comes here.”

I chuckle because she’s perfect and adorable and everything I could ever want in a woman. “It’s not empty because it’s unpopular.” On the contrary, I paid a hefty amount to reserve the building. The owner was worried his regulars would take it personally and demanded a couple more incentives. All of which I handed over eagerly.

“No?” She tilts her head.

“No.”

“Oh.” Then my words register and she stiffens. “Wait, did you... pay for us to have this restaurant to ourselves?”

“What would you like to eat?” I lift the menu. “Or we can have the chef choose. I heard he’s well-respected in Belize.”

“You did *not* spend...” She gasps. “Did you pay for them to be here too?” She gestures to the steel pan players. They’re staring in concentration at their instruments. The melody sounds familiar. It’s a popular love song.

“I think I’ll let the chef choose. Unless you have another idea.”

She plants her hand on top of mine. “Why are you being excessive? You’re never excessive.”

“Or illogical or expressive or... what was it? Fun?”

Her eyelashes flutter. Something shimmery is on her eyelids. Is that gold? It goes perfectly with the red undertones in her skin and the earrings dangling to her shoulders. The dress wraps around her slender figure like a glove and I can’t believe I’m the lucky guy who gets another shot with the most amazing woman in the world.

“You’ve changed a lot, Hastings.”

“Let me show you how much.” I offer my hand to her.

She stares at it. “No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m wearing open-toed pumps.”

“I won’t step on your feet.”

“Did you take dance classes while I was gone?” She accepts my hand and I swing her out into the middle of the room.

“Not exactly.” I pull her close. Her Caribbean-breeze scent makes me want to inhale her like a drug.

“Then?” She sets her dainty hand on my shoulder.

“I did some research.”

She laughs and the sound is soul-deep and so loud that all the musicians look up. “Of course you did.”

“Dancing requires more than following a set of steps. You have to...” I spin her. It’s rough and a little awkward, but it’s much better than I could pull off a month ago. “*Feel* the music. You need skill and heart.”

“Oh. Did you learn how to be cheesy from your research too?”

I dip her. “No.” Staring into her face, I whisper, “I learned that from an online forum.”

She bursts out laughing.

I don’t. One of the best ways to study something difficult is to get help from others. And, thanks to the internet, there were plenty of people willing to chime in and make suggestions.

I put her back on her feet and she rests her head on my shoulder. “What will I do with you, Darrel?”

“Forgive me.”

She startles and leans back.

I stare into her eyes as the steel pan music fills the air and we sway to the beat. “I shouldn’t have asked you to marry me as if it was just a ploy to keep the kids. If I’d stopped and thought about it for a bit longer, I would have found a different solution. One that didn’t hurt you or call your value to me into question.”

She ducks her head.

I kiss the top of it. “There’s something I have to clarify too.”

She glances up.

“Even though it *sounded* like I wanted to marry you so I could look better to the judge, that wasn’t all that I was thinking.”

“What else were you thinking?” she asks.

“I was thinking ‘wow, *I can’t believe how much I love this woman. I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else. I need her to say yes.*’”

“I felt it. The entire time you were with me that day, I felt you trying to prove something. I sensed that there was something bigger going on. It was there in your touch. In your eyes when we...” She swallows. “When I thought that all you cared about was getting the kids, a part of me broke. I wondered if that was all I meant to you.”

“I shouldn’t have put that doubt in your mind.” I cradle her cheeks, wishing I could go back in time and kick myself off the bed before I



screwed things up so royally. “I can afford to hire a live-in nanny from now until the kids are off to college. And I’m willing to do anything to prove that I want you because *I* love you.”

She chuckles. “I heard you mowed mom’s lawn and ruined her verandah.”

“Is that what she said?”

“She said you were going to get yourself killed trying to fix the roof and she had to stop you.”

I smirk. “Did I mention she loves me now? She says I’m decent. For a non-Mayan guy.”

“Decent. High praise.”

“I’m well aware.”

She smiles and I lean my forehead against hers. “I have never seen the kids happier than they are when they’re around you or talking to you or talking about you. I’m not going to diminish that and pretend it doesn’t play a part in why I see you in my future. You make them happy.” I kiss her forehead. “But you make me happy too. Not having you around was torture. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“Me either,” she breathes.

Although I want to keep holding her, I let her go so I can dig into my coat pocket. “Then, Sunny Quetzal,” I drop to my knees and show her the ring box, “I’ll ask you a second time. No looming court date or desperation or misunderstandings.”

She smacks her hands over her mouth and stares at me with tearful eyes.

“Will you marry me?”

Sunny lunges at my neck and kisses me so deeply that we almost fall over. I steady her, wrapping an arm around her waist and lifting her high.

“Sunny.” I lose my mind as she peppers my face with kisses. It takes another minute for my brain to work. “Sunny.” She presses her lips to my jaw and my mind goes blank for a second. “Is that...” The distant applause of the steel pan players and the waiters fill my ears, but it’s not as loud as my pulse rushing through my head. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes.” She leans back, her eyes bright and her smile wide and beautiful. “I’ll marry you, Darrel.”

I spin her around and kiss her solidly before slipping the diamond on her finger. We both stare at it, the world stopping as the gravity of the moment hits us square in the chest.

She was the queen bee of John Hearst.

I was the loner kid. The outsider. The hoodie guy.

Now, Sunny Quetzal is the queen of my life and the joy of Micheal and Bailey.

And I... well, I'll finish out my story as her husband.

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## CHAPTER 23

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# PATCHWORK FAMILY

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THREE MONTHS LATER

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## SUNNY

“BELLE, YOU CAN’T DO THAT,” I scold my niece. “You know Bailey is emotionally sensitive about cheating during UNO.”

“I’m not cheating,” Belle passionately points to her deck. “Check the rules. We agreed to play ‘train’. That means I can put down all my cards at once as long as they’re the same number.”

“You told us this way would be more fun.” Micheal frowns. He runs a hand through his curly hair, which is something he picked up from Darrel. I’m sure of it.

“You’re the only one having fun,” Bailey whines.

“It’s the rules, boys.” Belle shrugs.

“Who taught you this *ghetto Uno*?” Mom laughs, her accent slipping into Belizean Creole. “We used to play like this back in Belize.”

“I taught her.” Kenya raises a hand. “But it’s only because Sunny taught me to play in college.”

“See? I told you Sunny’s a bad influence.” Darrel points at Alistair as if to prove a point.

“I still haven’t gotten you to stop sharing random brain facts. So I haven’t rubbed off too much.”

“Seems like some more *rubbing* has to happen then,” Darrel whispers in my ear.

I swat at him and then shoot a look at my mom. “Babe, my *parents* are here. Are you insane?”

“Just saying.”

“No, don’t say anything. You just keep your mouth shut from now on.”

“You were the one who said I should ‘be more fun’. Are you starting to regret it?”

“I said try not to be such a curmudgeon.”

He flashes his sexy green eyes. “This is my way of doing that.”

“You’re still the biggest curmudgeon in the room.”

“Babe, that term does not apply to me anymore. Admit it.”

“I’ll admit nothing.” I grin.

Darrel picks my hand up and kisses it. "Then I guess I have to teach you some more lessons."

Heat pools in my stomach.

My eyes drop to his lips. "When are they going home?"

"Never. We're going to have to make a run for it."

"Ehem." Mom arches an eyebrow. "Look at you two feeling each other up in front of company. That's such an American thing to do."

"Mom, holding hands is not 'feeling each other up'. Geez."

"It's your eyes, Sunny. You think I can't see what nastiness you both are saying with your eyes?"

Darrel coughs. "Sorry, ma'am."

"I hope you two aren't getting married quickly because there's a bun in the oven."

"Honey." My dad places a calming hand on her.

"I'm just saying. Shotgun weddings don't have a high chance of success."

"She's right." Dawn emerges from the kitchen, her plate piled high with golden fry jacks. She's wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a wrench on the front. Her fingers look especially dirty against the white plate. She told me once that, in her line of work, she can never fully scrub her nails clean. "I knew a girl who married someone just because she was pregnant with his baby. The guy cheated on her like his zipper would break if he ever kept it in his pants."

"Is that why you never married?" Kenya asks quietly. She's sitting in Alistair's lap because there just wasn't enough chairs for everyone.

When I designed the farmhouse, I created a place where a couple friends could gather. But our group is growing by leaps and bounds. I'm going to have to find a way to fit everyone. Stylishly, of course.

"Me?" Dawn snorts. "Most men get intimidated when they find out I know more about cars than they do." She glances softly at Beth. "Not to mention that they run for the hills when they find out I've got a plus one."

"Idiots," Kenya spits.

"They have no idea what they're missing." I agree, high-fiving my best friend.

"Whatever. I'm just focusing on my job right now. Which I might not even have soon."

“What are you talking about? I heard Stinton isn’t firing anyone even though he owns that auto place now.” Just another sign that the man I talked to on the phone has a heart. I knew it the moment he offered an apology on behalf of his brother, but it’s good to be proven right.

Dawn’s eyes get dark when she hears the name ‘Stinton’. “What matters is I won’t be there for much longer.”

“Told you that guy was a prick,” Alistair huffs.

Darrel leans forward. “Do you want me to talk to him, Dawn? He’s in the city a lot because of the takeover. He’s a busy guy, but he’ll make time for me. You can come along and—”

“No, I don’t want to see another Stinton for the rest of my life.”

“Oh.” Darrel assesses Dawn carefully. His expression remains the same, but I can see the way he purses his lips as if he’s come to some conclusions about her in his therapy-brain.

I catch his eye. *What?*

He squeezes my hand as if to say ‘later’.

“Either way, I’m just happy Darrel and Sunny got themselves together.” Kenya leans forward and swats at my leg. Her curls bounce with the movement. “You two spent *forever* acting like you weren’t crazy about each other. Do you know how exhausting it was to watch?”

“No, wait. I genuinely didn’t like him at first,” I say, hooking a finger.

“And she was...” Darrel catches my dark look and amends whatever he was going to say, “a perfectly lovely individual with a sophisticated sense of style and a light, refreshing attitude.”

“Good boy.” I pat his chest.

He laughs softly.

Alistair lifts a beer in his direction. “Welcome to the club, bro.”

Darrel clinks his glass against Alistair’s.

Dad chuckles and shakes his head, mumbling, “You boys know nothing yet.”

Ms. Hansley bustles into the room. “Does anyone need anything?”

“Sit, Ms. Hansley.” Kenya gestures to her. “Take a load off.”

“Oh, I feel too restless when I’m—”

Without warning, mom throws her hand out, yanks Ms. Hansley in the couch next to her and slants her a scolding look. “You’ve been on your feet all day. Now, I know how hard it is not to fuss over the kids, but you’ve got to relax now and again too.”



Ms. Hansley chuckles self-consciously. "Oh... I guess."

I smile at mom's pushiness. We might not always agree on things, but I know that my mother loves people and genuinely wants the best for them. It's just the way she goes about it might offend more than it helps.

"Sunny," Bailey stumbles toward me, "come and play with us. You're the only one who can beat Belle."

"I can do it," Micheal says determinedly, fisting his hands.

Beth gives him a side-eye. She's Dawn's daughter, a pretty little thing with light brown skin, hazel eyes and blonde-streaked hair. Dawn is as dark as a beautiful starry night so I'm guessing Beth's father is white, but it's not like I'm going to ask and it's not like it matters.

"What?" Micheal scrunches his nose at her.

"Let's not be delusional," Beth says.

The one-liner seems like something Dawn would say. Why are all these little girls so savage? And why do I love it so much?

Bailey wails and wiggles my arm. "Come on, Sunny. Come on."

I give Darrel a 'help me' look.

He juts his chin forward and then sips his beer.

"You're no help," I grumble.

He winks. "I choose my battles, babe. And clearly, the boys have me out on this one."

I sit with the kids and play a few rounds of UNO, giving Belle a bit of her own medicine and teaching her what it feels like to lose.

Am I shamelessly rubbing my victory in a little girl's face even though I'm a grown woman?

Yes. Yes, I am.

And am I enjoying it like crazy?

Heck to the yeah.

After Belle's gotten enough of losing to me, the kids scramble outside to play in the yard. I get up to grab another glass of wine and Darrel follows me to the kitchen.

Once we're alone, our bodies fuse to each other like magnets and we kiss deeply.

He pulls back and lets out a breath. "How long are your parents staying?"

"Until mom's satisfied with the wedding prep."

He groans.

I slip my hand under his shirt. “You’re the one who offered to let them stay at the farmhouse. I need to go and put the finishing touches on the villa in Belize anyway. They could have stayed at my apartment while I’m away.”

He nips at my ear. “Your apartment is too small for them. Besides, I wanted to score some points with your mom.”

“Mom already loves you. Why are you trying so hard?”

“Because I love her right back.” He sighs. “But I didn’t expect that she’d talk about staying here *until the wedding*.”

I laugh into his shirt. “On the bright side, sneaking around with you is hot.”

“Is it?”

“Makes me feel like a rebellious teenager again.” I peck his lips. “Like the high school me climbing through the window to meet the hoodie guy.”

He breathes hard. “Don’t tease me.”

My brows go up. “What? You don’t want to grow your hair out and wear hoodies anymore?”

He backs me up against the counter.

My fingers interlock with his, craving that physical connection. I love this man. I love his green eyes that can twinkle or darken with his moods. I love the way he tirelessly takes care of Micheal and Bailey as if his wellbeing depends on theirs. I love the way he doesn’t smile much or talk much, but his selfless actions speak volumes about his character. He’s my rock when the world is crazy and my brain is tugging me in a million directions. He’s the anchor that grounds me and the lighthouse that points me home.

“I cannot *wait* to be married to you, Sunny Quetzal.”

My arms wrap around his neck. He has my full and undivided attention. “You want to get out of here?”

He smiles wickedly.

“Where did Sunny and Darrel sneak off to?” Dawn asks. *The traitor*.

“Yeah, I don’t see them,” Kenya mumbles.

“They’re probably feeling each other up in the kitchen.” Mom humphs. “Like heathens.”

Dad hisses, “Honey.”

Alistair sighs. “Do you think they’ll have more babies than we do?”

“Is everything a competition with you?” Kenya snorts.

“They already have two kids before you do.” Dawn points out. “If ya’ll want to beat them, you better get cracking.”

“Sunny!” Mom yells from the living room. “Remove your hands from whatever unholy things they’re grabbing right now and come back where we can see you.”

Darrel closes his eyes and groans.

“Just until the wedding, babe.” I pat his shoulder.

He sighs and then laughs in the way that you can only when it’s family. And even if they’re irritating, there’s something about family that makes it all okay.

“Add that to the list of reasons why I can’t wait to be married to you,” Darrel mumbles, giving me a kiss on the forehead.

“What’s at the top of the list?” I smirk up at him.

“The fact that I love you.” He looks down with his somber green eyes.

“And I love you... a tiny bit more than I love Bailey and Micheal.”

He laughs and wraps his arms around me. “Come on. Our family is waiting.”

I tuck my head into his side and join the people who make my life complete.

\* \* \*

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# THE EX PROPOSAL CHAPTER ONE

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## GISELLE

*“I wasn’t born with anything, my weapon is hard work and determination.”*  
- Seunghoon of WINNER

GISELLE STONE PULLED HER SMALL, pink food truck into the Belize City park and scared the crap out of six pigeons.

Though she’d given them a little adrenaline rush, she thought the white splotch one particularly frightened bird left on her window was a tad unfair.

Unfortunately, the birds didn’t stick around for an explanation of why her truck was making such a terrible, high-pitched sound when it idled. (According to her mechanic, the vehicle was a piece of junk, but that was beside the point).

The flock took flight—obviously annoyed—and the one who’d left his mark turned to glare at her. Giselle glared right back, not in the mood to be outdone by a bird with half her brain cells.

“Are you just going to stare at them or are you going to clean that?”

She shifted her glare from the doo-doo-giving bird to her sister Marcy. “I’m going with option B.”

“You *are* option B.” Marcy smacked a hand against the handles of her wheelchair. “Unless you’re suggesting that *I* climb on top of the truck. To which I would say ‘you’re insane’. I wouldn’t, even if I had working legs.”

Giselle huffed. “I say we wait for it to rain and see if it washes off.”

“Mm-hm.” Marcy bobbed her head in agreement as she rolled toward the napkins and plucked out a few.

“It’s part of the circle of life. Our customers will understand. What’s a little poop in the grand scheme of things?”

Marcy grabbed liquid soap from their mini-sink. “I’m sure everyone will have nothing but great things to say. Why... we should make a sign pointing to it. No, we should post it online. *Come see what made the Public Health Service shut us down—*”

“Okay, I got your point.” Giselle snatched the napkins from Marcy and stomped out of the food truck. The door opened with a lazy creak, admitting more of the early morning sunshine.

The tropical breeze shoved her in the face as if it wanted to fight. She battled the Jedi-force winds and tried to figure out how she’d climb the truck.

It was only six in the morning, but the sun had already burned through the dew. It sparkled against the choppy Caribbean Sea. Rather than turquoise, the water looked like sharp silver. Every wave was a metallic tongue gliding toward the heavens.

It was a rather unconventional picture set against the backdrop of the colorful city park. She smiled at the pebbled pathways, thatch-roof vendor huts and sprawling coconut trees. Giselle made a mental note to capture the sunrise on her phone tomorrow so she could share it on the food truck’s social media page.

A group of joggers slowed down to gawk at her as she carefully scrambled atop the truck. They were all dressed in fancy gear—complete with leggings, shorts, and sparkly matching tank tops.

Seeing an opportunity, Giselle balanced herself against the windshield and waved at them. “Morning! Having a nice run?”

No one responded and she felt her smile crack in half. Still, she maintained her cheerful tone. “You should...” Her words ended on a yelp as her grip on the vehicle loosened and she slid down the windshield like a naked kid on his first run down a water slide.

The crowd of joggers gasped and stared at her.

“I’m okay!” Giselle flipped over on the hood and struck a pose. Her chest heaved and her hair flew all over her face, but she did her best to salvage her pitch. “Make sure to stop by later. You get a free green tea cookie with every purchase.”

Once again, she got no response, but she definitely had their attention. The group kept on jogging but cast hesitantly confused glances over their



shoulders.

“All publicity is good publicity, right?” Giselle mumbled, her pride stinging as much as her wrist was. She must have pulled something on the slide down the windshield.

The truck door creaked open and a rattling sound followed. Marcy flew down the ramp and wheeled around the hood of the truck.

“Are you okay?” her sister asked.

“Fine.” Giselle pushed her smile higher, hoping it hid the pain. “I think we’ll definitely get a few takers from that group.”

Marcy chewed on her bottom lip. “We need to. Our business won’t survive if we keep bleeding money.”

“Don’t worry.” Giselle finished cleaning the window and returned to the ground. “When Belize discovers our drinks, we’re going to be crowded with customers.”

Marcy’s hesitant grin made Giselle’s heart sing. Most people thought she’d been crazy to abandon her cushy job at an accounting firm to open a food truck with her sister, but it hadn’t been a hard decision at all.

Marcy’s dream was to become the biggest name in fresh smoothies—not only in Belize but in the entire world. Giselle would stop at nothing to see her sister’s dream come true.

Besides, she’d poured all her savings into this business.

Failure was *not* an option.

Back in the truck, Giselle washed her hands and took stock of their ingredients. Bananas, papayas, coconuts, grapefruit, lime and watermelon overflowed. And there was plenty more where that came from.

Belize’s second largest industry was agriculture, and she had connections with an amazing farmer in the Cayo District who supplied the best ingredients.

Giselle didn’t stop there. She’d fitted the truck with the latest blenders, food-processors and tools. Everything, from the counters to the bottle openers, had been modified so Marcy could reach what she needed easily.

That meant that Giselle had to hunch her back to cut fruits or wash utensils, but she didn’t mind. Marcy’s independence meant way more than a couple aches here and there.

Her sister’s sigh caught Giselle’s attention. She stopped peeling an orange to ask, “What’s wrong?”

“Our Instagram page barely has any likes.”

“Did you post that picture of me eating a banana while making a shake?”

Marcy nodded.

“And that did nothing?”

“Oh, it did something.” Beneath her brown skin, Marcy turned a little red. “You brought out all the pervs.”

“You’re kidding!” Giselle gasped.

“Let’s just say, they wanted to replace the banana with something else. Ooh.” Marcy’s eyes lit up.

“What is it?” Giselle inched around her sister, wondering if there had been another perv post under the food truck’s page.

Instead, her eyes snagged on a brown-haired, bearded man holding the hand of a little girl—not more than five or six years of age.

Giselle stared at the picture and felt a jolt of electricity. It travelled from her throat to her collarbone, weaving through her chest to her fingertips and stomach.

The sensation took her by surprise, as did the warmth and levels of intense secondhand embarrassment that followed—a feeling she hadn’t experienced since high school.

“You’re friends with West Phillips?” Giselle asked, her voice carefully tight.

“This isn’t his page. I follow his older sister, Amy. She taught me for a few years in primary school. She’s nice.” Marcy showed her the phone. “Isn’t her brother so handsome?”

Giselle made a non-committal sound in the back of her throat. “He’s alright.”

He was definitely more than ‘alright’. Her eyes greedily drank in every inch of West, dressed in a suit that had been pulled off some designer rack and tailored perfectly to his sculpted torso.

The silly party hat strapped to his head clashed with the suit in a way that was endearing. His thick, black hair looked mussed, as if he’d been playing around and didn’t care how he appeared.

*West Phillips.*

She hadn’t seen him since they broke up back in high school. Time had treated him like a god because he’d only gotten sexier. *Life is so unfair.*

“Sis.”

“What?” Giselle blinked rapidly.

“You’re looking at him the way you look at your K-pop idols. Maybe shut your mouth before you drool.”

Giselle cleared her throat, slightly offended. Her K-pop idols brought her happiness and joy and West Phillips only brought her—

“Excuse me,” a voice called from the window. One of the joggers was standing outside the food truck, peering in.

Giselle perked up. “I’ll be right there!”

She and Marcy exchanged happy glances and jumped into action, leaving the conversation about West Phillips behind.

\* \* \*

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, GISELLE PARKED THE FOOD TRUCK IN HER PARENTS’ yard, dropped Marcy at her physical therapy appointment and dragged herself to her apartment.

She found her front door slightly ajar.

As she inched inside, the scent of heavy floral perfume gave the burglar away.

Horror flooded her and she burst inside. “Mom, *no!*”

“What the heck is all this?” Christina Stone whirled around, a scowl on her bright red lips. She held Giselle’s prized cutout of Ong Sung-hoon in her grip. The Korean heartthrob had a swooped bowl-cut and almond-shaped eyes. His fingers were twisted in a ‘heart’ sign.

“Mom, put Ong down,” Giselle said cautiously, hand outstretched.

“I thought you’d gotten over this Chinese phase in high school.” Her mother frowned.

“They’re not *Chinese*. They’re Korean. And it isn’t a phase.”

“Giselle, it looks like a teenager threw up all over your living room.”

She blinked rapidly, trying to see things from her mother’s perspective. Sure, every pillow in her couch had the faces of the gorgeous JEN-TEN group—a male K-pop band with mad vocals.

And sure, she had K-pop posters on the walls and K-pop mugs in her cupboard and a shelf of her most prized K-pop items, including the blessed V-Monster speedo she’d won in an international K-pop fan contest...

“You have a *problem*,” her mother hissed.

“I do not have a problem.” She grabbed Ong from her mother and set him tenderly back in place. Brushing him down lovingly, she murmured, “And I gave you my extra key for emergencies. You can’t just barge in and start judging me.”

Christina gestured to all of Giselle’s K-pop paraphernalia. “This isn’t healthy.”

“I’m a perfectly functioning adult, mom. My love of K-pop does not get in the way of my work or my business.”

“It gets in the way of your love life,” her mother shot back.

*Not this again.* “I am not single because I like K-pop, mom.”

“You need to get yourself a real man and stop fantasizing about these little boys who wear makeup and crop tops.”

“It’s called fashion.” She rolled her eyes. “And everyone in showbiz wears makeup. Lastly, they are not ‘boys’.” She stopped and thought about it. “Okay, not *all* of them are boys...” Giselle shook her head. “Besides, I don’t ‘fantasize’. That sounds creepy.”

“It is creepy!”

“I just support them. They have amazing talent and it makes me happy to listen to their music and buy their merch.”

“That’s it. I’m done talking. You’re out of control, Giselle.”

“Mom...” Giselle’s eyes widened when Christina pulled out her phone. “Mom, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to set you up on a date right now.”

“I’m not going on a date. I’m too busy.”

“Fine. I’ll have them come to you.” Christina tapped on her phone screen. “I’ll set you up on a date every day if I have to. I’ll make a profile on every dating website in existence. I’ll stop at nothing until I find a good match for you.”

Giselle shuddered at the threat. She had no time to deal with her mother’s ridiculous expectations. The food truck needed all her attention. She was exhausted enough trying to get that business off the ground.

“Hello?” Her mother spoke into the phone. “Yes, Malorie, you said your son Melvin was single, right?”

“Mom!” Giselle launched at her mother, trying to get the phone.

Christina nudged her away. “I think my daughter would be perfect—”

Giselle successfully grabbed the phone and hung up on Malorie.

“Give me back my phone, young lady.”

“Don’t set me up with Melvin.”

“Why not?” Her mother’s mouth flattened into a thin line. “It’s not like you’re in a relationship.”

She opened her mouth to protest.

Christina stuck a finger in the air. “If you say you’re in a relationship with these Korean boys, Giselle, I will wheel you to the psych ward myself.”

Casting about for anything to throw her mother off, Giselle blurted the first name that popped into her head. “West Phillips!”

“What?”

“I’m dating West Phillips.” She let the words flow even if they didn’t make sense. “It’s long distance.” And it wasn’t like her mother could prove otherwise. “You remember West, right?”

“West Phillips? Your high school boyfriend?”

“Mm-hm.” Her voice was high pitched. Taking her mother’s arm, Giselle gently nudged her to the door. “In fact, I need to get ready for a video call with him. Sorry, mom. I’ll tell you all about it later.” She opened the front door and pushed her mom out. “Love you.”

Christina’s suspicious expression was the last thing Giselle saw before she shut the door.

Her heart pounding wildly, she wilted against the wall in relief. That was too close. She only hoped her lie would stick long enough to protect her precious singlehood from her mother’s claws.

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