

The book cover features a close-up photograph of a young woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera with a slight, enigmatic smile. She is wearing a white lace-trimmed bralette and a long, multi-strand pearl necklace. The background is a soft-focus, light-colored wall. A vertical pinkish-red light flare or shadow runs down the right side of the image. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

*She'll risk the only
thing that's not for
sale: her heart.*

SELLING SCARLETT

ELLA JAMES

a LOVE INC. novel

~SELLING SCARLETT~

Elizabeth DeVille doesn't belong at a party like this—one where the gowns cost more than her Camry and cigars run higher than her grad school utility bills. Dragged out of seclusion by her best friend Suri, Elizabeth is merely playing dress-up, rubbing elbows with a crowd that banished her troubled family years ago.

Hunter West is tired. Tired of parties, tired of pretending, and tired of trying to right a wrong that haunts him every day. Bourbon heir and professional poker player by day, by night Hunter is gambling with his life in a high-stakes game of crime and blackmail.

When Elizabeth stumbles into Hunter's den of vices, she's a light in the darkness, a flame in the void. And, just like everything he touches, Hunter mars her in a record time. To rectify the damage done, Elizabeth needs money she doesn't have, and she's come up with a foolproof way to get it.

Follow Scarlett to the lush Nevada brothel where she'll auction her virginity and risk the only thing that's not for sale: her heart. The highest bidder is a familiar face, with wicked hands and the devil's mouth. And a secret so dark that it could cost her life.

This book is a work of fiction. Any names, places, characters, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination and are purely fictitious. Any resemblances to any persons, living or dead, are completely coincidental.

SELLING SCARLETT

Ella James

Prologue

~HUNTER~

It's Saturday night, and I'm coming off a two-day tournament. I'm tired and hungry, chugging back a DeVille bottled water as I steer my Aston Martin through the clot of traffic on The Strip, toward the private airport behind the golf club.

I won again, with a full house over queens in the last hand, but it was close. I was tired—am tired. Not enough sleep. I collected my chips just after midnight and we wrapped the show at one-thirty. There was a room at the Bellagio for me, but I'm sick of the Bellagio. The last two times I stayed, I found company in my suite. I didn't ask for any company.

I'm going to the vineyard: my house, my big bed, absolute quiet.

I know I can't sleep on my Gulfstream.

I'm still dressed in my poker black, and the jeans and button-up feel like sandpaper on my skin. I take another gulp. My head is throbbing like I just snorted a gram, but I didn't. Four months sober. Four months celibate, too. No real reason why. I just got bored.

I'm starting to get that empty, ill feeling in my stomach that comes from lack of sleep when speak of the devil, Marchant starts blowing up my phone. I let it ring as I navigate South Maryland Parkway. I pull off my Stetson and run my left hand through my hair. Kinda makes me want to go to sleep. Maybe I can sleep on the plane.

Marchant just won't quit it with the phone. On the fifth call, I pick up, sounding more pissed than I mean too. "What do you want?"

"I've got a favor, man."

I groan, because I can hear it in his voice that Marchant is all hyped the hell up. "You got a favor you want to do for me?" I drawl. "Cause I could use a favor."

"Nah, man." He hesitates, the way he always does before he drops a bomb. "I need you to come out here. I've got something going on. I need you to run backup."

Run backup? I'm not sure what that means, but I can already tell it's going to be a pain in my ass. "You must be out your mind. It's two forty-five." I move the phone away from my face, scowling. "Are you rolling?"

"What? No. Look, just—hold on just a second." I hear shuffling, followed by Marchant's hiss as I roll into the parking lot of the tiny private airport where I rent a spot in the garage.

"Dude," he says, after a moment of muffled static. "I got Priscilla Heat out here."

He pauses, I guess expecting me to be impressed. When I'm not, he says, "She wants me and some of the girls for one of her videos."

I shake my head. "I'm at the airport, March. I'm going to the vineyard for a little R&R."

"You're a bourbon heir, Hunter. You shouldn't even have a fucking vineyard."

I hit a button on my steering wheel, the garage door lifts, and I slide into the fourth slot. It's dark in here, making me ache for sleep. "The word is 'no.' Have Rachelle watch the ranch for you."

"C'mon, man, this is Priscilla Heat."

Marchant is the kind of guy that has a favorite porn star, and Priscilla Heat, the lasered, lipo'd two-time World Boner Award winner, has been Marchant's ultimate fantasy since college.

"I get it, dude, but use Rachelle." Rachelle is Marchant's right-hand woman. She can watch the cameras just as well as he can, and besides, he's got Richard on the ground. Richard and a team of big-ass bouncers.

"Rachelle is out," he says sourly.

"What do you mean, she's out?" I know for a fact she lives at Love Incorporated, Marchant's fluffy bunny brothel.

"I mean her sister died. Breast cancer. Rach won't be back till October first."

I rub my eyes. "Then tell Priscilla Heat to wait a week."

"She won't." Marchant's voice is low, almost a growl.

"Why not?" I throw my car door open, wincing as the garage's interior lights blink on.

I hear another puff, a pause where Marchant hesitates. Then he lowers his voice another octave. "She wants you here, man. She wants to spend the night with you and shoot the video here all week. It's more than a video. It's like a doc-u-fuck-ery or something."

I lean my hip against my ride, looking out the garage window at my waiting jet as I start to understand.

"You need the money."

"Yeah."

"Damnit, Marchant." I squeeze the bridge of my nose and swallow a sigh. "When this is over, I'm chaining you to one of your beds. No more going to Tao on Rach's nights, either."

I'm backing out of the garage a minute later, wheeling around and heading out toward I-215.

*

March and I met at Tulane, at the frat house. I had a shitty attitude because I joined under pressure from my father, and March was a party boy, moving through sorority girls like an assembly line. I thought he was full of shit, and he thought I was an uptight prick. But somehow the next semester we got stuck in adjoining rooms, and we've been tight since.

March's parents died our junior year—plane crashed into the peaks of the Ecuadorian Andes—and around then my dad won the U.S. Senator gig and left for D.C., so we said fucks to the frat house and moved into West Manor. Marchant

rented the entire downstairs, parading women in and out like cattle. The weird thing was, they always stayed friends after, so he had a lot of chick buddies. Sometime in our senior year, I bedazzled some of his inheritance, and he decided to use the money to open a brothel. Of course, Marchant being Marchant, he doesn't name it something normal like Radcliffe Ranch; he names it Love Incorporated.

It's a two-thousand acre, dusty, barren strip of Nevada desert, but the three sprawling, English manor houses and the forty or fifty acres around them—Marchant's got them looking like the Garden of Eden. He sold that image to a lot of people, too. Mostly people with dicks.

I'm not charmed when I give my Aston Martin to the valet and follow Bella, one of my least-favorite escorts, into the vast Love Den. Bella's got her strawberry-blonde hair thrown back over her shoulders, and it's kind of curly. Her blue eyes twinkle with a genuine smile, something I just don't understand.

Tonight she doesn't stop me in the den, with its many cozy alcoves, to ask me how I'm doing and bat her pretty blue eyes. In fact, I'm staring at the back of her head as she leads me down the nearest of four wide, candle-lit hallways. I watch her black silk dress sashay around her upper thighs, listen to her designer heels tap on the oriental runner. Against the soft brown wallpaper, her pale skin looks ghastly white.

For some reason, her silence makes me feel compelled to speak. "You doing alright tonight, Bella?"

"Just fine, Mr. West. Thank you for asking." She says it without missing a beat. "How are you?"

I rub my forehead, trying not to watch the crease between her thigh and ass. "I could be worse."

It dawns on me that most people would probably be happy with my weekend. I just won five million dollars. But one of the strange things about being rich as shit is five million's just not that exciting.

What most people don't know is that I haven't gotten my pocket of gold coins from great-granddaddy West. Not yet. Not until I'm thirty-five. When I turned eighteen my father gave me one of his stock portfolios to manage. He's fond of trial by fire, and I think he wanted to see if I would sink or swim. Before I graduated college I'd been able to triple what he gave me. Since then, I haven't stopped.

March's suite is behind a large mahogany door at the end of the hall, but we can't see it because there's a film crew camped outside. A few of them must recognize me because they tip their hats or nod as we squeeze through. I nod back, and Bella knocks briskly when we reach the door.

The camera mounted on the wall makes its creepy-ass mouse squeak, and I hear Marchant's voice over the intercom. "Good to see ya, West. Bella, thanks."

I press a Benjamin into her palm, because that's what any other guest would do, and the door swings open as she walks away.

Marchant is grinning. I can see relief and jubilation shining on his face as he pulls me into a bro hug. As always, I try not to wince.

"Thanks for coming, West."

I roll my eyes, checking out his black silk robe and spiky auburn hair. "Thanks for inviting me to the slumber party."

From behind March's wide shoulders, I hear a familiar, feminine laugh, and my skin begins to crawl.

"Hunter West!" I see a slim, tanned arm reaching around Marchant's robe, and then she moves around him, so I can see her body and her face. Priscilla Heat. Tonight she's decked out in a zebra striped teddy with red lace garters, black thigh highs, and six-inch heels. Her breasts are perkier than melons, and I'm looking at them before I realize that I'm breaking my rule. I look into a person's eyes first. Priscilla's are pale blue. Her smile is lasered, her teeth veneered. As she clasps my hand, I smell a whiff of sex.

"Hello, Hunter." She smiles coyly. "I'm so glad to finally meet you. I'm a big, big fan."

I try to smile. I swear to God, I really do, but my mouth muscles aren't working. I'm pretty sure I wince instead. This is confirmed by the small notch between her thin, dark, drawn-on brows.

"I've seen some of your films," I said. "You run a tight ship."

She bursts out laughing, then grabs my arm and jerks me to the giant, claw-footed dining room table. Tonight, it's piled with hors d'oeuvres and liquor. I'm eying a meatball, thinking how hungry I am, when she grabs my ass and squeezes. "Christ, you're tight."

"Hands off," I growl.

Her left hand comes up and grabs me by the jaw, and as she lowers her mouth to my ear, I know that she'll be trouble. "I do what I want."

She grabs my cock—or tries to. "I don't know much about your business," I say as I catch her wrist, "but in my line of work we shake hands."

"Funny!" Her red smile curves, stretching her face. Applause erupts from all directions, and it's nothing like the polite applause from an audience watching a round of Texas Hold 'Em.

"How would you like to be in an adult film," she croons, "opposite me?"

"I'm busy tonight." I strut over to Marchant, ignoring my giant hard-on, and grab his shoulder. "Sarabelle, my room, now."

I keep my head down as I stride into the hall, shouldering past a smug-looking guy with sunken cheekbones and slick black hair; a short, bespectacled girl holding an enormous camera; and a couple of others I don't see because my eyes are on the carpet. In seconds, I'm at the suite that Marchant built for me, back when we were young and I was snorting blow and drinking and fucking like a demon.

I know Sarabelle is free, because Tuesdays are her nights off. Even if she was working, she would have cleared her schedule. I strip, stashing my clothes in the chifferobe, and slide into a cold, silk robe. By the time Sarabelle arrives, wearing nothing but a blue teddy and wicked grin, I'm sprawled out on the bed, stroking my dick.

"Mr. West," she grins. "How can I help you?"

I eat her pussy, then fuck her. When we're both satisfied I buy her for the rest of the night, as per our old arrangement. I'm ready to split when Donnie, one of the male escorts, knocks on the door. He's got a bottle of West bourbon and two glasses already poured over ice.

Under the bottle is a note, scrawled on a receipt: For being such a good sport. ~P

I toss back one of the glasses, then shove the note into the pocket of my robe.

I tip Donnie with the bottle and the other glass, and by the time he closes the door, the room is spinning.

I hear a woman's voice as I sink to my knees, but I'm not sure which woman. Sarabelle is asleep. At least I thought she was. The voice is high-pitched, kind of like my stepmother's when she's angry at me. I blink at the swirling ceiling. Maybe it's my mother's—but I can't remember that far back. I can't remember...anything.

The next morning, I can't even remember if Sarabelle was ever in my room. All I know for sure is that she's not here now.

Chapter One

~ELIZABETH~

This is what happens when you don't leave your house for weeks on end, trying to prep for grad school finals. For the first time in my life, I'm looking at a man, imagining him naked.

Then again, he's not any old man. He is my host for the evening, Hunter West. It's objectively true: With tweed pants hugging muscular legs and jacket carelessly unbuttoned so I can see his undershirt and black vest, he screams sex. The kind of sex that's all slick skin and pheromones, bulging biceps and a six pack that ripples as he leans closer to plant kisses all over my face, and I arch up to bite him on the jaw.

The little fantasy makes me blush, but I don't look away from Hunter. We're in the same room for the first time in at least six months, and I'm entranced. I pretend to tuck my wavy brown hair behind my ear as I steal another glance his way. He's standing by a massive stone fireplace, surrounded by California's most eligible bachelorettes. I recognize a few of them from Hargrove Day School: Honey Neighton, a former cheerleader who missed senior year due to some kind of Ambien addiction; Brina Lulle, a pretty, petite figure skater who once qualified for the Olympic team but broke her ankle and didn't go; and Mary Baldwin Greese, the über shy daughter of one of L.A.'s best talent agents. There are more of them, decked out in designer gowns every color of the fall and winter fabric palette.

Hunter is more than a head taller than most of them. His wide shoulders almost triple the width of teenie, tiny Brina Lulle. He's nodding at something she's saying, the look on his face politely solicitous, but I tell myself that underneath, he's brain-killingly bored. Honey Neighton fans herself with her hand, drawing attention to her breasts, and I smirk down at my gown. It's like a bad regency romance: Everyone gathers at the nobleman's estate for a hunt and the unmarried ladies fawn all over the awkward and ornery—but charming!—duke.

Hunter West isn't a brooding romance novel hero, though. He has too much breeding to be awkward and he's too straightforward to play at anything—although he is hard to get; he's impossible.

I watch him produce a convincing and completely gorgeous grin for Brina before he turns to Mary Baldwin, ruffling her chin-length hair and laughing with his blond head thrown back. This earns him a small smile, which, coming from Brina, is like a lap dance.

Suddenly, Hunter turns and looks over his shoulder, and I can see his eyebrows arch. Marchant Radcliffe, one of Hunter's hell-raising friends, tosses a glass bottle over the heads of a cluster of middle-aged women, and Hunter catches it with one hand, saying something that makes his admirers smile before turning to the wet bar behind him and opening a cabinet.

He pours liquor, and his ladies wait. Even filling shot glasses, he seems completely in command of himself and what's around him. I've moved in or near his circle for a while, despite our seven year age difference, and I've never seen him not look like that. Like a man at the helm of the universe.

It's kind of surprising, considering he spends most of his time in Vegas, playing poker (professionally, of all things), man-whoring, and tossing back his family's infamous Louisiana bourbon. That was his great-grandfather, Willard West's legacy. Hunter's father, Conrad West, after a long life in politics, is Secretary of State.

He disapproves of Hunter's lifestyle, or so I've heard. I've only actually seen Conrad West in person twice, and both times from a distance, so I don't know much about him, but I wish I did. I collect Hunter details like my best friend Suri collects Hermès jewelry.

Watching Hunter turn around with a platter of tall shots balanced on his big hand and a sly smile on his face, I can't help imaging him lying on the Egyptian cotton sheets I know hug all the mattresses here at his Napa estate.

It wouldn't start there, though. As he tosses back his shot, I envision him backed against a wall, his shoulders bare and round and wide, that plump lower lip just begging to be bitten. Something about him makes me want to bite. If I was anybody else, maybe I would try to arrange that.

As it is, I'm Elizabeth DeVille, super spy and resident poor girl, and watching him out of the corner of my eye will have to do.

I nod at something my best friend Suri is saying to me, feeling like a shitty friend because I'm not really listening.

"I'm surprised she's wearing Oscar because I heard she's not modeling anymore," she says.

"Oh really," I reply, hoping that's the right response.

"Maybe someone on the design team is a friend of hers, because otherwise I don't know how she would get her hands on it."

Hunter leans against the fireplace, fingering a flask that sticks out of his pants pocket. I catch him wipe a hand back through his slightly wavy hair as his groupies shift their attention to a curvy black-haired girl who's gesturing wildly about something. For half a second, Hunter's gaze lifts. I think it rests on me, but then a blonde bombshell in a wispy red gown steps around me, and I'm sure his gaze is on her.

I'm watching him more brazenly than ever now, curious to see how he reacts to the sexpot stalking his way. I'm surprised when his jaw tightens. He almost seems to wince. Then she is close enough to reach for him. He drapes an arm around her shoulder, a gentleman greeting a fond acquaintance, and I realize who she is:

Priscilla Heat, resident porn star and my good friend Cross's arch nemesis. I don't know what went wrong between the two of them—he hasn't even told me how he knows her—but Cross seriously hates the woman.

I wonder if he's seen her yet.

A soft giggle pulls me back to earth, to Suri, who's standing beside me in front of a wall of glass doors that lead onto a balcony overlooking Hunter's vineyards. Even as I turn to Suri, I can sense Hunter at the other end of the room, exuding a low-level hum that makes my electrons feel unstable.

"I knew you still wanted to do him," Suri whispers, wiggling her eyebrows like she's trying to attract attention.

"I do not," I hiss.

Squinting my left eye, I look around us, mindful of who is close enough to eavesdrop. I can't see faces clearly because my left contact fell out in Suri's limousine, but I think I spot Carolitta Hamshon in a circle of gowns just beyond the couch in front of me.

I angle my body more toward Suri. "I do not," I whisper, even lower. There's no way I want Carolitta's coven of bitches to hear this. It's embarrassing enough that Suri spotted me.

"Yes you do, girlie. You've wanted him since sweet sixteen."

Suri knows all about the time Mom's Porsche broke down on the winding road that runs past West Vineyard. Hunter came to my rescue at just past midnight, leaving a beautiful brunette in a silky gown watching from his front door as he pushed Mom's Porsche down his long driveway and into his garage. He'd pushed it up a ramp and stripped down to his jeans, then pulled out a rolling body-board, eased his broad torso onto it, and scooted his fine self beneath the belly of the car. He emerged twenty minutes later covered in oil smudges, with grease in his golden hair and a self-satisfied smile on his tiger face, inexplicably smelling slightly of bourbon. He'd insisted I stay the night in his spacious guesthouse. Suri also knows how, the next morning, I'd heard moans coming from the direction of the pool. And how, from that point on, my insides have quivered every time I see him on Moneyline or read about his poker tournaments in a newspaper. It's even worse when the gossip blogs feature him toting a trophy date to this event or that. Every time I read about him with a woman, I feel like scratching her eyeballs out.

I don't like it, but it's something I'm just going to have to live with.

"I'm not lying," I mumble, but Suri's no longer paying attention to me. She's shifted slightly in her silver Manolos, tossing a not-at-all-discreet glance Hunter's way.

"Suri, stop," I hiss.

"His eyes are almost yellow," she murmurs, this time having the tact to lean her head near mine. "You told me they were green, but when he passed by earlier, I swear they looked like cat eyes."

I nod. I think of him as part tiger. He's languid to the point of appearing almost lazy, and yellow or green, those eyes are framed by ridiculous lashes, set in a strong

face with prominent cheekbones, full lips, and a sensuous smile.

I hear his chuckle, low and warmer than a gulp of bourbon, and I swear my knees shake under my slip like a debutant on her first night out.

"Elizabeth DeVille, I think you have your first boy crush."

She says boy crush because Suri has a long standing joke-suspicion that I'm gay.

"He's not my crush," I whisper, tight-jawed. I can feel sweat prickling underneath my arms, and the truth is, I'm starting to get a little upset as I worry Hunter will somehow know.

"Suuure he's not. Save it for the funnies, girly-o." Suri winks, and her boyfriend Adam Hamilton is there, smiling at us both and holding two wine flutes. He hands one to me and presses the other into Suri's dainty hand. Looking from Suri to me, he frowns, his eyebrows crinkling.

"What is it?" Suri giggles. Suri is always giggling. If she were a party drink, she'd be champagne for sure.

"There's something here," he says, pointing accusingly from Suri to me. "You're doing one of those girl things where you talk about someone and they don't even know it." He shakes his head. "It's not fair."

"Well it wasn't about you," Suri says, propping one hand on the hip of her burgundy, silk sheath Valentino gown. She slides her eyes to me, and Adam grins his dimpled grin. "Oh, I see. Miss Elizabeth."

"No, not Miss Elizabeth." I scowl, because I resent the simpering nickname.

"She has a hot crush," Suri murmurs, barely containing another trademark giggle behind her wine flute.

"I do not." My face is flaming. I seriously consider smacking Suri, except I know that would draw even more attention, and I am not a fan of attention.

"Bet my crush is even hotter," Adam says, taking Suri's hand. He brushes her brown curls out of her face and nods to the doors behind us, most of which have been propped open, letting in the nippy November air. "Want to dance?"

I roll my eyes at their cheesiness, but truthfully I'm glad Adam got the heat off me.

"Why of course, my love." Suri curtsies, and I have the wherewithal to flush on her behalf. Someone from Suri's family should act a lot more cool in public. Suri's like an oblivious nine-year-old.

I, on the other hand, am absolutely conscious of the eyes pulled to my orbit as Suri and Adam pass through the doors behind me, leaving me alone with my half-empty wine flute. I hate moments like these, where I know what everyone is thinking: Look at Elizabeth DeVille, left alone by the only friend she has. With a mother like hers and hardly any money left, it's a wonder she has even one.

Mentally shoving off their judgment, I lift the tail of my green dress in my right hand and gently pick my way through the crowded room, toward a slender hallway just beyond a staircase. I can't resist a glance over my shoulder as I go; I'm looking for Hunter, but he's nowhere in sight.

Out to my left, beyond a wine-gurgling fountain and across a vast oriental rug, I

spot my friend Cross Carlson with his arms around the red-haired Cole sisters: identical, with matching D-cup racks. He winks, and I give him a genuine smile, hoping the black-haired, blue-eyed devil in the bespoke tux is actually Cross. I really can't see. I curse the loss of my contact, and my own vanity. I have a pair of glasses in my clutch, but I'm too vain to wear them with my emerald satin, mermaid-cut Vera Wang.

Not that it would change my aesthetics much. With or without glasses, I'm still a fat girl. Not a lot fat. Just regular, eats-too-much-good-food fat. The kind of fat that curls the waist of my blue jeans down and creates an unattractive line of back fat between my pants and my top, just over the butt, when I sit cross-legged, hunched over one of my textbooks.

Since finishing undergrad—since my mom threw my dad out before having her third nervous breakdown in as many years, and dad went running to another family, complete with two new daughters—I've gained probably fifteen or twenty pounds, and the thing about the new me is, I don't care. I like Phish Food ice cream. I like beer, wine, and whiskey. I like Dove dark chocolate even better than the fancy imported stuff, and my mystery novel fetish is such that the time I don't spend studying for a PhD in Ethics is devoted to figuring out whodunnit.

With the exception of Hunter West, who's been my own personal porn since that fateful night Mom's Porsche broke down, I don't find that many men attractive. Maybe I am a lesbian, but I don't think so. I've never had the hots for another woman. I think most guys are just boring.

I clutch the tail of my dress a little more tightly as I glide down the hallway just off the great room. The wall on my right has turned from stone to glass, and I realize I'm approaching the atrium: a glass-walled garden in the middle of the octagonal house. Through the glass wall on my right, I see a swatch of starry sky, and I remember three nights ago, at Mom's house. Cross and I went to the front lawn to watch a meteor shower, and I think he wanted to kiss me.

He's always been like that when he drinks. Needy. Turned on. Most girls love it, but Cross is one of my oldest friends. I know how closed he is to everyone, how shallow he keeps things, especially with girls he likes, and I can't risk that happening with me. I need our long, deep talks, just about as much as I need his unwavering friendship. Besides, if we hooked up and it went wrong, Cross wouldn't have anywhere to live.

I let my mind linger on Cross's troubles only for a moment before I hurry past the atrium, knowing everyone standing in the glass-framed garden is probably making out or gossiping in cliques. I don't need their eyes on me.

My destination, a replica of an old-fashioned powder room, should be just past a serving closet up here on my left. I look at the rug as I walk; it's red, ornate, and old, and it covers most of the hardwood in this hall. My lack of sight in my left eye makes my right eye jump around, taking in the Sanskrit wall-hangings and the glittering, crystal light fixtures on the ceiling—and all the space in-between. I want to be sure I don't run into any company.

Cross texted the directions to the powder room earlier today when I asked for an escape place if I found myself alone. Mom built room on rqst, 4 his women, Cross told me, adding a winking smilie at the end. Cross's mom, Derinda, is a well-known Hollywood architect, and this octagonal mansion in the spot where the original estate burned is one of her most recent creations.

The 'smthng brass' Cross had told me would mark the powder room is a brass tiger's head door-knocker mounted on the sleek wood, and I smile when I see it. My hand is on the doorknob when I hear a moan. A woman's moan, followed by a man's moan.

I should move. I know I should, but I just can't. My BCBGs are pasted to the rug as my whole body heats to a boil.

Hunter is in there. I know that moan.

He moans again, and I hear a strangled "no" from low down in his throat. My body slumps against the door as my pulse dances. Sweat blooms on every inch of me. I can't swallow or breathe as the woman whispers something in an enticing alto voice, and Hunter's baritone voice purrs, "Such a bitch."

"You're the bitch," she laughs, and I hear the smack of a hand on skin. She moans like she's turned on, and I imagine Hunter's golden hair around his tiger face, the sexy curve of his lips as another slap rings through the room and the woman laughs again, high-pitched and off-key like the whinny of a horse.

Holy crap.

His release is rough, too. I can easily imagine his hips swinging, his ass tightening as he pumps into her from behind. His moan is guttural, almost a grunt. It sounds like pain but I know it must be pleasure.

"Jesus," the woman pants. "You're worth the trouble. Really, Hunter...what a fucking stud."

I listen with my heart in my throat, but Hunter is silent as the woman makes a little mewling sound. I can hear the shuffling sound of fabric over bodies, but there are no words—just the woman's panting.

A second later and there's heavy footfall, followed by the low squeal of a closing door.

"Jesus," the raspy, female voice whispers.

Looking down at my hand on the doorknob, I realize there's a key hole and I peek through it, getting a fleeting glimpse of Priscilla Heat in her red taffeta gown. Hunter has left her there with swollen lips and wild hair, examining her manicure as she leans on one of the ivy-covered columns framing a sunken tub.

Hunter—well-mannered, charming Hunter—slapped her ass, bruised her lips, and then he left her there. For some reason, that does crazy things to me: the image of Hunter, pulling down his expensive trousers and taking out his cock. Quick, rough sex, and then he's gone.

I imagine the bulge in his crotch as he struts out the door of the bathroom, and I'm so turned on I can't think straight.

I glance behind me and, seeing no one, stumble farther down the hallway. I'm

weaving like a drunk, and I am drunk: drunk on pent-up lust and yes, a heady, girlish crush. I stumble past a row of dark wood doors, stopping for a breath when I reach a bend in the hall.

I lean against the burgundy wallpaper, shocked by the intensity of my arousal. Every breath only steepens my desire. I think about how long it's been since I took care of myself. I've been busy studying for finals, so I guess it's been about a week. As I stand there, aching, I look down the remainder of the hall and notice there are no doors beyond the one I just passed. The hall turns to the right and leads around to the massive foyer, if I'm correct about where I am.

I glance left and right again. No one is around. I can't even hear the string band playing in the great room, where the party is. I take a deep, shaky breath. Then I grab the handle of the door behind me. It's taller and wider than the others, and to my surprise, it gives when I turn the knob and push.

Blinded by a haze of lust, I sail into the room, flaps of emerald silk flying around me, my hand already reaching between my legs.

Through my mental fog, I notice the vastness of the bedroom. My eyes slide over the flames blooming in a marble fireplace and I spot a tasseled pillow tossed haphazardly, inches from the fire. My attention settles on the bed; it's huge, with four mahogany posts and a deep green bedspread that matches my gown almost perfectly. I dimly note a surprising lack of pillows, just before I trip on one. I glance down at my feet, surprised to find I am standing in a sea of pillows. I glance around, still panting, and notice a broken mirror hanging beside a small armoire.

I'm confused and, for a second, worried, but another glance around the room reveals nothing else out of the ordinary. I assume someone has used the room for a party quickie. That turns me on even more, and I rush back to the door, locking it behind me before striding back to the bed.

It's ridiculous. I'm still blazing hot. I feel full and restless. Desperate. I know what I need. I've never done this outside my bedroom, but Hunter West does something strange to me, so I'm not entirely surprised—nor am I inclined to stifle my desire. I'm a grown woman, and God knows I'm the only one with a say-so in my sex life. Why not do what I want? Ten minutes, and I'll be back out in the hall, feeling a lot more level-headed. It's win-win.

I grin as I scoot up onto the mattress, inhaling the sweet scent of leather and cologne as I lean back on the only remaining pillow. Sweaty and trembling, I part my legs and reach under my gown. My fingers have just found their mark when a shadow rises from the floor space on the other side of the bed.

Chapter Two

~ELIZABETH~

Hunter is shirtless and sweat-slicked, with dark eyes and a twisted mouth. He wipes his forehead, squinting, and speaks in a voice that sounds strangely far away. "Is that you, Libby?"

I can't speak. I can't even move for the longest moment. When I find my voice, I sound like I'm choking. "Libby? N-no."

Oh dear God, he's beautiful. I am in awe of his shoulders. His pecs. My heart is racing, and under my gown, I quiver in response to—well, it must be pheromones. I have the urge to grab his arms and pull him down beside me on the bed. Instead, I squeeze my eyes shut.

Oh God. I'm done. I was an outcast before, but my old crowd will really slay me now.

Slowly I lift my eyelids, finding Hunter closer; he's leaning over the mattress, the weight of his gorgeous upper body propped on his thick arms. His face softens when his eyes meet mine, and he nods slightly. "Yes it is."

I have no idea what he's talking about anymore, because my brain has turned to soup. I'm all glowing, glittering sensation as his green gaze sweeps me from toes to crown. His brows are slightly gathered, his mouth still tight. Firelight illuminates his face, so I can see the exact moment he realizes what I've been doing. His torso stiffens as his hands, pressed against the mattress, curl into big fists. He makes a low, approving sound and speaks in a voice that sounds like molten lava.

"That's so sexy."

I look down at my hand, still tangled in my gown. "It is?" I search his face.

"Oh, yeah. Hell yeah." He's on the bed with me that next second, his gym-ripped body licked by the glow of flames. I gasp when he grabs my hips and turns me toward him. His eyes are flaring, and I expect him to let go of my fleshy hips. I'm already recoiling, hating myself for humiliating myself in front of this man. Instead he pulls me closer, locking both hands around my big ass and squeezing.

"Let me get you off," he purrs. I feel a throb between my legs, followed by a rush of needy warmth.

Oh God.

Somehow, I manage to nod, and his hand is fishing in my gown. I can barely stand to watch him. I'm already panting, and my eyes want to squeeze shut. I won't let them. Fate has given me this gift, and I intend to experience it. I inhale deeply, trying to hold off my release.

Hunter's eyes glow as he strokes my calves and traces up my thigh, across my hip.

He looks dazed as he lifts my panties with his finger, stroking oh so gently over me.

I whimper and he moves to straddle me, the fingers of his free hand tangling with mine, guiding my fingers, stroking me lightly, making me want to burst as he positions my finger, wraps his palm around my hand, and gently urges me inside myself.

His fingers are working my clit, and I'm wet...so wet. I am gasping, clenching and unclenching. My legs are locked, my feet dancing. All my blood has rushed under our joined fingers.

"You like it," he rasps, and then my finger is joined by his.

This is the most I've ever had, and I moan with the fullness of it. As I reach for him, clutching at his golden hair, he tugs away, ducking under my gown. I feel the soft heat of his tongue and shriek. My thighs clamp down around his head and it's like the universe is ripped apart. I groan and push his head down, nearly coming off the bed as he works me into what must be nirvana.

Holy shit.

I've never had an orgasm like this.

I'm bereft and shaking, gasping; humiliated and sated. I close my eyes and wrap my arms around myself, feeling like the child I clearly am. But as I peek shyly up at him, he grins, surprising me by stretching his gorgeous body over mine, hovering for a moment just above me before he dips down, kissing me lightly, even sweetly, on the lips. I can taste the salt of him. His breath smells like bourbon and when he tickles his damp mouth down my neck, I shudder so hard I think that I might burst.

And then I do—again. He cups me over my gown and strokes and— Oh my God.

From somewhere far away, I see him moving off the bed, standing wide-eyed at the foot of it. He's tugging at his golden hair, rubbing his eyes. Something is wrong, I think. He looks upset. I have the drowsy urge to hold him close and soothe the stress etched on that handsome face. But he is gone before I fall back down to Earth.

*

Did that really just happen? Christ in Heaven, I have stumbled into Fifty Shades of Grey. My legs are still shaking when I stand forever later. I grip the green duvet and set my gaze on the open door through which Hunter West disappeared; apparently this room has an attached bathroom.

I rub my temples, wondering if he's in there, or if the bathroom attaches to another room as well. Where did he go? Did that really just happen? I feel slightly sick about this. I feel gleeful. Hunter West! I picture him in the black button-up and Stetson he wears for poker tournaments. I picture his lazy smile as he waves at paparazzi from the red carpet at the premier of a movie his production company financed, his strong arm locked around a starlet's waist.

I shut my eyes and he is there above me. His eyes on my face are gentle as he leans to kiss my lips.

Still clinging to the duvet, I make my way around the bed and toward the open

bathroom door, pausing to examine something on the floor, where Hunter was sitting when I came into the room. It looks like a cravat. On a whim, I scoop it up and bring it to my nose. It smells like Hunter. I tuck it in my clutch and turn back around to see the bedroom one more time. With a clearer head, it looks more damaged than it did before. The broken mirror and strewn pillows remind me of the carnage left after one of Mom's breakdowns.

I do a quick sweep of the furniture and walls, looking for any tell-tale trinkets, but other than Hunter's scent, there is no evidence that this room is his. I notice something blue glowing in the fireplace and step back toward it. It's a broken wine glass, cracked and glowing with the heat.

It gives me an uneasy feeling, which intensifies when I remember what Hunter was doing just before I saw him—or rather, who he was doing. It's not Priscilla's profession that bothers me. I don't think there's anything shameful about a woman who has sex in front of a camera. It's the memory of Hunter's footsteps on the bathroom floor that bothers me. The way he left her there, even if sex was the only thing between them. Also bothering me is the proximity of that encounter to the one he had with me. I want to be okay with it, to just not care, but Hunter is still my crush, and care I do.

Why did he leave the room without saying anything? Is he some kind of sex fiend? A bedroom Batman?

I can't decide if I'm amazed that this just happened, or if I'm angry that he treated me just like Priscilla Heat. He just left.

I gather my gown in one hand and step through the door to the bathroom, holding my breath in preparation for seeing Hunter. But I don't. I glance around the empty room. The walls are decked with heavy, gold mirrors; the floors, the massive tub, the even more massive shower, are brown and gold marble; there's a glass-encased painting on the wall between the pool-tub and the shower; it looks like Dali and I wonder if it's real.

I'm looking in the mirror, giving my body a rare critique and trying to put things with Hunter in perspective, when someone enters from the other end of the bathroom.

My stomach dips like I'm riding a roller coaster and when the figure steps into the light, I feel ill.

Not Hunter. Another woman.

I notice she's wearing a prim black dress and a crisp white apron. Not another lover. She gives me a shy smile and as she steps forward, I can see that her dark brown hair is tucked into a tidy bun.

"Miss DeVille?" she says softly.

"That's me," I say, hands on my hips.

She nods at the largest of the two tubs. "Would you like a bathe?" she asks me in a French accent.

"A bath?" I correct her automatically, then feel guilty; it's the soon-to-be professor in me.

"Yes." She nods vigorously. "Would you like to get into the bath?"

I narrow my eyes at the massive, square pool. "Um, that's not necessary." I stare at her and fold my arms. I'm not sure what to say.

I decide to be blunt. "Where is Hunter?"

"Mister West, he is tending to some business."

Oh, I just bet he is.

"Did he send you to offer me a bath?" I ask.

The girl hesitates, then nods.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll take a few minutes in here by myself and I'll be gone."

The girl starts to go, and I put a hand over my breasts. I feel like someone's shoved a steel plate into my chest, and I tell myself that's what I get.

Who do you think he is, Lizzy? He's a freakin' man whore, and he found me in one of his bedrooms,funking the fuzzy franny. What the hell do I expect? That he'll rush back in and get down on one knee?

I step closer to the mirror, frantically smoothing my hair, and the housekeeper turns. "There is one more thing," she says.

I wait, brows arched.

"He does not make a habit. He say he found you, he had been drinking, you were beautiful. If there is any forgiveness to be asked, you will speak with him?"

I frowned, confused until I realize this must be Hunter West's damage control. Ouch. I swallow. Nod. "Yeah, whatever. Sure." She turns again, to go, and I say, "Wait." Her dark eyes meet mine, and I spit it out: "Tell him that's fine. I wasn't looking to get married, either."

After that, I lock the doors, pull my gown up, and work carefully to restore myself to my pre-Hunter state. I also give myself a mental shake.

He didn't use and abuse you, silly girl. You were both in the right place at the right time, and you had the best orgasm ever. If anything, he gave you stud service. It so happened to occur right after he was with another woman, but he didn't design it that way.

Besides, it was a great time. I can't regret that.

I try to believe my own propaganda as I smooth my hair, reapply my lipstick, and stuff the Hunter-scented cravat deeper into my clutch. I look perfectly respectable—and I am. I've had a nice time, and now I'm going back to the party. Maybe Suri will feel I've served my time, and I can go home and finish my reading for class on Monday; the subject is fitting: the morality (or amorality) of sex.

After a few more minutes of deep breaths, I start toward the door the maid went through, but as soon as I do, I can see royal blue and gold curtains. I don't want to come out in another bedroom, and I damn sure don't want to bump into Hunter again, so I turn around and open the door leading back into the emerald room.

What I find on the other side stuns me. Priscilla Heat is naked, lying on her back beside the fireplace, and Hunter is leaning over her. I'm so distracted by his amazing, taut backside, it takes me a second to notice what he's doing with his left hand.

It's pushed against Priscilla's throat. She moans. I gasp and Hunter's head whips my way. The look on his face is horror. I imagine mine is much the same. I fly through the blue room as fast as I can move.

*

I'm dashing through the hall, toward the vacant end that meets the front side of the house, and I guess I must be freaking out because I don't even notice Cross until he and I collide. His hands close on my shoulders as he holds me at arms' length, his blue eyes narrowing and then widening as he realizes I'm me.

"Where have you been, Lizzy? I was looking for you." His voice is low, and I can smell the vodka on his warm breath.

He must have had a lot to drink tonight, because his face has that relaxed look, the one I remember from the other night, out on Mom's lawn. On this rare occasion, Cross is an open door, and as I stand there looking up at him, his fingers press into the flesh of my shoulders.

"Is something wrong?" He moves his hand up to my face and cups my cheek. "You look like something happened."

Without waiting for my answer, he pulls me close. With my body pressed against his hard one, I realize that I'm shaking and I pray he doesn't notice. "I'm okay," I lie. And even though I'm not nurturing romantic feelings for Cross, being so close to him makes me feel warm. I imagine him sitting at his desk with a sketchpad and a pencil, dictating the design of a new Cross Hybrids bike, rough around the edges and pretty damn sexy.

He folds my head under his chin, and his deep voice vibrates through my ribs. "I should never have told you to come back here. I know Hunter West, and he's—" He inhales deeply, his nose in my hair, and then pushes me away, his eyes flying to mine. "Elizabeth, you didn't."

"Didn't what?"

He looks me over, up and down, and when his gaze falls on my left arm, all the color drains out of his face. "Fucking hell," he whispers.

"What?"

He snatches my purse, pulling out Hunter's cravat and waving it around. "Jesus, Lizzy. Really? Hunter West?"

I nod, because I'm not sure what else to do. "What's wrong with—"

I'm going to ask what's so wrong with Hunter West—a rhetorical question whose answer is among the hundreds of scandalous rumors I've collected about Hunter over the years. But before I can finish my question, Cross turns around and slams his fist into the wall, striking it hard enough to cause a loud boom.

I jump on him, stunned and appalled. "Cross! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

For half a second, he freezes, and I can feel the pent up rage seethe in him.

Another half a second and it's gone.

He gently removes my arms and turns to look at me, his expression carefully

subdued. "Do you need a ride home, Lizzy? Do you want to talk?"

"I'm fine," I say, and his mouth twists. He tugs me down the hall, back toward the green bedroom, where I hear slapping again and Hunter's moan. My stomach lurches.

"Don't think that you're the only one," Cross says. His eyes bore into mine, looking for something I can't name. "Did he force you, Liz?"

"No way! Of course he didn't." I grab Cross's hand and drag him back the other way, toward the empty foyer. "Call off the state of emergency. I've still got my V-card. Unstamped."

"For how long?" he asks darkly, and I've had enough.

"I don't care how much you've been drinking—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"Do you really want to be just another fuck?"

I recoil, feeling like I've just been slapped. It takes me a full half-second to gather my thoughts, and when I do, I'm seething. "I could never be 'just another fuck', so don't you say that shit to me. I'll make my own choices and I don't do a bad job, unlike some people who drink themselves stupid and sleep with any warm body that will have them."

He works his jaw, and I know it was a low blow. He's told me practically all his secrets since we were kids, and I know he uses sex to get affection.

"I'm just trying to be your friend, Lizzy." But his voice is hard.

I feel steam coming out my ears. I'm judged enough based on my mom, and I don't need Cross adding to it. "Why were you back here?"

The look on his face tells me exactly what I had suspected: he was looking for space for his two redheads.

"I'm not like him," he starts.

"Right," I snap.

I can see the hurt in his eyes. Instantly, I'm gutted.

"Cross, I'm sorry—"

But he's out the front doors in a gust of frigid air, and I can't take back what I've said. I stand there, trembling harder than I was before, feeling angry at him and like a shitty friend.

For a few long seconds, my stomach clenches as I ask myself why Hunter? I know that he's a man ho. I know he doesn't 'like' me. He doesn't even know me. And yet...I've never even had a crush on anyone but him. In one long second, I realize how messed up I must really be, and it makes me want to cry.

I kill the urge quickly, my shoulders heaving as I stare through the wavy glass panes on the ornate doors. I can hear Cross's bike crank from somewhere in the direction of the front of the house, and despite how terrible I feel, I don't want to leave without talking to the one close friend I have left.

I press my back against the wall, taking big, deep breaths and blotting the stinging wetness from my eyes when tears try to come. I stand there probably fifteen minutes before I make my way back around to the great room, and the first thing I do when I step into the room is scan for Hunter. I spot him surrounded by a flock of

women, missing his jacket and his tie—or rather, cravat—sporting just his vest and shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

My body throbs, and Hunter's gaze flickers over mine—there, then gone without conveying anything.

Then Suri is in front of me, cheeks flushed, eyes bright from wine. "Woman, where were you? Cross almost ruined his cover!"

Cross lives at my mom's house, in my old room. It's a secret. His family disowned him, and Cross doesn't want them to know where he is. His father, Drake Carlson, the governor of California, actually said he didn't care if Cross turned up dead. I wouldn't have believed it, but Cross let me hear the voice mail.

My family has fallen off the social grid, and Mom's in rehab and I live with Suri, so we think he's well hidden. Just in case, Cross and I try to stay away from each other publicly.

"Yeah, I just ran into him." My eyes widen warily.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Cross freaked out," I say. It's the only thing I can manage. "I guess I should go find him." He'll be at Mom's, alone. At least I think he will be. Cross isn't the type to hit the bars when he's upset, much as he'd like everyone to think the opposite.

Suri agrees to ride home with Adam and loans me Arnold for the night. A butler fetches Mom's worn, white mink and escorts me down the wide, brick walk, to the line of limousines where, years ago, our own driver, Wilson, would have been waiting. The door is opened, and I climb in, feeling weighted.

I lean forward and give Arnold instructions he doesn't really need.

"We'll be there in forty minutes or less, ma'am," he says.

"Thank you, Arnold."

The divider wall locks into place, and I'm alone under the starry sky, staring out the sunroof, looking for constellations I can't find because we're moving too quickly down the little vineyard road.

A computerized refrigerator offers me a bottle of water and I take it, smirking at the green and blue label: DeVille. This is how my great-grandfather made his fortune. It's good water. Almost as good as West Bourbon, which I find in the liquor console. I take a deep swing, remembering the taste of Hunter West's mouth. I wrap the cravat around my wrist. Wrong or right, I'm keeping it.

I'm ashamed to say my mind is still on Hunter when the limousine slows. Arnold lowers the shield, his face taut as he says, "Miss DeVille, please remain inside the vehicle." The wall goes up, and I feel a weird energy. A kind of darkness.

I'm not sure what compels me to open my door, but as I step into the road, I think some part of me already knows, because my arms and legs weigh two tons each.

My good eye blinks and there is Cross, lying on his side in the damp grass just beside the road. At first glance, it looks like he is simply lying down. His arms are raised over his head in the position he adopts sometimes while sleeping. His legs are scissored, his pretty mouth parted just a little.

I see blood oozing from his lips. The dark spot on the road—that's Cross's blood.

His bike, a renovated '73 Norton Commando Mark III Roadster he loves like a person, is smoking in the road beside him.

Chapter Three

~HUNTER~

I can't go back to Love Incorporated. I know I should, to try to jar my memory, but I can't. So we're at Batshit Ranch, a twenty-thousand-square-foot California red roof on my little patch of sand, just outside the Summerlin community. I own ten-thousand acres out here, and besides grazing some cattle, I don't do much with them. Not that I care. Some things should be for enjoyment only, and I enjoy staying at my country place. It's my Vegas home when I need to get away from the bustle of the Wynn.

March and I are in my study, and I'm behind my desk, cradling March's iPad as I scrutinize the chart that my friend and his private eye, Dave, put together. I turn the tablet sideways, frowning.

'To Catch a Criminal'. I flick a withering glance his way. "Enjoying the drama, Radcliffe?"

"Not enjoying," he says, his voice faintly defensive as he kicks his feet out and crosses his long legs at the ankles. "Just making do. I figured we should have a project name."

"Right." I look it over, curious to see the revised list of suspects. I note the absence of two names I'd hoped to see: Bill Percy and James Meyers, both deviant little fucks who've bruised some of the girls before.

"Percy wasn't there," Marchant says, reading my mind—or more likely, my face. Bill Percy was a prick from college turned prick lobbyist for the gaming industry. He left bruises on Juniper once; he claimed he was drunk, and Juniper decided not to press charges. "His wife caught him boinking the housekeeper that night," March tells me. "He checked into Bellagio around three. Meyers was at an electronic cigarette convention in Virginia."

Marchant takes a swig of his whiskey, then rolls up the sleeves of his button-up, looking serious for once. "All in all there are twenty-six suspects, including you and I. Eleven of the other fucks stand out."

I scan the eleven bolded names. "My guy's been on Rutherford and Kriss for going on sixteen days. He says they're both clean as a whistle."

Marchant passes his almost-empty glass from one hand to the other, looking moody and restless. "I say we drop Rutherford. He likes it weird, but I think that's only when he fucks Brad. Everyone seems to like it weird with him. Devotion to the pacifier does not a kidnapper make," Marchant mutters.

I lift my head, brows arched. "A pacifier?"

March shrugs. "That's what Brad says."

"That goes on the list of kinks I'll never understand."

"So now it's a list of one?"

"Funny. And we've got a more important list to worry about." I bring each name up as a slide, and flip through one at a time. Name. Picture. Possible motive. "Let's keep the tail on Kriss. There's just something about him."

Marchant nods, punching something into his iPhone.

I flip through a few more slides. "Are we still on the ex-boyfriend and the stepbrother?"

We've spent almost two months now paying a couple of Vegas PIs to track people of interest. So far all we've found is Vegas has a total of three decent PIs—and there's no limit to the number of affairs a determined man of means can have. That, and one of Priscilla Heat's screenwriters looks at kiddie porn. We're hoping Dave, a Vegas local and ex-FBI dude, can help us cover some new ground. Hence this revised list.

"Ex-boyfriend doesn't do anything but a waitress," Marchant says blandly. "Sarabelle's stepbrother doesn't do anything but Oxy."

"Tell Dave to keep tracking them. I'll add Michael Lockwood to my list, you add Caleb Zeuss to yours." Michael Lockwood was one of Priscilla's film crew; he quit his job just a few days after that night; he's come up clean so far, but something about him smells off. Caleb Zeuss is one of the cooks Marchant employs. He was on the clock that night, but no one seems to have seen him. The cameras are useless, because while March was fucking Priscilla for Pimps and Princesses, someone turned them off. The woman working the cameras just assumed the system was down. Naturally, when she tried to convey this to Marchant, he did not want to be interrupted.

I hand Marchant his iPad and pull out my smart phone, blinking at a new text.

"Cumming to your place tonight. Bringing a surprise. ~P"

I squeeze my eyes shut, opening them some seconds later to find Marchant out of his leather chair and standing in front of my desk. He leans over, pressing his palm against the sleek oak. "You doing alright? You look amped."

I glower. "Thanks." I'm not doing coke, which March should know, but I'm sure as shit not justifying anything to him.

"You sleeping okay?"

I snicker. Marchant drains his glass and rolls his brown eyes. He slinks back to his arm chair, reminding me momentarily of the Pink Panther. "You gotten any more calls from Smith?" he asks me. Josh Smith is the LVPD's lead detective on this case, and he's been on me like white on rice since the morning we called to report Sarabelle's disappearance.

I toss back the remainder of liquor in my glass and stand, stretching my sore legs. "I think he's finally gotten the hang of calling Lehland," my attorney.

"What about your old man?" Marchant asks.

"His people have stopped calling, too. I guess they've got all their fires put out." No one but Josh Smith and a few others from Love Inc. and Heat Enterprises know Sarabelle disappeared from my room in particular. Given the political sensitivities, it needs to stay that way.

Marchant, on the other hand, has been all over the news. His business hasn't suffered at all. In fact, he says it's picked up. Bunch of sick fucks out there.

His phone buzzes, and I feel a jab of guilt. He should be at work. He's busy, week night or not. I should have met him there.

Now I have to get him out of here before Priscilla shows up. He has no idea what's going on between the two of us, and I'd like to keep it that way for a while longer.

Twenty minutes later, I'm on the balcony attached to my room, pretending to read The Financial Times on my tablet and wishing Priscilla would hurry the hell up.

My life has been fucked up this way ever since that night with Sarabelle. I woke up the next morning stark naked, sprawled out on my back, with a splitting headache, a killer case of dry-mouth, and a lipstick heart drawn around my left nipple. When I sat up, the room tilting around me, I spotted a yellow note stuck to the nightstand by the king-sized bed. Large, feminine handwriting I recognized from the note the night before looped around the page.

"Last night, the Hunter was hunted. Do you remember how hard I made you cum? xo, P"

I didn't remember, but I'd been roofied before, and I knew what the hangover felt like. Not sure what I'd done with Priscilla Heat and hoping to hell and back that the answer was nothing, I slung my clothes on and left without giving Sarabelle a second thought.

I got the call from Marchant on my phone about an hour later. "Did you take Sarabelle with you?"

Now, sitting outside on this dry Nevada night, I take a sip of my brandy, remembering how suffocated I'd felt sitting beside Marchant in the private waiting room inside the LVPD. How ill I'd been, hearing that another escort had gone missing a few weeks before. Ginnifer Lucky, a 22-year-old from Arkansas. Vanished just after her last shift at another brothel. I had an alibi for that night in August, but Marchant didn't. It had been his night off, and he'd spent it at his private home in Summerlin.

Neither of us answered any of their questions. LVPD didn't need to know anything except that Sarabelle fell asleep in my room and I awoke the next morning to find her gone. I was back at the Wynn two hours later, and I was even more worried. I had no idea what had happened to Sarabelle, and the shit I did know didn't add up.

Donnie, the escort who'd brought me the drugged drinks, confirmed they came from Priscilla herself. According to the sticky note I'd found in my room the day after, I had fucked her that night, but I didn't remember doing so before I got the drinks, and afterward I'd been drugged to fuck and back. I could have performed in my juiced-up state, but it seemed unlikely. Had she really come into my room after filming all night with Marchant for a sunrise fuck with a man she roofied? What would

be the point of that, anyway? Some kind of ridiculous fetish?

The biggest question was whether or not I was the only person in my room when she arrived.

If so, then who had taken Sarabelle?

The person who'd tried to send Marchant an S.O.S. about the camera malfunction was an escort named Geneese Loveless. Richard, March's head of security, had been out with the flu, and with Rach away at her sister's funeral and March chasing his dick, Loveless had volunteered. I know Loveless well—I used to be one of her regulars—and I can vouch for her trustworthiness. She wouldn't hurt Sarabelle, and she sure as hell wouldn't have let someone rig the camera system.

It's always possible that Sarabelle got up and walked away on her own, but Bella, who roomed next door to her in the manor where the escorts live, confirmed that Sarabelle never returned to her room that night. She didn't even have her purse when she was in the room with me. She didn't have her phone or her car keys, so she couldn't have left. Clearly, someone took her. Who—and why?

I spent the two weeks after that night trying to track down Priscilla. When she finally surfaced, the shit really hit the fan.

I check my watch and stroll into my bedroom, remembering the night Priscilla surprised me here. I had stepped out of the bathroom, near naked from my shower and planning to hit the hay. I sensed company before I saw her, and I stepped toward the cabinet beside my bed. I keep a loaded .45 inside. I don't think she knew that, but she must have guessed, based on the way I moved.

"It's just me, Hunter."

I turned to find her in a form-fitting trench coat and high-heels. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I can still see the determination on her Botox'd face as she smiled. "How many people know about your mother?"

My gut clenched, but I held my poker face. "Rita?"

"No. Roxanne. The escort who worked for Lotti Bleaufont at the Hartland Casino in the early '80s. She died in child birth. Some big-headed boy." She grinned wickedly, and I felt my heart constrict.

She held out a folder, and I looked inside. It was mine. It came from my safe—or from my financial planner's office. Inside were all the papers. My birth certificate. The certificate of adoption, when my father's high school sweetheart and second wife, Rita, adopted me. This shit was kept under lock and key—mainly because no one knew my upstanding paps had once been head over heels for a Vegas escort.

"This would be such a lovely story for Page Six, don't you think? Your father would be known for something besides pissing off North Africa."

"What do you want, Priscilla?"

She'd smiled coyly. "I just want to get into your bed. I think you'd enjoy it." She shrugged. "If you disagree, I think you will agree that your story is just too salacious, given what's happened lately. Mother was a prostitute. A prostitute disappears after

you fuck her. Sounds kind of creepy, kind of kinky, doesn't it?"

I feel a tingle down my spine. "Sounds like you know a lot of things you shouldn't."

Her eyes widened, and she smiled widely. "Of course it sounds that way to you, silly man..."

I inhale deeply, returning to the here and now. I hear the sound of fabric swishing on the other side of my bedroom door, and seconds later, Priscilla strolls in.

"Hunter."

I hate the way she says my name. Like she's talking to a puppy. Like she owns me, for a secret I don't give a shit about, personally. It's other things I need kept quiet—things more likely to come to light if people start snooping around my family's past—but I know Priscilla doesn't know those things. Almost no one does.

Priscilla reaches behind her back and the long, suede robe she's wearing tonight falls dramatically to the floor, revealing...only skin. She's on me, has me stripped and on my mattress in seconds. Her hand slides around my cock, and I can't help but respond. I grit my molars as I harden and throb, forced along by nimble fingers and a warm, damp palm.

"Cum for me, Hunter. Cum for Mommy."

I slit my eyes open, and the glare of the bathroom light on her face causes them to shut again. I'm having trouble finishing. I squeeze my eyes shut more tightly, think of another face instead. I'm done in no time, cumming into Priscilla's hands.

"What a good man. If you want to keep your mommy happy, we'll do chains tonight. It's your night to wear them. I hit you."

I shut my eyes again. Truth be told, I like that best.

"I brought your surprise." It's E, and I roll my eyes at the little pill. "I've never been a fan."

"I think you'll like it."

I pretend to take it, we fuck, and when Priscilla leaves, I follow her. I catch up with her a few blocks later, and follow her another thirteen miles to a small brick home with a familiar address. It's the home of Michael Lockwood, the film assistant who recently quit working for Priscilla. The one who used to work security for Governor Carlson. Drake Carlson—the political heavyweight Priscilla used to fuck.

I park down the street and dial our new guy, Dave. "I've got a change of plans. You remember Lockwood? Lives on Anderson? I want him followed, night and day. Priscilla Heat, too."

Chapter Four

~ELIZABETH~

"I already told you, I'm his sister." I look the evil nurse right in the eye and lock my jaw, like I mean business, because I do.

"Mr. Carlson doesn't have a sister," she says after glancing at her clipboard.

I reach into my worn Coach bag and grab a fifty, shamelessly sliding it across the high-gloss counter. If I had more, I'd offer it all to her. But the only rehab I could get Mom into this time is seriously pricey, eating up our meager allowance from the DeVille Trust, and my fellowship money only goes so far. If Suri didn't let me live at Crestwood Place with her for free, I'd never make ends meet.

The nurse raises her right eyebrow and looks from my money to me, and I cross my arms in front of my chest. "How many visitors?"

"Excuse me?"

I meet her pale brown eyes and hold her gaze. "How many visitors has he had since I came Monday?"

Her lipsticked mouth twists, and her eyes flicker down the hardwood hall, toward Cross's spacious, private room. "Thirty minutes," she says, shoving the fifty back at me. "That's all you're getting. And I know you're not his sister."

I slide the fifty into the pocket of my pea coat, where my iPod Mini is, and hold my contraband-filled purse close to my side. I walk quickly to Cross's room, the way I always do, because I truly am eager to see him, coma or not.

For the first four weeks, it was medically induced, but when he began healing from his skull and leg surgeries, they decreased the sedatives so he could wake up. But he hasn't. I think I might know why, and I can't stand how much that knowledge hurts. But Cross's complicated secrets are safe with me.

As I push through the door and lemon-scented Lysol fills my nose, I'm angry, knowing I'm the only one who comes here more than once a week. Suri came the first two weeks, but she had to stop. All she can do when she sits in Cross's room is sob, and the nurses think he can hear us. Cross's parents—I could skin them both alive. They got him his swanky room at Napa Valley Involved Rehab, but neither Cross's mom nor his dad has visited since the first twenty-four hours.

It makes me queasy remembering that first day. How I couldn't sleep at all and how I itched to be here by him. I even bought a fake ID with the surname 'Carlson' so I could slip into the ICU with him, holding his hand and stroking his dark hair.

For those first few weeks, he looked a lot different. One of the saddest things

about right now is that he looks like Cross again.

Today the top half of his railed bed is raised. His head is propped between two pillows. As always, he looks peaceful. Beautiful. His almost-black hair is short—they shaved it for his surgery—and his long, dark lashes make his face seem pale as porcelain. The awful tube that once went down his throat has been removed, because he's breathing on his own. A tube that feeds extra oxygen into his nose is taped to his cheeks, and I know that under his gown, snaking into his abdomen, is a feeding tube. Sometimes I peek because I want to understand what's going on with him. I wish I was his next of kin, so I could truly get all the information, but there's a nurse who likes me—Nanette—and she's told me they think his brain is fine. He sometimes squeezes my hand, and once when I kissed his forehead, he moaned. He just won't wake up. Not yet.

As soon as I make it across the fluffy, olive-colored rug and over to his bed, I grab his wrists and squeeze his hands. They smell like Betadine and are striped with tape that holds IV lines in place, but I don't care.

I lay one of his hands back on his blankets, but keep the other one sealed in mine. I force myself to look at his still face and smile as if he's really here.

"Hi, C. How's it going?"

I imagine him answering, because otherwise having a conversation with myself is just too weird. I kiss him on the cheek and sit down beside him in the cream wing-backed chair I've come to think of as mine.

"When I called the other day, Nanette told me you opened your eyes for a few minutes. I can't believe I missed that! I had a test that day. You'll be glad to know I passed." The machines around him hum their response, and for a second, I get tripped up. It's been two months now, but sometimes it's still too strange to see Cross like this. "So...what else is there? Suri and Adam might be having problems, but she keeps it quiet. I think she likes to pretend they're okay. Probably because she wants them to be. You know she loves her decorating stuff in San Fran and I think Adam is pushing her to move to New York with him again. It is the place for literary people I guess, but it's just not Suri. I think she's coming here tomorrow. If she gives you the scoop, I want to know."

I babble some about classes. In the time since Cross's accident, the new year has come and gone and I've started the last semester of my second year of grad school. I search my mind for other updates, skipping over Mom (still in rehab), pop culture (Cross wouldn't care), and my non-existent dating life. I look down at my jeans. "I've been on the caveman diet. I've lost some weight. I feel good, so I might keep going."

I tell him more, sharing everything with him except for Hunter. Not that there's anything to tell. I haven't seen him since that night, and my thoughts about him pull me in two directions. The main one, though, is interest. I still want him, more than ever, and more and more I'm coming to understand that there is something seriously wrong with me. I'm not sure I want a real relationship, and for me, Hunter is just a fantasy. I think about his soft kiss on my mouth and I want to tell Cross, "He wouldn't treat me like he treats the other women. I'm different."

Except, of course, that's stupid.

Putting Hunter out of my mind, I let Cross hear some Neil Young and Grateful Dead on the iPod and then I use a straw to dip a little Sunkist into his mouth. He loves Sunkist, and I firmly believe that he can taste it. I put some strawberry lip balm on his lips and tuck the covers around his broad shoulders. The sheets and blankets are all mine. I wanted him to have things that smelled familiar.

When I get up to leave, fifteen minutes after the arbitrary deadline assigned by Nurse Bitchface, I kiss him on the cheek. It's selfish to play on the feelings he might have had for me, but I need him to wake up.

"I've got to go and read some Victor Hugo, but I'll try to come back tomorrow. I want to hear about your next N-therapy session." N-therapy is where they use some big, swanky machine this hospital patented to stimulate Cross's brain. They talk to him while they wave a wand around his head, and supposedly that helps. It must, because people with brain injuries come from all over the place to get treated here. In my mind, this is the very least his awful parents can do.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my coat, feeling sad again. "I don't want to pressure you, Cross, but I really do need you back. I miss you." Tears fill my eyes, and on impulse, I lean down and kiss his cheek again.

When his eyes flutter, I think I'm seeing things. As soon as I realize those are really his blue eyes, I feel my throat constrict, like I'm going to get sick or cry.

"Cross?" My wide eyes cling to his, and I just can't believe it.

I almost faint as Cross blinks. His eyes tear, and he makes a face like he's tasting something really sour. I feel something tickle my abs, and I realize he's grabbing my shirt. I back up, gaping at him. Laughing. "Oh my God, Cross. Hi."

His mouth lolls, and I can see he's trying to speak. I look down at myself and start to cry as I watch him white-knuckling my shirt. My heart is beating so fast as I clasp his hand. I look into his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I would do anything on Earth to take that lost look off of his face. "Do you want me to call someone?"

His eyes squeeze shut, and his chest makes a rumbling noise. "No."

"You don't?" I whisper through my tears.

He shakes his head just a little and mumbles something. His lids drift lower, and I grab his cheek, frantic he is falling back asleep. Instead, his eyes peek up at me again, and he mumbles, "...ch of a headache. And..."

He swallows, and I squeeze his hand. "What was that?"

His eyes shut, and I bite my lip—but again, they flutter open. The blue of his irises looks faded. "I'm sorry," he rasps.

"For what?" My voice cracks, so I have to swallow. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

His eyes roll back slightly, but his arm is tugging me closer. Still sweating and hardly able to breathe from shock, I lean down and wrap my arms around his shoulders.

"It's okay," I whisper against his cheek. I'm rubbing his back, wanting to be sure

that he knows someone loves him. Someone misses him. "I'm sorry, too. We're friends again. You're my best friend. Stay here with me, please."

I hear him swallow. Then his eyes are fluttering again, his eyelashes like butterflies against my face. They're closing as he says, "Stay..."

The soft word is the last thing that I hear before a nurse bursts into the room, and Cross is gone again.

*

The rest of the week passes slowly. I'm spending a lot of my time in mandatory group study sessions, which I definitely don't need in order to understand and apply our class material. If I wanted to spend all my time with other people, I'd have joined a think tank, not signed on to become an Ethics professor.

I'm grouchy and tired when I come home from campus Friday afternoon, toting a little brass scale for a presentation my Plato & Aristotle group is making to a high school honors class next Wednesday. The project is twenty percent of our grade, and I'm already looking forward to talking to the little twerps.

The driveway at Crestwood Place is almost half a mile long, taking me through a beautiful apple orchard and then around several fields where horses graze. The horses belong to Suri's parents, who are so seriously amazing, at times I pretend they are my own. Trent Dalton is the most modest big-wig computer software dude you could ever meet, and Gretchen is an elementary school counselor, working every day of the work week entirely pro bono. Suri has two sisters, Rachel and Edith, and I spot Edith's white horse, Samson, as I pull into the circle drive directly in front of the house.

I toss my leather pack over my left arm and scoop the scale up in my right. The columned brick home has a wide, stone staircase, and it takes me forever to drag my tired self up it. I press my thumb against the keyless entry and the door pops open immediately—so quickly, in fact, I worry that it wasn't locked. Which is strange since Suri always uses the kitchen door.

I wiggle my cell phone out of the pocket of my baggy Lucky jeans and quickly pull up the emergency services phone number, conveniently stored as No. 2, in honor of the bullshit usually going down with Mom when I have to use it. I'm not sure what scares me most as I slowly step inside: the idea of Crestwood being burglarized like the Dalton's city home has been a time or two, or the images that resurrect themselves inside my mind: visions of my mom lying in a broken heap at the bottom of the stairs or passed out in a pile of Oxy.

Thinking of Oxy—or any drug, for that matter—makes me think of Cross, which makes my heart ache. Really, it's a sharp pain, like I imagine a knife stab would feel like.

After the miracle of Wednesday, I skipped my classes Thursday to be at the hospital with him, convinced he would finally wake up. He squeezed my hand when I asked if he was glad to see me, but that was all. This morning when I called,

Nanette sounded weird. When I prodded her about what was up, she said he'd had another N-therapy session and during it, he said my name.

Amazing.

I'm wondering if I can slip in during Nanette's shift tonight when the scent of cinnamon rolls hits my nose.

I race through the foyer, past the spiral staircase, through the formal dining room, and into the massive kitchen like a kid hot off the school bus.

I come to a stop on the rug that spans most of the kitchen with a satisfied smile. Suri, in a pink and green paisley apron, has her back to me. Her curly brown hair is locked away in pigtails, and she looks like she just stepped out of Martha Stewart Living.

My smile disappears when she turns to me.

I hold up my hands, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. "Remember what we said last time with Mom. Just spit it out, Sur. No sugar coating, 'cause that makes it worse."

I bite down on my lip when Suri's eyes tear and she steps over, closer to me, fiddling with the oven mitt and meeting my eyes with a deep frown. "You're going to be so upset, Lizzy. I am, too."

"Suri, spit it out!"

She wrings her hands and starts speaking on fast-forward. "My mother told me today. She heard from their new housekeeper—she cleans Cross's family's house, too." My stomach takes a nose-dive. "They've dropped him off their insurance. They're not going to pay for his healthcare anymore. They've moved him, Lizzy. This morning, to a state-run place in L.A."

"What?"

Suri's eyes are wet. "Sunshine Acres Assisted Living. It's part of the Los Angeles County Public Hospital System."

"Is that the one my mom went to when she was sentenced for violating her parole? The one with no visiting hours and those shitty double rooms and that bad pee smell?"

Suri bites her lip. "I looked up the hours. Noon to three p.m. Except on Saturday." I feel like I've been punched. Suri sniffs. "It's closed Saturdays."

Chapter Five

~ELIZABETH~

I don't know if it's the thought of Cross locked up where I can't get to him or the knowledge that he'll never have the super special come-out-of-your-coma N-therapy again, but something hits me in the chest and a sob slips out my lips.

Suri's arms come around my shoulders and I smell the cinnamon rolls burning as she hugs me tightly. "I can't believe they're doing this to him." She pats my back and I hide my face in her chest, feeling like a child—I never cry—but unwilling to pull away because I know how hideous I look when I do, and I don't want to subject Suri to that even though she's seen it a time or two.

When I finally compose myself, there's a definite smoky smell in the kitchen. Suri squeezes my arm once more before dashing to the oven and yanking the cinnamon rolls out. They look like they've survived a volcanic eruption at close range.

"I'm sorry!" She looks anguished as she stares down at the cinnamon rolls.

"Suri." I can't help laughing, because this is classic Suri, dealing with a crisis via yummy foods, concert tickets, fruity daiquiris, and spa trips. It's actually pretty great, and I've enjoyed it since we were kids.

"I don't care about the cinnamon rolls," I say, unable to swallow a laugh at their horrible appearance. "It's the thought that counts." I smile, although my tears have started up again. "Do you want to go out or something? Maybe we can break Cross free from that shithole and move him here."

"That's the thing," she says, her voice going all high-pitched like it does when she's really distressed. "Adam is making me fly to New York tonight. Some special occasion he won't tell me anything about."

Despite my leaking eyes, my brain shifts gears. "Do you think that he's proposing?"

"I don't know, but he better not," she says, waving her arms. "He knows how I feel about New York, and he can be a literary agent on the West Coast much more easily than I can run Northern California Interiors from New York! His clients are all virtual. Mine have homes."

She bares her teeth and mimes a cat scratch, and I know things must have gotten really rough with Adam. I think it's safe to say he's not proposing.

"So the two of you are still at an impasse about where to live?"

She nods miserably but quickly finds a smile. "Maybe he's finally going to give in. I would so accept a Cali-shaped cupcake or...I dunno, Alcatraz earrings."

"Alcatraz earrings." I smile a little, and Suri giggles.

"I can hope," she says.

She pulls a napkin from the pocket of her apron and dabs at her eyes, and I put

my arm around her. She wraps hers around me, and together we walk over to one of the windows. I'm not sure who steered us here: her or me. It's like a game of Ouija Board; maybe we both needed a look outside.

It's quiet inside the house, so all we can hear is the low whoosh of the heat through the vents down by our feet, and the utter quiet beyond the glass-paned windows.

When Suri speaks, her voice is high and shaky. "Remember when we were in seventh grade and Cross invited you to Fall Ball?"

I nod, smiling at the memory. He came to my house to ask, wearing a black leather jacket and jeans with holes. I frown next, because I remember how his parents never drove him anywhere. It was always Renault, the Carlsons' butler.

Suri inhales softly, and I watch her face as she sucks her lips in and makes a classic Suri Thinking face. Then she drops a bomb. "Ever since then I kind of had a secret crush on him."

I shriek. "Suri, you have got to be kidding me!"

She shakes her head, blushing three shades of pink. I slap her arm. "How could you harbor such a huge secret?"

"I don't know." She smiles, and shakes her head, and I know the answer before she says it.

"I guess I just met Adam and...that was that." Her eyes tear again. "I still love my Cross."

"Me, too."

"I want to do something for him," Suri says.

I do, too. In fact, I have to.

*

Maybe it's because of Mom that I freak out. I don't have that many childhood memories of her being whisked away to rehab, and I think that's mostly because she never went. Not until I was a teenager. But she was locked away from me in other ways. Always in and out of altered states, sleeping just like Cross is now.

I have too many memories of watching from the foot of her bed as one of the many private nurses Mom went through hooked up saline to the IV stand she stashed in her make-up room. Sometimes, when I was really little, I would cry and my dad would tell me she was sleeping.

"She loves you, honey, but she's sleeping today."

After Suri leaves, I feel gripped by that old sensation, panic at my lack of access to someone that I love. But I'm not a child anymore. I grab my car keys and race to my old, powder blue Camry. I'm out of breath by the time I crank it, but that doesn't stop me from speeding to Mom's house, a massive, white Southern antebellum-style home with a huge wrap-around porch, situated in the rolling hills fifteen miles northwest of downtown Napa.

The gate password is still the same. It's been a month since I've been here—

several weeks after Cross's accident—but I notice no cobwebs stretched between oak trees as I fly down the arrow-straight driveway. I remind myself that a maid service is still coming; I hired them myself after Cross got hurt, mainly to check on the house so I don't have to drop by regularly.

The front of the house is lit up like usual to deter gate-hopping criminals, and as I see it for the first time in weeks, my heart squeezes, because no matter how much time passes and how much changes, this awful place will always feel like home. I throw the car in park and fly up the square staircase, unlocking the door and stepping inside quickly, so I can disable the alarm whose panel is one room away, inside the piano parlor.

The code is my birthday backwards. I picture Cross pressing the keys, probably standing in this very spot wearing old jeans and one of his bomber jackets, and tears sting my eyes.

I'm here for one thing and one thing only, and that's Dad's number. I don't keep it in my cell, because it's too enticing. I don't allow myself to call him on a whim. When Dad wants to talk to me, he calls, and as soon as we're finished talking, I delete the number from my call log. It's a Salt Lake City number, so it's not one I could accidentally memorize.

When I call from the rotary phone in our vast, dark kitchen, I'm grateful that it's new wife Linzie who answers and not one of her daughters, Fern, thirteen, or Hollow, nine. Her hello is flat and Midwestern; I can almost see her on the other end of the line, clutching a cordless phone and standing in a slightly dated kitchen. The picture of normal: that's Dad's new family.

"Um, hi Linzie, it's Elizabeth."

She pauses for a second, then responds in a crisp, telemarketer-sounding voice. "Elizabeth. Can I help you?" Whoa, her tone is brisk. I swallow back my irritation.

"Yeah. I want to talk to my dad." Biotch. I want to stick my tongue out and tell her he was my dad first, but instead I calmly say, "Is he around?"

"He is." I think she's gone to get him when I hear a breathing sound and Linzie says my name again. "Elizabeth?"

"I'm here."

"I know you are. Uh—" there's a fuzzy sound, like she's covering up the phone's mouthpiece. When she speaks again, her voice is tight. "Elizabeth, is this about your mother?"

"No." Now it's my turn to be surprised. And peeved. "Why do you ask?"

Linzie sighs. "I know that she's in rehab again, Elizabeth."

"Yeah. That's not news." I squeeze my eyes shut, wanting to bang my head against the kitchen wall. What the hell does Linzie care what my mom's up to?

"I know it's how things are there, but it's not normal here for us." She pauses, like she's rallying herself, and I try to put my armor on, because I can tell this is going to get me right between the ribs. "Your father is damaged from what he went through with that woman. You know how she treated him. But when things happen with her, he still feels responsible."

For some reason, this makes me want to punch Linzie in the nose. "Um, I'm not trying to be rude, but of course he does. He was married to her for more than twenty years." I inhale deeply, fighting to control my off-the-handle temper. "Like I said—I'm not calling about my mom, so can I talk to my dad now please?"

I hear silence, and for a long moment, I think she's hung up. Then my dad is on the phone.

"Elizabeth."

"Hi Dad." In the background, I can hear a girl's voice, and I know it's one of them. Fern or Hollow. 'One of my new girls'. I lean my head against the wall. "Look Dad, I just had a quick question for you."

"Okay. What's your question?"

I wrap the curly cord of the olive green phone around my finger, biting my lip, because I hate to ask this—but I have no choice. "I was wondering if I could get a loan. From the DeVille Trust, or from you."

My words are followed by a long pause, during which I honestly have no idea what he will say. Then I hear a sort-of snort.

"Elizabeth, are you serious? We've talked about this. You can't spend money like your mother used to. I know it's hard for you, growing up the way you did, but this is life now and you're twenty-three—"

"Dad, I'm not. I'm not spending any money." I clench my jaw, breathing deeply as my pulse races. "I never buy anything. It's not for me."

Pause. "So you are calling for your mother?"

"No." I grit my teeth as rage builds in me, pooling underneath my breastbone and radiating out over my shoulders like venom from a snake bite. I huff my breath out, so angry now I'm seeing stars. "Dad, did you tell Linzie to screen my phone calls?"

"Screen your calls? Of course not, Elizabeth. Linzie would never do something like that. She cares a lot about our relationship."

I can feel my lower lip tremble. "Why don't I believe you?"

He sighs, and it's the sigh he used to save for Mom. I get the eerie feeling Linzie is standing right beside him, encouraging him, with her deep brown eyes, to stick it to me.

"Elizabeth. You have issues with trust."

"What?"

"There's money available for counseling—"

His comment takes me off guard and makes me furious. "Oh yeah?" I demand, cutting him off. "You think so? Maybe Linzie could see me. Do herbalists take insurance? I know they're great advice givers, so maybe I could fly out—"

I'm still going—verbal vomit, that's what Cross would call it—when the dial tone dings.

My mouth stays open and my eyes fill up with tears. "I need counseling?" I slam the phone down with all my might, feeling the impact in my fingertips as I whirl around to face the empty kitchen.

At least, it was supposed to be empty. I was supposed to curl into a ball and sob,

because when I get this mad, it's the only thing I can do to discharge my anger. Instead, I find myself staring at Hunter West.

Chapter Six

~HUNTER~

Her face is blotchy, like she's been stung by a bunch of bees. I can tell she might cry because her sea blue eyes are glowing brilliantly, and she's got them wide open, the way girls do when they don't want tears to spill and smear up their mascara.

Her wavy, dark brown hair is messy, hanging just above her shoulders, and I want to run my fingers through it.

Shit.

I shouldn't even be here.

I saw the gate open and I threw on my superhero cape. Then I saw the unfamiliar car with the San Francisco plates and found the door unlocked. I know nobody's living here. I keep an eye on the place, because I want to buy it soon; its acreage backs against my bird-hunting lodge, which is where I was heading when I made this detour.

Batman or not, I've screwed up. I shouldn't be in Libby DeVille's childhood home, standing in this massive, outdated kitchen with her, just like I shouldn't have crept close enough to hear her talk to her father.

I tell myself that I should turn and go—after all, Priscilla's waiting for me—but my feet have other plans. I take a small step closer, my eyes never leaving hers, even as she looks me over, Lakers cap to boots.

"Asshole father?" In the tomb-like silence of the house, I'm surprised at how deep my voice is.

I can see her shoulders rise and fall; she's trying to control herself. Judging by the bit I heard, it makes sense that she would be worked up. If his reputation is anything to go on, Benjamin DeVille didn't do much for his wife or daughter when he was with them, and does even less now that he's left town.

Libby quickly smooths the pained look from her face and crosses her arms. "How much did you hear?" she asks me with a wary wince.

"Enough to know you're probably not the one in need of therapy."

She squeezes her eyes shut, running a hand through that silky hair. "Wow, well that's embarrassing."

If only she could be a fly on the wall at the family home in NOLA back when I lived there with Dad, Rita, and my half-sister, Amber. This wouldn't even register on our drama-meter. I want to tell her that, but I've got no clue how. Besides, the best way

to keep a secret—that Rita is not my real mother, for instance—is to avoid mentioning anything to anyone that even comes close to the truth.

Libby chews her succulent lower lip, and it's my turn to stare her down. I've only seen her once, from a distance, since the night of the party, and I'm surprised by how much weight she's lost. I wonder if it's intentional, or if she's stressed, and I'm surprised to find I actually kind of give a damn.

She plays with the ends of her hair, and I let my gaze linger, from her low-cut royal blue sweater down her loose jeans to her suede shoes—some kind of moccasins. She looks cute. Casual. I feel a pleasant tingle, just from being near her.

Finally her eyes flick up to mine, like she's waiting for me to say something. So I do. "What do you need money for?"

Her mouth draws up like she's sucking on a lemon. I like this face on her. The you-should-be-ashamed-of-yourself face; it's kind of sexy mistress. To top it off, she arches her eyebrows primly. "That's not really your business, Hunter West."

Maybe not, but I have a pretty fair idea. "Is it the Carlson boy? The governor's son?"

Her eyes flash, dark blue now. "The son the governor cut off and sent to a shitty state hospital because he's a dickhead who deserves to be ridden out of California on a rail?" Her cheeks flush. "You probably shouldn't ask me about that right now." I watch her delicate eyebrows meet as her sea blue eyes narrow to slits. "What are you even doing here?"

Her eyes wander the expanse of my chest and I know she's taking in the size of me. I saw the Mace on her key chain in the parlor, and I wonder if she's thinking about running in there for it.

I nod toward the back of the house, relaxing my shoulders so maybe I look a little friendlier. "I saw the gate open and wanted to check in on things. I own the property behind you."

Her furrowed brows crease more deeply. "The old retreat?"

I nod. "Bought it off the Anglican church a few years back. Turned it into a quail hunt." She still looks wary, so I give her a little more. "Just being neighborly."

Her face is blank, and I can't tell what she's thinking. I wonder the odds of her having heard about my connection to Sarabelle's disappearance, and decide they're nil.

Next I think about that night on my bed: her head pressed into my pillow, her hair spread out around her face. The memory of it makes me hard, but then I remember how it ended, with Libby seeing me with Priscilla. Impotent rage washes over me, but I'm still hard as a damn diamond. I shift my weight; that makes it worse.

Libby's eyes are on mine, thankfully. "Well I'm okay," she tells me, tucking some hair behind her ear. A tiny pearl gleams from her earlobe, and I have the odd thought that I could buy her something so much bigger.

"I appreciate you stopping in to check on things, and I'm sorry you got an earful of my business." She waves at the kitchen doorway. "You're free to go."

I don't want to go. It's that same strange draw I always feel toward this girl. For

half a second, I want to put my arms around her and stroke that silky-looking hair and find out what she smells like. I can still remember how she tastes, but that night, I had Priscilla's noxious perfume in my nose.

I rub the bridge of it now, like maybe that'll make the memory go away.

"Really, I'm good here." She's got her hands on her hips, and I notice she's closer to the parlor door than she was when I looked away. For a fraction of a second, I allow myself to play out a fantasy. Libby runs and I bolt after her, capturing her upper arms and whirling her to face me. I plant my mouth over hers and press her gorgeous body against mine.

I can't contain a hungry smile, and Libby side-steps, now even closer to the parlor.

I arch a brow. "I make you nervous?"

She smiles smugly, and the nervousness I thought I saw looks more like impatience. "I have my black belt in Judo. Do you?"

A grin blossoms on my face, but my lips aren't sure what to do with it. It falls right off my face, and I press my mouth into a more familiar solemn line. I adjust the bill of my ball cap, feeling the weight of the last few months. "You'd be right to be nervous. That's a good thing. You never know whose room you could be wandering into."

"So that was your room."

More statement than question, but I say, "Who's asking?"

She looks at me strangely, and I realize I've become too paranoid.

"Sorry." I rub my brow, feeling frustrated and tired. "It's been a long...long week."

I'm shuffling my feet, headed for the parlor, when her mouth does something soft. I want to kiss it. My cock twitches as she nods, like she's looking in a crystal ball and seeing every sleepless night and fucked up, dead end day that's led me here, to her kitchen. I'm trying to play superhero and it's just so stupid. I feel revulsion rise in my chest. Then she says, "I believe it." Her words are soft silk, and when they leave her ruby-colored lips, her radiant eyes are on me, gentle and perceptive.

It makes my throat tighten. I remember her that night at the party—the warmth of her, the weight of her. I need to leave, but I'm rooted to the kitchen floor.

Libby's eyes flicker to my clenched fists, and I imagine what I must look like: two-hundred-twenty pounds of head-fucked male, product of an escort and a professional asshole. But instead of bolting for the Mace, she tilts her head, regarding me like she would a puzzle. "Do you stay at the vineyard often?" she asks quietly.

"Sometimes." I'm not sure why she cares.

The corner of her mouth lifts, a lovely little half-smile that makes me wonder if she has any idea what effect she is having on me. "I'm sure you don't remember this, but you helped me fix my car once, years ago."

I nod, but I don't return her smile. Even then, when she was just a kid, I felt a pull, and the memory puts me off-balance.

She turns and walks into the parlor, and I follow her into the spacious room, decorated in dark browns and reds. She looks over her shoulder as she grabs her keys from a Victorian card table.

I can tell she's thinking about something. She hesitates before casting a troubled look into my eyes. "Did you do that to your room?"

"Do what?" I frown, annoyed at how I can't seem to make myself leave.

"At the party," she says. "Your room was a wreck."

I flinch at the memory, debating only briefly whether to be honest. "I was very angry that night." My voice is ultra-deep; husky. As I drink in Libby, I go back there.

I remember the sensation of choking—a sensation Priscilla sometimes likes to experience with a collar, or—so much worse—my hands around her neck.

I'm holding Libby's stare, hoping she'll see these things inside me and tell me to get going. I notice I'm holding my breath, waiting for her wary dismissal. Instead, her mouth softens again. I wait for her expression to morph into pity or sadness, but she looks serene. "I think there are two sides to you," she says quietly.

She must think one of my sides is a psychopath. At least she won't be disappointed if I ever become an official suspect in the escort disappearances.

Thinking of that, while looking at her delicate face, makes my heart pound uncomfortably, and I realize how afraid I am that it might come to that. I'm completely innocent, I remind myself, but I know better. There's a common perception, partially true, that rich people are above the law. It's true for a lot of us, but I have a feeling my notoriety could work against me. I'm the kind of guy prosecutors like to stick a case to. And I've got a dirty past.

Libby can read my mind. I think she can. Her eyes are latched to mine, and I can see my heaviness reflected on her face. She slides her hands into her pockets, stepping closer as she speaks. "What I mean is, most people only see what you want them to see. Like the night my mom's Porsche broke down."

I remember that night. It was back when I was fucking an escort from Los Angeles. The sex was explosive, but I always felt like shit after, and I'd been relieved when my security manager interrupted over the intercom. A few minutes later, after pulling on some pants, I'd gotten my first glimpse of Elizabeth DeVille. She'd had her hair in a pony-tail that stuck up off the side of her head, and she'd been wearing short red shorts and a light blue tank top with a whale on it.

"You like whales?" I'd asked her when I finished with the car.

Her face had gone all soft and pretty, making me feel more like one-hundred-and-three than the twenty-three I was, and she'd shrugged. "Yeah, but not a lot more than any other animal. I just like saving things."

The car was a piece of junk that likely wouldn't make it a hundred more miles, so I convinced her to spend the night in my guest house. After Marietta went to sleep I found myself sitting out by the swimming pool, hoping Elizabeth might wake up and come outside. It was ridiculous. Embarrassing, even. When I fell asleep in one of the plastic chairs, I dreamed of Libby DeVille holding my hand.

She's inches from me now, and she's reaching toward my face.

For a second, I feel a thrill of fear I haven't felt since I was a boy. It settles deep inside my stomach, and I steel myself. Then her hand touches my shoulder, and I start to sweat from every pore.

Her free hand grabs one of mine, and she tugs me closer to her, closing the distance between our bodies with a gentle tug. I lean closer to her, moving in small jerks. I'm getting seriously dizzy, as her thumb touches me between my brows.

"I see a frown mark, though," she whispers, "right here." I blink, surprised to find the soft sensation makes my eyelids heavy.

"I thought you were upset that night," she murmurs as she strokes. "After..." She colors, and I blink my heavy lids.

"I could see you at the foot of the bed, and I was kind of worried for you. I don't know why, but something about you..." That frown is back, visible through my lashes, and someone is scooping out my insides. I feel gutless and emptied, like I might dissolve into a puddle at this woman's feet.

"Something about you just seems sad. I don't know what about poker-playing would make a man sad, but I'm watching these," she says, gently thumbing my frown lines one more time. "Try not to let them get any deeper."

I nod at her, feeling like I'm in a dream. As I'm walking out the door, I turn again, fighting a vision I have of kissing her mouth.

I take her porch stairs two at a time, and my knees ache from my misadventures with Priscilla. I swing into my F-250 and before I can get a handle on myself, my phone buzzes. Priscilla. Seeing her name on the screen is like jumping into icy water.

I hit the button to answer, but I can't bring myself to say 'hello'.

I can hear the static on the other end, static and the clinking sound of hooker heels. "Hunter?" she says; it sounds like the lash of a whip. "Where are you? I'm waiting."

"Keep waiting," I spit out.

"Believe me, I will. But you'll pay for this."

I grip the steering wheel and wonder if Sarabelle is dead already. I tell myself I'm playing this fucked up game for her. My past doesn't matter. If my father doesn't want word to get out—if he's worried about people finding out what happened to Rita—that's his problem. Christ knows it always has been.

I can hear Rita's low voice, a whisper in my memory where it should have been a scream, and for the briefest moment I can feel the sticky sweat I used to get when she was mad. I can hear her say, "You're trash, just like your mother."

And I can see her crumpled in my arms, as her too-thin face turns white.

I lower the phone and I am punching the 'end call' button when I hear Priscilla on the line. Her voice is low and sultry, but it's wicked all the same, giving me flashbacks of being beholden to another evil bitch.

"I know where you are," she says. "And I don't like it."

Chapter Seven

~ELIZABETH~

I leave my mom's house feeling like a changed woman. It's dangerous for me, because it involves Hunter. I can't imagine what gave me the courage to be as candid with him as I was. It's true I'm not exactly shy, but this is Hunter, golden god, my oldest, only crush.

Maybe it was because he was intruding, technically; maybe it was that he heard me with dad and obviously got it. Regardless, in one fleeting interaction he went from Hunter West Fantasy to Hunter West Real Person, and the bad thing is, I like him more now.

I remember the sympathy in his tone when he asked about my dad. He cared that I was upset; at least that's the feeling I had in my gut. I could be wrong.

But not about the end, when we were in the parlor and he told me he'd been angry that night at the vineyard. I know I'm not wrong about that, and while I admit maybe I'm being self-indulgent, I feel like I can say almost for sure that what I saw wasn't really what was going on. Hunter seemed disgusted with himself when he looked at me. And tonight... He seemed protective. Kind. Not at all the kind of guy who gets off strangling porn stars.

I can hear Cross's voice in my head, telling me I don't know anything about Hunter, and I admit maybe I'm star struck. But I just don't think so.

I remember how he stilled under my fingers when I touched his face tonight. I remember the kiss he gave me that night, after...

If he's only a playboy, would he have been as nice as he was to me tonight?

Yes, idiot. That's what puts the 'play' in playboy.

I sigh, because I can't heed my own warning, and all I can think about as I park in front of Crestwood Place is when I'll see Hunter again.

*

Saturday morning, I wake up early and drive into Los Angeles. I could have asked Arnold to take me, but seeing Cross for the first time at this new place is something I want to do alone. I've still got Hunter on the brain, so as I fly through the city, my mind is a tangle of feelings. Worry for Cross. Fear for how I'm going to get him out of this. Longing for his friendship. Hope that maybe when I get there, he'll be magically

awake again.

I'm also curious about Hunter. Wildly curious. I'm practically craving him, although all fond feelings vanish as I drive through a dreary patch of East L.A. I pass a familiar-looking exit, then the one that's mine, and I know—I know for sure—that this is going to be that same hell-hole where Mom served a court-mandated week two years ago.

I pull off onto a run-down road, then hang a right onto a dead-end street, and there it is: Sunshine Acres—the building right next door to Sunshine Rehab, where mom was sent by court order. Both buildings are tall and Soviet-esque—completely void of frill; all function. The parking deck is dark and dank, even by parking deck standards. I tell myself my imagination is exaggerating, but I swear there's a thick layer of grime on everything.

The lobby, accessible from the third floor of the deck, is a vast space under a low-lying ceiling, filled with plastic chairs and smelling of stale carpet. There's a cut-out in the wall where two women and a man sit behind a counter top.

I stop in front of a stick-thin woman with short black hair, and ask for the charge nurse. I'm not nervous, because I know that if she says "No," I'll come back in a few hours, and I'll find a way to sneak inside. I'll wait for Cross's nurse to take a bathroom break. I'll decide for myself how well he's doing.

The person I think is in charge has a name tag that says OLIVE. She's wearing bright green, sweat-stained scrubs that hug her spare tire and compliment her creamy chocolate skin. She looks me over, from my Ugg Moccasins to my jeans and discount designer sweater and she folds her arms across her chest. "It's Saturday," she says, sounding tired. "What do you want with me?"

I can tell she's a straight-shooter, so I match my tone to hers and cut right to the chase. "My friend Cross Carlson just got here, and I'd really like to see him. I know it's a Saturday, but I'm going out of town tomorrow for a week. I'm asking for a favor. Just this once."

She blinks at me. It's an exaggerated blink, almost comical, and after that she bugs her eyes out, like she's just heard something sensational. "Do you know who's running this place today?" she asks me in a dead-pan tone.

I shake my head, and she says, "Frankie, and Frankie's not here right now. I can let you in this once, but you've got fifteen minutes before Frankie gets back from lunch. If Frankie catches you, you're shrimp."

I frown as she turns, and hustle to follow her down the wide, gray-carpeted hall. "Um, just out of curiosity, what's shrimp mean?"

She shoots me a menacing look. "It means you'll get your head bit off."

I follow her around two corners, and at this point, my heart is pounding. The hall has started smelling more like a nursing home—that smell of soiled linens, cleaning chemicals, and sweat. We pass a row of tiny metal doors, Chiclets punched into the drab, white wall, and I want to turn and run away. Cross can't be here. It was bad enough when Mom was in the psych ward next door, but Mom had earned that.

Olive stops before a small metal door and says, "Better hurry." I nod and thank

her. I push through the door without taking time to calm myself, and the sight of a stained blue curtain dividing the room shocks me. There's barely enough space for a hospital bed between the curtain and the wall, and as my eyes move over the bed's metal rails, I know it can't be Cross because this patient is lying flat on his back with his—or her—head wrapped in gauze, and he or she is intubated. The breathing machine looming beside the bed makes a noise that brings back memories of a childhood full of ICUs.

I'm headed for the curtain, hoping against hope that Cross will be sitting up in his bed, when the curtain parts and a freckle-faced nurse appears. She's frowning like she's confused, and her shirt is tugged halfway over her head, exposing a lacy, black bra.

My heart leaps in elation. Cross...you wicked thing.

Then I smell the vomit. The nurse is holding a garbage bag, I realize. I quickly notice that her pale pink scrubs shirt is flecked with orange bits. Did Cross puke on her?

I frown as she pushes down the shirt.

"What happened?"

"Mr. Russell, next door." She frowns, and I realize she's holding another, clean shirt in her left hand. "What are you doing in here? You subbing for Nancy?"

I nod behind her. "I'm here to see my friend, Cross Carlson."

Her face scrunches, unreadable. "Oh."

I try to see past her, but she's blocking my view.

"Hun, this is the professor." She leans her head back. "Dr. Dottswold."

I look from left to right. "So this isn't Cross's room?"

"He's right behind you."

My chest is filled with anger as I whirl to face the bed. I can't wait to tell Miss Black Bra she's wrong.

The second I really look, I see Cross's face. A cry rises in my throat, and there it dies. There is too much gauze around his head. There's a tube running from a ventilator to his chapped lips, bent in a stiff snarl.

It's like a giant is stepping on my sternum as I whirl on Black Bra, finding the curtain in place. I can hear a rustling sound as she changes behind it. I don't care. I snatch it open.

I hear her swift intake of breath, and then she's there in front of me, reddish hair rumpled, eyes wide and alarmed.

"What the hell happened to him? Why is he intubated? Who's in charge here?"

I can tell by the way her eyes widen that she's clueless, even before she smooths her mouth into a line and says, "I don't know, ma'am. You know, it's a Saturday and we don't—"

"No." I grit my teeth. "I don't care what day of the week it is, I want to know what happened to him." My voice is raised, almost to a yell, but I don't care. "If you can't tell me what happened find me someone who can."

She's looking at me like I belong in the psych building next door, but I don't care.

"What has he been like today? Has he moved or anything?" I glare at the gauze around his head. "Did someone drop him when they moved him here?"

The nurse scowls at me. "I can't share details with you. You're not family. You're not supposed to be—"

I whip out my phony license, the one that says Elizabeth Carlson, and shove it in her face. Her eyes harden, and it's like she wants to say the words she says. "He had a bleed."

"He had a what?"

She nods, folding her arms. "He had a brain bleed during the transport over." Her gaze on mine hardens. "He had a stroke." A small sigh escapes her lips, and she gives me a tired look. "I don't know much about it cause I wasn't here. They said he might have been experiencing some pain."

"That caused a stroke? How the hell does that happen? Like, his blood pressure went up really high or something?"

The nurse is moving closer to the door and I am moving with her, fully prepared to block her way if she tries to leave without giving me the long explanation.

"I don't know ma'am." She shrugs. "I'm not the one in charge. The doctors are."

Her hand is on the door, and I step in front of it. "What's he been doing today? Are you weaning him off the ventilator?"

"No. He needs it."

"Has he moved or anything? Squeezed anyone's hand? Like, a visitor's?"

She blinks. "I don't know. We can't sit in here with them all day."

I know I promised to be in and out, but now that I've seen Cross, I just can't do that. "What nurse is watching him this shift?"

She's defensive now. "I am."

Obviously. I swallow, putting my hand on Cross's bed railing. Suddenly I'm feeling faint. I glance at Cross. He looks so pale and...dead. He looks dead. Helplessness floods me, and I want to scream, but I can barely whisper. "So he's just...pretty much lying here?"

It's a stupid thing to say, but I'm holding back tears.

"That's what they do mostly."

My blood boils. Did this woman go to nursing school? He's not some vegetable! He had a stroke, apparently, but he's going to be okay. She doesn't know jack. No one here does.

"He's been getting N-therapy. He opened his eyes and talked to me the other day." Tears fill my eyes, and I do my best to blink them back as her frown deepens. "He's not in a persistent vegetative state. He's responded to stimuli, just this week. He's doing some kind of therapy here, like N-therapy, right? You have something similar?"

I look at the dark-haired guy in the bed, still wide-shouldered, still handsome, even with his chapped lips and the tube stretching his mouth.

The nurse dips her head again, and when she raises it, I can see the pity in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she says. "I shouldn't have said it like that. I don't know about him

yet." She shifts the bag, holding her soiled shirt, from one hand to the other, looking contrite. "Why don't you stay here a minute. Talk to him. You can come back Monday, when hours are open again."

"I can't come Sunday?"

She shakes her head. "Tomorrow we're closed for therapy."

"What do you mean?"

"We have a physical therapist come twice a month. She's coming to this hall tomorrow."

"Only twice a month?"

The nurse shrugs. "I have to go but I'll be watching on a monitor." She points to something over my head, and I struggle with the urge to grab her arm and hold her until she tells me something I want to hear.

Somehow, I force myself to turn around and face Cross's bed. I step over to it, starting to quietly cry as I scan the machines, analyzing the numbers I came to know so well during the first few weeks after the accident.

I check his blood pressure—136/95—and then his pulse—102. The ventilator is taking 24 breaths per minute for him, which means he's hardly breathing on his own at all. I wonder why that is. Maybe they gave him sedatives, so his body can rest and recover.

I stretch out my arm to touch his face, vowing to do something to make this situation better. As I do, the door behind me opens and I turn.

Standing in the doorway is a middle-aged Hispanic woman with her hair pulled into a tight French braid. She's shorter than I am, but everything about her exudes power. "You must be Pushy." She sticks her hand out. "I'm Frankie. And I know this SOB doesn't have a sister."

I balk. "Did you just call him a son of a bitch?"

She shrugs. "Governor's son, hurt himself riding a motorcycle drunk. I could call him worse things, but I'm sorry all the same. You need to get off my floor. Visiting is closed today."

I shake my head. "Not until you tell me what happened."

"I can't do that. What I can do is promise that if you don't leave now, I'll be sure you see the inside of a jail cell."

I put my hand over my chest, unable to believe that this is happening.

"I'll leave," I rasp, "but I have one last question."

She presses her lips together, like a disapproving teacher.

"Do you have N-therapy?" I sound composed, and Frankie's expression loosens a little as her mouth turns down.

"N-therapy?" She looks like she's never heard of it. Of course she hasn't.

"They call it N-therapy. I don't remember the full name. It stimulates the brain and makes them want to wake up."

"Neurostimulation therapy." She shakes her head, still brisk but not quite as stern. "I know it helps, but we can't afford to purchase those machines. This is a county treatment facility. Just the basics."

I nod, looking at Cross, and I can feel her hand close around my elbow. "I'm sorry, but visiting is closed. You need to leave."

I nod absently as I step into the hall, vowing Cross will leave soon, too.

Chapter Eight

~ELIZABETH~

It takes me almost an hour to drive to Napa, and the whole time, I feel like I'm in a trance. It's early afternoon on a chilly, gray day when I park my car in the cul-de-sac at the end of Brison Way and walk half a block to the massive gray stone home behind the pointy, black iron gates. Surprisingly, the gates are open, so I walk down the long, cement drive and up the pale staircase Cross jumped off so many times when we were kids.

I hold my fist over the door, wanting to knock with all my might, but decide to ring the bell instead. Seconds pass before one of the massive doors swings open and I find myself staring into the eyes of an unfamiliar, gray-haired housekeeper.

I stand up a little straighter and pretend I'm wearing a designer business suit. "I'm here to talk to Derinda Carlson."

The housekeeper frowns at me, then puckers her lips and shakes her head. "Mrs. Carlson is unavailable."

I press my lips tightly together. There's no way in hell I'm leaving here without speaking to Cross's mother. "Look, ma'am, I'm a family friend." I nod behind me. "I recognize her BMW and I know she's here this weekend. Tell her it's one of Cross's friends. I have something of his."

I don't, of course, but I'm hoping curiosity will draw Derinda to the door. I haven't seen much of her since I left for college, but I remember she used to be a vibrant, funny woman—if a little cowed by her powerful husband.

I spend the few minutes I'm kept waiting sending out pleas to the universe. Please let her come to the door. Please help Cross.

I'm almost surprised when the door opens again and she's standing there in front of me. When we were in high school, Derinda Carlson was thin, elegant, and well-dressed, with vibrant blue eyes and short, stylish blonde hair. I remember her sorting through papers as she drew up house plans, but she would always make sure the housekeepers kept Cross, Suri, and I well-fed, and the few times she greeted me upon arrival, she was always kind and smiling.

This woman is much different. Still dressed stylishly in an ice blue pant suit, Derinda has definitely aged. I can tell because her face looks ridiculously smooth, and the areas around her mouth and eyebrows don't move much as she looks me up and down. Her pale blonde hair, swept up in a casual up-do, bobs a little as her eyes travel from my moccasins to my hair, which is probably a mess.

Her arms are hanging at her sides, but I notice her hands are splayed and stiff, even as she bends her mouth into a sour-lemon smile and nods slightly at me. "Elizabeth, how can I help you?"

Tears flood my eyes as I think about Cross, with a tube down his throat and all that gauze around his head. My voice cracks as I struggle not to sob. "Why is he in that awful place?"

She frowns, and lines appear—well-worn tracks she can't completely hide. "We can't insure him anymore. Drake is paid by taxpayers these days."

My face says I'm not buying it, and Derinda's frown deepens. "I really don't need to justify anything to you, but do you have any idea how much the facility he was in cost?"

"No."

"Four thousand dollars every night he's there. That's after insurance pays a percentage."

I blink, stunned that these things matter. "He was waking up! He talked to me."

She's shaking her head briskly, like she can't stand to hear my words. "There's been no response for months."

"This was days ago! I told the nurse. It's probably on the cameras! They were doing that therapy on his brain and it was working. I could tell!"

Derinda shakes her head. "We love our son, Elizabeth. We just simply can't afford it."

I want to call her on her bullshit. Governor Carlson was a prominent litigator before he entered politics. And they certainly aren't acting like they love him. I want to tell her she's full of shit, that I know she never visits, but all that will get me is a door slammed in my face.

I change the subject. "What happened in the ambulance?"

She opens her mouth, pauses as she fixes me with an even stare. "They're not sure. He was on so many different medicines..." The corner of her mouth tucks down, like we're talking about a broken vase.

"He had a stroke," I snap. "You don't know why?"

"There are no whys, Elizabeth. Don't you think I'd be crazy if I sat around asking why any of this happened. Maybe you can tell me. You were there that night."

I clench my jaw. I want so much—so much—to tell her how their estrangement impacted Cross. How he'd lost weight and closed in on himself. How he spent most of the time he wasn't working at my Mom's house all alone.

My eyes simmer with angry tears. "They said he had the stroke because he was in pain. That sounds like someone's fault."

Her mouth draws up like a rotten fruit. "They shouldn't be discussing this with you."

I ignore her. "He was waking up. Why did you move him? He was doing well."

"He has no idea where he is, and he isn't doing anything, Elizabeth. I know it hurts, but it's time to be realistic. Cross is gone, and he's never coming back again."

I flinch, but I remind myself that she's the one who's misinformed, not me. "I'm

telling you, he talked to me the other day. Just ask Nanette or anyone who's there. I don't get why you don't seem to know this!"

Derinda's face is hard when she says. "You love him, so you want him to get better. I love him, too, but palliative care is the best we can do for him now. We must also be prepared for his condition to...deteriorate."

I feel my heart go cold as stone. "They said that?"

"It's too soon to tell, but with what happened..."

"With what happened, you're just giving up? That place in L.A. is not the best. Not even close! He won't get well in that hellhole. He needs to go back to the place in Napa!"

Her eyes go cold, and I can tell I've crossed a line. "You have no idea what's best for him—"

"I think I'm the only one who cares what's best for him!" I whirl around and fly down the driveway before she has a chance to shut the door.

*

I drive to a park and spend the next half-hour crying again, reliving every detail of that night. It doesn't help. There's one detail I can't reason away, I can't forget, I can't ignore, and that's this: He was upset—because of me—when he left. It didn't matter if that was fair, or if he had upset me, too. I hurt Cross bad enough to make him climb onto his bike half-drunk, and even if it was his choice, even if he made the wrong one, I was the precipitating event. I was the catalyst. And I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get over it.

Chapter Nine

~HUNTER~

Priscilla is having Libby followed. That means when I follow Libby, I have to be discreet. The last thing I need is Priscilla knowing that I know what she's doing. It would ruin everything. And I'm beginning to think there's really something here.

According to my guy, Priscilla has visited Michael Lockwood twice in the last week. The rumor was she'd fired him in a fit of rage—no one knew what over. So why visit? In the meantime, my bank girl found a Swiss account in Michael's name with more than \$5 million. That's a lot of money for an unemployed video production tech. How does it connect to Sarabelle? I'm not sure, but I have a terrible suspicion.

In the meantime, I'm fucking Priscilla, and when I have a spare moment, watching

Libby's new watchers. Of course I'm also watching Libby. Like now. I followed her to Napa Valley Involved Rehab, where Cross Carlson enjoyed seven weeks of the best care available before his family moved him to the county shithole. I watch her walk in with a notebook early this morning, greeted at the door by a nurse in pink and purple scrubs. Half an hour later, I see her fly through the door and sink into the grass, sobbing into her hands. I have to cross my arms to keep from opening the door and going to check on her.

Priscilla's spy doesn't follow Libby home, but I do, despite there being no reason for it. I watch until she's in range of Crestwood's security cameras and the driveway guard. I shut my eyes and imagine that warm, sweet hand closing over my cock, and it's all I can do not to bust a load right then in my pants.

Instead I go to the vineyard and jerk off in my bed. When I'm finished, I call Marchant.

I can't tell him about Priscilla's threats, because even March doesn't know about Roxanne, but I can tell him I'm fucking her for information. So I do. I come clean, and then I tell him about how edgy she's seemed lately—I don't mention the whips.

When I finish, he drops a bomb: "She's also fucking Josh Smith. I'm looking into it."

"Well fuck." That little bit of info makes my head reel.

"One more thing," March says slowly. "A woman from the FBI came out to the ranch today. She interviewed just about everyone. She said she's looking into 'several' disappearances. And as far as I could tell, she had the most questions about you."

*

~ELIZABETH~

Arnold is driving me home from a swim at the country club's heated pool, and Crestwood's porch has finally come into view. Someone is waiting there, and I activate the security system app on my phone to find out who. I pick the porch feed, and immediately recognize Suri's favorite lilac Vera Wang day dress and stylish flats. She's waving at me. I glance up, smile, then turned back to my phone. I'm reaching to shut the app down when I notice Suri is waving her left hand. I zoom in...

"Holy moly."

I'm out of the car before Arnold stops. I fly up the stairs, and she's beaming, laughing, and then we're both screaming. She shoves her hand into my face and a giant rock winks at me; it's surrounded by tiny fire opals: Suri's favorite.

"Holy crap, Sur, HE DID IT!"

"And he's moving back to Napa!"

"Oh my God you're getting married!" I grab onto her and we're swinging in a circle in front of the rocking chairs, both screaming like lunatics, and suddenly my throat is squeezing like I might cry. But Suri's laughing, and the crying feeling turns into

hysterical laughter.

When we finally stop spinning, I'm dizzy and giddy. I grab her left hand and pull her inside, where it's warmer. In the full light I can see how pretty her makeup looks, and I can see the fire opals in her ears, surrounded by tiny diamonds.

Suri beams.

"Sur, how did he do it? I want every single detail right now. I can't believe he finally made the move!" Suri tried her best to act cool about it, but I know that girl, and she's been wanting to marry Adam since our freshman year of college.

She grabs my wrist and tugs me toward the kitchen. "Come in here. I made this tea that has a dash of vodka in it. It's called wedding tea. You're going to love it."

We walk into the kitchen, and, ever the hostess, Suri pulls out a chair for me and then sits herself. The tea is already cooling in crystal glasses beside wedding cookies that look homemade, and I laugh when I realize she's been waiting here for me—almost the whole time I've been at the pool if I'm correct about how long it takes her to make wedding cookies.

"Lizzy, it was perfect. We went to Banana Beau's"—Suri's favorite piano/ice cream bar—and they started playing 'Rhapsody in Blue', and then they brought out this huge cake, and it was a red velvet cake, and I realized that the whole place was empty, and Adam tells me he got a new job." She grins. "All I could think about was how it was going to be in like Bangladesh, and then he says it's a freelance job with several different options, and he says he's thinking San Francisco or Napa, and he slid onto his knee and he reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring!"

I listen to Suri for the next hour, and then we talk weddings. I'm not surprised to find she wants to get married here at Crestwood, with white bows on everything—even the horse's necks.

I'm caught up in her happiness and slightly drunk when we take the elevator to bed.

"Screw toned thighs," Suri giggles.

"Screw 'em." I grin. "Why worry about being in shape when you've got a freakin' rock?"

Suri flashes it one more time, then leans down to kiss it. "I love my ring."

"I love it, too." Feeling spontaneous, I pull her into a bear hug. "You're the awesome-est, Sur."

"No, you are."

She wobbles off on the second floor, and I manage to get off on the third without face-planting. When my buzz wears off, I get a glass of cold water from my kitchenette and go into my study, where I keep my new friend the elliptical.

I work out for an hour and ten minutes, reviewing the events of the night before I get a shower. I think through the Suri-Adam thing, which from all angles seems to be awesome. Then I make myself revisit the subject of Cross. Within five minutes, I'm feeling so sad I can hardly move, so I deliberately turn my thoughts to Hunter.

I climb into bed, and I want him so badly I can practically feel him here beside me.

Monday morning, I'm up early. I'm doing a paper on Victor Hugo and whether I agree with his thoughts on prostitutes, and in the drama of the past few days, I've gotten behind. Still, I'm having trouble focusing as I sip my French vanilla coffee in one of the massive window seats that line the left side of my room.

I cross my legs and balance my laptop on my thighs, skimming that passage in *Les Misérables* where he talks about how prostitution is slavery. I type a few thoughts on that, and then I pause to look out over the dew-drenched pastures, glowing faintly orange with the sunrise.

Suri's paint horse, People Whisperer, prances near the white fence closest to the house, and I'm thinking about Cross again. We rode horses here just two weeks before the accident, and I remember how he grinned after he'd run on Trojan.

He'd tugged the horse's reins, slowing to a trot, and Suri and Adam had raced past us.

"How'd you know I was going to slow down?" he'd asked me.

I shrugged. I remember thinking on it for a second: Had my horse, Delilah, slowed because she knew Trojan and had picked up on his intentions, or had it been me that pulled on the reins? It had been me.

"I guess I just saw your face or read your body language," I'd offered.

Cross just nodded. He sucked his lip into his mouth. I remember the dusky, indigo sky reflecting off his high cheekbones. How blue his eyes had looked. "I used to want to do this, remember?"

"Breed horses?"

He nodded.

I looked down the length of him—strong arms, lean, muscled legs—and back into his eyes. "I bet you would've been good."

"It's the speed I like," he'd told me, and after a quiet second: "It sounds trite, but it really does push everything else out of your mind."

And I had known just what he meant, because I'd always felt that way, too. Whether I was swimming, riding, or even reading—maybe especially reading—I liked being in motion, because it let me go away.

"I know just what you mean," I'd told him, and he'd leaned over, just close enough to skim my blue jeans with his fingertips.

"I'm really glad we're friends, Lizzy."

As I think about that now, tears well in my eyes. Why couldn't I just like Cross back? Why is he my old comfy sweatshirt instead of the hot designer outfit I covet from the window? Why have I always felt so at ease with him, my hair never standing on end in that perplexing and wonderful way it does when Hunter is near? Cross is such a good guy. Loyal, funny, complicated. A talented bike designer and a good friend. He's always been there for me when I need him.

I think about my conversation with Dad the other night, and I want nothing more

than to talk to Cross. I blink at my computer screen and two tears slide down my cheeks.

I look down at my abs—flatter than they've been in years—and think about my kidneys. How much are they worth on the black market?

I sigh. Private care is so expensive, one Grade A kidney probably wouldn't last Cross a week.

I shut my eyes and lean my head against the wall, trying to think of a way to get a loan. I wonder if I could sell the house while Mom's in rehab. No. It's not in my name. It's in Dad's, and I'm sure as hell not calling him again.

I think about my car and want to scream. Three days. Three days is all my car would buy Cross at Napa Valley Involved Rehab. And that's if I got a good price.

I think about Suri again. I think about robbing a bank. I feel so trapped right now, prison doesn't seem much worse, and as soon as I have the thought, I start to cry, because the truth is I'm not trapped, and Cross is.

I think about the story of Sleeping Beauty, about how I used to kiss Cross after every visit. I remember his body wrapped in my blankets, and my cheeks get hot as I remember being pressed against that very same body on the night of Hunter's party. I know he cares for me—why can't I get him to wake up?

My thoughts wander to Hunter. For some reason, I think I could get him to wake up. I also bet he could pay for Cross's care. I wonder if I have enough money in my savings account to ask Hunter to gamble for me. He's a good gambler. He plays poker professionally.

But I've only got \$7,820. So no.

Still, I imagine Hunter sitting at a poker table in a Vegas casino. He's resplendent in black jeans, a black shirt, and a Stetson. His poker face is beautiful; intriguing. I feel my body heat again as I think about kissing his lips. I wonder if the women there fall all over him. I bet the escorts would pay him to take a tumble.

My throat goes dry.

That's it.

My eyes fly to the soft, damp spot between my legs, and the room around me tilts.

Holy crap. Holy insanity. Holy vagina.

I know what I can do to help Cross.

Chapter Ten

~HUNTER~

I've been watching Libby's house, and I don't like what I've seen. Priscilla's got someone following her at times that to me seem random, and at least once I've seen Priscilla herself do a drive-by.

I don't get it. There's no way Priscilla could know about the misplaced fantasies that plague me, so why the sudden interest in Libby? I'm losing my patience with this game we're playing—more so because our new guy, Dave, has a contact at the LVPD and she tells him they don't have any leads on Sarabelle's whereabouts. Knowing Priscilla is fucking Josh Smith, lead detective, really makes my hair stand on end. But I can't seem to find anything to fill in the wide gaps.

That's why I'm here at the courthouse. I want to buy a warrant, or rather let Diana know what I'm up to and give a little under-the-table donation to our lovely county. Doesn't hurt that on this particular day, I know Priscilla's here as well. According to my PI in Napa, she's been here for an hour already. There's no reason she should be. No reason she should even be in the state this week.

I feel confident she doesn't expect to see me here, and catching her off guard is important to me. I slide my Audi into a narrow space and put it in park, then step into the radiant California sun.

I've got on one of my Vegas getups: cheap suit—still tailored for my shoulders and chest, but not from Seville Row—and my regular joe shoes, a pair of Ralph Lauren loafers. Marchant likes to look like a slick bastard wherever he goes, but I'd rather not stand out.

The Napa County Court House is a smart, Italianate building: two stories of smooth stone arches and brick detail-work with cement stairs that lead into a covered entryway where people like to mingle before going in. I get a fucked up feeling when I come here, probably because the décor on the inside and the scent of cheap floor shiner remind me of Rita; she worked, for a time, as a secretary to the probate judge back in Orleans Parish. I try not to think about that.

Diana Mendez and I have been friends for years. She's objectively beautiful—long black hair, fantasy-long legs, doe brown eyes. Her ambition—she's the youngest probate judge in Napa County's history—only adds to her appeal. I try to imagine her naked as I make my way from my spot to the building's front—I have actual memories of her naked body to draw on—but Diana turns into Libby. Just like every other woman I've tried to jerk off to in the last few weeks.

I sigh, only because no one is around, and I want to let the birds know how

troubling the girl is.

Speaking of trouble, Priscilla is standing by the courthouse doors in black stilettos and a shiny silver dress that, in her fashion, shows too much thigh and too much tit. When I see her, I paste on my surprised expression. The look on her face is confirmation: She's not expecting me. As I start up the steps, I notice a news van pulling up and I wonder if my Libby will be here. I wonder if he called her Libby, too, and decide it's unlikely. Lizzy, Liz, or even Beth are more likely. I like to think Libby is mine.

"Hunter, darling." Priscilla grabs me by the shoulders, like she owns me, and plants a kiss on my mouth. I know from experience that it leaves a slick red mark, just like I know that if I wipe it off, I'll pay with skin later.

"You look surprised to see me. I take it you don't know what's going on today?"

"What?" I lie.

"There's a hearing. The governor is coming."

"A hearing for what?" I ask, sticking my hands in my pockets, a submissive move I'm adopting purely for Priscilla's benefit.

"For poor Cross Carlson." Her voice oozes insincerity. She isn't able to feel empathy.

"He get a speeding ticket?" I ask dryly. Truthfully my stomach churns thinking of what happened to the younger man, but sarcasm makes our ruse more palatable.

"No, the governor and Mrs. Carlson are cutting him off."

"Come again?"

"He'll be in a state facility now, instead of a private room at a private rehab. It was too expensive, so I heard," she says, winking.

I arch a brow, and deliver an important question. "How do you know the Carlsons?"

I know this answer, but I'm interested in hearing what she'll say.

She rolls her eyes and gives me a you-should-know-this look. "I was almost his step-mother, Hunter. Surely you know that. I care for him. They say he'll never be the person that he was."

She's wearing her liar's face, the one where her big, blue eyes are bigger and her skinny, sharp-looking brows are almost in her pale hairline.

"I'm surprised you and the governor still keep in touch."

"We don't," she says, and this is what makes my morning. I happen to know she spoke to the governor—a former employer of Michael Lockwood's—yesterday. "That man has forgotten me entirely," she continues. "Son of a bitch, I'd like to have his balls in a glass jar by my bedside." She says all this in a sing-song voice.

"You and the rest of the state," I say.

Priscilla holds out her arm for me, and I dread the next hour the same way I dread getting my blood drawn and flying in helicopters.

I'd rather be anywhere but here. Then I step into the courthouse, and my day gets ten times worse.

I can tell he sees me, but he's acting like he doesn't. He's got Priscilla Heat with him, and they're en route from the courthouse entrance to the courtroom. At first I outright stare, but when his gaze jumps over me and then sticks to Priscilla's face, I drop my eyes to my feet and keep on walking. I feel sick to my stomach as I veer the other way, away from the women's bathroom where I'd hoped to close myself into a stall and wrangle up some nerve, and back toward the front door of the courthouse, where Governor and Mrs. Carlson should be arriving any time now.

I realize for the first time how much hope my stupid little nothing with Hunter has been giving me, because seeing him with that—with that...woman—sucks it all away, making what I'm about to do feel much more difficult.

Nevertheless, I keep a straight face. I take a spot in the chair nearest to the courthouse's side doors and wait with the reporters, who are double-checking microphones and reapplying make-up as they wait for Cross's deadbeat, shithead parents to arrive.

I look down at my aqua pant suit and tell myself if nothing else, I can be glad about the way I look for the first time since high school. I've really taken to the elliptical and the caveman diet, losing almost fifteen pounds, and I'm kind of surprised to find I don't miss my old friend chocolate much at all.

I could let my Hunter sighting throw me off, but I'm determined not to—not yet, anyway. I need to get through this, to make good on a promise I made Cross when we were in ninth grade: that I'd always have his back.

While I wait, I revisit the black and red web site I scoured earlier on my cell phone, feeling nervous butterflies just from looking at the pictures. Even now, with the wheels of my plan already spinning, I'm not sure if I can really do this.

The crowd of reporters stirs, jarring me out of my thoughts, and then the cameras start rolling. A second later Gov. and Mrs. Carlson stroll through the front doors, looking like they've had a thorough spit-shining.

I grit my teeth and follow them with my eyes. As soon as they are through the arched entrance to the courtroom, my lawyer Donald Hartley comes to stand in front of me, arm out. I stand and give him a tight-lipped smile, but don't take his offered arm, choosing instead to walk into the courtroom a half-step behind him.

Donald is dressed in his signature pinstriped Armani suit, the one that makes my stomach churn because it reminds me of the many times we've appeared in court for my mother's violations. He pats my shoulder in a fatherly fashion, and we take our seats in the third row. Immediately I feel the stares burn into my back.

I wonder if I can feel Hunter's even hotter than the others, but I can't think of him right now. Seeing Cross's parents take their seats on the other side of the aisle, I feel nauseated. I don't trust them. If they can cut off their own son, who knows what they might try to do to me. At the very least I expect I'll become even more of a social pariah than I already am. That thought only strengthens my resolve, though.

As I wait through the proceedings dealing with other people and their problems, I run Nanette's words through my head. What she told me, when I visited Sunday, about Cross and how 'exceptionally' well he'd been responding to the N-therapy.

I rehearse my lines, expending some effort toward not glancing over my shoulder to look for Hunter.

Finally, the Carlsons' lawyer stands and explains the family's position in a crisp monotone.

Diana Mendez, the judge, nods patiently, just the way she did for my parents' divorce proceedings.

She looks curious when Donald rises. "Permission to speak?" he asks smoothly.

Diana's lips bunch. "Permission granted."

Donald holds a folder in one hand. He clasps his free hand over the one holding it. "My client, Elizabeth DeVille, is a lifelong friend of Cross Carlson, and is interested in his care." I hold my breath while quiet sweeps the courtroom, and it is in that moment that I spot Hunter, seated on the fourth row, across the aisle. I inhale deeply, trying not to focus on the outline of his form. "Miss DeVille would like to pay for Mr. Carlson to be returned to his previous facility. In fact—" my stomach squeezes — "she'd like to cover all his medical care for the remainder of this calendar year."

I hear a collective gasp go through the room as cameras start to flash. For a split second, my eyes are pulled toward the wooden chairs on the other side of the foot-worn aisle, where Cross's parents are sitting. I want to see their faces, but they both stare straight ahead. Instead the eyes I meet are Hunter's.

They are wide and ultra-green, and they're trained on my face like they're seeing right through my clothes. Despite my topsy-turvy stomach, I can feel myself warming from the inside out, the flush starting on my breasts and climbing up my throat.

Diana's brows meet over her nose, and my attention is, thankfully, diverted. She looks unhappy. Maybe confused. She gives a slight shake of her head. "You would need to work that out with the medical center. There's paperwork involved. For it to factor into the change of Cross Carlson's medical custody today—"

"It's all here," Donald says smoothly, walking forward to hand the judge the folder full of documents I faxed him an hour ago. "You'll find the appropriate signatures enclosed."

Diana takes the folder, pulling out the paperwork and examining it, her long black hair falling over her gown. I watch the way her face loses its puzzled expression, and I can tell she's surprised. Maybe even shocked. She purses her lips again, and when she looks up, I think maybe there's respect in the x-ray look she pins me with.

Half a second later, the Carlsons' lawyer is on her feet. "This isn't legal," she says sharply. "There's no provision for non-family—"

"Yes, you're correct," Diana interrupts, looking short on patience. "There's no provision, either way. And trust me, Ms. Chufunneker, if the bills are being paid, the state has no interest in picking up the tab."

The lawyer looks back down at the governor, and I can tell they're exchanging wordless information. Her gray head raises, and she's looking at the judge again.

"Does this grant Miss DeVille the right to make medical decisions on behalf of the younger Mr. Carlson?" Chufunneker sounds mildly outraged.

"Would your clients like that granted?" Diana asks coolly.

"Of course not," Ms. Chufunneker says, having the nerve to look offended on behalf of the horrible Carlsons.

"Well that's good, because they will remain in charge of Cross's medical decisions as long as he's unconscious."

"Including where he's...housed?"

"That included." Judge Mendez tucks her silky hair behind her ear. "If they wish to downgrade to a state facility at taxpayer cost, they certainly may." Her gaze locks on the governor.

The governor colors, and reporters' cameras flash.

Minutes later, the hearing is adjourned. The Carlsons have agreed to move Cross back to Napa Valley Involved Rehab. With all the press here, they have no choice. Which is why I didn't call them at their home after I signed the paperwork early this morning.

I hope if news of how I paid for his care leaks out, the press will use it to crucify the Carlsons.

Chapter Eleven

~ELIZABETH~

To get me out of the courthouse doors, Donald has to wrap his arm around my shoulders and pull me close to his round belly. When we get to the stairs on the front of the building, two security guards in blue suits flank us, asking us to consider making our way straight to our cars. "No lingering." As if.

They turn around when the Carlsons come out the door behind us, and the swarm of press shoots after them.

I part ways with Donald at a V in the sidewalk where he veers left, toward the street, and I turn right, toward the shady, overflowing courthouse parking lot.

I can hear the clink of heels on cement and low chatter of the press just steps behind me, but I'm moving at my normal pace, trying to keep good posture and avoid looking like a scandal-maker—which I definitely am.

The tap-tap of heels taps a little faster, and all of a sudden there's a blonde woman beside me. She sticks her microphone in my face, and I tuck my head, turning away. "Were you and Cross Carlson romantically involved?"

I cut into the parking lot, semi-freaked out. The footsteps grow louder, and I wonder just how many people are following me. I'm too afraid to check, and then a man's voice booms right beside my left ear. "Is this a decision you made after visiting Cross Carlson at his new facility?"

I duck my head and shoot off between a row of cars. If I move fast enough, surely they'll give up. I scan the lot for my Camry and keep on walking—fast.

"Did you have anything to do with his accident?" The grating male voice comes at me from the side, and I hold up my hand, almost bumping into the hood of a red Corvette.

"Please go away."

"Miss DeVille?" I feel a shadow beside me and my eyes flicker to the right; it's another male reporter with thick wheat-colored hair and a face full of freckles. "Where will you get the money? After what happened with your family's business—"

Something bright winks in my eyes, and I wobble backwards, bumping into a row of reporters and their cameras. Crap. These people are crazy.

"Could you please leave me alone?" I cry, holding my arms out. I side-step, trying to get out of the thick of them, and my hand smacks into Freckles.

"Where will you get the money?" Now he's in my face, and his tone is more insistent.

"That's not your business," I snap. "Now go away!"

But he doesn't. He comes closer, and all of a sudden I notice that the thing he's holding in his left hand is a tiny camcorder with a flashing green light on the front.

"Oh my God." I cover my face, feeling sick. It's bad enough being hounded, but to have it all captured on camera?

With my hands still covering my face, I dart between two SUVs and start to run. I'm clearing a row of cars, finally in sight of my own, when I hear the squeal of brakes and something hits me hard.

A compact car drives by, and I'm aware that I would have gotten hit were it not for the strong pair of arms around my waist. I glance up—into Hunter's face. As his hands close over my upper arms, I notice his expression. He looks like an avenging angel, with his strong jaw, soft lips, and ruffled gold hair. He's dressed in a suit that's clearly tailored for his shoulders and his chest, and even in the circumstances, I can feel the heat begin to gather between my legs.

I'm pulled against his chest and hurried the last few steps to my car. I can hear the reporters pounding the ground behind us, their shouts rising sharply over the noise of traffic, but all I see is Hunter's green eyes, widened with what looks a lot like concern.

"Where are your keys?" His voice is calm and rich. Mine, I think irrationally. The gentle strength of his arms is all for me.

"They're in my purse," I say, as the cameras flash all around us. I can actually hear them click, just like in the movies. My heart is beating so hard I think I might throw up.

My door swings open and I feel the solid heat of him behind me. With one hand on my shoulder, he says, "Get on in there, Libby."

The nickname makes me hesitate; for not the first time, I wonder if he thinks I'm someone else—but that doesn't make any sense. Libby is a nickname for Elizabeth.

That next second, they are all around us. Faces and equipment and voices, closing in on us. Hunter rocks his body into mine, urging me into the driver's seat. As he does, I feel his hardness against my hip.

His face is right by mine, his low voice like a warm breeze in the crook of my neck. "Remember there's a back exit if you loop around," he tells me, pointing in the direction I should go. "Just make a U-turn and floor it. It'll take you right onto the main road."

I nod, unable, to move my eyes from all the faces leering through the windshield.

"Libby, look right here." I feel a hand close over mine and I lift my head to meet his eyes. They are softer than I've ever seen them. "Don't get in a rush," he tells me. "Take your time. I'll take care of these pricks."

And that's it. My door is closing before I can even thank him. As I look over my shoulder to back out, I catch a glimpse of him clearing the traffic around my car, his burnt gold hair ruffling in the wind as he raises his arms. They create just the barrier I need to escape the camera lenses.

Driving from San Francisco to L.A., the flowered hills seem to roll past me too quickly. The sky above is flat, pale blue. Watching the horizon line makes me feel dizzy—like I'm stuck on a carnival ride and can't get off. I try to swallow back the sensation, but it builds within my chest, making my hands tremble on the wheel.

What am I doing?

I can't do this.

I just said I would do this.

Suddenly tears are pouring down my cheeks, and I want to pull my car over by the tall grass with its tiny flowers and sob.

I feel a thousand years old as I speed toward Mom's rehab. I have an appointment with her care worker. To lay the groundwork for my grand deception. I have an appointment at twelve-thirty, and my mom's expecting me, but I don't go there.

Instead I find myself at Cross's cement high-rise. I'm signing myself in and I'm sprinting down the drab hall, toward his room. I think that when I get there, things will be different. The gauze will be gone. Maybe he'll even be sitting up and extubated. All I want in the world is to see my friend again before I go to Vegas. Or maybe, if he's already awake, I won't even have to go...

When I get through the door, he's still in bed, and he looks much the same. The gauze is partially unwrapped, so I can see the tube is draining blood from his head. His eyes are tapped shut. His lips are super chapped, but I have lip balm in my purse. I'm reaching for it when I realize he is extubated! There's no more ventilator, just oxygen tubing in his nose. I want to scream with joy, and at that moment, the door cracks open.

This nurse is petite, with short, spiky pink hair and a diamond nose ring. She smiles at me and says, "I heard about you. Elizabeth DeVille?"

I nod, and she explains that she has seen me on TV. That makes my belly clench, but I try not to show her how rattled I am.

"Are you guys an item?" she asks quietly.

"No. We're friends." I step closer to Cross, taking his hand, which feels warm and surprisingly soft.

"She put some lotion on him right before you came."

I frown, my head snapping around so I can meet her eyes. "Who did?"

"She comes in sometimes at lunch. I think her name is Sari."

Well, hot damn. That's news to me.

"She was here when we extubated him." The nurse smiles. "His eyes were open because they were changing out the medicine in them. To keep them from getting dry, you know? It might have been just reflexes, but she thinks he smiled at her."

I stroke my thumb across Cross's cheek and squeeze his hard hand in my small one. "Geez, Cross, you guys are keeping secrets."

The nurse eyes our fingers. "So you really aren't a thing?"

"Really. He's been my friend since first grade."

"Well, I think he's lucky to have a friend like you."

Is he? I'm not so sure, but I smile anyway. "Do you know when they're moving him?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"That's amazing."

"Your friend thought so, too. She seemed really surprised when I told her what you'd done."

I rub my eyes. "I bet she did."

*

My good mood has evaporated by the time I take the exit for Mom's facility, a "spa" up in the hills. If she didn't spend most of her time in places like these, maybe I'd already have some money, and my crazy plan could wait.

I'm bitter. I know I am. Her doctors sometimes say so. Caretaker, therapist, counselor, psychiatrist—they're all the same. So much sympathy for Mom and her many illnesses.

Dr. Bryers, one of the better ones, might be proud of me for admitting that I'm pissed. Usually I pretend I'm not that affected. Over the years I learned to cope, but the truth is, she's screwed up my life, and I haven't forgiven her. To be fair (to me), she's never really asked.

The spa building is a rectangular, white one-story on several acres of green grass, large trees, and well-kept flower beds. I park my aging Camry in the egg-shaped parking lot and walk slowly through the tall, glass doors leading to the lobby. This place looks a lot like a European hotel, all mod and minimalist, fraught with glass and straight, clean lines.

I fold my arms on the counter and ask for Mahin.

I don't think while I'm waiting for her. I play Angry Birds on my phone and I send good vibes to Cross. Hunter creeps into my mind, but I push him away. Just because he's an enigma doesn't mean he's my enigma. Maybe going to Vegas will be good in that way. I'll forget him.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remember that he has two homes in Vegas, but whatever. When he's not playing he's at the vineyard—or so I've heard. Regardless, I'm sure he'd never recognize me. Richard says they're blurring out my face on the billboards, and one thing I'm almost sure about Hunter is he's not the type to bid on a woman's virginity.

Vegas will be good for me. It's my choice, and I'm doing it for Cross. I will make it good for me.

Mahin walks out without my mom, wearing her familiar black slacks and v-neck, her white hair dyed black at the tips, her lipstick pearl-colored, making her look kind of dead.

"Hi," I wave, and step into her office for my performance.

I leave feeling heavier, if that's possible. Mom will be told I'm taking a trip to Denver. One of my best friends from undergrad lives there, and it's one of my favorite U.S. cities.

I'm one third of the way to the freedom that I need to pull this off. My next stop is the University of San Francisco's main campus.

I'm nervous, knowing just how crazy my proposal is, but I think my second-year project manager, Dr. Kaitlyn Beauford, who also happens to be my student adviser, might be open-minded enough to sign off on it. If not, I'll withdraw from this semester. I don't want to do it, but I will if I have to.

I'm still wearing my courthouse pant suit and as I walk the familiar, green-tiled halls, I wonder if Dr. B has seen the news yet.

As soon as I walk into her office, she puts her blueberry smoothie on her desk and shakes her head.

"Elizabeth DeVille, stirring up trouble."

Despite myself, I smile, because Dr. Beauford always puts me at ease. "Doing my best," I say, wiping my sweaty palms on my knees as I sink into a faded orange chair.

She picks her smoothie up again and takes a long gulp, regarding me over the rims of her square glasses. "I read about you," she motions to her computer. "Thinking of being a savior?"

"Something like that."

"What brings you here?" she says. She's giving me that stare she's famous for, and for the very first time ever I feel kind of nervous.

"I have an idea," I say slowly. The heat in my face is humiliating, and for the millionth time, I curse my fair skin.

"What kind?"

"The kind that's going to help me out with what you read online, and the kind that could be made into an independent study or even a thesis maybe."

"And what's that?"

I tell her my plan. To her credit, she listens with a neutral expression, her chin propped on her folded hands, and when I'm finished, she smiles.

"From an Ethics perspective, that's very interesting, Elizabeth. But I'm afraid from a personal perspective I can't endorse it. Even from a professional perspective, it has some damaging potential—for me, that is—if I do."

My chest squeezes, but I take a deep breath and forge ahead. "So I couldn't use it for classwork, even if I came to you after the fact?"

"I didn't say that," she says pointedly.

"So I could write about it? Maybe use it as the basis for my thesis?" I wait for her answer with my breath held—as if it really matters. It won't change what I'm doing, but it might make me feel just a little better about it.

"You could do whatever you decide to do, Elizabeth. Just remember, you don't

have to. You don't owe your friend any debts."

I nod, although I think that's a little cut and dry, especially for someone as smart as Dr. Beauford.

She reaches into a desk drawer and hands me a slip of paper. "If you decide to go through with your plan, you may want to fill this out." I look down at the approval form for PhD thesis topics. "For the record, let it be stated that I'm not recommending your course."

Chapter Twelve

~ELIZABETH~

On my way home, I call Richard Waites, the man I spoke with this morning. He answers on the second ring. I can hear laughter and talking in the background, and through the phone line I swear I can smell stale smoke and alcohol.

Our connection is fuzzed by static, as if it's trying to discourage our contact. I think of Cross and press on. "Richard? This is Elizabeth DeVille again."

"Elizabeth, yes."

"I've thought about your offer, and I've decided that I want to do it. Can you tell me what the next step is?"

He pauses for a second, and I think he is surprised. "The next step? Well, you come out here. Come to Nevada and let me get this rolling."

"What does that entail?" I'm not going to a brothel without a detailed road map in my hand.

"It entails a lot," he says bluntly.

"Where does it start? I'd like to have some idea."

He pauses again, just long enough to take a drag on a cigar. "We do this from time to time, but never with a girl like you. Don't get me wrong. Our girls are beautiful, valuable, talented girls, but they don't have their own bottled water," he says with a chuckle. "They're not Elizabeth DeVille." Another pause, and I decide to put it to him straight.

"DeVille doesn't mean much anymore."

"Yes, and I appreciate your candidness, Miss DeVille, but let me share my own. Our bidders aren't buying your money. They're wealthy men, and what they'll pay for is your high-class hymen. You follow me? All I need from you—well not all I need from you—there's a lot to this— But what I really need is you to come here, do a little training—"

"Prostitution?"

"Well you can't do that. Not and have a decent auction. But I'm saying you learn from my girls. The ropes. It's not for long. Maybe two weeks, three. Whatever's enough to get you ready for your big night."

I nod. "I follow you."

I'm navigating the interstate, headed back up to San Francisco. The sky is purple. Dramatic, like it knows what I'm up to. "And you said the prices on this are pretty high?"

"In the hundreds of thousands, yes ma'am. We've done two this year and both were over five hundred thousand. One last year even fetched a million." There's

another pause, while I zip around an eighteen-wheeler. "Now all of these girls were models, and we had them on the menu for several months before their auctions giving other types of pleasure, so the men had built up some interest in them. Curiosity."

"Are you saying I have to...have my own clients?" I hold my breath. This wasn't mentioned earlier, but now that I've signed on to pay for Cross's care I don't think I can back out.

After a moment, he says, "Well, no. You're a different sort of girl, or so we're going to say."

"But I don't want to use my real name."

I hear his low intake of breath. "You don't want to use your name? Well Elizabeth, what do you think we're selling?"

"My body," I say. "Isn't that what you sell? Women?"

"I don't sell anyone," he says, and I bite my lip because he sounds a little defensive. "The women—and men—that work here sell themselves. I'm more landlord than pimp. And with all due respect, Elizabeth, the photos I've seen of your body...well, it's not compliant with the standard of this industry."

I bite my lip, trying my very best to swallow back my pride. For Cross. Telling myself it's nothing personal, I plunge ahead.

"I understand what you're saying, Richard. The truth is, I've recently lost some weight, but I can lose some more."

"I'm looking at the photo you sent me, taken in November. Why don't I put your weight at 165. Is that about right?"

I gape. "You really know your stuff." I'm not 165 anymore, but I was in November.

"I'd like you to have it down to 140. I'd still like some curves, so I want you tight and toned."

I look down at my body, already so much leaner than it was. Screw the numbers. I know where I look my best. I'll make that mark.

"You do that," Richard says, "and then come here. We'll take care of the rest, and you can use an industry name. We could do a wig or something, too. We'll put you up on bill boards around Vegas and we'll talk you up. Something like... 'Selling Scarlett'."

"And I'm Scarlett?"

"Yeah. You like it?"

I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I say, "Yeah. Scarlett sounds good."

I hear his fingers snap. "There, the hardest part's over."

He laughs, and I know my chuckle has to sound weak. "How soon can we hold the auction?" I ask.

"I think three months, if you want to rush it."

I feel a wave of cold sweat wash over me, and I want to kick myself for not going into detail this morning when we first spoke. "Three months, no. That's not soon enough."

"Miss DeVille, we aim for healthy loss and toning. We care about our girls—and boys."

"I understand, but I need the money in a month."

I can practically hear his shock in the static coming through the phone line. "A month?"

I rub my brow. "Is that doable?"

"Doable." He chuckles. "Isn't that the word? Of course it's doable. Let me get off the line and get you started. We take twenty percent of the final bid, and we reserve the right to manage the bidding. Understand?"

I swallow. "Yes." I don't know what 'manage the bidding' means, but does it really matter? I've already signed on for this. I'm in.

"One month." He laughs again. "Why don't you get up here as soon as you can, and we'll get you started with the girls."

I nod and drive the rest of the way home in a fog of disbelief. The only thing left now is to tell Suri.

*

"You're doing what?"

Suri's mouth is filled with cashews, but she doesn't spit them out or even choke. She simply speaks around them and then swallows, and I have the hilarious thought that Suri would probably be a great prostitute.

"I'm selling my V-card," I tell her again, leaning on the iron breakfast table.

Her face is comical. All her features twist, like she might laugh. Then her mouth pulls down, like a sad clown. "Lizzy, why? Why would you do that?"

I think for a second before replying, because I need to give Suri a certain impression. One that will prevent her from trying to stop me. I shrug, hoping for casual.

"I have it, and I definitely don't need it." An image of Hunter and Priscilla flits through my mind; I shove it away. "I figured why not do something useful with it? I'm thinking of making it a project for my PhD. You know, writing about value judgments people place on things. One sexual encounter is just that: it's a ten minute thing. And virginity? It's just a hymen, an antiquated measure of a woman's value," I say, pleased with myself.

Suri is shaking her head, her horrified face the same color green as her polka-dotted blouse. "Lizzy, you don't know." She shakes her head some more. "You're wrong. It's not like that. Sex is intimate, it should be done with a lover or a boyfriend or at least a really good friend."

Someone like Cross, I think, and really wish I hadn't.

"It's not just physical. It gets into your head. I know we're not the same, Lizzy, but I have trouble believing you'd be happy if you just...sold it to some random man." Her nose wrinkles. "What if they're ugly or old or they want to Fifty Shades you?"

All I can think about is Hunter as I try to mold my face into something reassuring.

"They can't be a criminal," I tell her. Richard told me that much. "I can even decline them if I want and choose another bidder. And if we leave the premises, I'll

have the option of taking along a team of guards."

"So they're...what, renting you? For a night? For a few hours?" Suri's face is grave. "Lizzy, if this is about money, if it's about Cross, and after what you did today I know it is—"

"But it's not," I interject. I'm waving my arms now, my heart beating fast as it becomes clear to me how much Suri's opinion matters in this. I don't want her to see me any differently. I don't want her pity. I want her support.

I think, not for the first time, how ridiculous it is that someone taking charge of their sexual assets, someone like me who's making money off them, is looked down upon. I can't wait to write about this.

"It's not about money, not all the way. It's about me doing something interesting, doing something that I want. I see it the opposite of how you do. I'm tired of waiting for the right guy. As you've known for years now, he doesn't exist." She opens her mouth, I'm sure to say something like 'You could meet him tomorrow,' so I beat her to the point. "I don't even think if I'd want to lose it to a boyfriend, to be a virgin when he's not. A twenty-three-year-old virgin." I make a face. "I want to go ahead and experience this, put it behind me. And if I can make half a million dollars in the process, what's wrong with that? In fact..."

I trail off, because Suri's mouth is hanging open. "Did you say half a million dollars?"

"Maybe," I say, like it doesn't matter.

Suspicion stretches her features as she stands up, grabbing for a napkin on the counter and using it to dab her mouth. She lowers the napkin and frowns. "So this is about Cross."

"It's about me," I say.

"So you're not planning to give the money to Cross?"

I open my mouth, then close it, not sure what to say. Suri's eyes narrow to slits. "I saw the news today, Lizzy DeVille. I'm your BFF, not a moron. Remember, I have money. I can help. I'm Cross's friend, too. In fact, I think it would be a travesty if you went out selling...selling yourself, when I'm right here and perfectly willing to help Cross."

"You just bought a huge house, Sur. Listen to me," I say, catching her hand in mine. I press our joined hands on top of the stylish flowered table mats, which coordinate perfectly with the green gingham table cloth beneath them. "Have I ever done anything I regretted, other than what happened that night with Cross? Have I ever made a really big, bad, stupid choice, one I ended up hating myself for?"

"There's a first time for everything," she says. "I have money, and I want to use it to help Cross. You need to let me, and you need to forget this craziness."

I shake my head. "This is something I want to do. It'll be an experience. And as for money, this was my idea. If you had extra money to throw around, I have no doubt you would have the second that you heard about him getting moved. You can chip in if you want, but I'm doing this, too," I say vehemently. "You might not understand, because you've had sex. You've done it. I'm just...waiting. Like...I don't

know...a dairy product outside the refrigerator."

Suri screws her face up, then lets out a little hoot. "Did you just compare yourself to a dairy product and take the extremely anti-feminist stance that you are somehow spoiling?"

"No! All I'm saying is it's bugging me. That I haven't done it. I feel like...the suspense is just getting to me. I'd like to have it done."

"What about...opinions?" she asks quietly.

I squeeze her hand and let it go. "I'll be using another name, and my face will be shadowed the night of bidding. When they advertise me, it'll just be my body on billboards or whatever. No one will know."

I've already called Richard back and asked him not to reveal my true identity to anyone, even—especially—Marchant Radcliffe, Hunter's friend. Marchant owns Love Inc., where the deed is getting done.

Suri's eyes are swimming with tears, and I feel a spark of annoyance.

"I know you're just showing me you care, and I appreciate it, Suri, I really do. But I'll be back in a month, just the same as I am now, but a little more experienced. I'm having one sexual encounter with a man who'll likely be very nice to me, and I'll have more protection than the Pope. I'm okay with this. It's my choice."

"You're doing this for Cross," she says again.

"Part of it is for Cross. Doesn't that make it even more meaningful, though?"

Suri nods slowly. "I guess so."

"See, I'm fine." I stand up, spreading my arms, and she hugs me, speaking into my hair. "You're a good friend, Lizzy, a really good friend. Just remember you don't have to do this. I don't think Cross would want you to."

"I want to do this. It's an experiment for me."

In more ways than one. A good twenty percent of this idea's allure is in my eagerness to get rid of my V-card so I can stop saving it for Hunter. I need to be freed of that idea. Freed of my crush. I hope that after spending some time at Love Inc., I never blush in the middle of a sexual encounter ever again. No Hunter West or anybody else will be able to knock me off my feet, and I like that idea.

Suri hugs me one more time and we call Albert. We're going shopping for gowns and robes in every color of the rainbow. As we walk down the stairs to our waiting ride, I feel more peaceful than I have in weeks.

Chapter Thirteen

~HUNTER~

I swear to God, Priscilla is psychic. That woman knows how to find me after a bad day. And the worse the day is, the more likely it is that I'll end up rolling in the covers with her, whipping her and spanking her, pulling her long hair and pressing my hand over her mouth until her eyes are wide and I'm afraid I'm gonna kill her stupid, spray-tanned ass.

Tonight I'm on my jet. There's a bed and a recliner but I'm too pissed to relax. Instead I'm sitting at the table, twirling an unlit cigarette around in my fingers like a showgirl's baton. I want the damn thing, but I'm not a smoker anymore. I keep a pack of Marlboro Reds in the freezer of every place I have, but I don't smoke them.

I've got my fingers tightened around the cigarette, thinking about snapping it in half, when the intercom crackles and Frank says, "There's something on the runway you need to see, Mr. West."

I dim the lights and look out the oval window, and the cigarette snaps. Of course it's fucking Priscilla. A brisk breeze is tossing up her ass-short, blood-red skirt and I can see her panties. There are sequins around the seams, so they sparkle in the runway lights.

I can tell by the way she steps toward the plane, waving as she moves, that she's in high heels. I can see the red light of her cigarette's cherry.

My head pounds, letting me know it doesn't appreciate the handle of bourbon I gave it last night. I press the call button, sinking a hand into my hair and rubbing hard. "Let her in, Frank."

I sweep the pieces of the cigarette into my hand and dump them in a garbage can inside a cabinet. Then I sit back down and watch her sashay into my cabin.

"Well hello there, big boy."

I grit my teeth. I am so not in the mood for her bullshit.

"I've got a little exhibitionist fetish I'd like to indulge with you," she purrs.

"How the hell do you want to do that?" My gaze roams up and down her body, making her think I appreciate her so she doesn't feel the need to pull her claws out any earlier than necessary.

She grins, crossing the space between us to straddle me.

"I want to fuck you somewhere public, Hunter. Somewhere like this runway."

She says it like she's doing me a favor. Like I've never been fucked before and she's the sexiest woman on the planet.

Priscilla lowers her red mouth to mine, and I close my eyes, meeting her for a rough kiss. Sarabelle, Sarabelle, Sarabelle, I chant silently.

Today, I was questioned by the woman from the FBI—Lisa—who came to my home in Napa while I packed my bags for Vegas. I'm not a formal suspect yet, and I intend to keep it that way.

I sweep Priscilla off to Beau's, the gym I own in downtown Napa.

While she steps into the ladies' room, I tell Harriet at the desk to cut the cameras in one of the private cardio hubs. I also send a text to Marchant, telling him to send people to both of my Vegas residences. I can't think of another reason Priscilla would've dropped by just in time to stop me from leaving town.

I know from Marchant's guy, Dave, that she spent yesterday at Michael Lockwood's place in Vegas. My California PI, Todd, told me she spent most of today with the governor she claims to hate. I still don't know how all this adds up, but I know Priscilla is lying to me. I also know Michael Lockwood is about my height and wore a black jacket that night at Love Inc. Security cameras captured him wearing it when Priscilla and her crew first arrived. I gave that footage to Lisa, the woman from the FBI.

When Priscilla strides out of the ladies' room and squeezes my ass, I want to run the other way. Instead I guide her hand around to my erection. I can tell Priscilla overestimates her appeal so much that she expects my lust. She tries to unbutton my jeans as we step into the 3,000-square foot weight room. I push her against a wall and kiss her up and down her neck, cupping her ass and grinding my cock into her hips, and she laughs that sultry laugh. I've always imagined she practices until she sounds as close as she can to Marilyn Monroe. Which isn't close.

"I don't know how you get by out here without me. Why don't you come with me back home to Vegas?"

Wrapping one arm around her waist, I guide her through the weight room, where a handful of men and women are working out. "You already know I'm going to Vegas for a tournament. I thought you were the one who wasn't going to be there."

I wait for her answer, curious to know if she'll go back on the lie she told me the other day, but she just makes a sour face and acts as if she's just remembered her plans.

"Such a pity."

Priscilla has led me to believe she'll be filming in Georgia. But Dave says her personal chef in Vegas has prepared a menu for the rest of the week.

As we walk through the back doorway of the weight room, Priscilla's fingertips graze my wrist, and I feel a strange ache behind my breastbone. I know why—and I wish I didn't. I want Priscilla to be someone else. Someone I have no business thinking about, especially considering what kind of black cloud I've got over my head at the moment.

I push that out of my mind, vowing to try harder to keep it out in the future.

Our little space, known to the Beau's security system as Cardio Hub 4, is a glass-

walled room just behind 2,000 square feet of women's-only weightspace. It's got six elliptical machines, three treadmills, and an adjoining sauna and massage suite. The room is almost always used by members with personal trainers, and since it's almost nine p.m., no one is around.

I pull Priscilla inside, hoping she mistakes my pent-up aggression for ardor. When I reach around behind me to flip the lock on my glass prison, she shakes her head.

"I want it unlocked." She smiles, straight blonde hair falling around her face as she cups me through my jeans. "Part of the thrill, Hunter."

Her palm against my dick makes me lose some of my steam, but I imagine it's Libby and I'm stiff as steel. I grab Priscilla by the wrists and lay her over the deck of one of the treadmills, buns up. I jerk her red skirt up and use the cord that goes to the machine's heart monitor to whip her ass, and she starts panting.

I still haven't puzzled out why Priscilla wanted me that night at Love Inc.—or why she hasn't gotten bored with me yet. We hadn't met before that night.

I still don't know what happened after she drugged me, either. She says she fucked my brains out, but I didn't feel like I'd had my brains fucked out. I'm sure if Lisa from FBI knew Priscilla claimed to have roofied me and fucked me, she'd be looking at Priscilla with a magnifying glass, but I didn't tell her that, and I'm not going to. Not yet.

Because the more I think about Priscilla coming out with the news that Rita wasn't my biological mother, the more I worry about what could come out next. What conclusions might people draw if they find out she and I weren't blood.

So I'm letting fear dictate the vile things I do with Priscilla. Letting fear keep me in this trap until Marchant and I figure it out for ourselves—or Lisa does. I wonder how long that will take, being certain, as I am, that Josh Smith from the LVPD is surely covering Priscilla's ass.

I feel a pang of regret for not being completely straightforward with FBI Lisa about Priscilla and the roofie and the fucking of lead detective Josh Smith. But the FBI hasn't taken over the case yet, and Lisa told me they likely wouldn't unless another girl went missing. So, for right now, Josh Smith is the top dog responsible for finding Sarabelle—and if Priscilla is one of the guilty parties, Sarabelle's only hope is Dave, Marchant, and I. At least, that's what I tell my guilty conscience when it starts howling.

Speaking of howling...

Priscilla.

It doesn't take her long to grow tired of the hair-pulling and whipping. I can't appease her by slapping her pussy, either, and I don't have the right kind of condom to do her in the ass.

"A condom's a condom, Hunter." She twists her red lips into a pout.

"You know damn well that's not true." I'm not a fan of anal, but we both know a thicker, tougher condom is required.

I can see it in her eyes when she decides she's pissed off. She shoves my chest, and when I just stand there, she slaps my face. I haven't been slapped since I was

fourteen, and the fierce sting sends me reeling back into the past.

While I'm off balance, Priscilla shoves me again. I wobble into the wall between the workout area and the sauna, and she giggles, then whistles seductively. "I think I've figured out what you like, big guy."

I feel the trembling start in my chest, and I want to throttle her. I don't care if she's a woman. I want to grab her hair and throw her against the wall and tell her to go fuck herself—and extra fucks for trying to dig into my family's past.

"You don't know shit about me," I tell her, struggling to breathe as I lean against the wall.

"I know you're nice and hard and I like to slap you around." She grins and slaps me again, and it takes all the self-control I have not to lose my shit.

My heart is racing. Fucking flash-back land. "You're a cunt—you know that, right?"

I feel my cock twitch as I look at her, and I hate myself for it. I'm becoming just as deviant as she is.

She bites my neck, the sting hard enough to draw blood, and I push her head away. I scoop her up in one arm, shove through the glass door to the darkened sauna, toss her onto one of the benches that line the four walls of the room, and start the steam. I turn her over and spank her again, hoping to ward off what I know we'll end up doing, but of course it only makes her shriek and pant.

She glances back at me and I can see it in her eyes that all she really wants is to be hit. A dom who wants to be dominated. It's what she thinks she deserves, and I know all too well the reasons why.

One night at my house she drank too much and spilled the story. How her mom left her with an uncle who sold her to his friends, and when she was old enough to change her fate, she ran off to a brothel where she made her own money and set her own rules. Later, she started making films. Got herself a C-Class ticket to the Hollywood shindigs and fucked some desperate actors, desperate politicians, desperate gamblers. Got herself a red Jaguar and tattooed eyeliner, eyelash implants, breast implants. God knows what else on her is fake.

She leans closer, giving me a nose full of expensive perfume, and whispers something in my ear. Not understanding it, I blink at her. As much as I loathe her—even loathe her beautiful face—I wonder for the first time if perhaps I should try to make the best of this: our fucked up coupling. I don't do sex with regular women, because too many of them expected affection in return. And I'd quit going to the brothels months before the night with Sarabelle. Escorts don't excite me anymore. So maybe I should be glad I have Priscilla. Maybe she and I deserve each other.

"What did I say?" she purrs.

"I have no idea," I tell her, squeezing her big, fake tits.

"I said who's your mama now, you son of a bitch."

My heart pounds in my chest, and for a second it doesn't seem real. That I'm here with Priscilla Heat. That Sarabelle is gone, Sarabelle who always did what I wanted and never asked questions. I didn't know her well, but she was always pleasant to be around.

"It's sure as hell's not you," I growl.

"Oh, you better not back talk mama." She squeezes my balls and I let out a moan. I lay her down and thrust three fingers into her, stretching her as she writhes against my hand.

"You know who's a little slut?" she pants. "Elizabeth DeVille. I want to hear you say Elizabeth is a slut."

Shock like a bucket of ice water slides through my veins, and for the first time I'm actually worried for Libby. True, Priscilla's been following her, but I assumed that was to keep tabs on me. Now I wonder if she knows I got to third base at my party. Maybe she's jealous?

I press my forearm against Priscilla's throat and she fumbles with my fly, her cool, thin hands reaching for my cock. She starts to jack me off and I can't stand the thought of cumming as she gasps for air.

I lift my forearm from her throat and she sinks her nails into my wrist. "I'd like to fuck that little bitch. Shove a dildo right up that tight ass just like Marchant does."

I freeze, dumbfounded, then lit up with jealous fury, and Priscilla grins—more a leer. "Hunter West, jealous," she says, still jacking my cock. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"You think I'm jealous?" I am. Blindingly so. I bite her mouth, and Priscilla moans. "I don't give a damn about Elizabeth DeVille."

"You lie," she hisses. She puts her hand over mine, and she guides it to her throat. She wants me to choke her. I'd like to, because I'm angry, but the idea of actually hurting her makes me hesitate, a crime for which she slaps me.

I see Rita's angry face and am too disarmed to do anything but gasp for air.

"What a little pussy," she hisses.

She cups my balls and pumps my dick, and my muddled mind shifts back to Libby. There's no way she's fucking Marchant, is there?

I shut my eyes and see a pointy little chin, lush lips, high cheekbones, wide blue eyes framed with dark lashes. Her smile is sweet. Serene. Just a little sarcastic sometimes. A full-blown laugh at others. I picture her delicate throat and collar bones, pretty just like every other inch of her voluptuous body. I have a flash memory of gliding my finger into her warm pussy and it sends me over the edge. I cum into Priscilla's expert hand and she clutches my balls so tightly I'm arching up, shoving her off me.

"Come and get me..." She dances a few steps away, wanting me to 'get her'. Wanting me to hit her. I wipe myself off on my boxer-briefs and tug them off, wishing I could leave the room, and her. All this pain for pleasure shit isn't my style.

And yet, as our night winds to an end, I'm on top of her again with my hands around her neck. I can feel her tendons strain under my fingers as she jacks me off, and it's everything I can do to stay hard. I imagine another pair of hands, softer ones with short, pale nails. There was a time, a few months back, when all I could do was watch Priscilla, worried I was hurting her, but I've had to stop that. I can't get off if I'm worried, and she demands that I do.

I spend the next two hours getting whipped and slapped and trying not to get too head fucked. I'm not a child anymore. I can fight back, if I choose.

But I don't.

Chapter Fourteen

~ELIZABETH~

It's kind of like what I imagine getting sent off to college would be like if you're in a normal family, where at least one person really cares that you're leaving.

Suri fusses over me like a mama bird, making me egg soufflé and sparkling green tea, plus a giant bowl full of perfectly gooey orange cinnamon rolls for the road. As we sit and eat our soufflé at the breakfast table, she watches me like a mama bird, too.

In the last two weeks, I've hit the elliptical hard, and I've even worked out at a real gym three times a week, with a trainer, going through photocopied exercises Richard sent. I look better than I have in a long time. I refuse to weigh myself, on principal, but I'm wearing size six pants. I actually teared up a bit when they slipped on.

I smile a little, figuring Suri must be thinking the same thing, but instead of complimenting me she frowns a little and shakes her head. "This is your choice, Lizzy. Remember you don't have to go. I have money."

After a second reminding myself she's only looking out for me, so I shouldn't roll my eyes or get irritated, I snicker. "I do realize I'm not a sex slave."

"Speaking of sex slaves!" She hops up and opens the drawer of the desk where she keeps her fabric swatches. She holds out something small and black, and I'm shocked to find that it's a gun case.

She holds it out to me, and I wobble backwards. "Suri, have you lost your mind? I'm not touching that death machine."

"It's a .38. You need it! Some escorts have been kidnapped and sold into sex slavery or murdered or eaten!"

"Really?" I pause, mid-chew. I've heard a lot of things about Las Vegas, but not that.

"Well, the cannibalism is just a pessimistic guess." She rolls her eyes, like the specifics don't matter. "They've gone missing. Two or three, I think. One of them was even from Love Inc. Surely you've heard about—"

"I have," I lie, because really—I don't need any added stress. I probably would have heard about it, had I done excessive Googling on Love Inc., but I didn't. Because I really don't care to know more about it than I do. I'll be there for a little over a week and a half, and then I'll be back home. Surely I can avoid getting cannibalized or kidnapped in eleven days.

Suri pushes the gun into my hand, and I take it. Not because I'd ever shoot someone, but because I want to ease her mind.

"Remember, if you have a problem, call me," she says, with her lip between her teeth.

"I'll just shoot 'em dead." I smile, waving my gun, and she says, "Don't do that! It may be loaded."

"You just gave me a loaded gun?"

"No, but you're always supposed to act like it's loaded!"

With a wide-eyed look at the little black case, I tuck the gun into my bag and turn to Suri, who's holding out the plastic box of cinnamon rolls.

"Don't forget these."

"How could I?" I'm an absolute sucker for orange frosted cinnamon rolls.

Together we walk to my jam-packed car, where I put that awful handgun in the trunk and Suri checks the tire pressure. She once had a flat outside Tyler, Texas, on one of those lonely country roads. She was rescued by a border patrol agent who was dressed like a smuggler; the experience was scarring, so since then she's always checked my tire pressure.

"Looks like you're good," she says, holding out the gauge. Then she throws her arms around me. "Lizzy, you look wonderful. I hope it's perfect and whoever wins the bid is a total prince charming. I'll come visit soon."

I squeeze her close. "The bidding's not for a week and a half, remember?"

"I can't be away from you for that long, crazy woman."

Suri and I hug once more, and when she closes me into my car, I'm reminded of Hunter, which makes my chest ache. I really need to try to forget about Hunter.

I roll down the window, preparing to wave until I reach the end of the driveway. Suri will do the same; it's our thing.

"Lizzy," she calls, as I shift into drive. She trots over to my window, her long sweater trailing behind her. "I'll visit Cross. Every day, if you want."

If I want...

It's hard to hide my smirk, but I manage. "Suri, that would rock."

She smiles a smile that's bigger than it ought to be, and then says, "Tell him 'hi.'"

"Huh?"

"Cross. Aren't you seeing him on your way out?"

"Yeah."

"Tell him I said 'hi.'"

*

I visit Cross at Napa Valley Involved Rehab and am thrilled to find him doing better. The gauze is off his head, and Nanette says his brain scans look much the same as they did the last time he was scanned at NVIR—meaning the stroke was minor and hasn't affected his long-term prognosis. Amazing. His eyes drift open once or twice, which leaves me feeling buoyant. I'm similarly thrilled when I speak to Mom on the phone and find out it's a 'busy' day at Ultra Mod/Hip Rehab, and she doesn't have time to see me before I leave town.

It takes me ten hours to drive to Vegas, but the driving is important. I have a lot to think about, and I need time to process it.

I'm really doing this. I'm really on my way to the Love Inc. ranch to sell my virginity.

I've dressed up. I'm wearing my new brown Armani slacks, the ones that make my ass look tight and perky, and a low-cut, sea blue wrap-around blouse that matches my eyes. I've pulled my dark hair into a playful up-do, and for once, I'm actually wearing lipstick. I feel sexy.

For a few hours, my mind cycles through practical concerns, like whether I have enough lingerie, and what kind of man likes garters. Superficial thoughts, like what kind of lotion I should use on the big night, and whether I need to shower before the bidding or if I'll have time after.

Richard and I have agreed that I'll get more money if I offer myself to the winner the night of the bidding. What will I feel like, lying on a stage under those glowing lights, with my face shadowed and steam rolling around my mostly naked body?

What if I'm still too pudgy? What if the winner doesn't like having sex with me and wants a refund?

Will the escorts treat me nicely?

The California hills flatten and the grass turns into sand. The air through my vents feels hot and dry. I loosen up a little and my thoughts dip deeper—to Cross. It's still so strange, the way things are now. He should be talking to me. He should be on a bike.

I have a strange and fleeting memory of the shape of Cross's fingertips, holding a pencil as he sketches. How, as a girl, I used to picture those hands when I thought about being fingered.

My eyes water as I think about his hair. How soft it was when it was long and dark and messy. How brilliant blue his eyes are. How they widened that night in the hall when I ran into him at Hunter's party.

He was just trying to watch out for me, even if he was being dick-tastic about it.

I go another round of wishing I'd acted differently. What the outcome would be. I think of Suri, secretly visiting Cross every day while he was at the county hospital. For how long? What were the logistics? I try to imagine her sitting in that awful, stinky place, legs crossed, her wavy hair pulled back, and everything about her radiating Suri; privileged Suri. I wonder if Cross felt safe when she sat there by him. I wonder if he felt loved when she pecked him on the forehead or smoothed his covers—two so very Suri things to do, I know she must have done them.

The sun climbs into the middle of the sky and starts to fall behind me. Cacti dot the barren land. For the longest time, I think of random things, like the cologne Cross wore in high school, which I loved so much. I remember Suri telling me one night when I slept over that if she turned thirty and she wasn't married, she would marry Cross. At the time I was surprised. She'd acted nonchalant and shrugged. "I bet I would never get bored with Cross."

I remember how Cross's jackets used to smell when he put them around my shoulders: like pepper and mints. Remembering a time when Cross lent me his jackets reminds me of being younger, and of course, I think of Mom. How she never

had sex with my dad, and how I really wished I didn't know that.

Thinking of Dad makes me think of Hunter. I remember a younger Hunter West, grinning, on his back, gliding underneath Mom's Porsche. I remember his gorgeous golden hair. How, for years, I thought he was the consummate playboy, fucking wealthy, silk-robed women by the pool before the sun was fully up. I recall the glitter of his eyes as he looked up from Priscilla, on the fireplace, in the same room where he and I had...

I don't know if it's because it's dusk and cool, or if it's that thought that gets me, but I'm shivering. I feel naked, and I hate it.

In a few days I'm going to sell my body. I'll strip naked and let a stranger shove his stranger dick inside me.

And it's true, I don't place much value on it: my virginity. For eons it was traded in exchange for land, cattle, power, whatever, so I know full well I'm in good company. I'm okay with that. But the idea of the act as a sensory experience—the knowledge that someone I won't choose will invade my body... I guess I kind of hate that.

I really hate that.

The image of Hunter leaning down to kiss me flits like lightning through my mind. I can almost feel his lips on mine—warm, soft, gentle. The look in his eyes as he watches me from the foot of the bed, and I can see he's haunted by something and I know I'll never know what it is.

Tears start to fall as I think of Hunter cutting a path to me as I'm hounded by media outside the courthouse. Is that the closest I'll ever get to a fairy tale?

I wrap my hands around the wheel, and I can't help but think of mother, in her curlers, behind the wheel of a much older, larger car; her foot on the pedal; my foot on the pedal. And for a long second, I want to run the car into the crag of rock off to my right.

I really kind of want to. Crazy is a siren call.

But I'm too practical. Practical Elizabeth. Elizabeth the whore.

I wonder what Cross will think. I wonder what Mom will think. I wonder what my dad would think.

I wonder what Hunter West would think.

I pass the sign marking the Vegas city limits with a lightness deep inside me. Like the part of me that matters is somewhere up above, floating in a helium balloon. This me behind the wheel is hollow. Brave and ready.

This me is older and stronger and smarter.

When I think about the tears that I shed back there in the dark, I know they won't come so easily again. And I am fine with that. I am.

Chapter Fifteen

~HUNTER~

I've got on my penguin suit when Priscilla calls. The Heat Enterprises Brawl for Innocence Gala begins in an hour, and I'm pacing around my penthouse, chewing on the laundry list of bullshit I just got from Dave the PI.

I feel a hot stab of guilt deep in my gut—that I'm worried about myself, when Sarabelle is God knows where—when my phone rings, flashing a red "P". I groan.

When Priscilla heard I volunteered for the fight tomorrow night, earning myself an invitation to the gala even after all the charity plates have been purchased, she demanded to be my date, but we're not riding together, so I shouldn't have to see her until I arrive at the Heat Enterprises Mansion in an hour.

"Damnit." I bring the phone up to my ear, working to sound calm and aloof, the way I used to sound before I realized Priscilla was going to Michael Lockwood's house on a regular basis, in addition to fucking Josh Smith.

I take a deep breath. "Priscilla."

"Hunter."

I roll my wrist, which is sore from the last time I saw her. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm coming up in ten." I can hear her Cheshire grin through the phone, and then her laughing hiss. "Get ready."

I strip out of my tux and swear that this will be the last time. Tonight, I'll figure out Priscilla's game, and end it. Josh Smith will be at the gala, as will Michael Lockwood. If I can find out what Priscilla wants with Smith—other than his dick—or the nature of her relationship with Lockwood, maybe I can finally put a stop to this farce.

I wait behind the front door of my penthouse. I'm planning to grab her from behind when she walks through it. Maybe rip her gown off. Bind her wrists with my neck tie and fuck her doggy style.

I shut my eyes, inhaling slowly while I wait in my darkened foyer like the crazy SOB I am. The small amount of enjoyment I've begun to get from these games with Priscilla makes me sick. I'm further disgusted by my cowardice. I pretend like I'm keeping her close for Sarabelle's sake, but the truth is I won't turn her in, just like I won't stop fucking her, until I know my skeletons will stay in the closet where they belong.

I don't give a shit about my father's political career, about what people would think if they knew he fell in love with an escort. Their relationship would be painted in the most tawdry light possible by the press, but would it jeopardize anything about

my father's position? Very unlikely. Would it shock all of New Orleans? Yes. My father returned from his business trip with a newly pregnant Roxanne, but for most of her pregnancy, she stayed secluded in West Manor. Less than a week after she died in labor—at the house—Rita came knocking. Dad was somehow able to hush the whole thing up, and I was presented many months later as Dad and Rita's child.

Things went just the way Rita had hoped, and ten months later, my half-sister Amber was born. She still lives in New Orleans, managing the advertising arm of West Bourbon, and she knows exactly what kind of insanity went on in our house before Rita got cancer. She also knows just how Rita died, and what went on afterward.

I lean my head against the wall and go over what we've got so far. The PIs—Dave and the two other Vegas PIs we just hired, Julie and Roberto—have found a few good leads:

1. Josh Smith is Michael Lockwood's third cousin. Last time Smith saw Lockwood: the morning before Smith told the FBI that I liked to tie girls up.
2. Michael Lockwood took a bus to San Luis two days ago. He had lunch in a hotel and went to the men's room twice.
3. The night Priscilla invaded my plane, a man searched both of my homes in Vegas. Marchant's guy, Dave, captured the whole thing on film, proving that, for now at least, the bad guys have no idea that we are onto them. When he later pulled up an image of Gus Victor, the man's mug shot matched the face of the guy searching my homes.
4. Two years ago, just before Priscilla's affair with Governor Carlson began, one of the governor's mistresses went missing. Maybe. Missy King was a working girl and rising porn star the governor met on a gambling trip. He put her up in a fancy Vegas apartment complex—that part, we've confirmed is true—where she lived until she didn't. There are no missing person reports, and there has never been a police investigation. But her friends tell Dave they think she was kidnapped, and the LVPD did nothing to find her.

Priscilla's phone is bugged as of today, so I'm looking forward to the next time she talks to the governor. Or to Smith. Or Lockwood, for that matter. I'm hoping they'll fill in some of the pieces, because right now I don't know what this is.

In a few days, I'll go down to San Luis myself to see what the hell could be down there, but tonight, the most important thing I can do is go to the gala. In my most ambitious plan, I can get my hands on Lockwood's cell phone. He'll be there because, like me, he's brawling at the Joseph Club tomorrow night in the name of charity.

Marchant wouldn't sign up for the brawl—something about winning making him look like a pimp and losing making him look like a loser—so I paid my five grand and slid into a spot vacated by a Vegas councilman who sprained his ankle.

There was nothing Priscilla could do to keep me out of the party at the Heat

Mansion, so she pretended to be pleased. I wonder if she's coming up here now to try to keep me away.

As if on cue, the door to my penthouse swings open with a swoosh of air. I let her get a few paces inside before I slam the door shut, jumping on her from behind. I sweep her up into my arms and tear her mink coat open.

She squeals, and I hear something drop. I spin her in a circle and see a big, leather bag sprawled on my floor.

"What did you bring me?"

"Why don't you open it and see?"

I strip Priscilla to her open-nipple bra and crotchless panties before I dump her on the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace and open the bag.

What's inside is vile. And it doesn't make my cock soften at all.

Chapter Sixteen

~ELIZABETH~

When Marchant Radcliffe started Love Inc., it was a high-end brothel on the Vegas Strip. If the Wikipedia page can be believed, Marchant never wanted to open 'just another brothel'. He wanted a place where the escorts were treated like any other profession—they have excellent health insurance, 401Ks, and the top performers can even buy a small stakes in the company.

He wanted a different kind of clientele, too. Wealthy. Connected. Men and women who appreciated an upscale ambiance and a whole lot of privacy.

I'm guessing this must be Wiki's way of saying he wanted to keep the riff-raff out. Eliminate tourists, bachelors, and shut-ins.

After only a year or two, he opened another location in a rural area southwest of Vegas, on a plot of land so large it's a bona fide green spot on my GPS. If I recall, it's something like two hundred acres. For several years, the location on the strip acted as a sort of gatekeeper. If the escorts liked a client or the client was regular enough, they got invited to the ranch. The strip location was swanky enough that it competed easily with more established places, so Love Inc. grew as a name-brand, but all the while, the ranch was building an identity of its own.

According to Forbes, the ranch location made more than \$600 million last year. It has two dozen full-time female escorts and seven full-time male escorts who live on the grounds, setting their own prices and choosing their own clients. Many of them have worked there five years or more. The place has a job-satisfaction rating comparable to Google.

Somehow, the Love Inc. Ranch has come to be known as the 'fluffy bunny' ranch. I've heard it's not fluffy—all kinds of prostitution goes on there, even some of the more hard stuff—but it's nicer than most other places.

I bypass Vegas, veering onto an interstate and following it southeast. It's eight thirty, and I'm starting to get a serious case of belly bats (the unrelated more serious cousins of butterflies).

It takes me almost forty minutes to get past Vegas and into the dry, flat land to the southeast of the city. In that time, I manage to contain my excitement/horror/hysteria by clinging to the 'fluffy' part of this place's nickname. I think about sparkling fixtures; plush, animal skin rugs; gleaming hardwoods; gourmet foods; and beds so soft you might actually want to climb into them with a stranger.

I veer off the highway onto a smaller, freshly paved two-lane road, its dark asphalt gleaming in the glow of an almost-full moon. Suddenly there are lamplights, and although the land on either side of the road is reddish desert dirt, my GPS tells

me I'm within eight miles of my final destination.

Holy belly bats!

I can't believe I'm actually doing this.

As I grip the wheel, I wonder who will greet me. Richard? The manager, Rachelle? What if it's Marchant? When I spoke to Richard this morning, he didn't say. Why didn't I ask?

I look down at myself. What if I'm not dressed right? Should I have worn a skirt or something? Maybe something more glam? Black slacks? My Manolos? I slow my car, pulling over on the side of the road, and reapply my lipstick. It's red, at least. That should be a good thing—I think.

As I flip my mirror shut, headlights, then tail-lights, wink past me. I recognize the shape of the vehicle: a limousine.

I pull back onto the road, excited and frightened to see that, just ahead, a billboard shines over the road.

I squint and slow down.

'Selling Scarlett'. And there I am, stretched out on my stomach, airbrushed and fake-tanned, but still very much the version of myself I was a few days ago when Richard asked me to send these pictures. I'm on a billboard, stamped with the Love Inc. Symbol.

Holy moly. Suri did a nice job posing me against white sheets in the great room. I don't even look like me. I look...like an escort.

My stomach clenches, and I try to feel okay about that. This is my choice, I remind myself. I'm doing this for Cross.

Another half-mile, and there's another Love Inc. billboard. This one features a stunning black-haired beauty with yellow eyes and a supple, suntanned body clad in jade green lace. She's opening a bedroom door, beckoning with her finger, the tiniest smile on her cat-like lips.

Another half-mile and another one. Except that this one has an arrow, pointing to a road that intersects this one. There's a brick guardhouse, and metal arms blocking both the entrance and exit.

Oh my God. I'm really here.

I roll my window down with sweaty fingers, and the beautiful face that appears behind the glass is framed by long, curling red hair.

"Scarlett!" She grins. "You're the VIP tonight." She leans to the left, and a door behind her opens. Out steps a tall, bulky man with thinning brown hair and a devilish smile.

"Scarlett." He stretches his hand out the window.

I grab it. "Richard." I recognize his voice.

"How do you like the sign?" he rumbles.

I blush. "It looked very...professional."

The redhead laughs. "Nice save." Her voice is kind. Warm. "I'm Marie V." She stretches out her hand, and I smell a pleasant scent that reminds me of sunlight and linen. "It's my off-night," she explains, "so I'm on booth duty for a few hours. The

clients like being welcomed by a familiar face."

I nod, because my brain is blown. "Why don't you drive on through?" Richard says. "I've got you all set up for tonight. The valets will take your car and you'll be met in the doorway by some very friendly women who will help you get acquainted with the place."

Marie V. leans forward. "There's food, too. Make them take you to Alan, our cook-slash-guard. Or," her eyes gleam, "if he's already on his way back out here, just go grab a sweet roll. They're amazing."

She looks so mischievous, so gleeful, that I can't help smiling. "Thank you. I feel ten percent less nervous."

"Make it one-hundred," she says, and Richard chuckles.

"There's nothing to be nervous about, Scarlett. We don't bite—unless you ask."

I can barely think straight as I drive ahead, following a curl of asphalt that rolls through unnaturally green grass, beneath enormous trees between whose branches I can see the winking stars. Lamp posts line the road, but it's the greenery that really gets me.

It doesn't belong anywhere in the Midwest. In fact, it reminds me a little of New Orleans. Then I remember that Marchant Radcliffe went to Tulane—where he met Hunter—and I shake my head. Well, duh.

The driveway rolls on forever. After five or ten minutes, the trees thin some and the iron lamp posts glow a little brighter. I'm reminded of my Hugo readings as I notice the stone wall rising ten or fifteen feet above the drive, on my right side; a fountain featuring mermaids, lit with spotlights; bird baths; benches; gardens.

Then I crest a small hill and see an expanse of soft, gold light, and my eyes focus on the largest English manor house I've seen in all my travels.

Holy crap, it's bigger than a frickin' castle. My gaze clings to the balconies, doors, windows, and ivy crawling the stone mansion, visible behind the flickering light of torches. My mouth drops ever further when I realize there are two smaller manors situated in a horse-shoe around the driveway.

I gape at the brutally trimmed shrubs and the fruit-bearing trees that blot my view of the open sky. I feel like I am in the South. Of England.

"Gorgeous..."

A plump white rabbit flits in front of my car, and I laugh. So that's the fluffy bunny thing! I roll another hundred yards or so, and come to a stop right in front of the manor. A valet in a red and black uniform comes down the stairs, trailed by two bellmen pulling a cart. My luggage is unloaded while a woman in a beautiful royal blue gown appears on the stairs. She steps out to greet me.

"Scarlett. I'm Juniper Francis. Come inside. Your luggage will follow you." She's British—or a prostitute that specializes in voice fetishes (if that's a thing). She's got coal black hair with stylish bangs; her hair is pulled into some kind of up-do that compliments her flawless, porcelain doll face.

I glance at my brown slacks and soft blue blouse, feeling dowdy. My heart beats

hard as I step up the stairs, and the woman—Juniper—holds out both hands to me. I take them, with only a little hesitation, and she squeezes my hands.

"You're the one on the billboard," I realize.

She laughs. "So are you."

We pass through two huge, thick wooden doors held open by women wearing black and red skirt uniforms, and I try not to gape as we step inside a vast foyer. It has to be at least 30 feet high, with ornate, white-washed wood walls and three-pronged iron candelabras that flicker as we move. Directly above my head is a sparkling crystal chandelier, and a few steps in front of me, an ornate double staircase that seems to fall out of the sky. I'm blinking up at it when I hear a good-natured chuckle. I look down, into the laughing brown eyes of a striking African-American woman. She's tall and curvy, dressed in a cream gown that's part party-wear, part nightgown.

"Hi." Her red lips curve. "I'm Geneese Loveless. You must be Scarlett." Her smile widens. "You're so pretty!"

Geneese holds out her hand, and Juniper clasps my other one, and together we walk around the stairs, through another set of smaller, but just as ornate double-doors, and into a room so huge I can only describe it as cavernous.

I'm struck first by the size of it—it's as big as a football field, for sure—and next by how much there is. There are so many little nooks, each with its own couch, love seat, and recliner; right offhand, I count at least twenty of them. The room is further divided by huge bookshelves, made cozier by coat racks and partial walls and house plants. The three dark wood walls framing the room are punctured by huge, two-story windows. The rug running under everything—a soft, camel-colored fabric—spans the entire room.

"Holy heck—" I say, embarrassed by my language.

"The rug?" Loveless asks. "Yeah, it's really, really big."

"It's a custom job, of course," Juniper says, and all I can think is blow job.

We stop beside a big desk that looks like it belongs in the oval office. The woman sitting behind it, looking at several rows of security monitors, smiles at me and says, "Hello. I'm Rachelle."

"Nice to meet you," I murmur. I'm hardly even looking at her, although she's very pretty with blonde Curly Temple hair and doll-sized blue eyes. There's so much going on behind her shoulder, I feel A.D.D. trying to take it all in. There are several mini bars, two elevator banks, a hallway cutting into each wall, and so many decorative details: moldings, glasswork, antique-looking fixtures, you name it.

"This is the heart of the main house," Rachelle says kindly. "It can be a little overwhelming at first, but it's really very cozy."

As if on cue, a beautiful blonde in a ruby red gown leads a young man in an obviously bespoke suit to one of the elevators. I can hear him telling her about his day as they pass.

"All that's left is the signatures."

She applauds. "Your first merger!"

This is real, I want to say out loud, because it seems like—okay, I guess it is a (former) frat boy's idea of paradise. This place is really freakin' real. This is where people come to sell their bodies.

The notion makes me feel frozen, so it's a good thing Geneese tugs on my hand. "Want to work out with us? Our shift just ended, and it's boxing night."

Chapter Seventeen

~ELIZABETH~

I'm tired, and I don't really want to work out, but if this is what they do at Love Inc., I will do it. I can already tell this place is its own little universe, and the last thing I want is to stick out any more than I already do.

Juniper and Geneese have let go of my hands, so I feel a less like a five-year-old.

"There are stairs," Geneese says, as we pass a brunette sitting on one of the couches, reading a magazine, "but it's hard to look elegant going up the stairs. Anyway, that's what boxing is for. You ever boxed?"

"I have before." I spot another couple—both with black hair—sitting together on a love seat, and Juniper explains, "This is where we meet our clients. They have to pass Rachelle and the cameras and then they wait for us in a pre-set spot. It's a security measure. Marchant Radcliffe—that's the guy who built this place—based it on the dormitory system. At uni, you know, or rather college."

I nod as we pass a beautiful bookcase and a little nook filled with bean bag chairs. The rug under my feet is spotless and looks soft enough to lie on. About twenty yards ahead, rising from the floor and up into the ceiling, is the nearest elevator bank. The elevator is old-fashioned and iron—pretty, if an elevator can be pretty.

"It's beautiful here."

"Some of us have rooms here," Juniper says. "The others bunk in the warehouse."

I must look surprised, because she blinks. "You do know there's an actual warehouse where we're made to fuck for our dinner, yes?"

I'm totally confused, and totally at a loss for what to say, when Geneese elbows Juniper. "Girl, that's so wrong."

"So I hear, so I hear." Juniper smiles wickedly, and Geneese presses the "4" button on the elevator.

"Your room will be here in the main house, with some of the girls who can't get on with the others, or have a wooden leg, or need to be watched closely," Juniper says as the doors glide open.

I smile weakly, hoping she's joking.

Geneese pulls me inside and then releases my hand. "I'm kind of a touchy feely person," she says smiling. "You have to bat me off."

I smile back at her, and she laughs. "You look nervous. Don't be nervous. This is a good place. You'll like it here."

I nod. "This is a first for me."

"Well of course," Juniper says. "You're a virgin."

The doors ding open, and we file into a hardwood hall with a deep crimson runner. The walls are done in creamy velvet wallpaper, and the ceilings are high, dark wood, punched in little hexagons where the chandeliers are mounted. On this floor, they're spindly and brass.

"It smells delicious," I say, and Geneese smiles. "This place is supposed to be appetizing."

The hall ends in a rounded nook where a portrait of a half-nude woman hangs, spotlighted and framed by gold tassels.

We walk a few more steps and Juniper pulls out a key, tries it in the antique-looking brass lock on one of the wide, wood doors, and pushes the door open. It creaks, and as soon as it swings open I can smell flowers.

Geneese waves her hand for me to go first, and as I step inside the lights come on automatically. A few steps on lush hardwood topped by a thin oriental rug, and I'm out of the small foyer and into a large living area. I've been in enough million-dollar homes to know the furniture and fixings are all nice, none of that mass-produced hotel crap. The claw-footed Victorian couch is really a Victorian couch, and the dainty chairs on either side, covered in lush lime green fabric, are probably also from England. A glance beyond my immediate surroundings reveals mirrors, original artwork and framed photos adorning the walls, and a full kitchen over to my left. There's a dark hall out in front of me, and at the mouth of it is all my bags.

"That was fast," I say.

"We aim to please. Why don't you come and see your room?"

Geneese waves me down the hall; she and Juniper follow. I almost gasp when I see the bedroom. At the center is the biggest canopy bed I've ever seen in my life, with lush crimson bedding, yellow and cream pillows, and a canopy so thick it actually creates walls around the bed.

At the foot of the bed is an old-fashioned soaking tub, and all along the outermost wall are windows—no, doors. Doors that lead onto a candle-lit balcony.

"This is really nice," I say, feeling almost intimidated.

"We want you to feel like a princess when you are here," Juniper says.

"Oh, I do." I turn a slow circle, and Geneese says, "I've always liked this room. You got a good one."

"I believe it."

They go into the living area while I change, and as soon as the bedroom door shuts behind them, I drop into the nearest chair and put my head into my hands. My cheeks feel warm, my heart is racing, and my stomach is about to fly out of my chest. Damned belly bats.

I stand up, dig some work-out clothes out of my bag, and pace as I wriggle into them. It's not just nerves, I realize. Some of what I feel right now is real anxiety. That I don't belong here. That I can't handle the task ahead of me. That I'll fail.

A virgin at a brothel...

I'm in way over my head.

I try to talk myself up as I pull my hair into a pony-tail. I think about Cross and

Suri and Crestwood Place, with its familiar fields and my familiar bedroom, smelling like my favorite vanilla bean lotion and coffee from the Keurig I keep right beside my bed. I picture myself reading one of my text books, and I remind myself that I can use this experience as school research. That makes me feel a little more level, so I'm gathered as I make my way into the living area.

Juniper grins as I step out of the hallway. "Looking sharp," she says, and Geneese points. "Your legs are so long and tight."

"I bet yours aren't much different," I say.

"You sure you're game for working out? You had a long trip if you drove. I wasn't thinking about that earlier."

"No, I'm okay. I want to see more of the place, and I missed my work-out today, so this is good."

Juniper gives me the story of how Love Inc. came to be as we walk back to the elevators, and it's pretty much what I read on Wiki. Back on the first floor, we exit out a side door and follow a shaded stone walkway around a small garden. The path leads us to the smaller manor house, and as we approach it, I can see the curtains hanging in the windows don't match—some are red, some blue, some pink.

"This is where the escorts and the trainers and the tutors live," Loveless tells me. "Behind the big house—" she points between the main house and the manor where the staff lives—"is another wing where Marchant and his buddies have their private suites. The other building across the way," she says, pointing across the courtyard at the third manor house, "is where we do official things, like see a doctor or go to the media lab or study if we want. If someone comes out here, like to fix the roof or a plumber or something, that's where Rach meets them. Can't have strangers in and out of the big house."

"There are privacy issues," Juniper says.

"That makes sense. Is Marchant Radcliffe here often?" I ask. I feel slightly nauseated, but Juniper shakes her head. "He's in and out. He trusts Richard and Rachelle to keep us straight."

The door opens for us from the inside, and we step into a smaller, more relaxed version of the 'big house'. It's decorated in vibrant lavender, deep purple, and silver, with silver fixtures, a ping-pong table, a pool table, and a cheery fireplace.

"This is our building," Geneese says. "You can call me Loveless, by the way. Everybody else does."

I follow them to the second floor, past identical faux wood doors decorated by welcome mats and the occasional potted plant. While we walk, Loveless and Juniper tell me about the gym below the building. As I wait for them to change, sitting in a plush chair outside Juniper's room, I feel awkward again, like the new girl, and I wonder how much they like me, or if they feel obligated to entertain me. I decide eventually that they both seem real enough, and even if they're being phony, there's no point in worrying about it.

A few minutes later, Juniper emerges from her flower-adorned doorway in nothing but a black leotard and hot pink sneakers. She smiles and hands me a bottle of

Evian. "I'm glad you're working out with us. I was wondering about you." Before she says exactly what she was wondering, she asks, "Do you have your own bag?"

"Gym bag?"

She shakes her head. "Punching bag."

"Not my own, but I've used them at gyms."

"It's therapeutic," she smiles, but I get the feeling she doesn't have too many demons.

She slants an eyebrow at me and gives me a look that's caught somewhere between a smile and a smirk. "I know what you're thinking," she says coyly. "I'm British, and I don't seem like a whore."

I gape, although that isn't really what I was thinking—I'm too shell-shocked to have gotten that far—and Juniper bursts out laughing. I make a mental note that she doesn't think she seems like a whore. I'll enjoy dissecting that later.

"I am an escort," she says, "but I'm also a cliché."

"Huh?"

She grins. "I'm a student. I'm studying at a distance, and later I'll probably also teach that way. But this has been my job for seven years."

My eyes widen, and she nods. "I'm an expert in the field of cock and balls."

Now it's my turn to crack up. We're both smiling when we get to Loveless's room.

She comes out in turquoise tights, an orange sports bra, and high-top trainers, looking like a model for sports clothes. As she turns to lock her door, she looks over her shoulder.

"I can't wait to get to know you. We haven't had any new blood in months."

"Druscilla," Juniper reminds her.

"That girl's as exciting as a roll of toilet paper."

Juniper elbows Loveless. "A soft, sweet roll."

"True," Loveless says. "But Scarlett, she's got secrets."

I laugh, though my heart is in my throat. "Secrets?" I shake my head. "I'm afraid I'm an open book."

But Juniper nods. "Richard hasn't told us anything about you. I mean, flat-out nothing. You're shrouded in mystery."

"Am I?"

"Well, a few of us know you want to keep everything quiet," Loveless says.

I chew my lip. "Wow. I didn't realize Richard had discussed me with anyone else."

"Just Loveless and Rachelle," Juniper tells me. "Rach is the manager here, as I'm sure you know, and Loveless is the Head Girl." I arch a brow, and they both laugh. "We try to keep it light," Loveless says. "And I do give mean head."

I blush, and Juniper says, "You will, too, before it's over. We'll teach you."

When my eyes widen, she says, "Don't worry. We'll use a dildo."

Loveless nods as I try to get my face to return to its regular color. "A big, blue dildo. You've got a whole box of treasures waiting in your room. But we can talk about the sexin' later. For now, we want to hear more about you."

My stomach flips, and I hate myself for it. For being so un-smooth. I'm in my

twenties now. I should be more confident. Less afraid of what everyone thinks. After firing off a quick, sarcastic thank you to my Mom, who's got to be the source of my perpetual fear of others' judgments, I sigh. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?" Juniper asks.

Seeing no reason to lie, I say, "I'm from California."

"Wouldn't be the Napa Valley area, would it?" Loveless asks me. She's wiggling her eyebrows.

I gape, truly taken aback, and they eagle-eye me.

I quickly pull it together, feeling a little more confident as we file into a stairwell.

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Juniper says. "We've got one of those Superman kind of clients. Loveless and a few of the other girls are half in love with him. Quite pathetic, really."

"I am not," Loveless says defensively. "He's just a mystery. Well, he was," she says, looking troubled.

"Who is he?" I ask, trying maybe too hard to be one of the girls. Honestly the thought of any client scares the poo out of me..

Loveless looks over her shoulder, casual as can be. "His name is Hunter."

"Hunter." I barely have enough air in my lungs to get the word out; I'm slayed by the image of Hunter locked around beautiful Loveless.

"We should go by first name only," Juniper interjects. "Privacy," she tells me with her brows arched. "Hunter's been a client here for years, but he mainly just sees Sarabelle, Loveless, and Marie V."

I'm silent as I imagine Marie V. and Loveless with their paws on Hunter.

Hunter visits Love Inc.? The shock of it makes my chest ache, although why am I surprised? His BBF owns the place.

We push through a metal door, into hallway that quickly leads us into a fabulous gym, and my brain is so rattled I'm barely able to follow them over to a hot pink mat. Hunter visits escorts to have sex. Hunter comes here. Holy shit, this is bad news. Holy shit. I can't run into Hunter here!

"What happened to make him stop coming?" I manage after a moment. Automatically I expect a joke about my wording, so I'm kind of surprised when they exchange a dark look.

They both look somber. Loveless, especially, has a blank look in her eyes. "It makes me so upset, to think about that," she says quietly. "Something terrible happened."

Chapter Eighteen

~HUNTER~

I find a receipt from a bar in San Luis in Priscilla's handbag while she's cleaning herself up in the guest bathroom off the living area. It's from a place called MIGHTY'S. Interesting.

I fold it and slide it into a desk drawer. I'm surprised to find my fingertips shaking just a little. With what? Anger? Excitement that the trail of clues seems to be leading somewhere, even if I still don't know where?

I realize belatedly, as I sink down on a leather chair to catch my breath, that I'm shaking because my back is ripped to shreds. The next heartbeat, I'm raging, because she did come to my place to keep me away from the party tonight, and my stupid ass let her. I let her whip me because when she placed it in my hand I heard Rita's voice inside my mind, and I would rather be whipped to shit than have to go through that.

But when the fog clears, I feel so stupid that I let her whip me. I also feel sticky blood on the back of my briefs.

I stand up. "Fuck." I even got a little on the chair.

I'm shaking in earnest now, because if there's anything I hate it's fucking blood. I turn a circle, squeezing my eyes shut as I realize I can't leave Priscilla alone in my house.

I grit my teeth against the throbbing pain and push a chair in front of the bathroom door. Then I rush back to my bedroom, where I keep a first aid kit. I grab a fresh pair of boxer briefs, a black towel, and an Ace bandage, figuring gauze won't be enough to keep the blood off my tux.

My stomach churns as I stride back into the living area. Priscilla is pounding on the bathroom door. "Hunter, you bastard! I have a party to host at my mansion!"

I shove the chair aside and she strides out, looking like an evil creature in her fluffy coat. "Hunter," she says with mock concern as her eyes flick over my face and shoulders. "You're bloody and you're pale as a ghost. You need to go lie down. You look like hell."

When I lock my jaw and hold out the bandage, her blue eyes widen. "Surely you don't expect me to..."

"Yes, I do, Priscilla." I hand her the bandage and the little metal clasps and turn around, trying to ignore her as she gasps and starts piling on the faux sympathy. "Oh

you poor doll. This has to be excruciating."

"Yeah yeah," I mutter. "Just start wrapping."

"But Hunter, what you need to do is shower. If I wrap it like it is, you'll get an infection." I can hear the subtle improvement in her tone, a little happiness as she thinks her plan falls into place. "Hunter, I know we agreed to go as a pair, but why don't you stay in tonight? Just relax. You've earned it, surely?"

"Wrap my back, Priscilla." I level a look over my shoulder that I hope kicks her ass into gear, and a second later she starts wrapping.

She works quickly and she's not gentle. The bandage is tight as she steps in circles around me, wrapping me from abs to collar. I clench my jaw and shut my eyes and inhale through my nose. Fucking Priscilla.

I can gauge the width and depth of the wounds by the way they feel under the bandage. The superficial cuts near my shoulders and my hips just sting, but the deeper slashes throb with every heartbeat.

"Tell me if I hurt you," she says in her sing-song voice.

I wouldn't tell her this shit hurt if my life depended on it. Priscilla is a masochist, but she has a sadistic side, I learned tonight. She brought the whip to keep me out of the party, but she definitely enjoyed using it.

"All done," she says after what feels like a thousand years. Pain is a hot vice around my throat, clouding my mind, making my body cold and light enough that I feel like I could float away. I ignore this and dress myself, trying as hard as I can not to wince or even move stiffly.

"You have a high pain tolerance," she remarks as I slip into my coat. My stomach is churning because it hurts so much to lift my arms, but I give her a smug smile and move briskly as I grab my keys and slide my phone into my pocket.

Priscilla wants to take her limo, and I make the calculated decision to indulge her. I'd like to get as far off her radar as I can tonight, and acting easy-going will help with that goal. I tell her as we slide into the limo that I don't plan to be at the party long. I can see her perk up as she pours two glasses of chardonnay.

I arch my brow, roll my window down, and dump the glass out, and Priscilla laughs like it's the funniest thing she's ever seen. I smirk and lean forward a little in my chair. There's something irritating about being around a woman who knows she got the drop on me. Makes me feel weak. I'm pissed off by the time we roll up to the gaudy monstrosity that is the Heat Enterprises mansion: two stories of sleek gray stone with massive gold lions guarding the blood red doors, but before we get there, there's a moat and drawbridge. The water in the moat glows sparkly red. Priscilla grins when she sees the place.

We spend thirty minutes, if not longer, greeting a long line of Priscilla's 'business acquaintances', everyone from city officials to local mafia. I get caught with her when a gossip columnist pulls out her camera. I don't duck out of the picture, but I don't smile either.

The house is tricked out with cameras in every wall; speakers in every ceiling; and a red, orange, and yellow ("heat") color scheme in every room, and every table is

stocked with pamphlets explaining domestic violence, the charitable cause to benefit from tomorrow night's fights.

Priscilla flits off with one of her camera people to pose for a photo with the assistant mayor—only in Las Vegas would the assistant mayor attend a porn star's benefit—just about the time I start feeling sick.

It's my back. My skin is burning. I'm on my way to the bathroom when I get intercepted by Marchant's cousin, Samuel. I talk to him for twenty minutes about some development ordinance he wants the city to pass. He wants me to help, and I have no fucking idea what he's talking about, my back hurts so bad.

I mutter an "excuse me" and shake my head. "Migraine," I croak, and he says, "Ow. I'm sorry, man. Those things hurt."

"They do."

"Take care."

Fat chance.

I spend the next five minutes in a frou frou yellow bathroom, where I text Dave and let him know I haven't seen Smith or Lockwood yet.

'I'm here, outside,' he replies. 'Lwd just arrived.'

Hell, yes. I'm stepping back into the formal dining room when I feel something trickle down my back. My stomach heaves—blood—and I whirl around to step back into the john just in time to see some lady close the door. Fuck. I step toward the food-piled table, telling myself to quit being such a pussy, but the punch is blood red and there's steak laid out on a platter right in front of me, swimming in...

Fucking fuck!

I set off down the hall, swallowing repeatedly, ignoring one of Priscilla's cohorts, a pretty porn star named Cinnamon Vern. The nearest door is only steps away, and I'm reaching for the crystal knob when I hear Priscilla's voice.

I lean closer to the door, but her voice gets softer.

What the—?

I notice another door a few feet down, and walk swiftly too it. I hear a male voice, too, rising and falling in turn. I'm only standing there for a moment when I recognize it from a tape I heard in Marchant's office: It's Lockwood. He says something low that I can't hear, and Priscilla laughs.

"I ripped up his back. He's trying to play it off, but he can barely walk."

Lockwood chuckles, and she goes on. "Go for his left shoulder blade. I think there's some ceramic impacted. It was swollen and I noticed in the car he's not moving that arm much."

I clutch my stomach; it feels hollow.

"I don't want to do that," Lockwood says. I frown, confused. "I don't give a shit about the fight, and it's a bad idea to match me up with him anyway. I don't want anything to do with that sonbitch. I'm keeping my nose clean."

"Honey, there's not a thing about you clean," Priscilla drawls.

He says something angrily, but for some reason it's muffled.

"Don't be silly," Priscilla says, and Lockwood groans, "Just finish the damn job."

Priscilla murmurs something I can't hear, followed by: "He doesn't like to hurt a lady." She snorts, like the notion is ridiculous.

"Which is why you're supposed to make him like it," Lockwood snaps. "And get it on tape."

She laughs under her breath. "I never have time for that."

"Yeah, because you're thinking with your pussy."

"He's a good fuck."

"Congratulations, now do you want to do time in prison, or do you want to frame this son of a bitch and go to Mexico with me?"

"Is she still alive?" Priscilla asks softly.

"Yes," he says, after a moment's pause. "Now get down on your knees and—"

I slip into the next room and get sick.

Chapter Nineteen

~ELIZABETH~

I see Loveless's big, brown eyes, and I see her swallow, like it hurts to even think about. Juniper squeezes her arm and Loveless's mouth flattens. Juniper says, "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this."

Loveless shakes her head. "Scarlett should know."

"If you think."

And I can't hold it in anymore. "Are you talking about the girl who disappeared?"

They both freeze. I watch as their mouths curve down in unison. Juniper nods. Loveless says, "Yeah. She was my next-door-neighbor. Sarabelle. I trained her when she started. Three years ago, I think." She opens her mouth, like there's so much more she wants to say, but in the end she just shakes her head. "We're praying for her."

"It makes me furious," Juniper says.

"Me, too, but here's the thing, Scarlett. You need to know a girl disappeared from here. I don't know if Richard told you but I'm the Head Girl and I want you to know. If you ever feel uncomfortable around any man, or something happens that doesn't seem right, you need to let me know."

I nod.

"Probably best not to bring it up," Juniper advises me. "We miss her, some of us more than others, but we're family here, so it's a hole in all our hearts."

"I'm sorry to hear about it," I say as we reach the punching bags. "But, uh, what does—uh, was it Hunter?" They nod. "What does Hunter have to do with this?"

"He was the last one to have her," Juniper says with one eyebrow raised.

*

The next morning, when I eat with Juniper, Marie V., and Loveless, all I can think about is Hunter and whatever happened here, with Sarabelle. I'm disappointed when the subject doesn't come up again over breakfast, and I tell myself that's crazy. I should be glad no one's talking about Hunter. Just like I should be glad he doesn't come here to see the escorts anymore. I'm not glad about the reason he's staying away, but I'm glad I won't run into him.

Juniper has today off, at least until four, so she shows me all around the place and I learn a little more about Marchant. Rachelle and him have had a thing since college, and everyone used to think it would be just a matter of time before they wound up in bed together.

"But they use restraint," Juniper says. "I'm not sure who they fuck. Marchant seems positively virginal when he's out here, although I know he must get most of his pussy in the city. Rachelle is different. I really think she's sworn it off. I'm not sure how. Orgasms are the best thing in the whole wide world. Don't you think so?"

I blush, but I'm proud that I can manage a response. "They are."

"So tell me how it is that you're a virgin, darling? Just never met the right one?" I think about Hunter and feel my cheeks and throat color again.

"Yeah. Just haven't found the right one."

"Well Mr. Right will pay you rather handsomely I'd bet. In fact," she laughs, "we're all betting. I'm putting my money on a randy bidder for those long legs of yours."

I smile, feeling warmed by her compliment. "I've never heard anyone use the word 'randy.'"

"I bet you've never had a lesson on deep-throating, either, am I right?"

We're en route to one of 'the rooms', and I've been wondering exactly what we'll do. Hearing this, I nearly fall flat on my face.

Juniper smirks. "I guess you do have virgin ears, but a virgin throat?" She shakes her head. "No more. No worries, though, you're learning from the best." She gestures to herself. "Men pay thousands for this throat. It's not as unpleasant as you might expect either, if you know what you're doing."

"So you're my sex teacher?"

She winks. "Anything you want."

"Does that mean I'm supposed to...give the winner a blow job?"

"No, not at all. But Richard felt you might appreciate some bonus lessons, for whoever might be Mr. Scarlett one day, or boyfriend of Scarlett." She smiles. "If it weren't for this, you'd be with Brenda all day, and that's not good, I'm afraid."

"Who's Brenda?"

"Your trainer. She'll be responsible for all your beauty matters. And though they're few, she's sure to make them count. She might order you a waxing, or many miles of running, or perhaps a new hairstyle." Juniper yawns, and mutters, "Sleepless night. I've got a boyfriend in London."

"You do?" I gape, and she nods. "He wants me to quit my job, but he's a poor man and he can't support me. A soldier, in fact. Coming here in several weeks. I'll have to take the time off, but truth is I'm rather excited for it."

We slip into easy chatter, but behind it I'm thinking about Hunter. Sarabelle disappeared from his room. What happened? The girls have all been careful not to say, so I know there must be something there.

*

By the end of the day, I still haven't learned anything else about what happened. I have, however, been waxed, tanned, toned, and pampered with an hour-long massage, and Brenda's personal shopper has brought me several outfits.

"We like our girls and guys to look a certain way. One that speaks to a certain kind

of luxury," she explained. "You might have wonderful clothes, but we'd like you to wear ours while you're doing business here."

The outfits are beautiful—rich, soft fabrics and complimenting cuts—and the truth is, I love them. I feel sexy. I call Suri after dinner and get an update on Cross, who squeezed her hand today, and then call Mom, who's spending an evening away from rehab. I wonder who authorized that.

After an hour alone, most of which is spent wondering about Hunter and Sarabelle, and Googling my butt off but finding nothing, I grab my bag and head downstairs, wearing gray leggings, a royal blue sweater, and tall brown leather boots, to meet the escorts who worked day shift. Those of us who have tonight off are going somewhere fun.

As soon as I arrive in the nook nearest to the staff side door, Juniper pulls me into a hug and begins to brag about my prowess today. It makes me blush, but it also makes me a little happy.

"I want to know how your next guy likes it," Juniper tells me.

Everyone laughs, and Hannah, an escort all the way from India (they get a lot of international girls, I'm noticing) asks if we want to see Thomas Bourne.

"Who?"

"He's a poker player," Loveless explains. "And one of Marie V.'s, but Hannah wants to recruit him."

"He's a beautiful man," Hannah says.

"Too skinny," says a girl named Cat.

"That's not why he's beautiful. It's more than just his body. It's his...everything." Hannah holds up her hands, miming a swoon, and Loveless bumps into her. "You sure it's not that dick you want?"

"Is it big?" Hannah asks innocently.

Five minutes later, Hannah has been outvoted. We won't be going to watch anyone play poker, which leaves me feeling defeated; I'd hoped, against all good sense, that I might see Hunter there.

"We'll go to the fight," Juniper says.

As we spill out the side door, Loveless winks at me. "All the men who come to Love Inc. will have their eyes on you, wondering who you are. You'll have cocks across the stadium standing on end."

"I'm not sure how much I like that," I say as we walk across the parking lot.

"You should like it, honey. It means more money for you."

"Do you guys feel safe, out and about? I mean...after what happened here?" I've taken her light moment and turned it deadly serious, but Loveless doesn't take the bait. She tosses her hair, which tonight she's wearing straight down her back, and gives me a funny look out of the corner of her eye—one I think says 'I'm not talking about that'. In a normal, cheery voice, she says, "I feel real safe." She opens her handbag and holds up a Taser, and I gape. For the remainder of our brief walk to a stretch limo, she shows me how to work it.

We pile into the limo, driven by Rod, a Peruvian man who's also an escort, who

declares, once everyone is in, "I'm tired of my female clients. I need a man tonight."

So we set off, to find Rod a man and watch a fight. I lean my forehead against the window and I hope more than I should that I will find one too. I'm tired of Hunter's memory—and the mystery of what happened to the missing escort—following me all around here like a ghost.

Chapter Twenty

~HUNTER~

By the time I get to the Joseph Club at ten on Monday night, I'm going on forty-eight hours without sleep, and I know I don't need to be here.

The last two days have been...intense. In addition to my adventures with Priscilla, Marchant and I are going after Lockwood with everything we have. We've expanded the team—Julie, Roberto, and Dave have been joined by a retired CIA guy named Ted Burts, as well as Julie's friend Lay1a, a forensic IT specialist who once worked for the Las Vegas mayor's office—and our surveillance is 24/7.

If wishes were fishes I'd have a fucking sea, because I've spent the last two days wishing I'd had the sense to use my phone's video recorder. When I'm not wishing that, I'm making absolutely sure I heard what I think I heard. Can I trust myself?

I know I can, because there is one thing I remember clearly. It's that gut-shot feeling I got when I heard Priscilla say "He doesn't want to hurt a lady." Before that, I'd let myself believe that Priscilla really didn't have anything to do with Sarabelle, or if she did, she was as much a pawn as myself.

But I know now she's not, and it feels like someone stuck their steel-toed boot through my abdomen. I've only felt that way one time before. It was when I was nine and Rita turned on me for the first time.

I'd had the chicken pox, and I was itchy and whiny. I overheard Dad worrying about my fever, which was high enough that I'd been delirious—although I was lucid at that moment, wrapped up in my Power Rangers sheet and spying on them from behind the couch. Rita sighed and said, "Maybe he'll sleep for a few days." She did this funny laugh that was deeper and said, in hushed voice, "Or more than a few."

Dad just laughed, and he told her to drink another glass of wine, but I had known by the tone of her voice that there was more. And there was.

I don't like thinking about that, so I try to stop. I'm in the basement underneath the arena, in a small, tiled locker room that reminds me of another basement. I need my mind clear tonight, so I try hard to think of something else as I shower and wrap my back.

I've been given some small black shorts to wear, but I can't face thousands of people in something that looks like an overgrown Speedo. Those things are bad enough in the damn pool, but I'll be jumping around out there. I'm well-endowed, and half the town doesn't need to see it. I pull my black gym shorts out of my duffel

bag and tug them on over boxer-briefs.

I take a long look in the mirror, running a critical eye over my sallow face and tense shoulders. If I went out shirtless with this gauze wrapped around my torso, I'd look like a hospital runaway, but I can't stand the thought of lifting my arms to put a shirt on. Tough shit. I pick a light blue shirt from a charity triathlon I did last year and I feel sick by the time I've got it on.

I think I have a fever, and I know why. It's because of my back. I should see about getting some antibiotics, but for some reason, I haven't. I tell myself it's because I don't want the headache. I tell myself it's because I can't go in for an exam; word would get around. Last time I went to the ER, with a fractured ankle from an impromptu game of soccer with one of the neighborhood kids in Napa, one of the local San Fran gossip rags ran some bullshit story about me coming from a 'certain' area of town where I used to get my coke.

That stroll down memory lane makes me pissed, and that should be a good thing, since I need a little energy boost for the fight. But pissed leads me only one direction, and that's Priscilla's. All I want to do now is smash my own reflection in the mirror.

My fist curls, and I come so close to doing just that, I have to go sit on the bench beside the shower and start taping up my hands. A shrink once explained to me the concept of mindfulness. It's been useful before, and I try it now—paying attention to the stickiness of the sports tape. To the shape of my fingers as I wrap each one. I even give some thought to the scalding pain on my back, telling myself it hurts like hell, but I'm not dead or anything. Just keep breathing.

And I do.

But with every breath, I want to punch that fucking mirror.

How could I be so stupid?

How could I let her get so close?

Even before I thought I was being set up to take the fall for—for whatever the fuck is going on, I knew she was trying to blackmail me for sex. Why did I ever go along with it?

You know why.

Rita's face follows me as I pace.

I check the clock on the counter: twenty minutes till show time. I inhale deeply, and I remember Marchant's reaction when I first told him Priscilla and Lockwood were trying to frame me, after the gala the other night. I remember the pity. He knows how much I loathe her, and he has to know there must be something more to my fucking her. Something sick and twisted.

And he's right—he just has no idea about the details.

I start jumping jacks. It's mundane and makes me dizzy from the horrible pain in my back, but it takes the edge off for a minute. Then I get too dizzy, so I sit on the bench beside the shower. I close my eyes and try to be still.

I wonder for the dozenth time about motive. Why me? And how far back does the plan go? Did Priscilla find out about my mother and decide that I would be the

perfect patsy? Did Sarabelle get snatched simply because she was with me? Or was it just chance? Did Priscilla drug me out of spite, because I'd chosen Sarabelle over her, and Lockwood went for Sarabelle out of simple opportunism?

I think about the governor's mistress going missing two and a half years ago, right before he started fucking Priscilla. Just sixteen months after Lockwood stopped working security for him and started working security for Priscilla. How likely is it that Lockwood simply spirited the other woman away? Down to San Luis. Then into Mexico.

I feel sick, because Sarabelle is alive somewhere, being forced into God knows what. I want to go get her right now. And tonight in this fight, I want to bathe in Michael Lockwood's blood.

I slide thin gloves over my taped knuckles and remind myself that I can't. He could be all we have to lead us to Sarabelle.

Ted Burts and Roberto are scouring San Luis at this very moment—starting with MIGHTY'S bar—and Julie and Dave are with Layla visiting Priscilla and Lockwood's places of residence while they're out. We think we're close.

I've decided we've got three days more. Three more days to find Sarabelle or I'm going to the FBI myself. Priscilla can say whatever she wants.

I stare at myself in the mirror again, hoping I won't have to take that risk. Just the thought of it has me vibrating with rage. I check the clock. Marchant will be here in two minutes. I inhale deeply, trying to find the chill zone before we have to walk upstairs.

There's not enough time. I swing at the mirror, shattering it—and maybe my knuckles—in one mighty punch that sends glass raining all around me. The pain in my fist is good, blazing like fire.

I let myself drink it up. Inhale it. I take it inside.

I don't have time to clean this mess, so I meet March outside my door. He's got an envelope containing the name of my match-up.

Lockwood.

*

~ELIZABETH~

The Joseph Club is like nothing I've ever seen. As far as gyms go, it's fairly ordinary; the yellow circus-tent exterior, with its sparkling, blood-red sign and showgirl ticket-punchers remind me we're in Vegas, but it's the crowd inside that widens my eyes and makes my palms sweat.

"Got them packed in like sardines, no?" Juniper is pressed against me, a vision in a skin-tight white pant suit and red pumps, her dark hair pulled into an elegant pony tail. Swimming through a sea of shoulders and elbows on my other side is Loveless, wearing a flouncy peach-colored dress that whirls around her gorgeous legs.

"It's like this every year," Loveless tells me as we battle our way through the

crowd. "Priscilla Heat knows how to throw a party."

I'm chewing fruity gum; I nearly choke. "Priscilla Heat?"

"The one and only." She says it casually, but when she glances at my face, I must have that swallowed-a-bug look—and that gives me away. "I sense a story here."

"There's no story."

"Sure there's not."

"Story?" Juniper pipes in.

"No." I shake my head, making my loosely curling pigtails tickle my bare shoulders. "There's no story, I swear there's not. I've just heard of her. Kind of surprised she's doing something for charity."

"Ooh, there is so a story here. One that perhaps will tell us more about who Scarlett really is." Juniper smiles slyly, like she's already dredged the rotten truth out of me.

"I'm not saying a thing." I mime zipping my lips and follow Loveless, who's flattened her body against a cement wall and is trying to make her way through the gate that leads to our seats. Finally we make it from the outer walkway and concessions area into the arena. Loveless stops, eliciting several irritated shouts from the stalled crowd behind Juniper and I, and holds up her ticket. "Looks like we're that way," she says, pointing at the bleachers below our walkway.

She takes my hand and Juniper grabs my other one, and behind Jupiter, Hannah, and on we go. I glance down at my bright red daisy dukes and loose, silk strapless top—it's white and sparkly—and I pray I don't stick out like a sore thumb. Already I've noticed that the biggest difference between these gorgeous women and myself is my lack of muscle tone. Yeah, I've lost weight, but you can see my flab and cellulite if you look closely; they, on the other hand, are built like gymnasts, plus big boob.

When we finally make it to our seats, I'm stunned to find how close we are to the fighting platform. I guess it's called a 'ring'. It looks bigger than anything I've seen on TV: a bouncy-looking blue platform about a third the size of a basketball floor, surrounded by red 'ropes' attached to four yellow square posts at each corner.

There's a platform around the ring that's sunken, sort of like a moat, below the first row of seats, which is level with the ring. It's packed with men in tight pants and women in bikinis. I notice a lot of fake tans and faker boobs and even what I think is probably fake hair. I wonder how many of these people are porn stars, and feel kind of embarrassed that I have no idea. I've never watched a porno.

As I sink into my plastic bucket seat, I'm listening to Juniper and Loveless with only half an ear. So when I hear the name "Hunter" I actually whirl around toward Loveless. She's got her head craned toward Juniper, who's reading the program and speaking loudly to be heard over the crowd.

"He'll be fighting someone named Lockwood," Juniper is saying. "There are five fights. Theirs is fourth."

Loveless is nodding when I realize my mouth is hanging open. I shut it and turn back toward the ring, but it's too late. Juniper reaches around Loveless and grabs my

elbow, shrieking, "You are holding out on me!"

I frown, trying my best to give her a 'what the hell look,' but Loveless is catching on now, too. She turns to Juniper. "Do you think she knows him?"

"Oh, I think she does."

"I don't know what you guys are talking about," I say loudly. A guy with taped fists and tiny black shorts is leaning up and waving to the crowd on the other side of the arena, so the noise level is at max.

Loveless gently grabs my chin and makes me meet her eyes. "Hunter West. You know him? Don't you lie to me, woman."

"I'm not," I say, but I can feel my stupid eye brows arching like they do sometimes when I lie. I look down at my knees, then Loveless shrieks and I put my head down in my hands.

"Holy shit, Scarlett! You sneaky little bitch!"

"I'm not sneaky," I wail. "There's not a story here."

"Oh, I'm quite sure she's lying," Juniper says.

From around her, a blonde, gray-eyed girl leans. "What are we talking about?" she asks in a Southern accent.

"Oh, nothing," Juniper says.

"Later," Loveless says in my ear. She gives me a pointed look, one that says I should be sorry for lying, and I shake my head a little guiltily.

A minute later, music I think I recognize from Rocky starts playing over the intercom, and everyone's attention is shifted to the ring, where two guys are now stretching. I try to feign interest, but all I can think about is Hunter. I wonder how much space stretches from my chair and the ring. Twenty yards? Fifteen? Could he see me from the fight? What if he gets hurt?

You can't care, I tell myself. He's not your boyfriend.

He's a guy who has sex with escorts and dates porn stars. A guy who has been nice to me a time or two. On a rational level, I know my feelings for him are about as realistic as a middle school girl's crush on a pop star—and the chances of it being realized are pretty much the same, too.

But I have a bad gut feeling when I try to feel okay with the idea of him dating Priscilla. It's her I should be worried about; I did see his hands around her neck. But when you look at Priscilla, you can see the bad in her. It's a woman thing, I think. Women convey so much without using words. Once you've seen one catty bitch, you've seen them all. And I know how to spot a catty bitch. Whatever Hunter is doing with her, she wants it, and what I really believe is that he does not.

The two men fighting first start to circle each other, and it's a good distraction. As I watch the fight, I'm buoyed slightly by the other girls' enthusiasm. It only takes a second before word reaches my ear that the fighter with long black hair, Dominique Domino, is one of Marie V.'s clients. His opponent, a muscled guy with buzzed hair, is a porn star.

Loveless cups her hands around my ear. "But he also pays for Marie V."

I gape. "Why?" I say near her ear. I try to lower my voice while still being audible.

"Can't he get all the booty he wants, like...on the job?"

She nods. "But he likes it kinky," she hisses. "He wants to keep his image clean, so he pays for Marie V. for the weird stuff." I don't even want to imagine what depraved acts could ruin a porn star's reputation.

"I think he kind of likes her more than just professional," Loveless adds, and I arch my brows. "Oh."

She rolls her eyes. "That's a nice way of saying it."

I spend the rest of the fight wondering what she means, eventually deciding Marie V. is probably not a fan of Domino's affections.

The fight only lasts two more minutes before Domino clocks the porn star—hard—making his nose spray blood and gaining his title in a fit of screaming and applause, and Loveless leans in close to me. "He's the possessive kind. Marie V. will have to cut him soon."

I wonder how many of those types of situations working women find themselves in, and I think I'll ask later. I'm feeling more comfortable with Loveless and Juniper now—more like we're friends. For not the first time, I wonder if I'm just a job to them, just like the men are, but I shove the thought away. If they think of me that way, it's not a bad thing. I don't need to get too attached. Plus, it wouldn't be fair to pretend to be friends when they don't even know who I am.

Juniper passes me a huge tub of popcorn, smiling, and it's like a confirmation that I'm right. We are becoming friends. I don't want to enjoy the feeling, but I let myself off the hook. It's easier to face everything with friends, even ones that don't know your real name. I feel truly at ease for the first time since I arrived at the ranch.

That feeling lasts through two more fights. Then Hunter walks to the ring.

Chapter Twenty-One

~HUNTER~

Lockwood is in the corner opposite mine, looking surly but not threatening in red shorts and black sneakers. He's shorter than I am—maybe five-foot-ten—and without clothes to give him bulk, I can see his upper body is well-defined but lean. His biceps and pecs are oiled and his black hair is slicked back, so his sunken cheeks and sharply square jaw stand out like a caricature. His wary brown eyes haven't left my body since I came into the ring, but I've noticed he doesn't like to look me in the eye. The crowd around us cheers, and he widens his legs, trying to adopt a more intimidating posture.

Fat chance.

I've got maybe forty pounds on this guy, four inches or so, and I hate him down to his bones. I think I'd kill him with my bare hands here and now, if I didn't need him alive. I flex my hands inside my gloves and try to ignore the pain radiating from my back.

We're announced, and then we step forward to tap gloves. I look into Lockwood's eyes, and for a second he looks into mine, and there's plenty of hate there. I keep my expression cool, because I can't let him know that I know what he's up to.

Lockwood swipes at the air as he bounces back to his corner, and the crowd cheers with excitement. In addition to doing camera and security work for Priscilla, Michael Lockwood also fights semi-professionally—meaning he has fans.

The fight begins with the loud honk of a bullhorn and the crowd roars. He steps out of his corner first but he's waiting for me to come at him.

I circle, looking for an opening. Of course, he doesn't give me one, so I lower my guard. He takes a swing. I jump back. He gets me in the shoulder, a hard sting that sends pain across my back in waves, but I keep moving, arms up, ready when the moment comes.

He peeks up for a second, and I smack the bridge of his nose. It feels good. He swings, and I think it's wild but he's aiming for my back. He connects, and as the pain erupts I curse myself for not expecting that.

The crowd cheers when my fist hits his jaw, but he was already turning out of it. I get a kidney shot, and then he's on me. He hits me on the shoulder, and, choking back a scream, I hit him in the head with my elbow.

He dances back, and I follow hard, thinking I've got him. I go for a knock-out punch, and he side-steps to evade. A hard jab to my stomach, then a blow to my

jaw. Everything whirls. He gets me in the hip, he gets me in the ear. I think I see Libby in the audience, and that moment of hesitation earns me a glancing blow across my cheek.

I get him in the teeth, and he spits blood at me. I slam him again in the nose and he goes down on one knee. I kick him in the shoulder, I punch him in the neck.

He falls back, and when his eyes flicker, he smiles a bloody smile.

"You're an evil bastard," he hisses. "Making that escort disappear."

And I change my mind. I'm going to kill this rotten bastard here and now.

*

~ELIZABETH~

Something's wrong with Hunter. I can tell the moment he steps into the ring. I've been watching him from afar for years, and I'm an old pro at his body language. Hunter West is a guy who's used to setting the agenda. His limbs are usually loose and relaxed, carried with the kind of self-assurance that comes from knowing you've got it all handled. So when he steps into the ring looking uncomfortable, those wide shoulders slightly hunched under a tight blue t-shirt, with eyes that look tired and heavy even from my vantage point, I feel worried.

Then the fight starts, and it's dirtier than the others. From Hunter's end and Lockwood's. A few times I catch his eye and I think he looks desperate. I cringe each time he gets hit, and I cringe each time he hits Lockwood, too. Eventually he knocks Lockwood down, and I sigh with relief. I watch Hunter lean over; words must have been exchanged, because Hunter settles on one knee and starts punching Lockwood's face.

"Holy shit." Loveless, beside me, is leaning forward, both hands over her mouth.

My mouth is open, too, because Hunter is really going at it.

A whistle blows, but he won't stop. People in the crowd gasp. Men come and grab him, throw him down. Meanwhile, a nurse and a doctor are stepping in to check on Lockwood. Marchant steps in the ring behind them and helps Hunter to his feet. Someone throws a metal winner's chain sash over Hunter's head and I see him wince when it comes to rest on his back. He stalks away with Marchant, and I wonder where Priscilla is.

"Where's Priscilla?" I ask Juniper a minute later.

"She's in Ontario. They're filming something huge there."

The crowd claps as Lockwood is helped to his feet. His face is a bloody mess, but he waves, drawing more applause.

The last fight is tamer, but the vibe inside this place is still a little...off. A little dark. I think about what Hunter did, and I begin to see holes in the story I created to make myself feel better about the whole Hunter-has-rough-sex-with-porn-stars thing. 'Cause he certainly seemed to like violence in the ring.

"Want to go downstairs?" Loveless asks over the din of chatter. "See if we can get a view of the guys after they exit their prep rooms, post-shower?"

I do, but obviously I should not. "I don't think so."

"Then let's get a drink. You can spill your Hunter story."

"Yes. You can," Juniper says.

I insist there is no story as I follow them to the bar that hangs out over the arena. We have to go up countless flights of stairs to get there, and when we finally arrive—in a dark den lit by flashing, multicolored strobe lights—I realize we've clomped to the very top of the arena.

Juniper goes to order our drinks, while Loveless and I take a seat at a yellow booth. She leans across the table, and I smile blandly, pretending I don't know what she's about to ask.

"What's your story, Scarlett? We trust you, now you trust us. What's your Hunter West Story?"

I swallow hard, aware that I'm going to have to tell her something. It's only fair. Finally, after looking twice at the bar, hoping Juniper will be on her way back and I can postpone my sad tale until she arrives, I jump in head-first.

"I have a crush on him. But he doesn't know that I'm alive. I promise."

Loveless nods, like she's thinking this over carefully. She has a pretty good poker face, I realize as she purses her lips. "You know him from back home?"

I nod.

"So you are from Napa Valley?"

"Please don't tell anyone else. My family would be upset if—"

She reaches across the table, grabbing my hand, which is curled into a nervous fist. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Pinky swear?" I smile a little, and we latch pinkies.

"Pinky swear." Loveless stands abruptly and leans down. "Will you be okay for a minute by yourself?"

I nod. "Sure."

Without giving me an explanation, she slips into the crowd. I'm following her as she drifts over to the right, back toward the stairwell, when my eyes latch onto Hunter.

He's leaning against a corner of a smooth, mahogany bar, drinking something out of a glass. Probably West Bourbon. He looks really, really tired, and he's holding his left shoulder like it hurts. He's swaying gently back and forth, and I get the impression he's looking for someone.

I consider not going over to him, because I don't know for sure that Priscilla isn't here. But I can't stop myself.

I stop right in front of him, and it takes his eyes a second to lock onto my face.

"Libby?" The word is low and almost strangled, and I immediately wonder if he doesn't want to talk to me.

"It's Elizabeth," I say smiling a little ruefully, "but I answer to Libby as long as it's coming from you." I look into his eyes, waiting for him to smile, and when he doesn't—the left corner of his mouth twitches a little, but he can't seem to summon a smile—I feel that worried sting again.

I look him over, from his damp blond hair, the handsome face that's bruised along the jaw and around his right eye; the green eyes he's barely holding open. He's wearing a faded blue button-up that's rolled up to his elbows, over black slacks and casual loafers. My eyes make it to his hands and I can't suppress a gasp. They're wrapped in white gauze, but the brilliant stain of blood is already showing through the knuckles.

"Holy crab cakes."

"Lost my gloves," he murmurs, looking weary and distracted. I remember; he didn't lose them—he pulled them off, to go at Lockwood with his bare fists.

I step a little closer to him, enticed by the warm, earthy smell of his cologne. "What happened out there?" Immediately, I wish I hadn't asked that. It's so nosy. Prying. So I rephrase. "Are you okay? You just look...really tired and I noticed you were bleeding on your back."

He blinks, and whatever daze was over him, it's lifted. His eyes narrow, and he's back to shrewd Hunter. He brushes a hand down one of my pig-tails, fingering my brown hair gently. I can see his tired face soften as his eyes search mine. "What are you doing here, Libby? I saw you sitting with Geneese Loveless."

I shrug, scrambling for a way to play it off. "We're old friends."

"So you're friends, are you?" His tone sounds weird. Almost..too interested. As if. He chews his lip, and I think I just might die of Sexy. "It's...anthropology or sociology. Ethics?"

I grin, irrationally pleased. "How'd you know?"

He shakes his head, bringing the glass of amber liquid to his lips. When he lowers it, he's smirking. "Lucky guess."

My heart is probably about three beats away from bursting through my blouse.

But Hunter's expression quickly darkens. Worry creases his brows, and his full lips meld into a pensive line. "You should be careful with Loveless. She's...a hard-hitter. So are some of her friends."

I wonder what on earth he means by this, and then I realize and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess to swallow back a laugh. That's how he describes prostitutes? Hard-hitters? I lick my lips, somehow managing to restrain myself. It's probably best to play it off. I don't even crack a smile as I casually say, "Her friends have been nice so far, but I'll remember that. Although," I can't help adding, in defense of my new friend, "Loveless seems pretty level-headed to me."

"She is." He leans closer, so I get a magnificent whiff of his cologne. With his other hand he's swirling the liquid in his glass like he's starting to get edgy. I notice he's scanning the crowd once more.

I edge away from him, and his fingers loosely curl around my hair as his attention boomerangs back to me, and his eyes grow soft again. "Just be careful, that's all I'm saying."

I'm hit with the full force of those green eyes, and there's no mistaking the concern there. He withdraws his hand from the loose curls of my pigtail and grabs onto the bar counter behind him.

"Why do you care?" I whisper. The question comes from some self-destructive place, because I expect him to say, "Well, I don't, really." Part of me hopes he will say it. I hope he'll tell me that he and Priscilla are forever, and she might be a porn star but I'm fat virgin garbage.

Okay, crazy, we'll deal with that later. I smile tightly, blushing furiously in the dim lights of the bar. "I'm sorry. I appreciate your kindness. I'll be sure to think on my feet."

The universe smiles on me for a moment, because as I speak, Hunter is tossing down the rest of his drink; this means I can't see his face. In the last glimpse I have of him as I turn to go, he's rubbing his forehead with a pained look on his face.

"Have a good night, Hunter. You be careful, too."

I point myself toward the booth where I last saw Loveless and I tell my heart to keep beating. Hunter West is still a mystery to me, and a mystery he'll stay. We're moving through this world at two very different speeds: his is light, and mine is much slower.

Chapter Twenty-Two

~HUNTER~

I've scared off Libby, but I can't go after her because I'm going to be sick.

I look down at my drink and groan at what a stupid SOB I am, but then I remember Marchant ordered this drink, before he left to meet Dave. The drink's not drugged. It's me. My back. My shoulder. Lockwood got a knuckle shot right on my shoulder blade, and it's been bleeding ever since. Fever is pulling on me like undertow. Marchant got me a prescription painkiller, and he tried to make me 'talk' like he used to do in college sometimes, but in the end he just talked at me. Not smart to beat the shit out of Lockwood. Not smart to break mirrors. Not smart to let Priscilla whip your back to shreds.

Thanks, bro.

We came up to the bar together, and for a long time I was watching Lockwood, over in the corner surrounded by a bunch of strip girls. He looked bad, but not as bad as I'd hoped. Both his eyes were black, and his nose was swollen—probably broken. But he was enjoying himself.

Marchant ordered me two drinks, and I downed one before he left and the second right after that. Combined with this fucking fever and not a lot of sleep...

Fuck me.

My eyes are almost closing on their own as I stumble down the dim hall to the men's room. I lost track of Lockwood when I saw Libby, but it's okay; one of our

people is here somewhere and they've got their eyes on him, too. Christ, I can't even remember who it is. Was Julie gonna stop by here? I rub my burning eyes. Whatever.

My mind pulls me back to Libby and the look on her face when she asked me why I cared if she was safe. It bothers me that I couldn't think of anything to articulate that was...more significant than nothing.

I should be glad. She takes up way too much space in my thoughts anyway. I don't know what she's doing here, but I need to stay clear. I definitely don't need to be drawing the wrong kind of attention to her, and the thing with her and Priscilla...I still don't know what's going on there, but I don't need to aggravate the situation.

Speaking of...Lockwood deliberately goaded me—so now the whole damn town thinks I'm a hot-head. I should probably care about what's coming next. Should probably care about myself. What will happen if I'm drawn further into this cluster fuck?

...I just don't care.

Everything at the end of the hall has been moved around in the club's redesign last year, so I have a hard time finding the men's. I'm starting to feel like I might tip the fuck over when I get a text from Marchant. Might have lead in SL on SB. Stay there, Balboa. You need an alibi in case it goes down.

After tonight's show of rage, that's especially true, and I realize that's how Priscilla planned it—putting me with Lockwood. So I would look like a reckless, violent asshole in public. Fuck.

By the time I get to the bathroom, aqua blue and gold and tidy, I don't feel sick anymore—just dizzy—so I lean over the sink, painfully aware that my back is exposed. Someone could jump me. One of Lockwood's boys.

The floor is tilting. I think about telling Sarabelle to close her eyes. I see Rita's hand flying through the air, straight for my face, and I can feel that fucking whip bite into my back.

"You're such an asshole, Hunter."

I splash my face, but I forget about my bandaged fists and one of them gets wet. I sit down on a glittery gold bench in front of a mirror. In a minute, I'll get up. I'll go home. I'm not making things any better by being here.

I decide to test my shoulder blade before I get to my feet again. It feels broken, but that might just be infection. I shudder just thinking of the pain I'll feel when the liquor and the pill wear off.

Priscilla has turned me into a masochist. Except I know it isn't her. I raise my left hand toward the ceiling, drifting under sparks of pain that point to a broken bone somewhere back there. I stand up and take a few deep breaths that only emphasize the pain's point. I step slowly into a bathroom stall and work my shirt off. Maybe if I re-work the bandages Marchant applied. He's not very handy with gauze and some of them are pulling...

I can't find Loveless. It seems strange that she would leave our booth and not return, but then again I wasn't there; maybe she did. Since I don't have anyone's number in my cell, I've started looking for Loveless or Juniper—or anyone. I've checked three dance floors, and now I've moved on to bathrooms and saunas. If I don't find someone here, I guess I'll go leave a message at the valet station asking our group to page me when they leave. Maybe I'll just wait there. It seems stupid, but I'm not sure what else to do. I could call Richard, but I'm too embarrassed.

When I get inside the ladies' room, dimly lit with a strobe light in the ceiling, the stall door swings open, revealing a man leaning against the inside of the stall. On another day his tone back and thick shoulders would have turned up my temperature, but dude's exquisite body has been through the ringer. His back is marred by long, straight welts, covering him vertically and horizontally and every way in between. The streaks look painfully swollen, and up by his shoulder, there's an open gash that's oozing.

I try to catch my breath, but the twisty feeling in my stomach just won't leave. Slowly the man turns his head slightly, and I gasp. Hunter.

All of a sudden I'm overwhelmed by heat, a strong sensation that's at war with the concern I feel over the sad state of his back.

I hesitate a second, wondering if Priscilla put those marks on him. What must be wrong with him if he's in that kind of relationship? I remember the distracted look in his eyes back at the bar, the awkward way he looked behind his glass when I asked him why he cared, and wonder what is wrong with me for wondering at all.

Then I remember him helping me outside the court house, and I tell myself that this is something. This spark I feel when I'm around him—it's worth something. Then I picture him leaning over Priscilla, and I'm back where I started.

When am I going to learn to stop spinning fantasies around this man? He's a rich-as-sin poker player who lives half his life in Vegas and is in a very weird relationship. What am I thinking? He hits a double, shows me a few moments of kindness, and now I'm hanging on every word and reading into every glance.

Am I really that pathetic?

I reach for the handle on the big wood door that leads into the hall, and I hear the stomp of footsteps behind me. My mind spins madly, projecting its wicked wishes into reality. As I pull the door open, I can practically feel the rush of air from Hunter's body, moving after mine. His strong hand grips my bicep and his low, rough voice says, "Libby."

He turns me to face him, then pushes the door shut behind me. I stare at his face with suspended disbelief. The wide green eyes. The sweat-slick skin. His hair is wild, like someone's fingers have been in it, and his mouth is drawn.

I tug my arm away from him, or try to. His grip tightens as his gaze holds onto mine. "Were you leaving?" His voice sounds ragged, like he's out of breath.

"Yes. I...need to go."

"Because of me?"

I can't seem to find my voice, so I pull out of his grasp, grabbing the door handle and wrapping my fingers tightly around it. I don't pull it open. I don't even turn my face away from his. He's weary, obviously, but I'm certain he doesn't want me to go.

I wonder why, and a thought occurs to me that makes my knees quiver. Does he want another romp? My bedazzled mind screams: This is Hunter! Take the chance!

Being this close to him is like stepping onto the surface of a star. I feel like I'm melting. My mind speeds up in time with my racing pulse, and all of a sudden I have to know. "What happened to your back?"

His eyes are still on mine, and I can't breathe as they flicker to my lips.

"I hurt it." The words are warm and gruff, like he's telling me a secret but he's not sure that he wants to. The simple answer surprises me. So does the bare look in his eyes.

"It looks awful," I say bluntly.

He shrugs, but his nonchalance is completely ruined by a wince. I look at his back, through the reflection in the mirror. There are a lot of welts, and they all seem to be about the same size. "Did Priscilla do that?"

"You think I'd let a woman do this to me?" He looks so stern and masculine, I feel stupid for asking such a question. Not my business.

But there's something in his eyes. Something hard, almost a challenge, and I can't help feeling like I'm being warned away.

I suck in a breath, struggling to speak as I try to pull the answer from his eyes. "Did you?"

He's quiet again, giving me a chance to examine his face. There's a nasty bruise on his jaw. "This was a choice," he finally says.

A choice? My stomach rolls. "Are you saying that you did that to yourself?"

He reaches for me, grabs my hand, and as he pulls me closer, I know I'm in trouble.

"I'm not saying anything." His free hand comes behind my head, his fingers in my hair as I look into his handsome, bruised face. "You're the one talking."

"About you," I whisper.

"About me."

"I think you need to be more careful," I say, throwing what he said at the bar back at him. "I don't want to see you hurt."

His eyes flare, and for a second I think he's going to walk out, but then he groans and pulls me even closer. "You know what hurts?" he grits, his hand splaying over my ass, squeezing as he pushes me against his chest. "This hurts," he says, and I can feel him through my shorts.

He's hard and ready, totally jacked up. For me, I realize. I shock myself by reaching down—I want to touch him—but I stop and hover over his hard, smooth abs. His eyes widen and I feel his hand close over mine. That's all it takes. The world folds in on me, and the small, dim room becomes a fantasy. I'm rubbing my fingers up and down his bulge, amazed by the hard, stiff length of it.

Hunter moans, and I press a little harder. The way he flinches makes me worry I'm hurting him, but he's rocking into my hand like he wants me to press harder. I roll my palm around the round head of him, and he pushes his face into my shoulder. "Christ."

I stroke him up and down, eager to feel all of him.

"Unzip your pants," I say. It sounds unsteady, because I'm trembling.

He looks down at me, his face bent into a question, and I nod, nuzzling his throat as I pant. I'm still aware that this is a terrible idea—I'm going to get hurt; of that I'm sure—but right now, I want to keep his eyes wide and his mouth open, his body curled over mine, his hands clutching my shoulders. Right now, Hunter West is lusting for me hard.

He unzips his slacks and I reach for him, pushing past the elastic of his underpants so I can feel him skin-to-skin. Oh my God, he's hard as steel. So soft—and burning hot. The second that my fingers touch his velvet skin, he gasps and jerks inside my hand. I smooth my fingers down him, feather-light until I reach the base, and then I stroke a little, like I learned today.

He starts to pant, and I stroke up and down again before I tentatively cup my hand and reach lower. I've never fondled anyone's balls before, and I'm loving the shock on Hunter's face as he pulls away to look into my eyes. His are dazed, almost glowing. I can feel his body shaking. His knees are shaking.

"Libby," he groans. "Jesus."

Then he's pulling me against him, pushing my blouse up, shoving my strapless bra away and closing his lips over my breast.

I moan, and he cups my ass and pulls me closer, so I can feel him, big and hard, through what I can now see are boxer briefs. My hand comes out of his pants and I rock against him just a little; he groans and grips my hand in his. He thumbs me through my shorts and I whimper as his fingers push past my underwear to stroke over my lips.

"Hunter," I pant, and his finger glides inside.

I could die happy right here, but then we would be Hunter 2, Elizabeth 0, and I can't let that score stand.

Using every bit of willpower I have, I reach around his arms, pushing past the elastic of his boxer-briefs to cup his head. My fingers glide down on each side of his cock and he moans, pressing his forehead against mine, kissing my mouth. His is open, panting. "Elizabeth."

The way he says my given name, all breathless and lustful, is conditioning. I wrap my fingers around him, pumping him near the top. With my other hand I cup his balls. I'm surprised by how heavy they feel.

The hand that's stroking his cock moves over his head, finding it slick. I made Hunter wet. That thought makes me wet. His cock is pulsing and when I glide up and down again, he lays his cheek against my shoulder, holding onto my back with one hand while his other teases my clit.

"Libby..."

The nickname brings me back to the here and now, and I loosen my grip on him. His hand, holding onto my shoulder, trails down to cup my ass; his fingers in my panties shove deeper inside and I feel pressure building there. I shift my hips, desperate to relieve it.

"Hunter," I groan. I feel shaky, almost scared.

He tugs me to him, lifting me up and carrying me across the room. We go through a big, glass door and into somewhere hot—the sauna, where he gently lays me out on one of the benches. I watch through lust-heavy eyes as he grabs a red towel and lays it on the wood plank floor; then he lifts me in his arms again and spreads me out. My pants are unzipped and folded down. His hand is moving and I'm gasping.

Hunter West.

Oh, yes.

No. I shouldn't be doing this.

"You're with Priscilla," I whimper.

He laughs, a hard, dry sound. "I'm not."

"I don't even...know you," I pant. It doesn't matter to me, but it should.

He thumbs my clit and I arch against his hand. "What's to know?"

He's kissing my breasts, with one finger inside me. I've got one hand inside his boxer-briefs, and he is groaning in my ear.

This is wrong, this is so wrong. I know it is, but I can't stop.

"We're in a bathroom. I must be crazy."

"Sauna," he pants.

Then his finger glides out of me and skates over my clit. I clench my knees around his arm, barely able to keep my hand on his cock moving as I tremble.

"I can't do this," I whimper, although I obviously am doing it.

He rests his hand atop my mound, but I still have him by the shaft. My hand trembles, and it must feel good, because he shuts his eyes. As he does, his hips rock into me, and heat blooms all over my hand. His eyes flip open and I'm shocked to find that this is...wow.

I blink up at him, fuzzily aware that Hunter is coming and I should stroke him. He groans so loudly it hurts my ears, and his hands come down on my shoulders.

He pants, and drops his head against my shoulder in a way I love. I cup his cheek. My mind is racing, and as my pulse calms, I ask, only loud enough to rise above the sound of our deep breathing, "Why do you call me Libby?"

He lifts his head, his eyes on mine. His softens, like he's remembering something nice. "I used to know someone named Libby. She was kind...and when I met you, you reminded me of her."

I flush with shame. So the name is not for me. Of course not. He's dating a porn star, for crying out loud. Is he like this with everyone, I wonder? Sex on a stick, making women everywhere drop what they're doing and give him a hand-job in club bathrooms? I think about his back, unable to reconcile the grisly wounds with the look of kindness burning in his eyes right now. He must be some kind of fiend.

I draw my hands back to my sides, scooting away so I dislodge the hand that's still

in my panties. I'm staring at his handsome face while telling myself that this is it. This insanity with Hunter West is over now.

"Libby, what's—" wrong?

How could I ever begin to explain?

I stagger to my feet and throw open the sauna door, and I'm into the bathroom before Hunter is even on his feet. I'm crying before I get into the hall. By the time I sprint into the parking lot, I know I have a lot to learn about more than sex—starting with how to shield my fragile heart.

*

~HUNTER~

I can't go after her. I can't even move. I'm shaking everywhere. I can't believe I told her that—the name Libby. I've never mentioned her to anyone, ever—not even Marchant. But I told Elizabeth DeVille. I told her something secret, something as personal to me as flesh and blood—and she looked at me like I'd just slapped her. Why did it make her so upset? Does she think Libby is a girlfriend?

'Libby' came into my mind the moment I saw Elizabeth DeVille trying to pop the hood of an old Porsche in the middle of the road in the middle of the night. She'd begun as a neon blip on my infrared security camera, but even then I could see her temper, her determination. As she watched me in my garage later that night, her perceptive eyes brought the first Libby back to mind. I have a thing for names, so the few times I saw her again over the years, I would remember how she reminded me of Libby.

I don't bother asking myself why I always end up doing crazy things with Libby DeVille. I already know I don't have the answer. She just does it to me. Gets under my skin like a rash.

As I leave the sauna and stroll back into the stall where I left my shirt, everything on my body aches, but nothing more than the regret inside my chest.

Chapter Twenty-Three

~ELIZABETH~

"Scarlett!"

"SCARLETT!"

"There she is!"

I'm standing in the parking lot by the side of the Joseph building, having just declined a ride from—of all people—Michael Lockwood, the guy who Hunter bashed to pieces, when my posse catches up to me. I turn around, and before I can get a good view of anything, Juniper smashes into me, surprising me with a ferocious hug. "We were dreadfully worried!"

"I'm sorry, girl." Loveless pats my head, and Bella says, "We've been looking for you for half an hour."

Juniper releases me, and I look down the row of concerned faces. "I'm really sorry. It's my fault. I went to the bar and..."

"That's when I saw Juan," Loveless says. "He was my client a few years ago and I hadn't seen him since then so I guess I got distracted."

I feel relieved. None of them saw me with Hunter—at the bar or in the bathroom.

"I'm so sorry," Loveless says. She grabs my hand, and I'm being tugged behind the rest of them. I assume we're going to our ride, and a few seconds later, there is Rod in the Escalade. The other girls shuffle me inside first—"So you don't get lost," Bella teases—so I end up in the back, sandwiched between Loveless and a wall.

As we crawl onto the crowded strip, I listen to the girls talk about the reason we're leaving 'early'. Apparently Domino, Marie V.'s overzealous client, started talking crap about the guy whose nose he broke in the fight, and Loveless thought it was a good idea for the Love Inc. crew to leave.

"So I held you guys up? I'm sorry."

"It was Loveless's fault for leaving you," Juniper says. "Don't worry. We're a family here. We forgive each other."

"How was Juan?" Bella asks Loveless. "Still looking fine as mama's apple pie?"

"Finer than a key lime pie," Loveless confirms.

She glances over at me, giving me an exaggerated wink. I don't really understand it, and it's not long before I find myself drifting off into my own little bubble of Scarlett angst. How is it possible that I'm selling my virginity as a fund-raising measure, but I'm so addicted to my crush that I'm all tied up in knots not over the auction the day after tomorrow but over who said crush is screwing and why.

By the time we make it off the strip, I've decided that I can console myself with

something: Hunter is obviously in to me in the same way I am to him. I remember the way his green eyes burned when he grabbed my arm in the ladies' room. When I add everything together, I'm very tempted to say Hunter doesn't want to have a thing with me, but he can't help himself.

I smirk. Maybe it's pheromones.

My smirk turns into a frown when I remember seeing Priscilla out by Hunter's car.

I really wish that bitch would just disappear.

The road darkens as we head southeast, toward the ranch, and in the privacy of the dark, I allow myself to remember Hunter's beautiful body. I'm pretty sure this will be the last time I ever see it—I'm not doing that to myself again—so I want to remember everything. But the thing that stands out most in my mind, other than the beautiful, blissful expression on his relaxed face as I worked him toward an orgasm, is his back.

And I know Priscilla did that. And I hate her for it.

And I wonder for the hundred-thousandth time, why? Why is he with her? Assuming for a second that her personality and her job don't matter at all (and I'm aware the job gripe is kind of hypocritical considering the company I'm presently keeping), she's not even that striking. She's attractive in a prefabricated kind of way, but there are lots of other fish in the sea—other pretty women with Crest-white smiles, fake tits, and mile-long legs.

I swallow, feeling weird. I'm one of them, aren't I? Okay, my boobs are real, but now that I've gotten into shape, I'm leggy, and I've always had a nice, white smile. It's strange to think of myself as pretty when I'm so accustomed to ignoring my appearance—but I am pretty. I'm striking. A week or two under Brenda's care and I'll be just as cut as the next working girl. I'm the whole package, so why is he with her?

I'm going to figure that out.

As far as the other major thing I have to think about—I feel comfortable with this, comfortable in general as the girls take turns describing features of their best-ever client, leaving the others to guess names. And then we turn onto the little asphalt road that's lined with billboards, and Loveless leans in close and whispers, "I didn't talk to Juan tonight. I saw him, but he went downstairs before I could get to him."

Her eyes widen purposefully, and I know what she's saying. She saw me disappear with Hunter. I expect her to ask me for details, but instead she pats my knee. "It's your story, Cinderella. Just tell me, did you lose a shoe?"

She has a habit of saying things that I don't understand, but I have a miserable sense that the answer is yes. Tears fill my eyes, and she whispers, "Oh, honey."

I nod, and I feel a little better.

When Rod lets us off in front of the girls' rooms, Loveless slips off with me, toward the big house.

*

"I'm okay if you're busy tonight," I tell her as we make it to the side entrance. "I

don't want you to feel like you have to babysit my sad self."

"Pshh. I don't do anything I don't want to do. Not usually. When I break that rule," Loveless says as we walk toward the elevator, "I break it for my Daddy when he calls wanting to talk about baseball."

"Baseball?"

She shrugs. "He loves the Cubs. I can't stand baseball."

I think about my own Dad and feel a sharp pang. "Does your Dad know you do this?"

We step into the elevator, and Loveless smiles. "He knows I've got a good job in the entertainment industry, and he knows where I live." She shrugs. "I bet he thinks that I'm a stripper—but he doesn't ask, and I don't tell." She laughs. "Thank God."

I nod. "Sounds perfect."

"It is. When it comes to some things, Mom and Dad don't want to know."

"Are your parents married?"

She shakes her head. "Divorced. My mom's married to a woman up in New York. It was an amicable split."

"Are you an only child?"

She laughs as the elevator dings and we step out. "You sound like Marchant giving me a job interview. He likes to psychoanalyze us."

"Really?" That doesn't seem like the party-going bachelor I hear so much about.

She nods. "Really. Once you get three or more women in one place, it gets crazy enough without adding an extra dose of cray cray."

I smile. "Don't I know."

I lead the way to my room and unlock the door. When we step inside, Loveless inhales deeply. "I love that smell."

"Which one?"

"That flowery smell they put into the rooms here," She looks over at a side table and smiles knowingly. "Those are tiger lilies—they aren't what smells."

"So they spray in here to make it smell good? Like that 'new car smell' that dealers use?"

"Yep." She winks and walks over to the refrigerator, opening the door and smirking at the contents. "You've got the sex 'fridge, too."

I'm in stitches as she goes through my refrigerator, giving examples for how to use honey, chocolate syrup, whipped cream, chocolate ice cream, strawberry yogurt, pickles, champagne, white wine, chardonnay, cherries...

By the time she's finished, I feel five percent more lighthearted.

"Thank you, Loveless."

"For what?" she asks, popping open a box of refrigerated chocolates. She holds it out to me. "I'm just informing you of what goes on in this room when we get over-booked. These are girls' private rooms, but we have to make do sometimes. I think I've come in here at least three times." She smiles naughtily, and I laugh.

"You're about as innocent as a junior high schooler."

"I am not," I say defensively.

Her mouth draws into a frown. "I guess you're not. So maybe you should just get on with your story. I want the whole sordid tale. I've got a Hunter story of my own."

"Yours first," I say. She opens her mouth to protest, and I say, "Because mine will take all night."

Her brown eyes widen and she waves a chocolate. "I've got enough of this to keep me going. I'll go first, but I want the whole thing after that."

I blush, and she hoots. "Okay," I say grudgingly.

She crosses her long legs and begins to unlace her wedge sandals. "I was working with Mr. West a couple of years ago. I think maybe five. He used to come out here and get all coked up, drinking everything besides that big ole water tower Marchant uses to irrigate this place. But he never came to us that way. He's got a room here, so he would spend the night and sober up. Sometime around three or four, he would come knocking."

"On your door," I murmur.

"It wasn't me first. He used to come see one of their college friends. Elinor. But she was only here for two, three years and she moved on. I think she's a lawyer up in Portland now. Great set of natural DDs."

"What's a DD?"

She laughs. "Double-Ds."

"Ooooh." I smack my head. "Right."

"You've got good ones, too."

I look down at my girls and smile a little awkwardly. "Thank you."

She nods, then reaches out her hand, pinkie extended. "I want you to pinkie swear for me that what I tell you next won't leave this room. Hunter hasn't been here for a while, but he's still my client until it's been a year, and he's Marchant's best buddy. I don't need a headache, you know what I mean?"

"My mother's an alcoholic."

Her face scrunches. "What?"

"I'm telling you something about me. So it won't feel so uneven."

"My Dad has another family." I inhale deeply, because the truth is, it still hurts like hell. "A new wife and two girls. She says her girls came from the sperm bank, but I think that's a lie. They look like my Dad."

"Oh." Her eyes go wide. "Well that is something. I appreciate your confidence. You're right. It does make sharing easier. That must suck a big dick."

I nod. "Yes."

"So you want to hear my Hunter story?"

"For sure."

"Well, he used to come in feeling like hell. You could see it in his eyes. He was tired and I think he would feel sick. I think he wouldn't want to go to sleep, so he'd come into my room and want to fuck me for four hours straight."

I flinch at her words, and she gives me a knowing look. "It's not the f-word bothering you, is it?"

"No," I confess. "I have a dumb crush on him."

"So you don't want to picture him with me."

"It's silly."

"No it's not. It's natural. And it's been a while, sister. More than half a year at this point."

"That's okay. You can, keep going. It's not like he's mine or anything."

"You sure?"

I nod, not entirely sure I want to hear, but certain I don't want to miss out on details.

"Well...anyway. Hunter came to see me for a while, and after some time I learned his ways. I talked to the other girls and you know, we compared stories. And here's something I figured out: He likes us all to shut our eyes. We have to."

I'm confused. "Is that uncommon?" I think about that song—the one about closing your eyes during a kiss. "I would think leaving them open would be unromantic."

"You don't get much romance here at Love Incorporated. When he wants our eyes shut, it's because that's the only way he can cum."

I feel like I've been hit in the heart. I nod.

"I think he's using that instead of tying us up or holding us down. He likes to have control. A lot of them do. But he doesn't like us to look at him—ever. And when we sleep he never does." She shrugs. "I'm not saying this is big news around here. I'm just giving you some background."

I digest this. He's always kept his eyes open with me. "Maybe it's a privacy thing..." They are prostitutes, after all. He doesn't know them.

"No. He doesn't feel safe. It's kind of frenzied, how he acts. Trust me girl. I've been with a lot of men."

"So that's your story."

"That's not all of it. But now that I've seen the look on your face, I want to hear about you and him. If you don't mind going into it."

And, strangely, I don't. I haven't been totally open all the time with Suri, and even if I had, she's had so much of her own stuff going on; she hasn't been as interested in my details as she normally would be. Loveless knows Hunter, too, and I can tell she's affected by him. That she cares about him. Even if it's just escort-to-client.

So I spill. The whole dirty affair, from house party to the sauna in the bathroom at the fight.

When I'm done, her eyes are wide. "You and him have got a thing. A real thing. If he's letting you look at him, that's something, honey. And let me tell you something else. Something private that I want you to keep just to yourself."

"What is it?"

"That night. The night it happened with him and Sarabelle. I walked into the room that night because I noticed that the cameras had gone down and I was checking on everybody. Sarabelle wasn't there and he was out of it. Lying on the bed. He had gotten sick. And he was crying. He was holding onto his face, like he'd been bitch-slapped, and he was saying, "Please don't look at me. Please don't look at me like that."

I frown, confused. "What do you think that means?"

"I don't know." She shakes her head. "I told the cops Sarabelle was gone when I found him, and he was sleeping. It didn't look like he had hurt anybody. He didn't seem in any shape to. I didn't mention what he said. I guess it kind of struck me as his business. And I don't see Hunter West as any kidnapper. But I've wondered about it since then. And I've thought about it. How he looked. It bothered me. I was just thinking maybe you could figure it out. Someone who knows him in his real life should know. Someone should care."

Chapter Twenty-Four

~ELIZABETH~

I try to tell myself that I'm not obsessed, but it's a lie. Suri calls Friday morning before I go down for breakfast, and I spill all—starting with the rendezvous at Hunter's house party and going all the way through the tryst in the women's sauna at the Joseph Club two nights ago.

I'm eagerly awaiting her response when I hear violent sobbing on the other end of the line.

"Oh my God." My stomach does a back-flip. "Is it something with Cross?"

"New York," she wails. "He's staying in New York—" She sobs some more. "We're not getting married anymore!"

I sit down on my bed, clutching my stomach and feeling shell-shocked. "Suri, oh my God, what happened?"

"And Cross has his eyes open!"

"Whoa. Holy shit! How is he?!"

"He's good!" She's still sobbing; I'm up and pacing the pale pink carpet.

"Suri, do you want to come here? Can you come here for like a day? An hour?" All I want is to be with her, but I know that I can't leave right now.

"No." I hear her cry some more, and then she pulls it together, although she's still speaking in her sobbing voice. "Cross is doing...really good. Nanette is stunned. The doctors are surprised. He's had his eyes open for a long time now, but he's not really responsive." She sniffs. "I just wish he would talk."

And then she's crying again—and so am I.

"They pulled him off some of the medicine yesterday. They think that might be why he's a little more alert. I think he's coming off some more today." Suri still sounds sniffly, and even though we're talking about Cross, I haven't forgotten what she told me about Adam.

"Holy cow, that's incredible. I want to see him so much. I just want to talk to him." My voice cracks a little and she says, "Why don't we call you? He and I? I'll give him my cell this afternoon and you can talk to him."

"Would you really? I would love that. I'll quit whatever I'm doing—promise."

"Don't worry, Lizzy. I'll take care of him."

"But you..."

She sniffs again. "I'll tell you all about it, but not right now. You're missing

breakfast, aren't you?"

"Don't hold back on me because of this. I want all the details."

"I'm not," she pauses, still sounding teary, "I'm just not sure I want to go into it quite yet."

I hesitate before asking my next question, because I don't want to press her if she doesn't want to talk—but I want to know: "Do you think it's something that will last?"

Her voice breaks. "I think so. Yeah."

"Oh, Suri, I'm so sorry."

"I know." She's crying softly again, and I would give anything to zap myself to where she is. "I wish I was there," I say.

"I know." She takes a deep breath and I can practically see her steadying herself. Wiping her eyes. "How are you, Lizzy? Are you doing okay? Cold feet, warm feet?"

"Same as the day before yesterday." Suri and I talk almost every day, so she knows what this means. "I'm nervous, but I can do this. It's for Cross."

"Lizzy, he's going to flip if he ever finds out. You do know that."

"Let him," I say. "He can hunt me down. I hope he does."

"He might. Remember if you back out, I'll come get you."

"I won't, but thank you for the offer." I thumb the tiny framed snapshot of Suri and I that's sitting on my night stand. "I'm going to be thinking of you all day, okay?"

"Okay."

"I want you to promise me you'll call if you want or need to. Pinkie promise?"

"Pinkie promise. Love you, Liz-Liz."

"You too, Sur-Sur."

I spend the next few minutes thinking about everything that Suri told me. Then I call and talk to Nanette about Cross. He's got his eyes open when I call, but still hasn't responded to anyone, which is disappointing, but I'm not complaining. In fact, I'm dancing as I get into my clothes: soft black slacks that make my butt look good, open-toe black heels, and a sea green blouse with wood buttons. I pull my dark hair into barrettes and let it hang down to my shoulders.

By the time I go downstairs, the kitchen is closed; a quick glance at my cell phone reveals that it's time for my exam. I slowly make my way to the medical clinic, where for the next two hours, my virginity is verified through an uncomfortable series of pokes and palpitations. By the time I get out of the stirrups I'm red in the face and feeling distinctly undignified. The moment I push through the door back out into the main hall, I'm greeted by the sound of kids' party bazookas and a single spray of silly-string, project across my face from a can in Loveless's left hand.

Juniper catches my arm, and Marie V. grins. "It's time for your sex class!"

"Sex class?" I put a hand on my stomach, which feels flip-floppy at the prospect. "Does that mean I—"

"You watch," Loveless says, winking at me. "Now, follow us."

So I do. I follow them around to the right side of the main manor house, into a spacious suite that's outfitted with more cameras than the rest of Love Incorporated.

A hot guy with silky blond-brown hair and pale blue eyes is waiting. When he sees

Juniper, he grabs her hand, and I watch with a notch between my brows while the two of them step into another room, and a few of the girls I don't know well move in to give me hugs.

"We're leaving," Bella says. "Don't want to be a looky loo."

"Have a great day," a girl named Luri tells me.

"Juniper's the best," assures a slightly younger girl.

When the room clears out, it's only Loveless, Marie V., and I. On the other side of the window, Juniper and the guy—who I quickly find is named Aspen—are making out. We sit down on a plush couch, and I ask if the window is one-sided.

"Oh, yes. They can't see us," Marie V. tells me.

But I can definitely see Juniper. She's unzipping Aspen's pants, and I'm feeling a little awkward.

"Clients pay to watch this?" I ask them as Aspen pulls off her blouse.

"Some," Loveless says.

"Wow, that's weird."

"But not for you," Marie V. says. "It's good. They're going to show you the ropes. Feel free to walk up to the window. That's why they're doing it. So you can see what it's going to be like."

"Wow." I do end up at the window, only because Loveless prods me to. I'm still reeling an hour later as we eat a picnic lunch on the lawn behind the main manor house. When Juniper finally shows up, drinking a smoothie and wearing a long, pink robe, she grins. "Well, what did you think?"

"You were amazing."

She bats her lashes, and I realize they look longer—and her face looks more made up. "That's what I'm told."

"Well it's true." I gesture to her robe. "Are you working right now?"

"I am. I just came out between clients. I don't have one for another for forty-five minutes, and it's you."

I nearly choke on my diet soda, and she laughs. "I'm going to be your model. It's the web cam preview, remember? I'll model the moves they'll want you to make, and then you'll make them. It won't be so bad."

"You can do it," Loveless assures me.

"Thank you. I'm nervous." Very. I've been here for days, but I still don't feel ready to pose for a camera. How could I?

"You're ready for this," Marie V. told me.

We shoot the shit a while longer, and then Juniper and I go film my web cam preview. It's easier than I think it will be—all the film people are nice. I'm wearing panties and a bra, but my face is shadowed, so on the screen, which I can see out of the corner of my eye, you can see the general shape of my head but not much else.

Afterward, Juniper and I practice some moves, which is funny and not at all sexual. I do dinner in the dining room, where I'm regaled with stories of everyone's day. Loveless is working all night, and so is Juniper. I have the night off, so I head back to my room, where I get a call from Suri and I get a chance to say a few things

to Cross.

When Suri gets the phone back in her hand, she says she's leaving Cross, so she'll call me back. When she does, I get the whole story on her and Adam.

"It doesn't seem logical to be with anyone else, because we care about each other, but it's not enough. Neither one of us wants to make the sacrifices you should be making if you're going to get married." Her voice cracks a little, and she says, "It's not just him. It's me, too. I love him, Lizzy, but there's no...passion. Does that sound ridiculous?"

"Not at all."

"Really?"

"It's what makes the mundane stuff doable."

"I think so too," she says.

"You'll find someone else, and you'll move on."

"I know. So will you, girl."

I hang up the phone and spend the rest of the night thinking about that. About whether I really want to find someone. So I can have a marriage like my mom and dad's? In my mind, marriage sucks, but what if both partners are normal? Okay, not normal, but less crazy than my mom. Less avoidant than my dad.

I curl up in my bed and just so happen to find *The Notebook* on TV. When Juniper calls my landline about thirty minutes in, asking me if I want to go to a poker tournament tonight, I tell her 'no'. Until there's a real reason for me to think that there is hope for Hunter and I—hope that can be taken out into the light, rather than hidden away in a shadowy bedroom or a dark club sauna—I've got to keep my mind off him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

~ELIZABETH~

Four days pass without anything that registers on my Hunter-o-meter, and I fall into a soothing—if not comfortable—routine. Mornings I wake up and work my booty off with Brenda or one of her trainers. I take a quick shower in the gym and put on something comfy, then go up for lunch with all the girls, plus Rod, David, Slash, and a few other guys I don't know. After lunch, someone is usually assigned to teach me something. Yesterday it was Bella, showing me how to move in lingerie. How even the smallest crack between your legs can flash someone your va-jay-jay, and if you walk like a runway model, your teddy will look a lot better on you. Today I'm booked with Sonny for my morning work-out. I'm warmed to hear he thinks I look like “one of us.”

I take a long time in the shower, because Loveless has a lunch session today, and Juniper won't be in the cafe because she has a scheduled phone call with her English boyfriend. I like the other girls, but there are still moments with them when I feel a little like an outsider.

I haven't seen Marchant yet, thank God, I realize as I slide into a muted aquamarine sundress. It hugs my bust, shows off my waist, and makes my legs look long; the fabric gets more sheer as it nears the floor. Under the dress, I'm wearing pink ballet flats. I take my time drying and straightening my hair and pull the top layers up into a barrette. I stick diamond earrings into my ears—they're loaners, and real—before spritzing myself with one of the house-approved perfumes and sliding my leather bag onto my shoulder.

Apparently I was going slower than I thought, because by the time I reach the cafe, it's mostly empty. I grab a muffin and a slice of turkey bacon and check my phone for a text to let me know where I'll be spending the afternoon.

My stomach roils when I see: Dr. Bernard—Love Inc. Psychologist

Immediately I dread it. I run back to my room, call and check on Suri and Cross—both about the same, Suri says—and grab a ginger ale for the trek down to the manor where all the official business gets done.

I put on a calm face but my mind is racing. What does Dr. Bernard want with me? Is the good doctor a woman or a man? How can I talk to them if they don't even know my real name? Richard must have told them. Damn!

I shouldn't be so nervous about this, but I'm in knots by the time I reach the small

office on the third floor of the building. The doctor's nameplate is mounted on the door, so I figure she must be the official Love Inc. shrink.

Elizabeth Bernard.

How much do I dread thee? Let me count the ways.

The door is closed and my phone tells me I'm a little early, so I drop down onto the plush mini recliner in the hallway and try not to bite my long, pretty, red nails. I'm obsessing over whether she will recognize me as the daughter of an addict—as if every shrink in the West has heard about my mom—when the door opens and a nice-looking woman about the age of my estranged grandmother steps out. A quick once-over reveals shoulder-length gray-brown hair, a loose, floor-length brown skirt, and a surprisingly stylish, flowing beige blouse.

Her thin lips curl into a smile that looks more welcoming than anything, and she extends her hand; the nails, I notice, are as bare as her face. "Scarlett. Please, come in."

I don't take her hand, something I'm sure she notices, but I don't really care. I've seen enough therapists to last a life time and now that it's 'go' time and the belly bats are gone, I don't plan to go out of my way to assure this woman of my sanity. I played those games my whole childhood. I make good grades and have nice friends. So what if my mother slit her wrists last week? If I want to flap my arms and cluck like a chicken, what will she do to me? Tell Richard that the ranch shouldn't host my auction? Um, I think not.

She waves to a cozy, suede-looking blue couch with gray pillows sporting cut-out felt daisies. I take a seat on the end nearest the door, because there's no reason not to. I don't want to be here and I'm not going to be anything but honest.

She sits down in a small, orange leather recliner and pulls a pillow under her elbow. "Shoulder surgery," she says with a wince. "I'm still recovering."

I nod. It's not like I care.

"What can I do for you, Dr. Bernard? What's the reason I'm here?"

She shrugs. "I'm not sure there is one. I speak to most people who come through the Love Inc. ranch as a matter of policy. You aren't an employee, of course, but you've been here for..."

"Ten days," I supply. "And in three more, I'll be gone."

She gives me a gentle, knowing smile. "You don't want to talk to me."

"Guilty." I feel a little awkward, but there's nothing I can do to stem the flow of animosity I feel for anyone sitting in an armchair with their PhD on the wall behind them.

"You've seen a therapist before."

"Dozens." I cross my legs. "One of the things I dislike the most is the questions, so let me answer them for you. My mom's crazy with a capital 'C'. She's been a drug addict or an alcoholic, in and out of rehab, since I was a young child. She married into money and my dad was in love with her at first, I think. Over the years that faded, and at some point he started traveling a lot for business. One of the...plants—" that would be bottling factories—"he visited was in Salt Lake City and about

thirteen years ago, or maybe before then, he started seeing Linzie. He has two daughters with her—at least I'm pretty sure he does because one of them looks like him and the other one looks a lot like me. When I went to college he left Mom, sold the controlling share in his family's company, which had been in decline for some time, and moved to Utah to be with his new family. Yes, I'm bitter about it. And it doesn't help that Linzie is a bitch.

"My mom is in rehab as we speak; only it's not really a rehab, it's more like a spa, and it's costing us more money than we have. My oldest friend, Cross, got into a motorcycle accident after a party where he and I had a fight, and he needed help paying for his care. I knew—well, knew of—Marchant Radcliffe, and I got the idea to sell my virginity."

I think that's a pretty tidy summation of what's the what. The first half, about my family, I've given several times before.

Dr. Bernard arches her delicate brows. "That's quite a story. Frankly I don't know which part is the most dramatic."

I wrinkle my nose. I'm not used to a therapist being this direct. It makes me feel like being direct, too. "I wouldn't call it dramatic as much as just...screwed up. Seriously screwed up. At least the part about my family. The part with my friend—" whose very distinctive name I should not have mentioned— "was just an accident, and the part where I sell my V-card is obviously an attempt to get money." I purse my lips, looking for some levity. "At least it's not a kidney."

"Did you consider that?"

I nod, smirking. "It's less profitable, crazy though that is."

"That is crazy," she says. She looks down at her lap and makes a note on a pad. "Before we continue I want to make sure you are aware that I know your real name."

I gulp. "You do?"

She nods. "I'm sorry, but it's necessary. However, in my notes I'm referring to you as Scarlett."

I frown. "Do you know who I am? Like, my identity?"

"Do you mean who your family is? Yes," she says. "For most of my career I ran a center that specialized in the dynamics of financially privileged families. You're the DeVille heiress."

"Inheriting coal and switches," I say drolly.

"Tap water," she offers.

"Yeah. The kind with pollution."

"You've been through a lot, then, with your mother. And your father."

"I guess so."

"I think the answer is a resounding 'yes.'"

I nod. "Yes."

"You know it's not uncommon for the children of addicts to harbor some resentment toward the therapists who treat their parents."

"Why is that?"

The good doctor shrugs. "You've watched therapists fail your entire life."

That's true.

"Hope can turn ugly when it's dashed over and over."

Her words strike so true that I have I bite my lip to keep from crying. Feeling desperate, I change the subject. "Are you from the New Orleans area, by any chance?"

She smiles. "How did you know?"

"Accent. How did you end up here?"

"I'm a child of privilege myself. I married a privileged man, a lawyer and later a politician. His last name isn't Bernard," she tells me, winking. "By the time I divorced, I knew Marchant and his adopted New Orleans social circle well. He's been a client of mine since his college years. In fact, it's thanks to him that I relocated. When he decided to bring a psychologist on board at Love Inc., he wanted it to be his own."

"Really." That surprises me. Marchant doesn't seem like the type of guy to admit weakness.

But Dr. Bernard nods. "He came to me after he lost his parents. In fact, we still talk. Maintenance therapy. I'm not sharing anything with you that he would mind. He's very open about it."

I nod, because I'm not sure what to say.

"I've got a question for you, Scarlett."

My stomach flips. "Okay."

"Why are you still a virgin?" She smiles a little. "Let me rephrase. There's no reason not to be a virgin, if that's what you so choose, but you're a pretty girl, and judging by your plans, I assume there are no religious or ethical qualms about experiencing intercourse."

I swallow hard, wanting to die. Does she actually expect me to answer this?

"I was curious, that's all. If you don't want to discuss it, we don't have to."

Well, dangit. Now I feel like I should discuss it. I play with my fingernail, then realize I'm doing it and force myself to look into her eyes.

"The question makes you uncomfortable?" she asks.

"Well, yeah."

"Does sex make you uncomfortable?"

I sigh. "That's not why. I guess it's just a little further than I like to go."

"With therapists."

"With anyone," I say. But, hey, I'm here. Why not? I chew my lip and then just jump in head-first. "I used to be fat," I tell her. "And I have trust issues."

"What kind?"

"The because of my mom kind. The kind you get when you grow up in an unstable home. You know the story."

"I don't know your story. How does that go?"

I shrug. "My parents never had sex very much. A few times I over-heard them talking about it. Their relationship was just the surface. Probably because, with an addict, it's impossible to get any deeper than that. So we were all...I don't know...like, roommates. I made friends with Suri and Cross, my two best friends,

when I was young, so I grew to trust them without meaning to. But everybody else..." I bite my lip as the truth finally dawns on me with crystal clarity. I spit it out in a froggy voice. "I guess I just never considered that it was possible to have a good relationship with a man."

Her face is sympathetic. The kind of sympathy that almost hurts. I raise my hand to my chest. It kind of does hurt. "Geez, that's new to me. I didn't even know that until just now."

She nods. "That's one of the reasons people—non-addict people—come to therapy. To learn more about themselves. How much time have you spent learning about Scarlett? Not Mom, not Dad, but Scarlett. Her issues. Her fears."

I press my lips together. The answer is none, of course. "I never had time."

"That's very common for a young woman with your history. And it's not your fault," she says with a reassuring smile. "The great thing about getting older is, you change yourself. And what's healthy and appropriate, you nourish."

I nod, relieved. I'm not a freak who doesn't want a relationship. I just never really thought that one was possible. It makes sense!

She looks up at the clock behind me, and I'm surprised to find an hour has passed since I walked through her door.

"Do you find yourself in Vegas very often?" she asks.

"Sometimes," I hedge. I sigh. "Not really." I feel my cheeks flush, and I tentatively say, "I wish I did. It was kind of nice talking to you."

She smiles. "Well I asked because I have an office in Los Angeles. I know it's not a speedy drive, but it is in driving range."

I nod, and she asks, "Would you like to talk again sometime?"

"It depends on how much money I get," I say, smirking, though honestly, it's embarrassing having as little money as I do.

"I work on sliding scales at times. Perhaps that would work for you."

"Maybe." She hands me her card, and I put it in my purse. "I'll call some time."

"I'd like that. And Scarlett?" I turn with my hand on the door-knob. "Don't hesitate to come back if you'd like to talk again before you go."

Chapter Twenty-Six

~HUNTER~

Even as I'm playing, I know Lady Luck is with some other guy tonight. I imagine the headlines, stupid puns arranged in that kind of cadence that journalists and bloggers like.

West doesn't know which way is up in tourney

Bourbon heir floats in first-day tourney

What-the-fuck-ever.

I screwed up last hand, and I'm screwing up again this time. A Zen master couldn't play with all the shit I've got bouncing around in my head. I want to tell that to the annoying blonde holding the camera. She looks a little too much like Priscilla for my liking, and I'm having trouble not snapping as she pushes her mic into my face.

Today has sucked. Scratch that. Everything has sucked since the other night at the Joseph. Priscilla didn't really go to Ontario. Today she rode down to San Luis and Julie tailed her, but she didn't seem to do anything except have dinner with a client at a swanky hotel.

I'm obsessed with her now. Priscilla. Obsessed with bringing her down. I go over every detail of her conversation with Lockwood at the gala again and again, and the worst thing is, without a recording, we've got no proof. Zip.

Doesn't help that Lisa from the FBI stopped by this morning to ask if I have ever been to Sarabelle's house. I don't say a word. I've got nothing to hide, but I'm not dumb enough to cooperate when I'm clearly emerging as suspect número uno. There are a million ways your words can be used against you once they leave your mouth.

Then there's Libby. Libby, Libby, Libby. I know she's been in Vegas, but Dave hasn't been able to find her. I finally broke down and texted Loveless an hour before

play began.

'Elizabeth DeVille still with you?'

She texts me back near the end of the second hand, and I read her messages between the second and third hands.

'Who?'

'Elizabeth.'

'I don't know who that is. R u ok, Hunter?'

'Elizabeth,' I punch furiously. 'You were with her the other night at the Jo.'

When Loveless doesn't text me back, I take a few minutes during a commercial break and call Marchant.

I was right about my luck tonight. I lose the game.

I'm so furious I don't even give a damn.

*

~ELIZABETH~

The big day is a busy one. So busy, in fact, that I have almost no time to think of what's coming. I'm grateful for that as I am waxed, worked out, fitted, and eventually sent to my room with a red lingerie set I will wear when I lie on the bed for bidding.

I review the contract, which is a lot longer than I anticipated but appeared to contain everything that Richard and I worked out. The winning bidder is paying for six hours of my time, either at Love. Inc. or at another location. I can bring guards. I will provide vaginal intercourse. OH MY GOD, it sounds so technical this way! But luckily, I am only required to do this once to fulfill the contract.

If I provide only oral stimulation the bidder will be refunded 95 percent of their bid. If my hymen is broken but I stop intercourse before the bidder reaches climax, the bidder receives a 40 percent refund. Love Inc. takes a cut of my final total.

There's also a list of nos. No photography or video or audio recording. No hair pulling. No name-calling. No spanking. And no contracting me in any way after—although, oddly, there is a provision for me to contact the bidder. As if. This isn't Pretty Woman.

After eating a light lunch, I return to my room and have a last-minute freakout. I look in the mirror, at the stubborn bit of cellulite on the back of my thighs—it just won't go away, no matter how many lunges I do. I look at my not-quite-six-pack stomach and wonder if the winning bidder will want more. What about my breasts? They are nice, but they're just full Cs, not DDs. My fingernails are bare, but my toenails are painted red. I have weird toe-nails. The one on the big toe looks like a space helmet. And my voice... In third grade, Holcomb McVey said I had a stupid voice. I don't think I do, but—

My cell rings, and I whirl around naked to face my bed. Suri.

"Thank God," I answer.

"What is it?"

"I'm freaking out here."

"Do you need a savior?"

"No!" I laugh. "I need to remind myself that this was my choice and that I don't need a savior. Or anyone's approval."

So Suri talks me down, and she tells me about Cross—he opened his eyes again!—and when I get off the phone with her, there's a knock at my door and it's Marie V. She's wearing a pink robe and holding a small bag of lotions and perfumes.

"Are you nervous?" she asks.

"Um, hell yeah."

"Let me tell you something: They won't be expecting much. Every man knows virgins are kind of clueless. As long as your hymen is still intact, the guy will have a great time."

I scrunch my face up. "Um, thanks?"

She laughs, and surprises me by leaning in for a hug. "I enjoyed hanging out with you, Scarlett. I hope you have a great night."

"Thank you. I'm glad I met you, too."

"Any chance we might see you again?"

"I don't think so. I think if I do end up leaving the ranch to do the deed—"

"You probably will."

"You think?" I ask, wide-eyed.

"Just a guess."

My belly bats do a simultaneous dive. "Well if I do, I'll be picked up by a driver in my car, and I'll go home I guess."

"We're going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss this place, too."

I put the things that Marie V. gave me in my toiletries bag and answer the door again when a man named Max comes to do my hair. While he's using some super-powered hair dryer on me, Brenda comes in. She tells me how good I look and offers me a small, black box of condoms.

"The man should know to have his own, but just in case."

"Thank you." I say goodbye to her, thanking her for my better-than-ever calves and biceps, and when the room is empty, I start zipping my bags. If I stay here to do the deed, I'll have to get my things out of them, but if I go, someone else will collect them for me, so I'll be glad they're packed. As I'm zipping my largest suitcase, there's another knock on my door.

I open it hesitantly, trying not to mess up my pretty hair, but it's all for naught: Juniper and Loveless throw their arms around me, and the last thing I care about is my hair.

"We came to help you dress!" Juniper says.

I don't think I've ever laughed so much in such a short period of time. My nerves nearly disappear, and I know I'll be forever grateful to them.

At nine-thirty, the girls walk with me to the showroom, where a huge king-sized

bed is set up, all the bedding red to match my bra and panties. I lie out and they help pose me, spraying yummy scents in the air and lighting candles.

"You're beautiful," they tell me.

I thank them for their help, and they leave one at a time, each with a final word of encouragement. Juniper is last. "I remember my first time. Believe it or not," she laughs. "It's scary, and then it's over. You'll be fine."

I have about two seconds to myself, just enough time for my heartbeat to take off, when the door opens, and Marchant strides in. "Hi there, Scarlett DeVille."

My heart stops. I stare at his smiling face, and the only thing I can say is, "Uh... you know my name?"

He nods. "Don't worry, though. Our secret."

I say nothing, mortified beyond belief. I want to ask him if he'll be watching—I want to ask him to not watch. But of course he's going to watch. I almost drop dead when another thought occurs to me. If Marchant knows, does that mean—

"Bidding might get intense, but you'll only see the numbers. These things usually don't last but ten minutes or so."

I nod, still feeling totally panicked that Marchant Radcliffe—Marchant Radcliffe, Hunter's best friend, who knows my family—is here, and he knows what I'm doing. I tell myself it was probably inevitable, but I still feel ill.

He must misinterpret my anxious look, because he steps a little closer, sticking one hand in the pocket of his pinstriped coat. "You'll be okay. Everyone I know who's bidding is good people. I wouldn't put you in bad hands."

I don't know what to say, so I nod. "You look great, you'll do great," he says as he pats the bed. "No more than ten minutes, Scarlett." He winks, and then he's gone.

My muscles tremble as I try to keep my pose. I'm lying on my side, with my legs slightly scissored and my hand propping my head up. My fingers are threaded through my hair so it falls around my right shoulder.

I'm staring at the digital ticker near the ceiling, feeling like I might have a panic attack or pee myself, when the door bursts open and I shriek.

It's everyone. Not just a few but all the escorts. Loveless is out in front, and she presents me with a little velvet box. She pops it open, and two beautiful, glittery diamond earrings wink at me.

"Surprise!" everyone shouts.

Loveless leans down. "I'll put them in your ears. Just hold your pose, girl."

As she puts the earrings on me, I feel a sense of total peace. And okay, it evaporated as soon as they left the room and a little speaker on the bed told me I'd be live in two minutes. But before then, I felt valued and loved. Here in a brothel.

The ticker clock has big, red numbers, and as they inch closer to zero, I can feel my throat constricting like I might be sick. I focus on deep breaths and think about Dr. Bernard and how many good things have happened to me here. I feel older. Wiser. More capable. I can handle this.

Then the ticker reaches zero and the windows surrounding my bed change subtly in hue—getting a little paler. I forget to breathe for a second, but then I smooth my

mouth into a generic smile.

When the first bid flashes across the ticker, I nearly die.

\$50,000, just like Marchant said. That's a lot of money.

The numbers quickly jump.

\$80,000.

\$100,000. Oh my God.

\$140,000.

\$150,000.

\$200,000.

\$300,000. I feel dizzy, and it's hard to keep my smile. You can do it, Lizzy. Just a little longer. There is absolutely no way the bidding will go higher than 300 grand.

\$400,000.

I want to barf, but I try to stay in pose as the light covers my face but shines on my body. I tell myself again it's almost over. Then the ticker moves again.

\$3,000,000. I'm shaking.

\$3,200,000.

\$3,400,000.

Holy Moses.

\$5,200,000.

\$5,500,000.

\$5,900,000.

\$5,000,000.

\$10,000,000.

This cannot be real.

I'm gasping for air as the windows grow darker, and lying sweaty and shaky on the bed, I can't believe what I've done. I've sold my virginity. I can't believe anyone paid \$10 million for my hymen.

I'm not sure I can do this.

I'm not worth that much. Maybe after a few rolls in the hay, but not now. I don't know how to do this.

I'm almost in tears as I pull the covers over myself, and Richard strides in. His eyes are wide. "I can't believe it. No offense, I thought you'd do well, but..." He shakes his head and laughs. "You're set for life."

I smile weakly, because if I don't smile, I'm going to start sobbing. "Is it...someone good?"

I mean who won me, and Richard gets it. He hands me a small, white card with the winning bidder's name printed in gold script. My heart really does stop this time.

Hunter West

Chapter Twenty-Seven

~ELIZABETH~

"I can't do this."

I'm sitting in an black velvet armchair, and Marchant Radcliffe is again standing in front of me. We've moved into a private room, one with no windows of any kind. I'm wearing a black silk robe, and I'm gritting my teeth as I try to come to terms with what just happened.

Marchant shakes his head, looking annoyed. "I've already taken the bid."

"I didn't say I wanted to back out." I don't want to back out. What I want is to disappear, right down to my ten million dollar atoms.

"Woman, you're giving me whiplash," he drawls. "You just said you couldn't do this."

"I didn't mean to say that," I say quietly. "I was thinking out loud."

"This is good for you," he tells me. "Real good. You got a price I wouldn't dream of and the bidder is a good guy. That's a Disney ending."

"It is?"

He narrows his eyes a little. "Yes."

I look down at my black robe. So this is what a princess looks like. I rub my eyes. Oh my God. How did this happen?

Marchant is tapping his foot, and I'm reminded that despite his easy charm and good looks, he's a business man—a business man in the people-selling business. He leans forward, tipping my chin up with gentle fingers. "Are we good? C'mon...I want to hear you tell me that you're okay. You feel prepared?"

I nod, although it couldn't be further from the truth. I'm not ready to have 10

million dollar sex with anybody, much less Hunter. The mere thought of seeing him in this position makes my eyes well up with tears again. I blink them back. I'm not going to be a prima donna or a baby about this. At least not when anyone can see.

"Does Hunter come here often?" I don't mean to ask it. The words just fall out of my mouth.

"He comes here to see me. He's an old friend. One of my best." Marchant's eyes are digging into mine, and I get the feeling he's trying to figure something out. A second passes, and his mouth draws up. He curses angrily and digs a hand through his hair.

"Goddamnit." He looks back over his shoulder. "I'm sorry for the French, but shit. You and him...you've got some sort of history." He says it like 'history' is a curse word.

I shake my head, wondering what it means that Hunter hasn't told his best friend about me. "I was just curious."

At that, he throws his head back and laughs. And laughs. And laughs. "Just curious. I'll put that down in your file." He takes a step closer, kneeling so we're at eye level. His brown ones look earnest. "You want the money?"

I nod.

"You sold your virginity to Hunter West for \$10 million. Are you ready to fulfill your contract?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, if that's what he wants me for." I'm having a really hard time believing he paid that much money to get what he could probably get in a club bathroom—heck, anywhere—for free.

"If that's what he wants you for." Marchant snorts. "He just paid millions for you, honey. I'd say he fucking wants you." He gives me a pointed look, like he's expecting some explanation as to why his friend would do this. When I just blink at him, he rolls his eyes. "Well here's the deets. He wants to host you at his ranch. Tonight." He exams my face, which is bug-eyed, and shakes his head like he can't believe what he's about to say. "He's willing to pay an extra two million if you have any objections."

An extra two million to get me to his house tonight? I rub my lips together, freaking the F out and trying not to hyperventilate. "Okay," I whisper. I can do this. Oh God, can I?

"You gonna charge him the extra, or you want to amend the contract and settle with what he paid already?"

"Ten million dollars." It just can't be real.

But Marchant nods, those brown eyes holding mine, like he's looking for something. I sit up straighter, hell-bent on keeping him from finding it.

I take a deep breath, so I can speak without my voice shaking. "I'll do it without charging two million, unless there's something else to this. I mean, he doesn't want me for a threesome or something, right?"

"A threesome?" He laughs. "That's more my speed."

I remember the story about Priscilla Heat filmed an orgy scene with Marchant. The

thought disgusts me. Makes me cold. I wrap the robe more tightly around my body and nod. "Well okay then. I'll go...tonight."

"I'll have Jeff ride with you if West wants to take his own wheels."

I smooth the robe over my knee. "I don't think I need him. Thank you, though."

He arches his brows—same color as his distinctive auburn hair—and sticks his hands into the pockets of his suit. "I'm sorry you're unhappy with the outcome of the bidding."

I try to smirk, but my mouth just ends up quivering, so I press my lips together. "I don't really believe you. You're his best friend. Everybody knows that."

"Guilty as charged. Hunter's a good guy, Scarlett. He won't hurt you. He..." Marchant looks like he's going to confide in me about something, but then he shakes his head. "Hunter's a good guy," he says.

He glances down at his iPhone, then back up into my eyes. "Are you okay to talk with him? He'd like to see you now."

Right now? I look down at myself. I can't talk to Hunter in this. Then it hits me, for the first time fully, that Hunter is the winner.

I feel tears of panic pooling in my eyes. Hunter West. Not some stranger I can forget. My Hunter. Except he isn't mine—and now he knows I sold my V-card. I didn't want anyone to know!

I bite my lip so the tears dry, and I straighten my posture, determined to master my emotions. Marchant's mouth is puckered into a curious expression, but before he can throw any more of his questions at me, I nod briskly, in a way I hope looks professional. "I'll talk to him."

He turns to go, but he turns back around to me before he reaches the door. "Scarlett?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know what's going on with you two, but I want you to know: Hunter's my boy. He's a good dude, and he's got a lot on his plate. I mean a three-course meal of bullshit. So just make sure whatever happens tonight doesn't turn into something else for him to deal with, okay?"

I'm so stunned, I can't even nod. I just sit there with my mouth hanging halfway open, and after giving me a smile that looks almost sad, Marchant turns and leaves.

Holy cow.

I fold my arms around myself, trembling slightly. What is Hunter playing at? I just don't understand. I can't believe he paid so much money for me. Why did he do it? And 'three-course meal of bullshit'? Does Marchant mean the Sarabelle thing? Hunter's not a suspect, is he? I tell myself obviously Marchant's a drama king. Look at his job. Showmanship. Drama. I'm sure it's nothing.

Still, I ball my hands into fists and bite my lip until I taste blood mingled in with the dull tang of my lipstick.

Pull it together, Elizabeth.

I can do this. I can keep my heart intact, have no-strings, virginity-losing sex with Hunter, and go back home to Suri and Cross. I take a few deep breaths and start to

feel a little better. Even a little angry. Marchant doesn't know what he's talking about. There's nothing vulnerable about Hunter. I'm the one who doesn't need any extra bullshit. Hunter is invincible. Capable of eating me for breakfast in one big CHOMP.

I drop my head into my hands, feeling like I'm being tugged in ten directions. A few more deep breaths, and I remember that I just can't care. This is a one-night thing. Nothing more.

I'll be glad to get rid of my V-card. And holy belly bats, am I grateful for the money.

As for everything else...I don't know why Hunter bid on me, and I don't care. I don't have to. All I have to do is screw him.

I stand up, my black robe whirling around my ankles. I run my fingers through my long, loose hair and slide a tube of lipstick from the robe's pocket. I can do this.

And I believe that—right until the moment the door swings open and Hunter strides inside.

He looks rough, his smooth skin pale, his mouth pinched tight. And God—that body. His massive shoulders draw my eyes, and my gaze falls down his flawless abs, visible through the tight, black t-shirt that is his trademark poker outfit. Poker outfit? I look down at his pants, and yep. They're the black jeans he always wears, along with big, black boots. He's Stetson-less, though, and his pretty golden hair is messy. His eyes, now fixed on me, are slightly red. I wonder if he's doing cocaine. I've heard he used to. My stomach twists. He looks me over, same as I did him, and I realize with a jolt that he looks genuinely angry.

His mouth pinches a little more, and he nods briskly at the door. "I've got my ride at the side entrance. Marchant says you're ready."

I lick my lips, looking into his face and searching for any hint of what he's thinking. But he's got a hell of a poker face. "That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it? Are you expecting something more? A corsage?" he asks dryly.

I flinch. "No, of course not. I just mean...you look upset or something."

He stuffs his hands into his pockets. "Not so much upset as pissed."

"At me?"

"Just pissed," he says, folding his arms like he's daring me to challenge him. I couldn't if I wanted to. I have no idea what he's talking about. But I have a strong gut feeling that it's directed at me.

"I don't want to go off with someone who's angry at me."

His face goes from stony to downright hard. Those gorgeous green eyes are like nails. "Then reject my offer."

"No way," I say. "I mean...I can't. It's done already."

"Then go get into my car. You don't have to like it." His lips press flat. "I'm paying you, remember?"

I feel my face heat up. "I'd be a lot happier if you weren't. Seems we both have a better time when we hook up in bathrooms."

"I was thinking the same thing," he says. He sounds like he's being dry again, and I'm confused. He rubs his hand roughly over his forehead and turns toward the door. "Never mind about getting into my car. Wait here for me. I'll be right back."

I'm standing, frozen on the spot. I didn't know what I expected, but this

He's back so fast I jump. He doesn't notice, and I take another moment to examine his tired eyes. He looked exhausted—dead on his feet—the other night at the Joseph, but tonight it's something more.

I bite the inside of my cheek as I eye the suede, fur-lined coat that will probably cover everything but my feet. He holds it out, and I just stare at him. He's got this haunted look to him, like he's seen something he doesn't want to see, or heard something he doesn't want to hear. He looks...worried. Worried and desperately unhappy.

He steps over to me, holding out the coat, and my traitorous heart aches for him.

"Stick in your arms," he says, a little gruff.

I do, and he turns me to face him. That heaviness is still there. His eyes look desperate; they make me feel itchy.

"Let's go."

His voice is still rough, and I think about saying something sarcastic. I would have, if we were doing this at a party, or dare I dream it a date, or any other social function that didn't involve him paying me \$10 million to have sex with him. As it is, I'm not sure how to act.

Eventually, I decide to salute him. I'm reaching all the way back to middle school for this one. "Yessir," I say smartly, snapping my feet together.

"Damn right," he mutters as he opens the door for me.

I step into the hall to find my girl posse waiting with hugs for both Hunter and me. The only Hunter hug I see, as I'm pulled into embrace after embrace, is the one between him and Loveless. She pulls him close, cradling his nape with her long fingers, and my heart bursts into jealous flames. The flames are quickly extinguished as I see her hug him tightly around the back. Hunter flinches. It's a barely there motion, subtle enough that I'm probably the only one who notices it. His arm, wrapped loosely around her waist, stiffens, falling down beside his leg.

She hugs him once more, and I see him push his face into her shoulder. Then I'm swept up by Juniper, who gives me a crushing hug. Loveless joins after a minute.

"Take good care of him, and yourself, too."

I hug her hard, and then Hunter is there beside me, offering his arm. As we move toward the side door, crowded by the laughing, hooting girls, and Hunter wraps an arm around my waist, I can't help feeling just a little like we're bride and groom. Which is ridiculous. So, so silly. And feels more so as we burst through the door into a ring of guards. I feel Hunter's arms around me, guiding my steps, and then he's picking me up. I feel his feet leave the ground and I'm aware we've moved into a car.

He tucks me close, under his rock-hard arm, and leans up. "Drive," he tells someone.

I feel the car lurch forward and hear the familiar whirring sound of the thick, plastic partition going up between the front of an Escalade limousine and the back. Seconds later, the hood is pulled gently off my head, and I'm staring into Hunter's green cat eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

~HUNTER~

I've gone and done it now. Lost my fucking mind. When Marchant started acting sketchy on the phone last night, I didn't know what the hell was going on, but then I remembered those billboards on the way to the ranch, and how I always get a giant hard-on when I see that woman's curves. I got a sick idea and when I really lit into March, he gave the old tired "I'm not going to say yes or no", and for Marchant that's always a "Yeah, Bro!"

Libby DeVille—virgin for sale.

I had half a mind to punch Marchant out until I realized what a hypocrite I was being. Well, until he pointed it out—that I myself pay for escorts, and what's different about Libby and those girls?

The answer: a thousand fucking things, and nothing at all. Is it wrong for me to make a distinction? Maybe, but I don't care. I stayed angry, and tonight, when I saw her wearing red, all that long dark hair splayed across the bed, it was like a holy vision. Except we weren't in heaven. We were in a fancy brothel, and there were a dozen other men with the same view I had—and they didn't deserve to be there. I know I didn't either, but this world's imperfect, and I couldn't stand to see her with somebody else.

So I bid on her.

I piled cash all the way to the ceiling for her, but now that I've won I'm wondering what the hell I'm gonna do with her. I don't plan to make her fulfill her contract, obviously... I know, I've had a lot of sex with escorts, but Libby isn't an escort. If she fucks me, it'll be because she wants to.

Hal pulls away from the curb, and there's an obvious question in Libby's ocean-colored eyes, like she has no idea why I'm so riled up. She folds her arms over her middle, looking gorgeous with her hair rolling in waves over her shoulders. "I wish I understood what's going on with you."

I grit my teeth. The feeling is mutual. "Why did you do this?"

"Do what?" She crosses her legs, and I can see every line of her under the snug jacket I borrowed from Loveless.

I scowl, because I'm not in a game-playing mood. "Pursue your PhD," I say with as much sarcasm as I can muster. "What do you think?"

She's looking down at her hands, but her spine is stiff. She's got her hackles up. Her eyes rise to mine and I find her face blank. "I did it because I needed the money. Are you going to get all judgy?"

Me who just paid for her. Me who, I assume she knows, visited Love Inc. almost

daily for several years. Of course I don't judge her for the idea, but the execution... well, stupid, even if she doesn't know that.

I shudder to think who she could have ended up with. I also don't understand why she's so hard up. "I know the value of your mother's home. Why not just sell it?" I rub my dry eyes.

"It's in my dad's name."

I frown. "You must have had some other means. Some kind of trust fund—"

"Hunter," she cuts me off, quiet but firm, "you're not my keeper."

I inhale deeply, rubbing a hand across my face. I like the way my name sounds coming from her mouth. I think about the way she looked, lying on that bed, and I'm hard again in an instant, even as she gives me a wide-eyed, serious look.

"I hope you didn't bid on me out of some misplaced feeling of responsibility." Her eyes drop, then raise to meet mine, and I can sense a rallying as she squares her shoulders slightly. "Why did you bid on me?"

My answer won't do, so I ignore her question. "Do you realize anyone could have won?"

"Anyone without a criminal record," she corrects. "And yes."

"Do you know who the runner-up was?" The runner up was Alexander Halford, a weasel corporate attorney who's fifty-five and only fucks women in their '20s.

She lifts her shoulders, staring straight ahead, at the limousine's divider wall. "I don't care."

"Such trust in the world." Even to my own ears, I sound like a caricature of some cynical old man, but I don't give a shit. Looking her over, imagining Halford's hands on her, I feel another wave of rage.

"Trust or apathy?" She arches a brow. "It's just sex, and it's just one time. I wanted what could be done with the money badly enough that it didn't matter who the winning bidder was."

My dick twitches, and I scoot a little farther away from her. "You're helping your friend, the Carlson boy." Remembering that day in court, I grit my molars. I'm probably about to stick my foot in my damn mouth again, so it's a good thing she cuts me a fed-up look and signs.

"Why I want the money is no one's business but mine."

I snort. "I was in the courthouse that day. Unless you've got something else in the works..."

Her mouth tucks up, the little minx. "Maybe I do."

I turn toward her, wanting her to understand this. I pin her with my eyes and turn my gaze on high. "You can't trust just anyone. And definitely not a man that's going to pay millions to have sex with you?"

"I have guards," she points out.

"Yeah, and you dismissed them to come with me. How well do you think you know me, Libby?"

She surprises me by reaching out and touching my shoulder. "Well enough to know you're tired and grumpy, and your back's still sore." She sighs. "I know I don't

know you very well, but am I really supposed to worry you're some kind of villain?"

"I'm a recovering addict who visits brothels and has a penthouse at a casino. You've seen me fucking a porn star—not too easy, either. You're riding an awful fucking lot on intuition."

"And you're not telling me anything I don't know," she murmurs. She looks away from me, and guilt grabs me by the throat. Guilt that I've treated her the way I have.

I sigh into my hands. Lift my head. Meet her eyes. "The other night at the Joseph —"

"Doesn't need to be rehashed. Seriously, Hunter," she says calmly. "There was nothing complicated about that, so why make it complicated now?"

Now I do snort. I'd hate to see her version of complicated. I wonder if the mess I'm in up to my ears would qualify. Probably so, I think grimly.

She sits back against the heated seat, and I wonder how anything with us could ever be anything but fucking complicated. I can't help being hard as a rock, sitting this near to her. All that long brown hair, that gorgeous face, the way she smells, like cinnamon and vanilla—delicious.

I'm silent as we roll toward Batshit Ranch. Not counting Priscilla, who comes by uninvited, I've never brought a woman here before.

*

~ELIZABETH~

I feel like I've fallen through the rabbit hole.

I'm sitting by Hunter on a plush, heated bench seat inside his stretch Escalade. We are rolling past fortress-like houses and sprawling, landscaped lawns, on our way to his ranch. He's been quizzing me about my choices, like a...well, I'm tempted to say a jealous boyfriend, except I know there's no way Hunter West is jealous over me.

I pull the coat closer around myself and wish I was wearing something different underneath. I think of what I just told him, about how our last encounter was no big deal. I wonder what it means that he wanted to talk about it.

Now that I've had some time to digest, I'm incredibly glad it's Hunter I wound up with. I can't account for what he does with other women—especially Priscilla Heat—but he's never been anything but gentle with me, and I can't picture him being different tonight.

I slide a glance his way, admiring his body in those tight, black clothes. My God, he looks amazing. Sex on a stick. I'm going to be having sex with him! I shiver a little, and Hunter puts his hand on my knee. "Cold?"

"I'm okay."

He pushes a button on his door, and I feel more heat coming from the vents.

"Thank you."

He doesn't speak, but he seems to notice that his hand is still on my knee. He lifts his palm up, looking kind of confused, like he's not sure how it got there. We endure

a few more minutes of weird silence before the limo passes through massive, iron gates and starts rolling down a long driveway. A few hundred yards later, I see a huge, stone house surrounded by big, lush oak trees. We turn into a circle drive and park between a fountain and the bib-shaped stairs.

Hunter is out before I am, coming around to my side and opening the door before the driver can reach me.

His hand in mine feels warm and rough. He tugs me gently toward the stairs before he stops, cupping my cheek with his other hand, looking contrite. "Libby, I know I've been a dick tonight, but...I don't want you to worry. I'll make sure you're comfortable with our arrangement."

"Thanks." It sounds awkward, but then I am awkward. What does he mean, make sure I'm comfortable? It's sex, not a bikini waxing. Is he talking about how much it hurts the woman when the hymen rips?

My stomach is clenched hard when he tucks an arm around my shoulders, and then we're going up the stairs. He pushes through the double doors and leads me into a massive foyer, with gorgeous, hardwood ribbon stairs curling up to a second-floor, a massive wood-carved chandelier with dancing gas flames, and a marble tabletop with a curved, scroll mirror that rises toward a vaulted ceiling.

"Wow—it's beautiful."

I feel a little embarrassed as I say it—a little bourgeoisie—but this is Hunter; he's seen my mom's 1990s kitchen, and I know he knows about my family's financial woes.

His hand around mine tightens. "Decorator." In the dancing light of the chandelier, his face looks beautiful and hard. "Are you hungry?"

"No, not right now." I'm too nervous for that.

He nods. "Then follow me."

I'm all eyes as he leads me down a wide hallway with a marble, checkerboard floor and gorgeous wood walls. It's very masculine, elegantly understated, with few frou-frou decorations.

We pass a huge, lit painting of a bird dog prancing and a Gothic, shotgun home, and I say, "You're from New Orleans, right?"

He nods, but doesn't speak, and I feel kind of foolish for acting like we just met.

Really, our relationship—if you can call it that—has been pretty much the same since that night at his party. Nothing personal, just physical. Which, again, makes me wonder why he paid so much for this. I wonder if it's possible he really likes the idea of being the first man in between my legs. It's a little crude, so I push the thought away.

I follow him into a comfortable men's parlor with two plush, soft couches, a recliner, and a fireplace, plus an emerald marble bar and shelves filled with old, hardback books. His laptop, a sleek, black Mac, sits on an end table, half cracked. I can't help the buzz inside my chest that comes from being in his personal space.

"Have a seat," he tells me, motioning to the couches.

He strides over to the bar and pours two drinks. Bourbon, of course. Mine is

shallow, his is larger. He sits across from me in a wing-backed chair, one ankle propped on his knee, and I feel the belly bats again. He looks so serious, and even more imposing than usual, here in his own home.

"I have a proposition for you, Scarlett."

Belly bats DIVE!

I swallow hard, feeling like I might throw up. "Okay."

"You stay for a week, and sex is optional. Initiated only by you. If, by week's end, you haven't done so, you can return home to Napa."

My mouth falls open. That's how shocked I am. I can feel my face redden as I falter, "I-I don't understand."

"Take it at face value," he advises.

I shake my head, feeling shocked and...kind of stung. "I just don't get...why did you do this? Why pay so much tonight if you don't want to... If you don't want this. Does this have to do with Priscilla Heat?" It doesn't seem logical, but then again, nothing about him does. Maybe bidding on me was just a means to an end. A bet or something. Maybe he wants me to be in a film. I rub my lips together, feeling vulnerable and disappointed.

"Priscilla and I are not an item," he says wearily. "Trust me."

I have no reason too, as he's already pointed out, but even if I did, that still doesn't explain why he just paid millions of dollars to take my virginity, only to now tell offer me this bizarre...I don't even know what to call it.

Then I have a terrible thought. What if he's decided he doesn't want me anymore, and this is the best way he can think of to let me down gently. I swallow back my humiliation.

"Have some of your drink, Libby. Hal will have your luggage in soon and I'll show you to your room." He rubs a hand through his blond hair.

"You look tired."

One eyebrow arches, a similar expression to the one that Marchant Radcliffe makes. When it's clear he's not answering, and the ensuing silence has stolen all my bolder questions, I decide to ask about that. "You and Marchant have been friends since college, right?"

He nods.

"Tulane?"

"Right." He takes a swallow of his bourbon. "I'm surprised you know."

I know I have to be red as an apple, but I try to cover. "You're kind of famous."

"It's the television," he says. "People watch you play poker, they feel like they know you."

That hits a little close to home, and I smirk to cover my nervousness. "Do you consider yourself easy to get to know?"

He regards me over the rim of his glass, looking like a grumpy bear. "What do you think?"

I lift an eyebrow. "I think our relationship is...weird. Our interactions, rather. I'm not sure I'm in a position to say."

He stares at me—almost through me—for a second before bringing his glass back to his mouth. I get the feeling he wants to say something, but he doesn't. He just sits there, looking tense and tired, and I'm talking again.

"Did you play tonight? You're wearing black."

"I did," he says gruffly.

"Did you win?"

"No."

"You didn't win?"

He looks grave—but maybe he's just giving me his poker face. "Shocking, isn't it?"

I press my lips together. "I thought you hadn't lost in almost a year."

"I haven't."

"Oh. Well I'm sorry to hear that."

He snorts. "I don't give a shit."

He looks behind my head, in the direction of a clock I hear ticking, and stands, leaving his glass on one of the shelves. "Come with me. I'll show you to your room."

I follow him, feeling like I've somehow lost any hold I had on this situation, and I'm not even sure when or how. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as he leads me back down the elegant hallway, toward the foyer and its staircase.

"What will it be?" He asks gruffly, after a moment of silence, in which all I hear is the swishing of our clothes and the soft pad of our shoes. "Would you rather wait a week or get the deed done now?"

We round a corner to the entry hall, and I ball my hands into fists. Why did I ever think I could handle this? My heart is pounding and my knees feel weak. I'm so confused; I want to run. With a deep breath, I remind myself how many times I've played it cool around people who made me uncomfortable.

I manage to flash Hunter a nonchalant look. "You're the winning bidder. It's your choice," I say as we reach the stairs.

"Then we'll wait."

It takes a few seconds for the shock of that to sink in. Hunter doesn't want to have sex with me? Or maybe he wants me around longer. I swallow hard. "If you're doing this for my benefit, please don't. You get what you want. You paid enough."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I'm going to ask him more about his week-long plan when I notice how carefully he's moving up the stairs. I think about his back again, which reminds me of Priscilla and how wrong it is that I'm here, in his house, but still, I feel a swell of sympathy for him.

"How is your back? Are you feeling any better?"

"Are you always so solicitous, or is it my charm that brings that side of you out?"

I think he's teasing, but I don't realize that until after I've spoken honestly. "I'm not sure." Then I add this little gem: "I've never had a boyfriend."

It was relevant in my head; whatever this is with Hunter is the closest I've ever come to Romantic Relationship Land. But he didn't need to know that.

He sounds strangled when he asks, "Never?", and I want to die. My hand actually

comes to cover my mouth. I jerk it down, so frazzled I actually stop my ascent. I look into his surprised face, feeling like an idiot.

"I don't mean I've never done...anything ever. Never dated, I mean. I just mean, it was nothing serious." I clench and unclench my fists as we walk onto the second floor, done in vibrant navy blue, pale green, and gold.

I run a hand back through my hair, now sweaty, and Hunter looks at me like I've grown horns. "Are you a lesbian?"

"Do I seem like one?" I ask him pointedly.

He smirks, and I tell myself to get back on my game. You're okay. You can do this.

We go about twenty feet down the hallway on the left, and Hunter stops, opening the door to a room that's done in green—just like another room, in another of his homes. "This will be yours."

"It's lovely."

He nods once. "It should have everything you need."

"Thank you." I'm still confused. I wish I had the nerve to ask more questions. To find out why he wants me hanging around here for a week, and why he's seems find with the possibility that he might not get what he paid for. We do have chemistry. I know that much. So what gives?

He looks me over, head to toe, and I feel a blush cover my cheeks. "You can dress however you want." I look at him like he's crazy, and he adds, "I mean, I don't want you to feel like you have to walk around the house half-naked ."

Does he not want to see me?

"Are you sure you don't want me to just go home? Because I can. If this isn't...you know, working out."

He puts his hand on the small of my back and pushes me gently into the room. "I'm sure, Libby." He leans on the doorway. "Call for me if you need something. Press one on the phone, and it will ring my cell."

And that's it. He's gone, and I'm alone in my lingerie and silky robe, feeling more confused than ever.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

~HUNTER~

This is a fucking mess.

I am a fucking mess.

I gave her the room adjoining mine? Really? I drop my head into my hand and use my fingertips to rub my throbbing temples. I haven't slept in days and having Libby next door isn't going to help. Shit is hitting the fan with this Sarabelle situation, which means having Libby here is an even worse idea.

So why did I do it?

It's not that hard to figure out. I didn't want anybody else fucking her. And it's not a caveman thing. I don't want to possess her—I don't want to possess any woman.

And yet...she's got some kind of voodoo on my cock and balls, and I sure as shit don't want any other man to have her. Especially if she's a virgin.

Jesus H.

Libby DeVille, a fucking virgin. I knew she felt tight when I had my fingers inside her pussy, but I thought she was just inexperienced. Not a goddamned virgin.

I'm leaning against the hallway wall, hard as a baseball bat and straining against my fly, when I get a call from Dave.

"What's up, man?"

"Bad news." My stomach sinks, and I hustle down the hall, hoping to put as much distance as I can between Libby and this shit. "In addition to claiming all Sarabelle's client logs earlier today, the FBI is out at Love Incorporated right now. Went in the back way, across that desert and that patch of grass behind the left manor. They haven't gone inside but one of my sources there says they're asking who won the bid tonight. They're getting hotter on your tail, for lack of a more apt expression."

That's because I'm being fucking framed, but I'm not telling Dave that.

"Fuck."

"I'd feel the same way if I were in your position."

I grit my teeth. "Keep me posted, okay?"

"Sure thing."

The line goes dead, and I suck a big breath down. Fucking Priscilla. Now that my boner is gone, I practically run down to my office, where I page my head of security, Julian, and give him instructions on how I want this place protected. Then I pull out my .38, stick it in the holster I wear up against my abs, and pull my tight black t-shirt off. I stride to one of the guest rooms, grabbing a white undershirt out of a package I keep in the top drawer for visitors. Then I pull on my ragged-out bomber jacket and go back into my office.

I pull out my phone and call Priscilla. It rings four times before I'm sent to voice mail.

Shit.

It was a stupid move, maybe. I've never called her for a booty call before. I hoped that wouldn't occur to her. I hoped she'd invite me over, and I could confront her ass—get my hands dirty before they get cuffed.

But I don't get an answer.

I slump down in my desk chair and pour myself another glass of bourbon. West Bourbon. Truth is, I find the shit a little bitter. How's that for a secret?

I'm comforted by the familiar warm glow in my belly, and I call Priscilla again. This time I'm sent to voice mail after one ring.

Shit!

I'm up and pacing, thinking about Rita. How if everything hits the fan, It could lead to Rita. I know of at least one person who knows the truth—one of them is Libby Bernard, who, considering her new job at Marchant's ranch, might have a more personal reason to want to do me in, if she suspects I hurt Sarabelle—and there may be more. I think my father's kept it quiet, but you just never know.

I prop my cheek against my palm and try my best to think about something else. But all I can think about is handcuffs. I've been cuffed one time before, for getting into a bar fight at the Wynn a few years ago. I still remember how much I hated the feeling.

Made me feel small hands around my wrists and fingernails pinching my sides. Which made me feel the sting of getting slapped, hear high-pitched curses in a voice that haunts me still. "Piece of shit! You little bastard!"

And fuck it, that calls for another glass.

I'm halfway on the road to plastered when my cell phone rings again. I see Marchant's name and decide to save myself the headache of repeat calls by simply answering the first one.

"Yello."

Marchant's voice sounds tight. "How you doing, man?"

I rub my eyes. "I'm doing. Sleeping beauty's upstairs." I laugh, because I want her so much I'm hard even now, half drunk.

There's a long pause, during which I expect Marchant to ask about my semi-drunkenness. Instead, he says, "You haven't heard from Dave yet?"

"Just a little while ago."

"So you don't know?"

"Know what?" Through the haze of liquor, I feel something prickly and cold. There's silence on the other end, and I want to come through the phone and throttle him. "Know what, dickhead?"

"Sarabelle is dead." His voice cracks. "They found her in San Luis with one of your cuff links in her hand."

Chapter Thirty

~ELIZABETH~

My phone rings a few minutes after Hunter leaves, and it's Suri—sobbing. The first thing that comes to mind is Cross, so my heart is in my throat when she says, "HE'S AWAKE!"

"Holy crabcakes! Are you kidding me?!"

She isn't.

Cross woke up two and a half hours ago—with Suri in his room. She was holding his hand just before the end of visiting hours and reading him a magazine about vintage motorcycles.

The news makes me so excited, I actually shriek, then promptly sit down on the bed, because my knees are shaking.

"Suri, I want every freakin' detail."

"The last day or so, he was different," she says. "I didn't tell you because it wasn't something I could explain, but he was looking around the room some and sometimes he seemed...uncomfortable or something. I would look down at a book and then back up and it seemed like he had shifted. I don't know, it's hard to explain."

"Then tonight he made this choking noise, and I thought something was wrong so I pushed the nurse button, and as soon as I did he said my name! I was worried it was a fluke, but he's still awake now and they're checking him over. They're even going to give him orange soda." Her voice breaks on the word, and I sink down in a chair. "Nanette said he might be asleep by the time I get back, but they were doing some man stuff so I didn't need to be in there and I just had to tell you. Am I interrupting anything?"

I tell her an abbreviated version of the Hunter saga, and then I steer things back to Cross. He's so much more important than my romantic angst.

"Suri, did he seem okay? I mean...did he seem the same?"

I can hear her voice break as she says, "He really does."

"I can't believe it," I breathe. "I mean, after the stroke, I was worried he would..."

"I know," Suri says, "me, too. But he seems okay. At first glance, anyway." She laughs a little. "I asked him all the silly TV questions, like did he remember the year and who's president, and he did. He even asked about his bike."

I wipe my eyes, grinning like I've won the lottery. "That's just freakin' amazing." And it really makes the anxiety and drama of tonight seem about a million times more worthwhile.

"You should feel really proud of yourself for having the guts to do what you did," Suri tells me. "It wouldn't be a course I would have taken, but you got what you

needed, and for Hunter to be the winning bidder...call me crazy, Liz, but I think it's the universe repaying you."

I snort. "I'm not so sure about that, but I'm over the moon about Cross. Suri, I want to hear from you soon. I mean very soon. Within hours."

"We'll call you, Lizzy! As soon as we can, I promise."

'We'...

That sounds strange.

By the time I hang up the phone, my mind is reeling in three different directions. I take my time in the luxurious, two-person shower attached to my room, then change into a big, old University of San Francisco t-shirt and my favorite pair of comfy, bikini-cut panties—deep red, with a white pattern of Xs and Os. The huge, canopy bed is cold, and the pillow smells strange, like vanilla and lavender, and I can hear the air whooshing through the ducts somewhere nearby.

It takes me a long time to go to sleep, and I remember the last thought I have before I shut my eyes is 'I hope I sleep through some of the awkwardness of tomorrow', followed by 'I don't want to miss a thing with Cross'.

So when I find myself staring at a pitch-black bedroom sometime in the wee hours, I feel confused and ill at ease. The curtains are deep green with gold accents. They're thick, so they stand out as black against the creamy wall. I can still hear the air whooshing through the noisy vent somewhere near my head, and I wonder if anyone's ever had the balls to tell Hunter it's annoying.

Hunter...

I'm at Hunter's house. And I'm still a virgin.

I feel so disarmed, I push myself up on my elbow, reaching for the bottle of DeVille bottled water on my night stand, which doubles as a mini-fridge. I take a deep chug, and then I sit there, still as a portrait, listening to the sounds of the house and wondering what woke me. Is it something with Cross? Maybe I got a text.

I'm reaching for my phone when I hear it: a moan. It's a guttural sound from somewhere deep in Hunter's chest. It sounds like pain...or pleasure. Worry slices through me, but on its heels is dread as I make an educated guess about what's going on.

It isn't long before shame, anger, and hurt are pounding through me. I feel sick. Disgusted—with myself or him? As I slide from the bed, I wonder why he's doing this. Is he really so awful that he would bring me to his house and then screw Priscilla Heat in the room next door?

I clutch my chest as I step closer to the door where I can hear another moan. I put one hand over my ear, wishing the noises will stop.

I want to run. To lock myself away. I need to get a house and two dozen cats, because I'm never trying this again. Never getting this crazy over any man again. Never hoping. Because if getting into fighting shape and offering my maidenhead isn't good enough, then nothing ever will be.

Tears sting my eyes and start to drip down both my cheeks.

Another moan, only this time it's more groan than moan. There's no mistaking:

this is pain, not pleasure. And for some reason, it makes me crazy furious.

And maybe I'm just crazy, because I'm not even mad at him. I care for him—for his obvious unsettledness, his hard lifestyle, the lost look in his eyes at the bar the other night, the coldness of this gorgeous home where the only sex that's ever had is messed up sex. Maybe one day I can bring myself to hate him, but for now the light of sympathy still burns. And when I think about Priscilla Heat with him, I want to claw her face off because it's wrong. He deserves better than that. Everyone deserves better than that.

I pause at the door, but only for a moment. I'm here, and I have nothing left to lose. I lean against the cool, wood door, listening for Priscilla's breathing or her voice, but all I hear is Hunter.

I try the handle. I'm shocked when it turns. I hesitate again, but then my legs are moving, carrying me forward, into a den of darkness—so dark, I can't even make out shadows. Terror washes over me. Mortification at what I'm doing, but that is quickly steamrolled by the rage I feel at knowing Hunter and Priscilla are somewhere in this room, making a fool of me.

I'm tense, listening, and just as my eyes start to adjust I hear another low man.

My eyes fly to a chair on the other side of the room, and there's a person. Hunter...alone. He's hunched over, clutching his head, breathing like someone on the verge of hyperventilating. He's naked except for a pair of boxer-briefs, and sweet Jesus he is beautiful. My eyes can't help appraising him. My body warms. I glide closer, arms stretched out, and when I get within leaping distance of him I can smell liquor.

Oh no.

I remember how rough he looked earlier today, and at the bar the other night, and fear and worry twist my gut. Is he an alcoholic?

"Hunter?" His massive shoulders rise and fall and I can hear his labored breathing, but otherwise he doesn't stir. I glide my palm along his beautiful, thick shoulder, stroking lightly near his nape. "Hunter?" I try again. "Are you okay?"

He curls over more tightly, clutching his golden hair—too hard. On instinct, I brag his fingers to loosen their grip. He puts a hand over his face and moans again, his body twisting.

"Hunter?"

I feel lost. What do I do for him? Did he drink himself into this state? I can't believe he'd do that. On TV, at least, he always seems so in control. Even those times with me, when he'd caved to his desires, he seemed at the wheel. Nothing like this.

Except something else is going on here. I know a head-screwed drunk when I see one. This seems like something else.

"Hunter? Are you sick?" He continues breathing hard, almost like he's struggling, and I wonder about the drugs he's said he doesn't do. For some reason, the thought of Hunter doing drugs makes me feel ill.

Moving slowly, I step closer to him, so I'm standing directly over him. He's still

lying back against the chair, so I have full view of his glorious, ripped chest. The way his abs and hips taper down to... Oh, no, Liz. Don't look there.

With all my self-control, I pull my gaze back to his face. He's got it covered with his hand, but I can see his nose and mouth between his fingers. His lips are twisted. Like he's having a nightmare. His body still seems...asleep.

Moving hesitantly, I reach for the arm that's lying on his leg to see if I can rouse him, but when I touch his forearm, he jerks back. He moans, and it's an awful sound.

"It's okay," I whisper. I stand there, aching to comfort him, and the only thing I can think of is to take his hand in mine. I do it quickly, grasping and then squeezing. I sandwich his hand between both of mine, and he leans forward a little. His shoulders relax some, but he's still covering his face with his free hand like whatever's going on inside his mind is more than he can bear.

"Hunter. It's okay." I trace the surface of his hand, his bruised and scraped knuckles. My mind is racing. Maybe he's feverish, but his hand feels cool.

"Come to bed," I murmur. I stand, tugging on his hand, and I'm surprised when he rises. The way he walks over to his bed—the dazed look in his eyes and the stiff movements of his body—lets me know he's somewhere else. Not here. He stops beside the bed and I touch the small of his back, where he doesn't have any fresh cuts. When he climbs into bed, I try to get a clear view of his back, but he rolls and collapses, face-up. His eyes are shut, his body slack.

I rub his shoulder. "Turn onto your side."

He shifts his hips, and I get full view of his back. It still looks bad, striped with pinkish marks and painful for sure, but not infected. A shudder rolls through him and I put my hand on the firm skin of his side.

"It's okay, Hunter. Go to sleep."

I step up, near his head, and find his eyes are open. I'm shocked when they roll over my face. "Libby?" He sounds strangled.

I nod and whisper, "Go to sleep." His eyes drift shut, and I am brave enough to stroke his golden hair. It's soft, so soft and pretty, like his creamy tanned neck and his cute little ear.

"Go to sleep, Hunter. Everything's okay."

Finally he's breathing evenly, his body relaxed.

I bring him the bottle of water from my bedside, and fish some crackers and Advil from my purse. I leave them on the table beside his bed and stroke his hair once more before I go.

Chapter Thirty-One

~ELIZABETH~

I open my eyes to streams of golden light peeking through the edges of the curtains over a massive, wall-long window. The first thing I think is something important happened, but for that first minute, I can't remember what. All I know is that I feel rested, and my huge oak bed, with its sheer, flowing canopy and satin duvet, makes me feel like a princess.

Holy crabcakes. I'm at Hunter's house. And...what the fudge was that last night? There's no reason my memory of the previous night should make me nervous, but suddenly that's what I am. I can't move from the bed. I can hardly even breathe as I think about the man who slept next door to me. Is he okay? Still sleeping?

What the hell am I doing here, in this bedroom that connects to his? I feel almost crushed by a wave of surreality. I sold my V-card. For ten million dollars. To Hunter

West.

How am I ever going to pull this off? Have sex with Hunter? I imagine a fully awake and fully erect hunter, naked and lying over me...

Dear God.

I hop off the bed and fly through my morning preparations. Since I showered the night before, I consider skipping, but considering what might be on today's agenda, I shower one more time. I dress in a pair of brown leggings and a long, sexy red sweater that dips down just a little low in front. I pull on some ankle-length boots I borrowed from Suri and put on just a dash of makeup. If Hunter might be seeing me up close, I don't want to look phony, but I don't want him to see the sprinkling of freckles on my nose, either.

But will he be seeing me up close?

I feel silly for over-thinking things when I've messed around with Hunter before, but those times were different. Spontaneous. This... despite what I thought going into the sex business, it is kind of weird.

I send a quick text to Suri, telling her to text me updates about Cross. I want so badly to tell her what's going on, but I don't. I do enjoy a moment of glee, where I want to fall down on my knees and thank the heavens that Cross is awake. Then I tuck my purse and phone under the bed, give myself one more glance in the mirror, and step out into the hall.

The first thing I'll do after reassuring myself that Hunter is okay is let him know I'm not cool with our plan. I don't want to initiate sex. I've never done it before and he is, after all, the winning bidder. He should chose the moment. If he doesn't want to... I won't be offended.

Slowly—so slowly that I'm almost not moving at all—I step to the door beside mine and raise my fist to knock. My knuckles connect with the cold cherry wood, and I hold my breath as I listen for his footsteps. Nothing. I knock twice more, trying not to worry when he doesn't answer. Then I tuck my hair behind my ears and head for the stairs. Maybe I'll find him in his study.

My pulse is pounding by the time I reach the bottom of the curling staircase. With sunlight streaming through the windows, I can fully appreciate the beauty of the foyer, with its glossy marble floors and sleek wood walls. The chandelier hanging from the high ceiling is made of what looks like an old-school wagon wheel and some kind of copper. It's just the right blend of eclectic and classic.

I'm thinking of going left, toward the study, but then I catch a whiff of something delicious. It's pretty unlikely that Hunter's wearing an apron, but I'm so hungry, I don't care who's cooking. I come down off the bottom stair and follow my nose, toward the right, past a grand dining room with a fireplace and a long table topped with what looks like an ivory sculpture of a sailboat. I'm walking past that room, toward another room that looks like a formal living area, when I see, through a half-cracked doorway in the dining room, a posh black and white kitchen. Score!

I'm stepping past the table when Hunter's beautiful body fills the doorway. I'm shocked to see his lips spread in a cat-like grin as he looks me over from head to

boot.

"Libby DeVille, right here in my house." He tilts his blond head at the room behind him. "I've got breakfast."

As he turns back into the kitchen, I realize he's holding a wooden spoon. Holy belly bats, that's sexy. Hunter in house clothes, cooking breakfast. Dark jeans hang off his hips, with a worn-out spot over the left pocket. A scruffy green button-up shirt is rolled up to his elbows. Rugged boots with real live mud clomp on the tile floor as he heads for the stove.

As I step into the kitchen, which smells like butter and sugar and bacon, he turns around from the stove and flashes me a cautious smile.

"How are ya?"

I surprise myself by sliding a look up and down his delectable body. I just can't resist. I notice that despite his sunnier attitude, his eyes are still tired and, underneath a day's worth of stubble, his normally tanned face looks slightly pale.

"How are you?" I ask, praying he'll mistake the ogle I just gave him for friendly concern.

"Up and kicking," he says, turning back to what he's doing so I get a view of his broad back and ass. The double oven and industrial-sized sink face a massive window overlooking rolling acres of grazing cattle. Framing them on either side are rows of bar space, complete with black stools, place mats, and silverware.

I take a seat at the bar nearest me, choosing the spot closest to the oven, so Hunter is standing right in front of me. I prop my elbow on the counter—black granite with coppery swirls—and try to pretend that this is normal for us. Me and Hunter, regular breakfast buddies.

He's pushing some bacon around on a skillet, not looking my way, when I begin to wonder if this will be a repeat of last night. I'm not sure if I can stand the awkwardness again. Then he lifts his head and pins me with a warm gaze I can feel between my legs.

"You cook?" he asks, and I notice for the first time that there are two big platters on the bar on Hunter's other side, already piled high with biscuits and cinnamon rolls. Wowzers.

"I don't," I say, hanging my head. "Suri, my roommate, cooks like a champ, so I'm kind of spoiled. I'm surprised you do," I add. "I would have thought you had somebody."

"All honesty?" He arches a brow. "I gave my chef the day off." He picks up a gooey-looking cinnamon roll and hands it to me. Then he gives a slight shake of his head and grabs a plate from one of the cabinets. "Try that," he says, pushing the plate my way, "and tell me you're still skeptical."

I do, and "oh my God." I shut my eyes, and when I open them, he's grinning.

"That's just sinful."

"Our cook in New Orleans taught me to make these things from scratch," he tells me, biting into one. His eyes widen, like he's realized he can't speak around the cinnamon roll, so he quickly tries to chew, which makes me laugh.

Our gazes hold like magnets as we both finish our rolls, and then Hunter turns back to the oven, where the bacon is popping and crackling.

His eyes flick over me as he works on the pan. "I have to say, I miss the getup from last night."

I'm surprised charmed. I smile at him. "Do you now?"

"I do."

He quickly moves the bacon from the skillet to another plate, then pushes it toward me. I try not to watch his tight ass as he turns and grabs a basket of eggs out of the 'fridge. I can't help admiring his shoulders as he cracks them into a giant bowl. He seems so...different in his own space. Not at all like the Hunter from my sex fantasies, or the anguished man from the last few nights.

I wish there was some way to ask about last night in particular, but I can't think of one.

"How do you like your scrambled eggs?" he asks over his shoulder.

"Hard, I guess," I say, and yeah, I blush a second after I said it.

He doesn't notice though, and I munch my bacon. He's quiet, again, so I have time to work up my nerve. A few minutes into his egg scrambling, I bring up the subject of our deal.

"I'm not sure I like the deal we made last night."

His green eyes flicker over mine, then return to the eggs. I can see his shoulders tense.

"I'm glad you mentioned that," he says, sliding a glance at me as he stirs the eggs. "I've thought about it more, and I'm thinking it might be best if you head home a little earlier."

He pauses, giving me a pensive look, and I cross my hand over my stomach. I'm not sure what to say. I just don't understand.

"You can go whenever you want," he says, meeting my eyes. "You'll still get your money."

His words hit me like a drop-kick to the chest, and I can't control what comes out of my mouth. "You don't want me?"

"I didn't say that." His words are hot—and so sincere that it's impossible not to believe him. "If you really want to do this, I do too. But it needs to happen today."

"Why?"

His jaw tightens, and again, he won't look at me as he stirs. "I've got some business that just came up. You'd be more comfortable back at your own place."

Oh, so that's how it's going to be. My temper flares. "You're bullshitting me. Not that it matters. You did pay for this, so you can do whatever you want."

"It's not Priscilla," he says, pressing his lips together. "It's not like that."

He moves the eggs off the stove and checks the oven before walking around the bar to stand right in front of me.

His hands tunnel under my hair. "I want you," he says in a husky voice, and then I can feel how much he wants me bump against my hip. "I'm disappointed about the change of plans. Believe me. But it's what's got to be."

"Why did you do it? Why did you say...to stay the week? Why did you even bid on me?"

"I want this to be yours. On your terms. That's how it should be, Libby. You should be comfortable. I thought you'd like a few days here to get your footing." His fingers, in my hair, trail up my face; his thumb strokes my brow, and I shiver. "I didn't buy you for sex, although I'd love to take you to my bed. I bought you because I can't stand the thought of some other bastard pawing at you. Not you."

"But it's okay for other girls?"

He strokes my hair off my forehead. "I've only ever been with ones who choose, Libby. At Marchant's, all the girls choose their clients. It's invitation only out there, I'm sure you know. They set their own prices. Get paid well. And most of them aren't doing it for altruistic reasons."

He strokes his calloused thumb over my lower lip, and I'm shaking. My insides have gone liquid. "You used to go out there," I whisper.

"I did."

"How come?" He cups my cheek, still gentle, but I can sense him closing off.

"I've got my reasons."

"But you could sleep with any girl."

Loosening his grip on me, he laughs, and I look up at him. "I'm glad you find me so appealing, Miss DeVille."

I blush. "Almost any girl."

His jaw drops open in a funny way, and I grin so hard I can feel the dimples in my cheeks.

"Is it because you like to keep your distance?" I ask.

"Wow." He sort of chuckles a little bit. "Sneak attack."

I shrug, because I didn't really mean to sneak attack. I just felt like I had an opportunity. Pretense has never been stripped away like it is now between the two of us, so I figure I should take advantage of it.

Hunter seems to feel the same way. "Keep my distance?" He strokes up and down my cheek bone, and I feel hypnotized as I reach out and put my palm on his thigh.

"What do you mean, keep my distance?"

My knees part a little as he steps closer, coming in between them.

"Do I strike you as a man who keeps my distance?"

"I don't mean that," I say, breathless. "I mean, no relationships."

"I have a better question: How is it a pretty girl like you's still got her V-card?"

"I'm not a girl," I whisper.

"No, you're not."

He leans down and covers my mouth with his, and I pull him close, feeling his hardness with a heady rush as he rocks his body into mine.

"You're a woman," he says, between hard kisses. "Goddamned gorgeous one at that."

My hands drift into the pockets of his jeans, and oh my God, that ass. It's tight and firm and everything a man's ass should be. I want to pull his jeans off. Squeeze it.

Kiss it.

I'm panting, elated by his compliments, as he trails gently down my throat and kisses my collar bone.

"I'm like you," I whisper into his hair. "Want to keep my distance."

"Not doing a very good job of it," he pants.

He comes up for air, pushing his forehead against mine, so close that I can count the yellow flecks in his irises. "You know what I mean," I murmur. "I don't want a relationship. I never do. I mean I never have."

His eyes change, going from aroused to something more shrouded as runs his fingers down my arm. "Probably your mother."

I lean back, stunned that he said that to me. "Probably so." I guess I come off as the screwed-up daughter of a drug addict. Lovely.

"I'm only saying because I've had my share of therapy," he says, squeezing my hand before he walks back around the counter, to the oven. He opens it, and a heavenly sweet smell wafts out.

"You have?"

"Yes ma'am. Mostly when I was a kid."

"After your mother passed away?" It's a forward question, but then he's been forward with me.

Something passes over his face—something ugly. He covers it quickly and nods. "Something like that."

"Well you're probably right." I lean against the bar, propping my head in one of my palms. "Relationships, other than with Suri and a few other friends—they just don't seem worth it to me."

"That's because you don't want to get hurt."

"You're quite the Ann Landers, Hunter West. I'm shocked."

He looks at me without any trace of a smile. "I do write an advice column. Vegas High-Rolling. For the Las Vegas Sun News."

I gape, and he laughs. "You gotta be outta your fucking mind if you think anyone would give me a column." He sobers a little. "Pardon the French. I don't have the cleanest mouth."

"I'm sure you don't," I say coyly. I'm feeling a little more relaxed now, and happy to flirt with him, and willing to broach sensitive subject. Like: "So what's up with you and Priscilla?"

"Nothing but the sky," he says, pouring two tall glasses of orange juice.

"You don't care about her, but there's chemistry?"

"I don't care about her," he says flatly.

His eyes meet mine, and they're so cold, and all of a sudden it's painfully obvious to me that we're not really friends, or breakfast buddies, or anything at all. We don't know each other, and I've struck a bad cord with my prying question.

Hunter turns back to the stove and begins to pile two plates with food. When he speaks again, his tone is lighter. "I've got a question for you: weren't you even a little worried about who would win your heart?"

"Uh, yeah. My friend Suri kept joking that it would be someone old and slimy."

He smirks, piling scrambled eggs on two big, square plates. "Are you saying I'm over the hill?"

"I didn't know you'd swoop in to rescue me."

"That wasn't a rescue. Believe me." He checks the oven again, then shuts it. "Do your parents know?" He sticks his hands into his pockets and leans against the sink.

"I assume not."

"They don't."

"I'm surprised your friends let you go through with it."

"I needed the money," I say. "And it was one friend. I didn't really let her argue."

"Well, I'm good for it." He rubs the bridge of his nose, like he has a headache.

"Do you win a lot at poker?"

"More in investments." He peeks into the oven one more time, and I think how sexy he looks in chef mode. "What kind of jam do you like?"

"Strawberry."

"I'm a strawberry man myself."

He slides the jar of homemade jam over to me, then puts the oven mitt back on and opens the oven, pulling out a tray of...

"Beignets! Holy crap, I love beignets!" He puts two on a plate and slides it across the bar, then puts two on his plate. He does not come around and sit beside me.

I pick one up and turn the hot pastry around in my burning fingertips. "You're incredible."

"You think so?" He regards me silently over the counter as he polishes off a piece of bacon, then says, "I know you're doing this for Cross Carlson. I'm not sure if I think you're stupid or amazing."

I scrunch my face up. "That's not the only reason. I'm also doing it because I'm tired of being a virgin."

That draws a chuckle from him. "What's so tiring about it?"

"I guess I'm tired of all the anticipation."

He grins wickedly. "I'd say anticipation is one of the best parts."

"I wouldn't know," I murmur, biting into my beignet.

"Are you saying that you want to know?"

"Oh yeahh." I squeeze my eyes shut, blissed out over the warm, doughy goodness. When I open them Hunter is smirking at me. I blush. "I meant oh yeah, that stuff is really good. But yeah, I do I guess. Otherwise I would have hung onto it."

Slowly, languidly, tiger-like, Hunter walks around the counter. He wraps his hands around my biceps, turning me gently to face him, and pulls me close. Then he bends down slowly, bringing his face close enough so I have an amazing view of his lips. As I sit there, brainless and overheated, he leans closer and licks my lip.

"Powdered sugar," he purrs.

I'm panting, halfway to a heart attack, when he stands back up, looking down on me with a suddenly serious expression.

"You think about this, Libby. Really think about if you want to be with me. It'll be a one-time thing. You just said it—I don't do relationships, and I don't make exceptions, even when I'm tempted."

"I don't either." Although I haven't ever had the chance, and with him, I totally would.

"Well I'm in if you are." He strokes his palm over my hair. "You give me half an hour and I'll come find you. You sure?" he murmurs.

I nod, clutching the bar stool so I don't fall off.

"Okay." He trails his hand down my arm and squeezes my fingers, so gentle it almost takes my breath away. Then he kisses my cheek and starts to back out of the kitchen. "One V-card," he says, holding up his hand, "claimed."

Chapter Thirty-Two

~HUNTER~

I feel like I'm living in a dream: part nightmare, part fantasy. The fantasy is easy enough to dwell on. I've got Libby in my house, and soon I'll have her in my bed, underneath me, with those long legs spread and her hot pussy just waiting for my dick . It's a good feeling. One I could dwell on for hours. But I don't have hours, because this also a nightmare.

I walk into my study, shutting the doors behind me, and go immediately to the bar beside the shelves. If I'm going to call Marchant, I'll need this.

As I toss some back, I try to remember what I did after I heard about her death the night before. I know I drank. I had a dream about Libby, but it almost feels like a memory. I awoke this morning with an awful headache, and even now, after a shower and breakfast, I'm still feeling like shit.

I don't know whether to tell Libby. It has nothing to do with her, but if I am declared a suspect, I don't want her to feel duped—like she had sex under false pretenses.

I don't think I'd be found guilty were I to be charged, being that I didn't actually do anything, but I'm not naive. I know my father has his enemies, and so do I, and I also know Governor Carlson is involved in this. Powerful players produce powerful results.

I feel queasy thinking of that, so instead I think of Libby's breasts. How I'll get to kiss them soon. We'll have a good fuck before I send her off, and I'll make it one to remember. One I can re-play over and over, in the dry spell I'm sure I'm about to experience.

I pull my cell phone out. I need to hurry, get upstairs to Libby before she turns on the news. I don't think my name would be on it, but I can't be sure, and I don't want to lose my chance.

I lock the doors of the study dial Marchant. He answers on the second ring.

"Hey, dude. You free?" I frown. Wasn't I the one who called him? "What do you mean, am I free?"

"I'm surprised no one's knocking at your door. I've had someone in a dark suit poking around the penthouse, trying to get past security."

I frown. "You're not at the ranch?"

"We've closed for a few days for Sarabelle."

"How you holding up?" Sarabelle was one of the women I visited from time to

time, but she was Marchant's employee and friend. He feels the responsibility of this even harder than I do.

I can see him clenching that square jaw of his when he says, "If Priscilla Heat did this, I swear I will kill her with my own two hands."

I shut my eyes and rub them. "You and me both. Tell me what you know."

"Dave heard it on the police scanners about ten minutes before I called you last night. He's also got a guy inside the FBI. Says the cufflink has your initials in capital letters. He called me asking if I thought you did it."

Fucking great. "What'd you say?"

"What do you think I said?"

I rub my eyes. "What's going on with her and Lockwood now?"

"Lockwood's been MIA since yesterday. All our people are looking for him."

"And Priscilla?"

"She's at her house. Hasn't moved."

"Sarabelle was...found in San Luis?"

"Yes," Marchant says tightly.

He doesn't tell me where, and I don't ask. It'd be best if I don't know, in case I'm questioned.

I hesitate before asking my next question, because I'm pretty sure I don't want to know. "What color was the cuff link?"

"Color. Uh...I think Dave said that it was black."

"Goddamnit." I jump up, curling my hands around the phone although I want to smash it. "That one came from my top drawer."

*

~ELIZABETH~

As soon as I get back to my room, I see a message on my phone from Loveless. 'Call me ASAP.'

That seems random. I hope nothing is wrong. I pick a soft-looking wing-backed chair to sit in, stick my feet on the foot stool and count the rings. She answers on the third, and I can hear in her voice that she's been crying. "Scarlett. How are you?"

"I'm fine, but what's wrong?"

She sniffs, and there's a long pause before she whispers, "It's Sarabelle. They...found her body."

I press my hand over my mouth. "Oh my God. Loveless, I'm so sorry."

"We're all in a state of shock. But that's not all." She speaks even more softly, so I can barely hear her. "FBI agents came by today." I hear a shuffling sound, and when she speaks again her voice is muffled. "Scarlett...you can't tell anybody but...they think Hunter did it."

My stomach bottoms out. "Holy shit."

"But he didn't, Scarlett. I've known him for years. He would never do this."

I lean my head against the chair, feeling dizzy. "If he didn't do it, why do they think he did?"

"That's what I don't know. But I thought that you would want to know that something's going down."

I nod, feeling...stunned. "That's so crazy." And then I remember myself, and what this call is really about. "I'm so sorry about your friend, Loveless."

"It could have been me. It could have been any of us." Her voice breaks. "But Sarabelle was so sweet. It shouldn't have been her."

"It shouldn't have been anyone," I say.

Loveless sniffs, then says, "Just be careful. Not from Hunter—well, you should be if you get a bad feeling, but I don't think you will. Be careful because something's going on, and now that you've been here at Love Inc., you're one of us."

For some reason, her words make my eyes water. "Thank you, Loveless. Thank you so much. I'll be thinking about you. About all you guys. Take care of yourself, okay?"

I hang up the phone with a heavy feeling in my stomach and read two texts from Sur.

'Did u know one of escorts frm brothel found dead??!!'

Thirty minutes later. 'U ok? Msg me back. Paranoid here!'

I take a deep breath and tell myself that I can handle this. I don't need to message Suri for backup, and I don't need to go running home like a chicken.

All of a sudden it hits me that this must be why Hunter was so weird last night. He must have found out about Sarabelle then. Wow. I can't even imagine what it would be like to be falsely accused of something like that.

Unless he did it.

He didn't kidnap her, did he?

Of course not. I shake my head and send a reply to Suri: 'I'm fine. Cross??'

'Doing good. I'm here now.'

'Gr8. Can I call him l8r, even if u not there?'

While I wait for her reply, I change into my sexy clothes—a fresh red teddy and crotchless panties, followed by my black, silky robe—but I don't feel sexy. I feel sad. Sad for Sarabelle, sad for my friends at Love Inc., sad for Hunter. Last night he was clearly grieving.

I'm walking to my en suite bathroom, ready to lather myself with lotion in anticipation of the big event, when I hear a deep boom from somewhere in the house. I stop in mid-step, all the hair on my arms standing on end as I realize the sound is shouting. Hunter's shouting. It grows louder in time with loud steps down the hall.

For half a second, I want to shut myself inside the bathroom and barricade the door. I've seen way too many freak outs out in my life. But my feet seem glued to the oriental rug as I listen to Hunter coming down the hall. The rhythm of his footsteps is unsteady, but there's no more shouting. He stops, and I hear a loud bang that reminds me, eerily, of Cross's fist against the wall that night at Hunter's house

party. I hear a muttered curse, followed by the sound of a door swishing open, then slamming shut.

I stand doe-still, barely even breathing as shuffling sounds start to come from the room next door. A creaking sound that reminds me of a drawer being opened. A slamming sound. A few heavy footsteps. The unmistakable sound of something shattering.

I'm shaking now. Sometimes Mom got drunk or wasted and broke things. Sometimes in proximity to me. It's not that she meant to hurt me; she simply never noticed I was there. Once, when I was nine, I had to have stitches in my left eyebrow because a piece of a glass bowl caught me as I came into the kitchen to make sure she didn't hurt herself.

I don't want to go into Hunter's room this time, but just like last night, I can't seem to stop myself. I'm sweating, my fingers trembling as I wrap my hand around the doorknob. I know better than to knock. Angry people almost universally want to be left alone—only when they're breaking things, they probably shouldn't be.

As I turn the doorknob, I remind myself that he isn't doing drugs. He isn't drinking. At least not like my mom does. He's upset because someone he knows died.

Or maybe he killed them.

"Shut up," I murmur to myself. He didn't kill Sarabelle. He was playing televised poker for the last two nights, and last night he was here with me.

I take a fortifying breath and throw the door open. At first, I'm not sure I'm in the right room. What, last night, stood out to me as a large space with elegant, imposing furniture is now a clothes tornado. I immediately notice his huge dresser is missing two of its drawers, and atop the dresser, I can see a picture frame lying face-down, surrounded by bits of broken glass.

A quick glance around the room reveals Hunter standing by his hulking, four-post bed, pawing through a sea of undershirts and boxer briefs. Mixed in with the crimson pillows and blankets of his bed are two hefty dresser drawers. He's bent over, arms moving in a frenzy as he throws clothes every which way.

He doesn't even glance up as I step closer. He doesn't seem to know I'm here. His face twists in fury, and he grabs one of the drawers with both hands and hurls it at his headboard, where it bounces off and lands on a pile of pillows.

"Hunter?"

He's breathing hard, his face white, his mouth and eyes standing out vibrantly against his skin.

He straightens, shoulders heaving as he sucks back air. He looks so furious, it's like he's in a daze. He's not looking at me, but rather at something in front of him. Something behind me.

Without moving a muscle or glancing my way, he whispers, "Go away."

I follow his vacant gaze to the wall behind me and find that he is staring at a mirror. Staring blankly at himself. No, not blankly. Desolately.

As I watch, he leans down against his bed, elbows on the mattress, face going into his palms as his shoulders hunch and one of his hands tunnels back through his

messy hair.

Oh, Hunter. "I heard about Sarabelle."

He straightens, whirling toward me. His mouth is twisted into a bitter pinch, and his eyes are harder than I think I've ever seen.

"I'm so sorry. I know you knew her."

"You don't know the half of it," he murmurs hoarsely.

"I'm sure that's true." I hold his gaze. "I know you're upset, but throwing things won't help," I say softly.

"Nothing will." I watch the edge in his eyes fade back into dazed desolation, and I take two steps closer. When he doesn't react, I close the distance between us and gently touch his elbow.

He jumps a little. "Jesus, Libby." He lifts up his hand, like he's going to touch me, but instead he takes an unsteady step back. "You need to get your shit and go. Just go."

"I don't want to go yet." I want to wrap my arms around him, but he grabs my hand. His fingers grip me hard and his pretty eyes grow tortured. "I can't make any promises...unless you go. Sometimes when I'm upset, I..."

"Throw things?"

He swallows, and my eyes rake over his body. I can't miss the erection straining against his jeans.

"Sometimes when you're upset, you want to have sex?" I whisper.

He nods, just barely.

"That night at your house, you were upset, weren't you? I saw your room. There was a broken glass and the pillows were all over the floor." That was just after I'd heard him having sex with Priscilla. "Hunter...what's going on with you? I'm worried."

His eyes slide over me, and I think it's the most honest I've ever seen him look. I'm reminded, oddly, of an angry, despondent child before he reaches out and grips my shoulder. "You should leave." His voice is hoarse and low. "Libby, please. Turn around and leave."

I bite my lip, and I consider doing just that. But I can't. This is Hunter. And maybe I'm a crazy idiot for feeling how I do, but when I'm with him, I feel better. More me than I am without him, and that's not something I can just let go of, even if it is insane.

"Do you think that you could talk to me?"

Hunter looks into my eyes and I feel like he's seeing everything inside my past and future. Then, suddenly—roughly—he tugs me to his chest and wraps himself around me. I feel his head come down on top of mine and my gut clenches.

"Libby." It sounds like he's pleading with me. I look up at him, wishing I knew what he needed, and his hands come up frame my face. "Libby...honey. Why don't you do what I say?"

"I don't want to leave yet." I clutch his biceps and press my cheek against his chest. "I really wish that you would talk to me."

He nuzzles my face with his, his cheek stroking mine as our mouths join in a kiss. I

expect that it will quickly turn hard and fierce, but instead his lips are feather gentle, so soft it doesn't feel quite real.

I pull him close and hungrily deepen our kiss. His tongue glides past mine and he's tugging deep breaths while never moving off of me. I'm feeling dizzy when he whispers, "Keep your eyes closed."

This is what he said to them. To Loveless and Marie V. and Sarabelle. Keep your eyes closed. I shudder, and he shoves clothes off the bed and lays me down as my limbs stiffen and I feel a shot of fear.

I can hear him in the limo: "You're riding an awful fucking lot on intuition." I try to feel some of the recommended skepticism as his fingers stroke my cheeks, his lips moving over my temples, teasing my ear. And, right there, he groans and presses his heavy body into mine.

"No, open them. Open them, Libby. I want to see your beautiful blue eyes."

His eyes are wide, and when I look into them, I feel like my insides have gone molten. I nod, then arch up and press my lips to his. We kiss for what seems like hours. Hunter's body is warm and weighty, and as things between us heat up, I grab his hips and he rocks into me with increased frenzy, panting, "Oh God, Lib. Oh God."

He's got my robe unfastened and it lies in heaps around me. His lips are sucking my breast, his hand holding my teddy up, and I can feel him trembling.

"Hunter, can I...?" I fumble with the button of his jeans, and he groans.

"Libby, sweet. Oh no." He pants. "You first."

He ducks and pulls my panties down, and before I know it his mouth is covering me right where I'm throbbing. I'm coming off the mattress, tugging on his hair, and he is moaning like he loves it.

I cum with a strangled scream, clamping my legs around his head. He grins when he disentangles himself, and I can feel his stiff length pressing against my leg through the denim of his jeans. I try to reach for it, but he lifts his weight off me.

"Why not?"

His eyes are wide. "Do you want to?"

"Yes. Of course."

I grab his shoulders and push him down beside me. This time it's me between his legs, unzipping his pants and freeing that huge, hard, staff. I pull his blue jeans down, his boxers down, and there is all of Hunter—cock and balls and hair-strewn thighs. I can feel a spurt of warmth between my own legs as I lean down and ease him into my mouth.

He nearly comes off the bed. I suck his head against the soft inside of my mouth and stroke his shaft while my other hand cups his balls. I take him deeper, licking his rod-stiff length just like an ice cream cone—the way I practiced. I lap around the edges of his head and he tugs my hair. I suck some more and pump him just a little harder. I can feel his balls stiffen in my hand. His cock throbs, and I taste a tinge of salt before he jerks away from me, coming over both our hands.

He's pushed himself up onto his elbows and I think he will lie back. Instead he wraps his arms around me and brings me down beside him, curling his body around

mine.

"Hunter." I reach behind me and feel the delicious hardness of his abs.

"You're a fucking angel," he rasps.

"No," I whisper, grinning. "Just a girl."

"My favorite girl." He gathers me into his arms and pulls me to the top of the bed, where the pillows are, urging me underneath the covers as he sits the drawers down on the floor. I realize I never figured out what he was doing when I came into the room, but he's not doing it anymore, so it doesn't matter quite as much.

Especially not that we're under the covers, our warm, sated bodies pressed together. Our arms and legs are tangled and I stroke his face, because he's just so handsome.

Soon his breathing is even and his body slack. I stroke his hair and face until my arm muscles are aching from the strain of hovering up over him. I tuck my arm back by my side and kiss his cheek. "Get some rest," I whisper.

Then I snuggle down beside him. I might have drifted off. I can't be sure, but when I open my eyes, I know it's afternoon by the amber and pink tone of the light streaming through the curtains. I blink up at the ceiling, realizing with a pleasant burst of warmth inside my chest that Hunter is wrapped around me, his face hidden in my hair.

I grin. Then I look across the room and see Priscilla.

Chapter Thirty-Three

~ELIZABETH~

Holy crabcakes. This is not good. I'm lying here with Hunter, and there is Priscilla, leaning against the door to his room. Her eyes and mine collide, and I drag my gaze down her body. She's wearing a black pantsuit and tall red heels. Her blonde hair flows over her shoulders like she's just come from a beauty parlor.

Her red lips curve into a twisted smile, and she purrs, "Scarlett."

I sit up and glance wide-eyed at Hunter. He's still sleeping. On his stomach. So I can see all the half-healed welts on his back. It's all I need to get angry—at her for what she's done him. And that she's even here at all, ruining our moment. I have no idea why Hunter's tied up with her, but I know he shouldn't be.

I pull the sheet around me and hop down off the bed, moving with borrowed bravado. Hunter, still sleeping peacefully behind me, is my inspiration. He's got enough on his plate. He doesn't need a drop by from Priscilla. Normally my insecurity might cause me to question that—maybe he's in love with her; blah blah blah—but I know deep down he's not. I'm not even sure he likes her, and if nothing else, I know she won't be as gentle with him today as I will.

Holding the sheet tightly around myself with one hand, I use the other one to point at the door. "I have no idea what you're doing here, but it's creepy and you need to leave. He's asleep, as you can see. He isn't feeling well."

Priscilla laughs. "His little hooker. What a spitfire you are." She rakes her mean gaze up and down my figure. "I'd like to know what you did to lose all that weight. That night I saw you at Hunter's party you were quite the fat ass."

Her comment bounces off me. I stalk closer to her and jerk my finger at the door. "Get out of here. I'll tell Hunter you came by, and he can decide if he wants you back." If she doesn't leave in just a second, I might claw her.

She laughs, a throaty, knowing sound. "I see what this is. You actually have a thing for him."

I look down at myself. "Um, I think it's clearly mutual."

She shakes her head and makes a tsk-ing sound. "Believe me sweetheart, you don't want to get involved with him. He's poison."

I frown at her. This makes no sense. Hasn't she spent the last few months—or even longer—having sex with him? Good sex, from what I saw through the powder room keyhole.

Intuition tells me she's full of crap, so I roll my eyes as I wave at her again. "I know what I want, and I don't trust a word out of your mouth."

She shrugs. "Your choice Triple X. But if you think he's yours, keep dreaming."

It takes me a minute to realize she's not calling me X-rated; she's calling me plus-sized. I snort. "You're ridiculous, and believe me, you really need to leave before I call security." It's a bluff—a stupid one, since I have no idea how much she knows about his house—but she takes a small step backward, the backs of her heels bumping the door.

I glance again at Hunter's sleeping form, and I know in my gut that isn't true, what she said. He's not poison. She is. "Get out of here and don't come back. You sadist."

I march forward, and to my shock, Priscilla turns, opens the door, and steps into the hall. "I'm going," she says in an airy tone, "but it's not because of you, Elizabeth DeVille. I'll be back when Hunter has time to enjoy his true pleasures."

The sad thing is, I might have believed her, had a gray-haired man dressed in a butler's outfit not come striding down the hall at that second. "Ms. Heat?" He takes a few quick strides, closing the distance between the two of them, and I'm surprised by how fast he's got her by the waist.

"Hal, I—"

"Mr. West has placed you on the do-not-admit list," he says, as he hauls her off. "I don't know how you got in through the back gate, but it's time for you to go."

Priscilla shrieks, and I watch as he unceremoniously tosses her over his shoulders and marches toward the stairs.

As they disappear from sight, and I sink down in front of Hunter's door, shaking. What have I gotten myself into?

*

When I return to Hunter's room, he's still sleeping. I hesitate only a minute before unraveling the sheet from around my body and lying it gently over his. I slip back into my teddy and robe and go next door to call Suri.

"Hi." I smile, feeling oddly content after my little run-in with Priscilla.

"Hi! Lizzy, how is everything? I want to hear about it all. I'm sorry I haven't been a good friend this last little while. Has he put the moves on you?"

"Sort of." I blush. "But I want to hear about Cross first."

She says Cross is awake, but he's quiet and moody. I smile, because that sounds about right.

"I'm sure he'd love to talk to you, but there's a social worker in there with him now. Do you want to call back later?"

I agree to do that, and after a few more minutes of filling her in on the days' events, I hang up and go back into the room with Hunter. I slip into the bed and snuggle up to him. Within seconds, his eyes are open and he's blinking at me.

He reaches out and thumps my nose as a gentle smile spreads over his lips. "How

are you?"

"Good. How are you?"

He sits up, revealing his amazing chest, and I worry I may combust. I think he notices, because he smirks and runs his finger up my throat, the way you might stroke a cat. It makes me shiver, and I find myself giggling like a teenager.

As he slides off the bed, totally, gloriously nude, and begins to look for his clothes, he peeks over his shoulder. "I'm sorry about earlier. Damned embarrassing." It takes me a second to realize he's talking about the mess he made of his room—not about Priscilla.

"It's okay. Don't be embarrassed."

He grabs some boxer-briefs off the floor, and it takes everything I have not to watch his perfect package as he steps into them. Holy moly.

"I've thrown things around since I was a kid. It's how I used to deal with anger I guess."

I nod, toying with the silky sheets. "You lost your mom. It makes sense that you would have had anger issues."

He gives me a charming little sideways smile. "You're wise for your age."

I arch a brow. "My mom has been hard in other ways."

"I can believe that." I watch in bliss as he throws a few handfuls of clothes into one of the drawers, his chest rippling. As he steps toward my side of the bed, I know I must be flushed. I watch as he swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I know we haven't had the main event yet. I just wanted you to know that it's not because I don't want to."

Holy cow. My blush gets blushier. "Thank you," I say awkwardly. "That's nice to know."

He leans against the bed and pulls me up against his chest. "If I'd known what I was missing out on, I'd have looked you up while you up a while ago. Actually," he adds, smiling a little, "I sort of did."

"You did?"

He nods. "One day I just got curious about little Libby DeVille, and I looked you up in the campus registry. Kind of a pervy thing to do when you're in your mid-20s."

I laugh. "You liar. You're thirty."

"Indeed, but I wasn't then."

Holy crap. Hunter looked me up when I was an undergrad? The belly bats turn into butterflies, and they soar around my stomach.

He squeezes my shoulder as he steps away, grabbing another handful of clothes and hauling them over to his dresser, and I work hard at not overheating as I watch his taut ass. Ah, and those long, muscled legs.

His back still makes me a little sad. The welts make me feel a little sick. I open my mouth to tell him about Priscilla. At that moment, though, he stuffs the clothes into his drawer and comes back over to me. He leans against the bed, and I notice how radiant his face looks; that's how focused he is on me. I have to struggle not to grin, because it feels so good.

"I'm sorry that you saw me act the fool, but I'm glad you're here. It's been...a break. A nice break, Libby DeVille." He twirls the end of a strand of my hair, the way he likes to do sometimes.

I wink. "Maybe you need to take breaks more often."

His fingers tunnel into my hair, and he brings his mouth down over mine. I'm lost in the warmth and softness of his lips and tongue, the nibbling teases of his teeth. He climbs into bed, resting his delicious weight on top of me, and he's hard and I'm wet and I'm grabbing that gold hair and staring into those cat eyes. When I pull away to gasp for air between our kisses, I really think this might be it. Maybe I'm finally going to lose my V-card.

I go for his boxer-briefs, but his hand clamps over mine. His gaze on mine is hard, which I don't understand. His chest is pumping, and I can feel how hard he is against my knee.

"Libby—no."

I frown. Did I do something wrong?

"It's not you," he pants. "You're perfect. It's just...I don't want your first time to be like this. With me like this." He looks down at himself, and when he looks back up, he leans his head against my neck and speaks his warm words on my collar bone: "You could do better."

His words shock me. I sit up a little, jarring him, and then I lie back down and cradle his shoulder. Hunter thinks I could do better than him? "Better how?"

"Better place, better circumstances...better guy."

"What's wrong with this guy?"

He swallows. "You deserve someone who's got his shit together."

"You seem pretty together."

He chuckles, but it's a dry, humorless sound. "That's just because you don't know me." He runs a gentle finger down from my throat, between my breasts. "You deserve the whole package, Libby."

"I'm not sure anyone has that." I haven't called to check on mom since I left California—because I just don't care. I'm still angry enough to spit nails at my dad. The more I think about seeing Dr. Bernard again, the more afraid I feel. "No one's perfect, Hunter. You need to give yourself a break?"

He swallows, and his eyes look so clear, like the river. "Don't try to get close to me. It's not a good idea."

"I don't care if it's a good idea. I don't think I can stay away from you. Now that I know you better..."

He shakes his head. "You're wrong." He pushes himself up and lithely shifts his body off the bed. "You don't know me. And what you do know should not make you want to learn anything more. You need to trust me, Libby. Stay in your own world, and leave me in mine. We can have a little fun together, but that's it."

I'm surprised and humiliated when my eyes well with tears. "That's all you want from me?" I can't believe this. That he's giving me no chance to go beyond just sex. And after what I told Dr. Bernard. Since I've been here, and we've spent some time

together, I'd actually started thinking...I don't know. That we click. That there is something here worth exploring.

He rubs his face roughly, like he's frustrated, or his shadow is itching. "It doesn't matter what I want. I've got...a lot going on, and I don't want to get your hopes up falsely. If you're crazy enough to have those kinds of hopes," he adds, pulling his mouth into an ominous frown. "Maybe you're not."

I push myself off the bed. "All I said was 'You don't give yourself a break much'. It's not like I got down on one knee."

He just looks at me, his jaw locked. For the longest time, I think I'm being stonewalled. Then his mouth softens, and he sighs. "Then maybe it's me," he says, very, very softly. "Maybe it's me who's wanting more. Like I said, you're beautiful and sweet. I'm sure you're not surprised."

He grabs my arm, gentle even as he steers me to the door that joins our rooms. I drag my feet, mostly because I'm shocked—and thrilled—and totally confused. Hunter wants more! But he doesn't want to let himself have it?

I frown up at him, but he's shaking his head again. "Libby, I'm so sorry that this didn't work. I guess I didn't think it through. You need to go. Tonight or tomorrow—as soon as you can get away. Tap your red slippers and go home to Napa."

My chest aches, and I'm shocked to find I can't speak over the lump in my throat. I swallow hard and try my best to look dignified, instead of like a beggar. "Hunter...I don't understand."

He shrugs. "This is how it's got to be."

He opens the door that joins our rooms, but I don't move. He puts his hand on the small of my back. "C'mon, Libby...I don't have room for wherever this might be headed, so why not end it while we're both ahead?"

"We're not," I whisper.

He tugs me through the door to my room and sweeps his palm over my hair, giving me a look of what can only be longing before he holds up his hand in a goodbye pose. "Take care of yourself, Libby."

I can't even form an answer as he steps back through the door.

*

~HUNTER~

I woke up sometime after Priscilla arrived. At first I thought it was a nightmare. Then I heard Libby, telling her to go away. I'm so ashamed that I just lay there, eyes closed, listening to that bitch talk shit about me—and listening to Libby, my avenging angel. I soaked it up. It soothed something inside me. Made me feel like I'm alive instead of dying.

That's what it's been like with Priscilla. Like suffocation. A slow snuffing out of everything I want and everything I need.

Like it was with Rita.

I don't understand how Libby is so different. After I peeked into the hallway and I realized Priscilla was being dealt with, I feigned sleep until Libby came back and got in bed with me. I stayed completely still while she wrapped an arm gently around the lower part of my back and nuzzled her face into the crook between my shoulder and my neck. Why did it feel so good? I've been touched before, but it never felt like that. What's so different about her?

I sit for a long time in front of the door I sent her through. I shut my eyes and try to feel her in the room behind me, packing up her things. There is a part of me—a raging, senseless part—that wants to burst the door open, rip her clothes off and fuck her until she can't walk anymore. She'll be stuck in my bed, the smell of vanilla and cinnamon surrounding me forever.

However, the part of me that actually cares about her wins the day. I wasn't lying when I told her she deserved the whole package. She is selfless, kind, beautiful, smart, good, and in so many other ways out of my league.

I don't know why she seems to care for me, even just a little, but I shut my eyes and try to drown in the peaceful feeling that I get whenever she's around. It's more than the lust I used to feel whenever I bumped into her. It's like the amplification of that feeling I had the very first night I saw her, with the broken Porsche. Peaceful. Pleasant. Beautiful. Good.

As I listen to the room around me, I think that I can hear her voice. She sounds upset, and it kills me that I'm the reason why.

My back is sore from pressing on the door, so I rock forward, leaning over my knees with my head propped in my hands.

"I fucked up... I fucked it all up... I fucked up..."

Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can hear myself sobbing and my dad yelling and I see all that blood.

I inhale deeply.

Libby. Think of Libby.

I've got her face pinned to the forefront of my mind like a motherfucking screensaver when the phone rings. Not my cell phone, but my land line. Shit.

*

~ELIZABETH~

I don't want to leave, but I'm not sure what else to do. Hunter doesn't want me here, and I can't force him to, regardless of how much I want to stay. I want to walk back through the door, and I would, but this is the second time he's said I should leave, and Priscilla was just here. He has a whole life outside me, and if he means what he says about not wanting to take things any further with me, I don't see the point of trying to force myself on him.

I'm packing my bags, feeling numb and desolate, when Suri calls.

"Lizzy—hi." She pauses for a second. "How are things?"

"They're good. I'm headed home."

"Really? Wow. So I guess things must have progressed?"

"Kind of," I hedge. I don't even try to go into it, because I can tell by her voice that something's wrong. My stomach's tied in knots, because I'm worried that it's Cross.

"Is something going on? You sound weird," I say.

She sighs. "Girl, you always know, don't you?"

"I'm your bestie. That's my job. So spit it out."

"It's Cross. He's saying...what happened that night wasn't an accident. That someone did it. He's upset, like he pulled out all his IVs and cursed at Nanette, and then he told me to leave because he needs some time to think." Her voice breaks on the word 'leave' and I know something is going on with the two of them.

"Wow." I clutch the phone a little tighter. Cross has had some serious issues with his father, but I don't think he has any real enemies. Does he? I lean against the bedpost, feeling sick—over this, over Hunter. Over everything. "Is he doing better now? I mean, when you left was he..."

"I didn't leave. I'm outside, in a waiting area. I think they sedated him. He was really upset." She drags in a teary breath and I can hear a sniffle, followed by the rustle I'm sure must be a tissue. "I'm sorry to burden you with this while you're at Hunter's, but I didn't know who else to call. He said that when he left to go...after the fight the two of you had, there was this guy messing with his bike. Like, touching it and stuff. The guy told him he liked the bike, and when Cross tried to go, he tried to get him to go back in and have another drink. It doesn't sound like much, but Cross says when he got onto the road he had trouble steering. He said the steering had been messed up, and the breaks were messed up too, but not completely. So he didn't flip like he might have, he just lost control of the steering...because of how much he had to drink."

"Holy shitballs. Did he know this guy?"

"Cross said he looked like someone he used to know. I asked if it was an enemy or something, and he acted kind of weird. I don't know if we can trust him, though, Liz. He thinks you two had a fight because he was jealous over you messing around with Hunter."

"He was," I whisper.

Suri huffs her breath out, and I can feel her censure. Her irritation that I kept it from her. "I guess I don't know anything." The next second, I'm left there standing with the dead line in my hand, and no way home. How nice.

A phone rings, and for a moment I think it's Suri. It's actually the landline on the table in the corner. It rings once, twice, three times before I reluctantly lift the earpiece.

"Hello," I hear Hunter say. His voice is extra low and slightly raspy, and if I'm not mistaken, I can hear the echo of it through the door that joins our rooms.

Almost immediately, there is another voice.

"Hunter." It sends a shiver down my spine, because I know that voice from TV.

Hunter's father. Shit. "Are you alone?" Conrad West's voice has always been a little creepy: a cross between Darth Vader and a used car salesperson.

"I'm at my house and yeah, I'm by myself. What can I do for you, Sir?" Hunter sounds weary. Under that I hear a ring of irritation.

"It's been a long time since I've heard from you," Conrad says.

"Yep."

"You feel no obligation to keep in touch with your father? Your sister says she never hears from you either."

"What do you want, Dad?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know." His voice tightens. "You wanted to wish me a good day?"

"You know damn well why I called!" Conrad snaps. "You're in water hot enough to boil a crayfish. Is there anything you care to tell me?"

"I don't care to tell you shit. That's why I never call."

I can practically feel Conrad's anger through the phone line. My palm around the phone starts sweating as Hunter's dad growls, "You don't want to talk? Then allow me. You are being investigated for the murder of a woman named Sara Meyer. Does that ring a bell?" Conrad's voice has gotten more Southern; he's practically drawling. "Sometime between the night you engaged her services and the next morning, she disappeared. Right out of your bed. She was found dead last night in a ditch in Arizona, with your cuff link in her cold, dead fingers."

"I didn't—"

"That is immaterial, Hunter. You can't be investigated. Do you understand how badly you've fucked up?"

I wait for Hunter to come up cursing like he normally does, and I'm surprised when the line is eerie quiet.

"Okay, then let me spell it out" Rita is dead because of you. She died before her time because of you. Because you couldn't learn to quit pushing that woman's buttons." I don't understand what exactly Conrad is saying, but I'm shocked. "Do you want to see your hands in cuffs, Hunter? Are you intentionally trying to ruin your life, because you're doing exceedingly well?" Hunter says nothing, and his dad continues. "You tend to do that. Ruin things. Well let me tell you, this sort of scandal is below our family.

"You know, for years after you moved to Vegas I had patience with you. I, too, had some oats to sew, but unlike you, I moved forward."

Hunter's voice warbles on the line, then comes through loud and strong; condemning. "You fell in love with a hooker. And she died. That's how you 'moved forward.' Because my mother died. Rita weaseled her way back into your life and you took her, and you pretended she was my mom, too. This scandal's not below our family. This scandal is our family."

"No it's not the only scandal comes from you!" Conrad snaps in a rush of anger.

"I'm not the one who hit a little fucking kid!"

There's a pause, and then Mr. West's voice lowers, soft and deadly. "Neither am I,

but sometimes I wish I had. Clean this mess up, Hunter. Pay off the cops. Do whatever you need to do to bury this. But let me warn you, you may have to go farther than I did for you. Priscilla Heat is close enough to Carlson to suck his fat, red cock, and she is covering for him. From what I've been able to gather, this somehow goes back to one of Carlson's mistresses. This is hearsay now and I'm working to find evidence, but I am not going public with it. It will hurt my career. You need to find someone who can. Check your e-mail. Check it daily. Check it hourly. Right this course or so help me. Goodbye."

Chapter Thirty-Four

~HUNTER~

I've been pounding the bag so long that things have started getting blurry. When I hear my name, it's like a salve, but I can't stop what I'm doing. My knuckles are bleeding, the scabs from the charity fight split open, and I need the blood.

My father is right. I do have her blood on my hands.

I was playing cards online in the basement that afternoon when Rita came in. For months, it had been the only place I knew she couldn't reach me. The cancer had advanced. She couldn't make it down the stairs. I remember how I thought it served her right. She had come to find me in the basement playroom so many times before. The walls had always muffled the sound of her palm against my cheek. When she screamed and raged, the sound bounced off the tile, magnifying in my ears. But my father could pretend he didn't hear.

These were different days, though. Rita was quiet more than she was speaking. When I got hungry or wanted to go outside, I typically only had to avoid the sitting room, where I could hear her the Darth Vader puffs of her little blue oxygen machine.

So when I heard her creeping down the stairs, hanging onto the bannister, gasping freakishly without her oxygen, I'd half wondered if she'd died and come to haunt me on her way to hell.

She was skeletal, with dry bald patches between short tufts of black hair, but I remember feeling anxious when I saw her reflection in the monitor. She might have been weak as hell, but she still hated my guts.

She raised her bone-thin arm and I whipped around, my arms already up in front of my face. But she wasn't trying to hit me. She had a hot pink shirt. As she shook it out, I noticed spots of bleach.

"Did—" gasp— "you—" gasp— "do this?"

"No."

She held the shirt out, her frail hand shaking. "You...lie."

"No I'm not." Her eyes were bugging out. Her gasps getting louder. My heart was racing, so I tried to curb my fear and keep things light. "You should go back upstairs."

It was clear she couldn't hit me. What was the point of bringing me the shirt? I sat there staring at her, and that's when she did it. She wrapped her bony fingers around my wrist and dug her brittle nails into my skin. I remember looking into her flat, brown eyes. Her mouth—her trembling lips—were pulled into a sneer. She sank her

nails in deep enough that I could feel the blood well and she hissed, "You're a—" BIG gasp—"selfish little bastard."

I don't know if she was already falling when I pushed her. I know when my palm connected with her chest, her eyes rolled back into her head, but were they rolling back already? In my nightmares, I can never tell.

I knew as soon as I pushed her that I'd made a horrible mistake. I even tried to grab her, but her knees just crumpled. She hit the floor, and blood was everywhere in heartbeats. I tried to find the source, but it was everywhere: her mouth and nose, her head. Even—I remember—her ears.

I still can't get away from all that blood. I wake up covered in it. It's there when I have a good hand. When someone orders red meat medium rare. When I'm tagging cattle.

Rita is always bleeding out on me.

Right now, I want the blood. I punch the bag again.

"Hunter..."

Shit. I whirl around, panting. I had almost forgotten she was here. "Scarlett" DeVille. She reaches for me, but I step away, holding my bleeding hands near my sides. "Libby—go away."

"I can't." She sounds like she's crying. When I blink the sweat out of my eyes, I find that hers are wet. Without thinking, I pull her into my arms, pressing my lips against her hair as I speak quietly near her ear. "Do you see why you need to leave now? I'm a fucking mess."

"I know you are." Her voice breaks as she wraps her arm around my waist. "That's why I can't leave." I inhale vanilla and cinnamon, allow my eyes to close. "Hunter, I know what happened with Sarabelle."

I step back, feeling like I've just had my guts stomped out. "What are you talking about?"

Her eyes are huge, but she doesn't back away. "I wasn't being nosy, but I heard it at the ranch. You slept with Sarabelle, and then she disappeared. And now...they found her. That's why you were upset last night, wasn't it?"

I rub my hair, noting the stinging of my knuckles. "You don't need to worry about any of this."

Her jaw tightens. "Did you hurt her?"

"What?" I suck in a breath. I can feel the blood rush out of my head, the way it used to when I heard Rita coming down the stairs. "Fucking hell, Libby, do you think I would hurt a woman?"

"Did you?"

"Jesus—no. Don't take my word for it. That's just stupid. But no, I didn't hurt her. I would never hurt her." My throat goes tight and I have to work my jaw. I look away, and Libby takes a step closer.

"The cops think you did it?"

I swallow hard. "She was found with one of my cufflinks."

She looks into my eyes, and I see only sadness. "Oh, Hunter. How did you get into

this?"

"I don't know. And I wouldn't tell you even if I did. You've got no business anywhere near this."

"I already am. I'm a Junior Ranger Prostitute now, and more importantly I care about you, Hunter. And I'm sorry this happened, but..." She pauses, obviously working herself up to something. I definitely don't expect her to say, "I didn't mean too, but I overheard some of your conversation with your dad."

I can feel the air leave the room. I start to sway.

"I'm so sorry. I answered when it rang and—"

"You shouldn't have," I rasp.

"I know." A tear falls down her cheek. "He was really horrible to you."

I turn my back to her as blood roars in my head. "I fucked up... I fucked it all up... I fucked up..."

I can sense her coming around to stand in front of me, beside the punching bag, but I've got a hand over my face. "I heard him say something about Priscilla. Is that why you and her are...I mean, is that why you have sex with her? Because of the—"

I whirl on her, cutting her off. "There is no why. There is no why! Where you're concerned, there is no why! Quit asking questions and just GO! Fuck it, Libby! Can't you see I'm trying to protect you!"

"From what?" Her blue eyes blink. "What is going on? Is she trying to frame you, Hunter?"

"I don't know," I answer finally.

She touches my shoulder and I can hear her sucked in, sobby breath. "Your back..."

I raise my head to look her in the eye. The pity on her face cracks something in me open. I shift my weight, trying to draw a breath. I can't take the pity, so I dip into my reservoir of anger, instead. It makes my tone sharper when I ask, "Did you ever think maybe I like that shit?"

"Do you?"

"What do you think?" I grab her shoulder without thinking about my bloody hands. As soon as I see my stained fingers on her, I feel dizzy. "Do you think I like it?" I rasp.

"I don't know." Her eyes, on mine, are huge. Her face looks pale and worried. Out of nowhere, guilt slams through me like a train. I should never have brought her to my home, and if she heard that phone call with my dad, she knows way more than she should about an unsafe situation.

Damnit!

I do the only thing I can to say I'm sorry.

*

~ELIZABETH~

Before Hunter kisses me, I really think he's going to throw me out of his house. He's bleeding, upset, radiating anger and frustration, and I'm just...here. Useless. Totally unable to help him. Unwanted, even, if what he said earlier was true.

Then he cups his palm around my head and pulls me close and plants his mouth on mine, and my knees turn to jelly. He hold me against him and kisses me like he's drowning and I'm air.

I kiss him back, returning fire for fire, because he's Hunter, and my body just responds. But my mind is spinning. Someone hit him when he was a kid? Is that why he let Priscilla hurt him? Priscilla is having sex with Governor Carlson? Is that why Cross hates her so much? And Governor Carlson had another mistress killed?"

It dawns on me that Hunter is right. This is some really big shit. Some huge shit, and I don't know what's going on. Then Hunter's tongue sweeps through my mouth, and just like that, I forget my worries.

I tug his hair and run my free hand up his hard shoulder. He's shirtless now, here in his gym, and I can feel the line of every muscle. My hand settles over his strong nape as he kisses roughly down my neck and I moan, "Hunter."

"You're a stubborn...woman...Libby," he pants as he kisses down my chest and rips my button-up blouse open. His hands tickle behind my back and my bra is off in seconds. My breath is in his mouth as his fingers make quick work of my slacks. He lays me on the bright blue work-out mat and sticks one big forearm inside my slacks, moaning in pleasure when his fingers find their mark. I'm not wearing underwear. I didn't want a panty line.

"Jesus, Libby. This is so damn hot."

He slides a finger in and I'm clinging to his shoulders as he rocks his hips into my thigh. I can feel his swollen length, and I want it inside me.

"Hunter," I pant. I want to tell him what I need but I can't find my voice.

*

~HUNTER~

I shouldn't take this any further, but her mouth on mine is so soft, it's like a vindication. Her hands, reaching for my cock and stroking through my jeans, are so damn tender. I can't resist this woman. I lean down and taste her salty sweetness with my lips and tongue, showing her just how hungry I am.

When she cums, she screams, then pushes herself up on one arm, leaning her forehead against my shoulder. I'm astonished when I realize she's not leaning on me; she's trying to reach past my torso.

"Why are you doing this?" I grate out as she works my zipper.

"I don't know." She laughs. "I'm crazy, I think. Every time I see you, I..."

"You what." I grab her chin, because I want to hear this, and I want to see her eyes when she says it.

"Every time I see you I want you," she whispers. "Ever since I was sixteen."

"The Porsche?"

She nods, and I kiss her mouth. She kisses me back with all her might. She ends up on top of me, pulling my jeans off like a sexy-crazed nymph. The denim rubs my cock and I'm at full-mast, pushed painfully into my boxer-briefs. She yanks them off, pops me into her mouth, and I groan. I want to ask her if she's sure, but my ass is rising off the floor and I can't keep from pumping my hips. Her hands are...God. "Yes, there!" She's gliding over my balls and pumping my cock and licking my head and—

I come fast and hard, pulling out of her mouth only just in time.

She grins, and I push my tired self up to kiss her lips.

Chapter Thirty-Five

~ELIZABETH~

I don't think I've ever seen anything hotter than Hunter's face as he comes. But in the seconds after he finishes, I'm worried again. He grabs a towel off a bench and cleans us up, and then he pulls me to my feet and hands me my clothes—and he's gentle, with his eyes on me as we both dress, clearly concerned about whether I enjoyed myself.

I look into his eyes and tell him, "That was wonderful."

"Good," he says. But the little smile he gives me doesn't reach his eyes at all. He looks distracted. Worried, even. Like maybe he regrets what happened. And why wouldn't he, says a little voice inside my head. He told you to leave, Lizzy—and you didn't.

I'm staring at the floor, trying to decide what to do next without making all this ten times more awkward, when he reaches out and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Want to go upstairs?"

"Of course."

There's no smile from him, no sign at first that he's relived or happy that I'm still around. But after we step off the elevator onto the main floor, he wraps his arm around my shoulder as we walk toward the staircase. Every time our sides and hips bump, I feel a bolt of lightning jolt my body.

He loosens his grip on me a little as we take the stairs, but we're still close. His eyes glide over me. He looks pensive. "I want you to get a shower."

Oh no. He's sending me away now.

I swallow, because I don't trust myself not to make embarrassing noises. If he wants me to leave, I need to go.

"Okay," I say quietly.

He holds out his hand, and for a second, I'm confused. "I didn't think about this when I touched you, but my hands are bloody."

Panic flashes through me. "Are you positive for something?"

"No. I'm not. Just...I thought you might like to clean it off."

He says nothing more as we make our way through his room into and his massive bathroom, done in sleek whites and grays.

There's a shower, which I figure he will turn on, but instead he reaches over the square gardener's tub and turns the knob. He turns around and pulls some bottles from a cabinet, squirting something from one of them into the tub as it fills.

"Take as long as you want," he tells me. He sits a towel and a wash cloth on the

tub's edge, and then he disappears, closing the door behind him.

What the heck? I strip out of my clothes and hop into the bath only as a courtesy to Hunter. I don't feel dirty, and I don't want to sit in here by myself, curious about what's going on inside his head, but maybe he has a thing about cleanliness.

I take the world's shortest soak bath, and as I reach for my towel, I notice the mess of fluffy, black terrycloth isn't all towel. There's a robe there, too.

I bring it to my nose and a quick sniff reveals it's Hunter's. It smells like shaving cream, deodorant, and Hunter. As I slide it on my damp body, I actually shiver.

Holy wow.

After only a moment's deliberation, I use a comb on the counter to brush my hair and then I gather my dirty clothes into a bundle and walk into Hunter's bedroom. It's been entirely put to rights—by Hunter while I bathed, or by a housekeeper, I'm not sure; I was so focused on Hunter I didn't pay attention to the room when we passed through it before.

I don't see Hunter, but then he taps me on the shoulder, and I realize I passed him. He's sitting with his back against the wall, just outside the bathroom.

"Hi." Despite the weirdness of our circumstances, I can't help but smile.

"Hi." He returns the smile, but his is weary. I jerk my thumb toward the still-steaming bathroom. "You should shower, too." He's sweaty and his hands are still bloody. "I bet you'd feel better."

He shakes his head and pushes up off the floor. His green eyes meet mine and hold. "Libby, I'm worried about you. Priscilla is used to getting what she wants, and she won't like it that you're here. Will you please go?" For the first time, I can tell he doesn't want me to. When he asks me to leave, he's frowning, and there's a crease between his eyebrows. His body is tense, like he's waiting for a blow.

"So you know Priscilla came by?"

Something flickers over his face, but I'm not sure what it is. "Hal told me. I'm sorry you had to deal with that. It's bullshit. Just another reason now would be a good time for you to leave."

"I want to stay. Just one night with you." I pause only for a minute before pinning my heart right to my sleeve. "Consider it my fantasy come true."

The lines between his brows deepen, and he gives me a questioning look, but that's it. No words. My Lord, this man is pensive.

I grab his forearm and tug lightly. "Come into the bathroom with me. I want to help you wash your hands."

"I can do it," he says softly.

I run my fingers over his. "You need to put some gauze on them."

I catch a flicker of something on his face that I think might be embarrassment, but it's gone just as fast, and for a long moment as he gets a First Aid kit from a cabinet, he's Hunter West, the enigma/fantasy/unattainable.

When he's back in range, I put my hands on his smooth shoulders and urge him onto the side of the tub. "Sit." I grab a chair from behind me and pop open the kit.

Cleaning his fists is surprisingly intimate. It makes my belly clench, not because

he's beautiful—and he is, especially with his torso bare—but because I feel so much for him.

I run a damp towel over his right hand, and I'm hit with the memory of Loveless telling me about the Hunter she found in Sarabelle's room that night. "Don't look at me..." I frown. Didn't she say he was holding his cheek? His words from the conversation with his father ring in my mind. "I'm not the one who hit a little fucking kid!"

My stomach clenches. I have so many questions, but I have to wait until the right moment. He still seems edgy, uncomfortable, as I wrap gauze around his palm, so I want to keep it light for now. I briefly meet his gaze. "When's your next tournament?"

"Supposed to be in two weeks."

"Do you split your time pretty evenly between here and your vineyard?"

He shakes his head. "I prefer the vineyard. When I can be there."

Which I hope is a lot. I'm practically gleeful when I think of him being so close.

I glance up at him as I switch hands, and I find him looking down at me through long, dark eye-lashes. His face looks so handsome, it's hard to think about anything else. I take a deep breath as I tie off the gauze around his left wrist. "I was wondering...how do you think Sarabelle ended up with your cufflink?"

He locks his jaw. "Do you really want to hear this?"

Still sitting on a chair in front of him, I nod. "I know that you're not guilty, Hunter. Not only do I not think you would do something like this, but you didn't sound guilty on the phone, and no one at Love Inc. thinks you are. Those three things are good enough for me."

He rubs a hand back through his hair. "I don't want to drag you into this."

"Is it because you don't trust me?"

"No. It's because I'm worried for you." He doesn't meet my eyes, but he does take my hand and lead me next door. On the way, he grabs an undershirt from his drawer and slides it on.

When we get into my room, he says, "Let me help you pack. I don't know who might show up here. It's not a good place for you to be right now." He presses a kiss on my cheek. "Libby, you've done enough, and I appreciate it. What I'd like best is for you to go home and don't worry about me."

"I'll go tomorrow if you still think I should. But for tonight let's just talk, or...I don't know. Watch movies or something."

He gives me a skeptical sort of look. "Watch movies?"

"I bet you have a hell of a home studio somewhere in here."

"And if the cops show up and take me off in handcuffs?"

"I'll post your bail." I smirk a little. "I have the money."

I start to fold and organize my clothes, which are laid out by outfit all over the room, and Hunter leans against the bed. It's a little awkward, but also kind of companionable. "I'm surprised you went to a brothel for sex," I say after a few minutes.

"Are you?" he smiles a little ruefully.

"You could get it on your own."

"True. But I'm emotionally detached. Women don't like that."

"Do you really think so?" I don't see him that way at all.

He shrugs. "They want more. Most people do."

"No, I meant why do you see yourself that way?"

He shrugs. "Nurture shaping nature." One eyebrow lifts when he sees my face. "You look surprised."

"I am," I say, sticking the last of my stray outfits into my suitcase. "I don't see you that way at all."

He presses his lips together in an expression I can't read. "That's because I'm not, with you."

I link my arm through his, and we take the elevator up to the third floor. and make our way into his movie room. He's still got my hand laced through his arm, but when we get into the vast room with its rows of black leather recliners, he lets go of me and waves at the cabinets on the wall. "You pick something. I need to call Marchant, okay?"

I nod. "I need to make a call, too."

We go into separate corners. Suri tells me Cross is calmer now, wants to see me, and insists he's right about someone trying to kill him that night at Hunter's party. I tell her I'll be back tomorrow.

Hunter walks over to me, his hands in his pockets. "Something...um, happened. Having to do with the situation you heard my father mention. If they don't get it straightened, I might have to go out and help."

"Who's they?"

"Marchant and I have a team of private investigators, looking into what happened to Sarabelle."

I nod slowly. "I see." Before I can ask him another question, he arches his brows and asks, "What did you pick?"

"The Notebook."

The horrified look on his face is priceless.

I laugh, pulling the DVD out from behind my back. "What about The Princess Bride?"

"Now that'll work."

"I want to watch this and have fun. But tell me one thing first. Was it all fake? You and Priscilla?"

He nods, and I can't help myself. "So she's framing you. Blackmailing you or something."

He starts the movie and pulls me into his lap, in one of the recliners. I'm surprised, but I adore the closeness. "Don't worry about me," he says as I settle against his chest. "And please, don't ever be afraid of me. You know...I still remember the first night I ever saw you."

"You had a woman over."

"An escort."

I frown, wondering about his mother. She was an escort, or so his father said. "Do you only like escorts? Is that why you're not having sex with me?"

"I have sex with escorts because they don't want anything. Remember? I'm a no strings attached kind of guy."

"You seem like you would make a good boyfriend," I say, stroking his arm. Not that I can really say, having even less experience in relationship matters. "I mean, if you found the right person."

He's silent for a second, and I kick myself for being so obvious.

Eventually, he says, "I think ultimately I just can't take that risk."

He kisses my temple. I snuggle up to him as the movie starts to play, and want to cry.

*

~HUNTER~

Libby falls asleep against my chest sometime before the credits roll, and I carry her to my bed. Then I discuss the Priscilla incident with Hal, who doubles as my driver as well as my head of security. It seems at some point Priscilla—or one of her friends—rewrote my system's security protocols to admit her 24/7. Hal has reset the system, and he's called in his brothers, Jake and Gilly. I have him post both outside my door.

As I dress, I think about everything that's transpired between Libby and I. Everything that's been said. And I wish, for the first time, that I was a free man. Really free. I wish that I could have her. Not just for a night. She's not that kind of woman. And the crazy thing is, when I'm with her, I'm not that kind of guy.

I think about all the food I cooked for her for breakfast. I never cook. I never want to. But I want to feed Libby. I think about how I let her touch me with her eyes open. I let her look at me, and I didn't feel anxious like I do with other women. In fact, it's the opposite; I like looking into her blue eyes. I think about her up there in my bed, and I'd give anything to be there with her. Kiss her. Fuck her. Fly around the world with her. I'd like to take her to New Zealand. The Alps. Some place that's as beautiful as she is.

Instead, I get my gun and call Marchant to see if any of our people have a lead on Priscilla's location. He tells me no one has she's still M.I.A.—so I head out to try to find her. I check out with Hal and open my front door, already thinking about how I'll get the little recorder stashed in my glove box and put it in my pocket, just in case I actually find Priscilla and can get her talking.

I lock the door, turn around, and jump as a slender arm encircles my waist.

"Hunter."

Priscilla! Now that's a surprise. She's standing in the nook where a huge potted palm blooms, right beside my door. The porch light is on, and in the amber glow, her

hair looks white, her eyes almost black.

"Priscilla," I growl. I want to throttle her right here and now, but I need the recorder to make any of this worth while. I push her against the side of the house, pressing my palm against her ribcage, and look into her coy face. "You and I need to go talk. Somewhere not here."

I guess she sees the rage twisting my face, because her eyes widen, and she arches up against the stone wall. "I didn't pick you, Hunter," she says quickly. I try not to let my surprise show as she leaps right into a confession. "Not for anything but sex. I wanted you beside me on screen. We look great together. That's all I cared about."

"So it was all Lockwood?" I murmur.

She leans up to kiss me, but I move my hand from her chest to her throat. "Don't try that shit," I hiss.

She sticks her hands up like I'm holding her at gunpoint. She's worried, and I've never seen her worried. Is this a game? Why is she here? Why is she talking? "He knew I had drugged you that night, and he wanted to fuck Sarabelle. She never took him as a client. He didn't like that."

"So he—what? What did he do to her?" I need to know, but I don't want to know, and that just stokes my anger. I wrap my fist around Priscilla's blouse and tug her down the stairs, toward my truck. She slips and falls, but I'm not thinking clearly. I don't care if she gets scraped up. I jerk her forward.

"Hunter, stop!" She shrieks, and it's loud enough to wake the fucking dead. "Listen to me! Listen to me!" She wraps her arms around a rock that's in the flower bed by the bottom stair and looks up at me with her mouth hanging half open. "I can't control what he does, Hunter!"

"What did he do?" I growl.

"He slipped into the room. She was asleep and you were out. I think he knocked her out and then he—" She swallows. "It's disgusting—I know it is, but I had nothing to do with it!"

"And then what?" "You can't expect me to tell you anything extra," she says, haughty again. "You've made your bed, and now you'll have to lie in it. You took her out to the car and put her in! I asked you to, and you did it without question!"

"No I didn't." That's ridiculous. "I would never do anything like that! You're a goddamned liar."

"You did it," she snaps.

"Because I was fucking drugged!" I lunge down and grab her by the wrists, dragging her toward my truck.

"I recorded you on my camera phone, and I've already delivered a copy of the file to Lisa from the FBI. She has your cuff link, too! Did you know that? And your real mother? Roxanne the escort? The Los Angeles Times knows about her, too. In fact, about now they should be learning a lot about you, Hunter West. I came upon a whole stockpile of your history."

"You bitch." I want to slap her, but I'm so shocked, my hands stop working and I

let her go.

She dances out of reach, blonde hair flying around her face. "It was so easy," she laughs. "What I told you was true—we didn't plan this. But Lockwood has a cousin on the police force. Once he heard that they were really going to make a case out of this, he remembered how you helped us that night and he reached out to me. At that point I was pissed off." She gestures at her body, laughing shrilly. "If you think you're too good for me, I'm too good to help you, so I helped him set you up."

I lunge forward, grabbing her wrist, and she shrieks again as I drag her toward my truck. "Let me go!"

I fumble with the "unlock" button on my key as I try to keep her talking. "I still don't understand why you're helping him at all."

"Who?"

"Lockwood! Are you in love with him?" I know she's not before she snorts, and I'm correct that the ridiculous question will elicit an elaboration.

"In love with that disgusting boar? Of course not!"

I swing the door open, tightening my grip around Priscilla's forearm. I'm going to get this shit recorded if it kills me.

"So it's the governor," I murmur as I jerk her toward the cabin.

She shrieks and starts to go ape-shit, kicking at my crotch and biting at my arm. "LET ME GO! LET ME GO! LET ME GO!"

"No," I growl. I throw her skinny ass into the front seat and Priscilla starts to claw at me. As I try to climb in behind her, planning to hold onto her arm until we take off driving, she pulls a can of Mase and sticks it in my face. I move so fast I'm out of the car before Priscilla can get her balance back; she tumbles out into the dirt.

As she gets to her feet, I try to grab her again, but she slaps me in the face, and I go reeling back.

"You can't win this, you stupid motherfucker. It's got roots you can't imagine, and you're the FBI's suspect number one. That's what I came to tell you!" She takes off into the lawn, her hair trailing behind her as she dashes to her Camaro. She stops mid-way. "You know, I am a little sorry, Hunter. Good men don't belong in prison." She shrugs. "Guess that's what happens when you fuck hookers. Even virgin ones."

"If you touch her, I will kill you slowly," I warn.

She laughs, throwing back her head. "What a great idea." She waves, and she's walking around her car—gone, and my opportunity is lost.

Chapter Thirty-Six

~ELIZABETH~

I wake up the next morning feeling like something is missing. I roll over in my cozy bed, and that's when I notice where I am. Holy crabcakes, I'm in Hunter's room! That makes me grin into the pillows. My smile slips a little when I realized I'm in it alone, and it goes away completely when I remember that today's the day I promised I would leave.

And I'm leaving a virgin.

I don't want to leave, and not just because I still have my V-card. I don't want to leave Hunter. He needs me right now—I feel certain he does. I roll over in the sheets, inhaling his scent, and I have to swallow back a sob. If I leave now, we might never spend this kind of time together again. And what about the trouble Hunter's in? Who's going to help him?

I go into my room, check to see if there's a text from Suri—there's not—and then I slide into a red dress and pin my hair back with red barrettes. I check my phone again, not quite ready to leave the room and set this day in motion. The clothes I slept in still smell like Hunter, so I bring them to my nose. How am I ever going to get over him? How will I forget any of this? Not just the experience with Hunter, but the dark story weaving itself around him. Sarabelle, Priscilla, the governor? I want to know more—for Cross's sake, and for Hunter's—but I can't ask.

I leave the room without zipping my bags. I inhale deeply when I reach the stairs, praying I'll smell breakfast—but there is nothing in the air except the smell of cleaner and hardwood. Where is Hunter? Is he even here?

I'm headed to his study, not sure exactly what I'll find. As soon as I reach the first floor, the doorbell rings. Doorbells at odd times remind me of the accidents my mom has had—accidents or incidents in which the cops showed up at our house. So hearing it now stops me in my tracks.

I look around.

It rings again.

I step over to the hallway that leads to Hunter's study. "Hunter?" I call. Surely a house like this has speakers in most rooms; in fact, I think I've seen them.

The doorbell rings again, and I step slowly to the glass panes surrounding the doors. Against my better judgment, I peek out. I'm shocked to find the person on the porch is Dr. Bernard. I clutch my stomach as my panic soars. She can only be here for me. Did something happen to my mother?

Without a second thought, I unlock the door and pull it open.

I'm holding my breath, bracing myself for her news, when she reaches her hand

out to me like she wants to shake mine. Her face is curious, not grave.

"I'm surprised to find you here, Elizabeth. How are you?"

"I'm surprised to find you here," I manage. I suck a deep breath in. "Are you here to see me?"

"Actually I'm not." She smiles, a little awkward, but friendly. "Would you mind letting Hunter know I'm here?"

My stomach clenches—maybe because I can't imagine why she's here. "Uh...one second." I shut the door in her face without even thinking of asking her in. As soon as I turn around, Hunter is there. He's wearing black jeans and a brown shirt, and he looks pissed off. Behind him are four other men, all beefy, with guns on their belts. They definitely don't look like cops.

"Is that Elizabeth Bernard?" he asks, frowning.

"Yes. She says she wants to see you."

He nods, looking kind of dazed. "I was in a meeting. I thought you would be sleeping."

One of the men—they are all still standing in a row beside the stairs—tips a baseball cap at me, and I say, "That's okay. I only answered because I thought she was here for me."

Hunter looks over his shoulder. "Dave, Jake, Gilly, why don't you wait for me in the kitchen. My chef, Bernita, is there. She can feed you."

"I'll show you the way," I offer, as Hunter opens the door.

He smiles as he squeezes Dr. Bernard's hand. "How can I help you, Libby?"

My jaw drops, and I almost run into the couch. That—Dr. Bernard is Libby? Someone kind from Hunter's past. Someone I remind him of. How weird is that?

I want to go upstairs, but I decide to wait for him outside his office. I won't get too close, just close enough so I can see him when he comes out. If I don't, I'm afraid I won't even get to say goodbye.

I'm not surprised to find the big, wooden doors shut, but I am surprised that Dr. Bernard's voice is coming from just inside the door. It's not loud, but it's crisp and clear. The woman has excellent enunciation, and I can hear every word. I take a step back, wanting to respect Hunter's privacy but then I hear "girl who disappeared" and my curiosity keeps my feet planted.

I inch closer, driven by curiosity over what happened to Hunter's former escort, and I can faintly hear Dr. Bernard say: "...looking back through some of my files. Quite a few women at the ranch were friends with Missy King. I trust you're familiar with what happened to her."

"I am."

"Yes, well I spoke with several of our escorts after she went missing. One of those women is still employed at the ranch, and she spoke with me yesterday about Sarabelle's disappearance."

"Do you have something?" Hunter asks. I'm shocked, because he sounds...almost desperate.

"I think so," the doctor says. "One of the things that bothered her most was a

connection she saw between Sarabelle's disappearance and Missy's. She said that Missy entered into a relationship with a man from San Luis months before she disappeared."

"Do you have a name?"

"Jim Gunn. She's sure."

"How sure?"

There's a brief pause. "She seemed certain."

Hunter is silent for a moment, and I would pay a lot to hear his thoughts. Eventually, he says, "Did she say anything else helpful?"

"Nothing that stood out, but if I think of anything else, I'll let you know."

For a long second, no sound comes from the room.

Then I hear Hunter's voice. He sounds choked up as he says, "Thank you."

"I know Marchant and you are looking into this on your own. He doesn't mind me telling you, he mentioned it during one of his sessions. I know you don't like that I moved West, and I know you don't like me knowing so many private things about your past. But I care for you, Hunter. I'm on your side, and I always was."

I hear what sounds like a squeak from Dr. Bernard, and through the crack between the doors I can see Hunter's arms around her shoulders.

"Thank you, Libby." His voice is low and sounds like it's coming from the back of his throat, and suddenly I understand the subtext here: Back in New Orleans, Dr. Bernard was Hunter's shrink, too. Which is why she wants to help him now.

With questions spinning in my mind and an ache in my chest, I hurry toward the stairs.

*

I'm in the bedroom Hunter gave me, sipping a chilled latte I got from the refrigerator, when I hear footsteps coming down the hall. I've spent the last thirty or so minutes thinking over what Dr. Bernard said. Thinking about what Dr. Bernard knows. Thinking about how it all applies to Hunter. The truth is, I know so little I really can't even speculate. All I know for sure is Hunter's in a mess.

I sigh, and allow my mind to chew on other, more personal details. Like how his real mother was an escort. Rita, the woman I thought was his mother, died of cancer when Hunter was fourteen, but based on the conversation he had with his father, it sounds like there was no love lost between them. Was it Rita who hit him? Surely not. A well-bred woman from New Orleans wouldn't hit a young boy, would she? Maybe so. There are so many things I want to know—I want to know everything about Hunter—but he's up to his eyeballs in this awful situation, and if he wants me to leave so he can focus on getting all this figured out, I will.

I hear him turn the doorknob and my stomach aches. I don't want to go, though. I don't want to leave him here in this big house by himself. The thought that we might never share any time like this together again makes me feel terribly depressed, and the more I think about it, the more I think it's not just because Hunter is an

unavailable male for me to idealize but never get to know. I do know Hunter now. And I like what I know.

He comes into the room, and as usual, I can't breathe for half a second. He's such a handsome man. It's not just his high cheekbones, or his beautiful, lash-framed cat eyes, or his soft, firm lips, or his messy, tug-able golden hair. It's the way he moves. The sound of his voice. The way he reaches out and touches my elbow. The way he looks at me with concern.

"How ya doing up here?"

I shrug. "I'm fine. How are you?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Just got a visit from an old friend."

I smile. "I talked to her at the ranch. She's really nice."

I'm surprised when his lips tuck up into a lazy grin. "I thought you might say that. You know, when we first met, you reminded me of her."

I can barely contain my own silly grin. I love that I remind him of someone who cares about him. "Oh yeah?"

"Yep. You're both...just really nice."

I smile, and I love the way his eyes caress my face. "I think you're the nice one, Mr. Southern Gentleman." I take his hand and pull him close. His other hand curls around a piece of my dark hair.

"You think I'm a gentleman?" he smirks, then kisses me soft and low. His eyes burn when he pulls away.

"I want a rain check," I murmur.

"What do I get when you cash it?"

I stroke my finger down his chest. "You get what you paid for."

I'm shocked when he pulls me close. His arms close hard and firm around my back, and his face is buried in my hair. "I already got it and more."

He holds me for the longest time, and I hold him. My eyes are hot with tears.

"I wish things weren't like this," I whisper.

After I say this, my heart pounds. I've never been so open with anyone, and if Hunter sees me as nothing but a bed buddy, I think my heart will break in two. I'm holding my breath when he says, "So do I."

My voice cracks when I start to speak. "Will you call me sometime soon?"

"As soon as I can."

I look up at him, and I'm surprised to see the sadness in his green eyes. He's still got one arm around my back; the other hand is smoothing my hair off my forehead.

"I could stay here with you," I say. "I don't mind if you're busy getting everything sorted out."

He slowly shakes his head. Before I can argue, he brings a finger to my lips. Then his mouth meets mine for a kiss so gentle it makes me shiver. "I won't forget this."

I nod. "I'm going to miss you."

Half an hour later, I'm gone.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

~ELIZABETH~

"Seriously, Lizzy. You just can't make this stuff up." Suri looks at me from behind the wheel of her lavender Land Rover. We're driving on the lonely, two-lane roads between Crestwood Place and Napa Valley Involved Rehab, and I've just finished my story—or at least, the censored version. Suri doesn't know all the heavy details, and she probably never will, which kind of sucks, because I don't think she has any clue how ripped up I am over leaving Hunter.

This is confirmed when she shakes her head in wonder. "Do the girls from the ranch know yet? That it didn't happen?"

"Yet?" I snort. "You think I'm just going to call and tell them? No way." Sarabelle's funeral is today. I'm sure they're all too busy to care about how my sex life isn't going.

"Are you going to tell the truth if one of them asks you?"

"I don't know." I look out the window, at the bleak gray day. "I can't see myself lying, but it is kind of embarrassing."

"I don't think so. I think it sounds like he really likes you, Liz."

"Maybe. Maybe not." It's been three days, and I haven't heard a word from Hunter. With every hour that passes, I worry that he was too gentlemanly to take my V-card, but his care never quite reached the next level.

He's got his own life and I've got mine. Yeah, he has a vineyard home, but that doesn't mean he has time for or interest in having a California girlfriend. "There's no question, we have chemistry, but chemistry isn't everything."

"Isn't it?" Suri murmurs.

And I know she's referencing Adam and her. She hasn't talked about it much, but her sadness is obvious.

I check my phone's screen—I'm pathetic, and have put Hunter's name into a search engine's alert system, so I'll know if anything about him is published online. Nothing new has popped up, not even news of his next tournament.

I slide my phone between my thighs and try to think of something non-Hunter-related. "I want to hear more about you and Cross."

It's an intentional turn of phrase, because I think there's something going on, even though Suri won't spill.

She shrugs. "We've been hanging."

I haven't had a chance to visit Cross yet, unbelievably. My first day back, Mom's rehab called and wanted me to do a discharge visit. It actually went better than they

usually do. Mom looked more fit and happy than I've ever seen her. They've got her on a new antidepressant, and I'm trying to be positive about her recovery. I even stayed the night in one of the guest rooms at the 'spa'—where I lay awake on my little cot half the night, combing Google for news about Hunter or the investigation into Sarabelle's death. The next day, yesterday, Cross got a visit from his father, so I couldn't visit then, either.

"I can't wait to hear how the visit with his father went," Suri says. "I hope he wasn't an asshole to Cross."

"I hope so too." I try to squash the awful curiosity about what Hunter's father said—about the governor—but I can't. So I look out the window and focus on the grass and trees.

A few minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of NVIR and I start getting butterflies. "Are you sure he doesn't mind if I come?"

It seems ridiculous asking. Cross has always been more my friend than Suri's. But I'm struggling with the feeling that in just two weeks, Suri has taken my place.

"Of course, you silly goose. He's dying to see you and hear how your 'class trip' went."

"Ugh. I hate having to lie to him."

"Are you actually going to write about it for school?" she asks as we get out of the car.

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably."

We're quiet as we walk through the door, and there's Nanette. She's got her long brown hair pulled up into a pretty bun, and she's wearing purple scrubs. She reaches out her arms for me, and I'm kind of surprised, and kind of thrilled.

"Nanette. Long time!"

"Too long. How are you?"

"I'm good," I say. It only feels a little like a lie.

"That's great."

"How is Cross?"

"He's up and moving. He shaved today and he's been playing games on my cell phone. He's still having some trouble with his left hand and leg, but we're seeing improvement in the leg."

"Not his hand?" Suri asks.

"Not much," Nanette says. "But we're not anywhere near the end of his rehab."

I tear up, because it's so amazing to hear that. Cross is awake, and he's doing rehab. Suri and I hold hands as we walk back to his room.

"Ready?" she whispers.

I nod.

She pushes the door open, and I feel like a kid at Christmas.

Cross is leaning against his bed, wearing gray scrubs and a dark blue t-shirt, which is enough to knock me off my feet. Then I see his face, and I feel like I've been punched. As soon as his eyes land on me, he looks...infuriated.

I open my mouth to say his name, but he beats me to the punch. "Suri," he says,

his eyes never leaving mine. "Give us a minute. In fact, come back later."

Suri looks confused. She shakes her head, and there's no mistaking the worry on her face. Cross notices it, too, and sighs. "Everything is fine. I'm doing fine," he tells her. "I just want a minute to talk to Liz—alone."

After shooting me a clueless look, she steps into the hall, and I'm alone with Cross.

"What's wrong?" I walk slowly to him, crumbling under the weight of his horrible, accusing gaze.

"Why did you do it?" he asks hoarsely.

"Do what?"

He swallows, and for the first time he looks upset instead of mad. "Why did you think that I would be okay with that?"

Obviously he knows I went to Love Inc. I feel like a kid getting scolded by my dad, and I play like I don't know what he's talking about. "Okay with what?"

"So you're going to deny it?"

"Deny what?"

"You sold yourself. For me." His voice cracks, and I'm filled with awful, ice-cold dread. Cross steps toward me, and for the first time I notice his limp. His face still looks the same. Except colder. "My father told me. You know how he feels about Vegas. He's got spies there. Lizzy, tell me what would make you do a thing like that."

"Why do you think?" I croak. "I couldn't stand to see you in that awful place they transferred you to! And," I add quickly, "I didn't need to be a virgin. What's the point? At twenty-three, it's almost a joke."

He opens his mouth, looking anguished, and I hold up my hand. "It went just fine, Cross. I'm okay. Right here, in one piece."

"You went home with Hunter West." His voice is soft fury—and it makes me mad.

"What do you have against Hunter West?"

"He fucks Priscilla Heat. Don't you know that, Lizzy? Don't you care?"

I can't say anything to that. It's not my secret to tell, so instead I say, "Do you believe everything you hear?"

"I saw them that night. They were having sex before the party. Did he tell you that?"

"I didn't ask."

"So you don't care." His mad face crumples into hurt. Frustration. "What is it about him, Lizzy?"

I still don't have the answer to that question, and I definitely don't want to talk about it with Cross. "I've got a better idea: Why don't you finally tell me why you hate Priscilla Heat."

"She fucked my father," Cross says bluntly. I blink, and he rubs his eyes with his right hand. "I told you that he had affairs."

"With her?" He chose Priscilla Heat over Cross's beautiful mother? My mouth hangs open.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Cross rolls his eyes. "He likes hookers."

What pops out of my mouth next is unplanned. It's only meant to be a thought, but I guess it's so powerful, my lips forget the message and I murmur it aloud. "One of them was Missy King."

Cross's eyes pop. "What do you know about Missy King?"

I bite my lip, not sure what to say now that I've divulged that I know something. That was stupid. I don't want to point anything back toward Hunter, so I shrug. "What do you know?" I ask him.

"What do you know?" he snaps.

I hug myself, feeling small and stupid, but I've already put my foot in my mouth. Might as well keep going now. "Is that why you and your dad don't talk? Is that the secret you found out last year? That he was seeing an escort, and she disappeared?"

Cross's eyes squeeze shut, and my heart pounds—hard.

"It is, isn't it?" Holy shit, this is big news. I fumble for the other name I heard in Hunter's conversation with his father. "Cross, have you ever heard of someone named Lockwood?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "Who is that?"

"What about Jim Gunn?"

He blinks slowly, his face losing all its color. "How do you know that name?" he asks hoarsely.

"I heard he dated Missy King."

Cross swallows, wrapping one hand around his stomach. "You don't need to say that, Lizzy."

"Why not?"

He gives me a sharp look that makes me feel like I'm being warned. "Just don't say it. Don't ask me about it. Sometimes there's stuff you just don't need to know. Do you get that?"

His face is deadly serious, and I almost feel like I'm in some kind of crime drama. I shiver, and for a long second, I consider letting it lie. But then the stern look on his face starts looking kind of...fearful. "Cross—what's going on? Do you know something bad?" I suck in a deep breath. "Did Jim Gunn do something to her?"

My question seems to hit Cross like a punch. He bends at the waist, clutching his head and moaning. "How do you know this shit, Elizabeth?"

"So he did?" My eyes are a centimeter away from popping clean out of my head.

Cross looks at me through his hands, and when he speaks, his voice is ragged. "Suri told you, didn't she? She told you what I said about the guy I saw who was messing with my bike."

I shake my head. "But if Jim Gunn did something bad to your father's ex-mistress and you know about it, and if you think the guy beside your bike that night was him... That's bad, Cross. That's scary bad."

Cross is leaning heavily on the side of the bed, breathing hard, and I notice there are wires running out of the bottom of his t-shirt as one of the machines starts to hum.

I step close enough to touch his shoulder. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

He sucks his breath in, and just as I get really worried, his right hand clutches mine. I lace my fingers through his, and someone knocks on the door. "You okay in there?" Nanette calls.

"Fine," he says, but it sounds like he's gasping.

"Oh my God, Cross." I wrap my arms around him and he pulls me close.

I drag a deep breath in, and the monitor stops beeping. I run my palm over his soft, short hair and look into the handsome face I've known for my whole life. I can't imagine someone hurting Cross. "I'm sorry that I mentioned that stuff. I didn't mean to upset you."

I'm expecting him to brush his freakout off, the way Cross would. I'm expecting anything but what he does, which is push my hair back and kiss me, his lips touching mine for half a second before he jerks away.

I touch my mouth, horrified. "Cross—"

"I know, okay?" He holds his hands up. "I know I'm not the one you want. Jesus, Lizzy, just give me a second." He turns away, and out of nowhere, tears are spilling down my cheeks. I feel like I can't do anything—for Cross or Hunter.

I'm standing there with my arms around myself, wishing I had never come here today, when Cross turns me around to face him. There's space between us this time. "I'm sorry, Lizzy. Please forgive me."

"I do. Of course I do." I look into his blue eyes. "But I'm worried about you. If you know details of a...I don't know, some kind of crime—"

"Shhh." He reaches for me, but he doesn't touch me. He brings his hand back to his side. "Don't talk about that, please. And don't think about it either, okay? I'm fine now. I'm good."

I wipe my eyes, smirking. "Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"Would that be bad?"

"Yes." It would be terrible for Cross to go through this alone. Just like it's terrible for Hunter. "It was him, wasn't it?" I whisper. "Jim Gunn did something to make Missy King disappear, and you know he did."

He shuts his eyes.

"Did your father...ask him to?" It's such a horrible question, I can barely get the words out. It seems impossible, but if Conrad West is right, and Missy King turned into trouble... God, he really might have had her killed or sold as a sex slave or God knows what. I drop my voice an octave lower. "Do you have, like, evidence or something?"

Cross hesitates, his lips pressed into a firm line. And I know Cross. That's a confirmation.

I feel cold all over. Icy. For a long second, I can't even find my voice. When I do, it's high and squeaky. Scared. "What are you going to do about it?"

He holds his arm out, then lets them fall against his scrubs. "What is there to do?"

"There's gotta be something. Especially if the guy found out you know. Cross, that's terrifying."

"My dad's a terrifying guy."

I don't plan to tell him, especially after what happened a few minutes ago with that monitor when he got freaked out, but his face is so defeated, I can't help myself. Cross is in danger and I have to tell him what I know and find out what he knows.

It takes me almost an hour with the two of us sitting hip to hip on his bed. I whisper near his ear as we play music on my iPod in the background. After that, he whispers in mine. Then we get approval for Cross to leave the grounds tomorrow.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

~HUNTER~

I'm in my library at the vineyard playing cards with myself when Marchant calls. I ignore him. My head is aching and I didn't get a damn bit of sleep last night. I don't want to talk to his hen-pecking ass. I'm sleeping worse since Libby left than I did before she got here. I guess I know now what I'm missing. I finish the game and re-deal my cards. I'm looking at them as I play, but I'm seeing Libby's face.

And I'm thinking about the other Libby—Dr. Libby—who came by again today, to “talk”. I know March put her up to it, but I can't find the energy to be angry. It's kind of nice to have my old shrink tell me I'm a good guy. Even nicer since it looks like that might hold.

Priscilla's threats are seeming more and more empty. For the first few days after she dropped by my house, I waited for the other shoe to fall, but it just hasn't. The FBI has stopped coming around, and Josh Smith from the LVPD has closed his case, giving it over to the shit-head, crooked cops in San Luis. For the past few days, Lockwood has been at his house doing nothing but watching satellite TV. Priscilla has been fucking a cop buddy of Smith's. If her phone conversations—recorded by Dave—are to be trusted, she's thinking of putting him in one of her films.

Sarabelle is dead, and that can't be changed. Her funeral was this morning. Dr. Libby was dressed for it when she came by.

Sarabelle is dead, and the case appears to be going nowhere. But I'm working on my own play for Lockwood and Priscilla. Mainly Lockwood. But Priscilla will get hers, too.

Marchant calls again.

I hit ignore.

Again five minutes later. “What is it, dude?”

“Hunter—fuck. Have you read the L.A. Times today?”

“No.” My whole body tenses. “Why?”

“There's allusions to you left and right in that story. House in California, one in Vegas. Heir who visits brothels. They're saying that the FBI has you as their prime suspect. I'm surprised you haven't missed a call or had them show up at your fucking house. The Times even put a bit in there about Rita. How she wasn't your real mother and your mom was an escort. Damn, man, I'm glad I knew that or I'd be shocked.”

“How'd you know?” I whisper. I feel cold.

“Dave found out. Man, are you okay?”

I swallow. "Yeah."

"You want me to come over? I've got Dave all over this; he's checking with his contacts at the FBI. But he's started acting suspicious, dude. Says he found some shit in your family's closet that he wants to talk to you about. What do you think—"

I kill the call and walk slowly to the liquor cabinet. I've downed two shots when three men in gray suits ring my doorbell.

*

~ELIZABETH~

"Are you sure this is a solid plan?"

Cross is sitting beside me in the Camry, wearing a ball cap and looking grumpy.

"Oh, yeah. Hunter will tell me everything he's found about Jim Gunn AKA Michael Lockwood. I'm willing to bet there's something that could help you." Now that I know Jim Gunn is Michael Lockwood, I'm even betting the information might help Hunter. I look back at Cross. "Hunter trusts me enough to share info, I think, and I trust him. It might turn out to be lucky for you both."

Cross gazes out the window, the way he's done most of our drive, and I feel so sad for him. I take his hand before I think about which hand it is: his left one, the one whose fingers don't all work. I only have it for a second before he draws it back into his lap.

"It'll get stronger," I murmur.

He looks down at the hand. "Can't draw up any new design plans." He means for the motorcycles he designs. "Can't steer, either."

I want to cry for him. To scream about how unfair it is, that Cross was almost killed for knowing something he hadn't even meant to find out. Instead I try to keep the pity off my face and say, "I know."

He uses his right hand to give my hand a squeeze, and then he's looking out the window again as we roll through the valley. It's a sunny morning, with a crisp blue sky stretching over miles of vineyards. Even the grass beside the road looks especially vibrant. But the pretty day doesn't do much to calm my nerves. After what I learned yesterday from Cross, I've got a lot riding on what Hunter tells me. I think all three of us might.

"So in and out?" Cross asks, tapping his right hand on his knee. "Wham bam?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." I shrug. "You said you didn't mind—remember? And it's worth it. I promise."

He shrugs. I can tell he's down, and I wish so much that I could help more. We're almost there when he says, "Change of subject."

"Okay." I wait a beat and he blows his breath out of puffed cheeks.

"Suri likes me, doesn't she?"

His question throws me off so much, I actually cough. It's everything I can do to keep my eyes from widening. "You think so?" I ask neutrally.

"C'mon, Liz. Shoot straight with me."

She does like him. I'm ninety-nine percent sure.

"Fine. Then yes. I think maybe." I'm breaking the girl code by telling him, but Cross is as good a friend to me as Suri is, and he's got enough drama in his life at the moment without having to wonder about that.

Cross sighs. He looks out the window, at the vines, and I can tell he's not going to say anymore right now.

We're on the last stretch of the dusty little road to Hunter's octagonal home, and I'm getting nervous. Nervous about taking Cross back here to the site of his accident, and nervous about coming here myself. But Cross wanted to come with me. In fact, he insisted.

I'm quiet as we pass the spot to the right of the road where the grass is black and frayed. Cross lets out a deep breath, and press my right arm into his left.

"You remember it, don't you?" he asks after a moment.

I nod, and he does something funny with his mouth—a thing he does when he's trying to push something down instead of show his feelings.

For the next fourth of a mile, I try to think of something soothing to say, and when I can't, I wrap my right hand around his left one, not threading our fingers together but enveloping his hand with mine. He leans his head a little my way on his head rest and closes his eyes.

I'm worried he's asleep as we pull into the driveway, but when I park and touch him lightly on the knee, he looks right at me.

"Wish me luck." I force a smile.

"Good luck. And, Lizzy—thank you."

"You're welcome." I hug his neck, and out I go.

The belly bats are back in full flock as I walk to the front door. I've tried to get in touch with Hunter six times in the last twenty-four hours, and each time he's hit the 'ignore' button on his phone. I don't even know for sure he's here, although I did hear he was released after being questioned in Sarabelle's murder, and I know that he prefers his Napa place to Vegas.

I knock once, then twice, then three times before I try the handle. As my fist closes around it, it's jerked open from the inside, and I'm thrown off-balance. I bump into Hunter's beautiful bare chest.

The second we make contact, he shoves me off him. His eyes widen as he sees my face. "Libby."

I nod, and my eyes rake down his body. He's shirtless in black gym shorts, and his bare chest is every bit as delicious as I remember. I pull my eyes up to his face, steamrolled by another wave of emotion as I think of all he's been through in the last day.

"Hunter, hi." I swallow, because suddenly my throat is dry and tight. "I tried to call you."

"I know." He looks put out, but now that we're face to face, I'm not nervous at all. I want him so much, and I'm so worried for him, I just can't be.

"How are you? I heard that you were officially questioned in Sarabelle's disappearance."

I search his eyes for some sign of how he's doing, but they're carefully blank. "That's kind of you, but I'm still standing."

I can tell he's trying to sound strong, but for just a second as he says 'that's kind of you', his eyes look lost.

"I miss you," I say softly, which is what I feel the strongest. His brows draw together, just a little, and for a second I think he's going to hold out his arms and say he misses me, too. Instead he rearranges his mouth and folds his arms across his chest. "What can I do for you, Libby?"

I'm silent for too long—stung that this is the reception that I get. His lips tighten. "I said I would call you if I could, Libby. I haven't had the time."

"I don't understand what's going on." I lower my voice, stepping closer, and Hunter retreats, taking a step backward into his boxy foyer. "You didn't hurt Sarabelle, and I don't get why you haven't told the FBI what's really going on."

"What's really going on?" he asks flatly.

I shake my head. "I thought you had people investigating. Your father, too." All of a sudden, my eyes are swimming with tears. I try my best to blink them back.

I look at the floor, because there's nothing emotional about the floor, and that's when I see Hunter's ankle. There's a metal band around it.

I cover my mouth. "Oh my God! You have a tracker."

He scowls, shuffling his foot a little bit behind him, and hot tears start to trickle down my cheeks.

He reaches to catch them, then drops his arm, like touching me would violate some rule. "Libby, please don't cry for me."

I throw my arms around him. "Hunter—how?"

He folds his arms around my back and whispers into my hair. "I'm the only lead they have."

I squeeze him harder, like the strength of my hug can fix this mess. "Tell them about Priscilla and Michael Lockwood, and their connection to Governor Carlson. Tell them what you know. I don't know the whole story, but I know there is one. I know your father doesn't have bad information."

I feel him shake his head as my cheek is mashed against his chest. "You don't understand."

I pull away and look into his sad green eyes. "So make me understand. I'm tired of being in the dark."

Now he drops his arms off me and steps back, away from the light that streams through the windows of the door and into the darkness of the foyer. His eyes search my face as he brings his lower lip between his teeth. "Libby...some of what they have against me is true."

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't Sarabelle," he says. "It's something else. You don't need to know the story, Libby." But I do. My mind is racing. I remember what his father said. "Let me

warn you, you may have to go farther than I did for you."

"Did you do something bad when you were younger?"

His face hardens, and he looks out over my shoulder. I pull the door shut behind me and step forward to grab his hand. I pull him into the hall where Cross punched the wall that night what feels like two lifetimes ago. Looking up into his eyes, I can't believe the guilt I see.

"Hunter, talk to me. Please."

His head snaps up, those green eyes flashing. "Libby, I can't. Don't you think I would if I could? You're the only person I want to talk to."

"So talk to me."

He shakes his head. His jaw is locked, his shoulders set. "I can't," he says. "I won't."

"But it's not a secret? The FBI knows it happened?"

He grits his teeth, looking stoic. I take the answer as a 'yes'.

"Are you ashamed?" I ask. "Embarrassed? Please don't tell me that you think I'll judge you."

He grabs my shoulders. The face I miss so much is tantalizingly close, only inches from mine. "Libby, please. You need to go."

"No." I'm tired of being sent away, dismissed, denied access to people I want, feelings I need. "I—I've never liked anyone the way I like you, Hunter. And I don't want to have what's going on with us cut off before it even has a chance to start, all because of someone like Priscilla or that Lockwood guy. I can't let you get dragged further into this because you won't accept some freakin' help. I heard Dr. Bernard that day, and I heard her say you were in the right. She knows about this secret of yours, doesn't she?"

His brows are drawn up tight, his face set, harsh and sad and pessimistic.

His mouth quirks into a little frown, and as he looks into my eyes I swear that for a brief flicker of time, I can feel how much he wants me. Not my body—me. But then he stalks to the front door and pushes it open.

"I'm sorry, Libby. Later on you'll see it's for the best. You don't want to get close to me right now. You don't know who I am, and if you think you do, you're wrong." His gaze rolls over me, and I'm left with the poker face. "Did you get the check?"

Rage lights up inside me like a match. "I don't know if I got the check. I haven't checked the mail because I've been so damn worried about you I forgot there was mail!" I whip out my phone and text Cross: 'It might b a while. U prob have time to take that walk u mentioned.'

I hold it up. "My ride is gone. You're stuck with me." I sink down to the floor and cross my legs and glare up at him. "While I'm here let me tell you something that I need from you. Something I think might help you, too. Because I've found out something of my own. Something important.

"My friend Cross says a man was messing with his bike that night at your house, and that's one of the reasons he lost control of the wheel. The guy's name—or the name of the man he thinks it is—is Jim Gunn, the man who used to date Missy King.

Cross knows about Missy. He knows his father made her disappear and he says Jim Gunn is the one who did it. I need to know what you know about Jim Gunn."

If Hunter was wearing his poker face before, now his features go completely slack. He turns a wobbly half circle before he crouches, jerking a hand back through his messy golden hair. "Is this a fucking joke?"

"No. Of course it's not. Hunter, just bear with me for a second. I want to show you a picture of him. Of Jim Gunn." I pull the image up on my cell phone but am hesitant to hand it over to Hunter. The snapshot came from Governor Carlson's computer, and Cross found it—and a whole bunch of other crazy shit—by accident one day almost a year ago when his laptop died, and he decided to hack his way into his father's to re-image plans for a wrecked motorcycle. I meet Hunter's eyes and hold his gaze as I pass him my phone.

I can tell the moment he sees what I saw: Michael Lockwood's face. Jim Gunn has different hair in this photo, but his face is unmistakable: the sunken cheekbones, thin lip, super square jaw. His hair is blond instead of dark, like it is now, but he even wears it the same: greasy and brushed back.

Hunter's eyes widen. "Holy shit." His gaze bores into mine. "How does Cross know this? How does he have a photo?"

"Cross borrowed his computer. He found this and some saved e-mails

"Does he still have the e-mails?"

"Yes, I think. He had the picture in his inbox. He logged in on my phone and there it was."

"Holy shit." He's on his feet again, pacing. "Holy shit, Libby."

I nod. "And if Jim Gunn AKA Lockwood somehow knows that Cross knows, it would make sense that he tried to mess with Cross's bike."

He nods, still pacing.

"What do you know about him? Do you have any kind of evidence? Or maybe knowing he and Jim Gunn are one and the same will make something connect. Either way, this is new info. You have to tell the FBI."

He stops mid-step and turns to me, looking like he's seen a ghost.

"You're not? Why not? That makes no sense."

He shuts his eyes, and I grab onto both his hands, squeezing them in mine as I stand right in front of him. "Hunter, please."

"I don't have anything to share with them. Jim Gunn is just a name. A name Dr. Libby knows, and one Cross knows. Unless Cross has info that's very damning, and that also happen to deal with the Sarabelle situation specifically...I don't know how much it will help me."

He looks into my eyes, and his are so bleak, my heart sinks before he even continues. "I'm a good suspect, Libby. They'll charge me before they pin it to the governor."

"But...why?" I let go of his hands and raise mine in the air, ready to launch into a passionate attempt try to get his deep, dark secret out of him again. But before I can start talking, he bows his head.

"Because. I killed my stepmother. And then there was a cover-up."

I frown at him, confused. "No you didn't. She had cancer." Everybody knows this. When his father ran for U.S. Senate, his wife Rita's untimely death was a major part of his sympathetic story. "Hunter...?"

He slumps down against the wall and pulls his knees up to his chest. He props his forearms there and rests his head on top of them. All I can see is the top of his hair. But I can hear his voice.

I slide down beside him, and he tells me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

~HUNTER~

I tell her everything. I don't see why not. I don't worry about how it will make her feel, either. This secret, with me for so long, can't wait to leap out.

To understand how the FBI knows what they know, she has to understand that Priscilla—or Lockwood, AKA Jim Gunn—found out I spent a year or so talking to Libby back in New Orleans when I was a teenager, and sometime in the last week, the digital file cabinet in Dr. Libby's inbox got hacked. The information was turned over to the FBI, presumably by Priscilla.

"So if I were to try to pin this all on her, they'd immediately suspect I was just playing tit for tat with the person who turned me in. But even if they didn't think that, I'm going to have a real tough time proving that I'm innocent...when I'm not."

I tell her about that day in the basement with Rita. I'm hesitant at first, but then I don't spare her any details. I tell it to her like I told the doctor. And, just like Dr. Libby, my Libby can't believe it.

"You wouldn't do that. Not without a reason." And I can see it in her eyes that she knows I had a reason. I know she must, because she listened to my phone call with my dad, and it's not hard to deduce.

"She treated you badly, didn't she?"

"She wasn't good to me," I hedge.

"She was abusive," Libby whispers.

I shrug. "If you ask my father, he'll tell you I antagonized her all the time."

"Well that's bullshit!"

"How can you be so sure?" Even I don't know half of the time. Not after hearing for so long that it was my fault.

"Because you didn't mean to kill her, for one!"

I open my mouth, but I'm not sure what to say.

A shadow crosses Libby's face. "You didn't, did you?"

The other Libby asked me the same thing, and the answer to that question is what's tormented me all these years. Did I intend to kill her? Did I think to myself, "Time to kill Rita!"? No. But the relief that I felt... Sometimes it's easy to forget it was an accident.

Libby clears her throat, and she has my attention again. I can tell from her face I've been silent for too long. "Hunter?"

I shake my head. "No." Even with my fucked up point of view, I know that's the appropriate answer. I didn't set out to hurt her.

"Were you ever charged?"

I shake my head. "There was no chance. My father kept that shit quiet. Covered it up, even. Bought people off. Tried to get the coroner's report changed. He did get it changed. That's a big part of the problem. He was in the middle of a tough race, and he thought the truth would be too distracting." I chuckle sourly as I consider what I'm going to say next. "In the end, Rita's death and our family's story of loss is probably what won him the election."

"So he never called it what it was? He acted like it was your fault?"

"He thought it was," I tell her bitterly.

"Hunter, that's just not true. You don't have her blood on your hands." Her voice drops. "She has yours."

I shrug. I've told myself that before, but to little effect.

"Here's something I don't get," Libby says. "Those files from your talks with Dr. Bernard should be inadmissible. Right? They were stolen."

This is also true, although the files could certainly point the FBI in the direction of the people who were paid. Probably did, if what Dave told Marchant can be believed. The information, which will surely be leaked, will cause a big stink for my family—my father in particular. But, "Even if I don't face any legal consequences from that incident, and from my father's cover-up of it, in the court of public opinion about Sarabelle, I'm pretty fucked."

"But there must be some way—"

I sit up straighter and lean my head back against the foyer wall. "There's too much we don't know. All we have pertaining to Sarabelle is a bunch of phone recordings of our villains talking in code. Lockwood—Gunn—if he has a place down in San Luis, our guy's never seen it. And Sarabelle was found in a damn ditch, not sold into Mexico.

"I know." Her eyes glisten with tears. "But Hunter, we have to try."

"And wait and see how long it takes them to drag out more of my story? The part about how Rita liked to hit me? The world already knows my mother was an escort. The media is having a fucking field day with all my 'Mommy issues'. You know what it will be like when it comes out that I killed my goddamned child-abusing stepmother."

"You didn't kill her!"

I shrug. "It makes no difference to them."

"What do Dr. Bernard's notes even say? I've been to enough shrinks with my mom to know she probably didn't write HUNTER IS A MURDERER in red caps."

That's true. I have no idea what's in those files. Libby Bernard hadn't looked at them in seven or eight years, she said. But it doesn't matter. "I don't know, but that's not the point. I think the FBI already knows about the cover up, which sure as shit makes me look guilty. Even if they don't, in the court of public opinion, I'm fucked. And when I get charged for Sarabelle's murder, I'm doubly so."

"So we have to set the record straight," she says. "We have to try. Please try. Please." She kisses my mouth, and I can't help groaning. "Libby. You're so good."

"You are."

She's tugging at my gym shorts, and all of a sudden I'm hard as fucking rock and aching for her. I sweep her hair out of her face and press my palms against her warm cheeks. "Libby, are you sure?"

She knows what I'm asking, and she leans in closer for a kiss. As I lap into her sweet, warm mouth, I realize I just told her. I just told her everything. My eyes flip open and I squeeze her shoulder. "You don't care? What I told you—it doesn't...change anything?"

"Hell yeah, it changes things. It makes me want to kill your father, but that's about it."

I let out a long breath, and she shakes her head. "I'm so made for you, that you had to go through that. That you still are." She leans her head against my cheek. "But does it change my feelings for you? No."

That's all I need to hear. I swoop her up, throw her over my shoulder, and stomp to the bedroom doing my cave man impression. She's trying to grab my ass and giggling as I spank hers. I carry her to the green room—it's clean, this time—and toss her on the pillow-stacked bed. I climb up after her and tug her shirt over her head.

"I think it's time to cash that check."

"Yes, please," she gasps.

My cock twitches as my gaze rakes her shirtless body, and I bend over and start to work her bra. "Is this okay?" I murmur between our kisses.

"Oh yes." She leans up, kissing my throat as her warm hands pull my shorts down, and when my dick springs out, I swear to God she actually shivers.

"Oh...Hunter. I want you so badly."

"You can have me. But I want to taste you first."

*

~ELIZABETH~

His eyes are molten as he crawls over my limp body and pinches my nipple in between his teeth. "Oh," I moan. "Hunter!"

He sucks me for another second before he lifts up and kisses both my eyelids, then my cheeks, my nose, my mouth. He's breathing hard, and his dick is rubbing against my thigh.

I lean up and kiss his mouth. "I want you inside me."

He nods, his shoulders rising and falling with his need. "No promises, remember? You know I can't yet."

I stroke his jaw, feeling warm inside because he said 'yet'. "I only need you, Hunter. I just need to know you feel this, too—right now."

"Yes. I feel you." He cups his hand between my legs and glides a finger inside. I'm wet and ready for him. I reach down between his legs and gently stroke his head. He pushes himself into my hand. His breath is coming in harsh tugs, and I can tell by the way he kisses my mouth that he's getting hungry.

"Christ," he pants, "you're so beautiful."

"You are." I kiss his shoulder and his pec and his mouth and his knuckles. He's got his fingers inside me and I'm trembling and needy.

"Please, Hunter."

I roll over the edge with a shuddering gasp, and Hunter reaches for the drawer beside the bed. He pulls out a rubber and I sit up a little. "Can I help?"

I work it over his weeping, plum-sized head, and he gasps as I curl it down his shaft.

He dips down and licks me one more time, and slides another finger in. "You're so wet."

"Ready for you," I say, breathless. I want to scream it at him.

He crouches his body over me, leaning down to nibble at my throat. "It's going to hurt. I wish it didn't."

I nod.

He strokes me some more, bringing me close to climax again. I'm aching. "Hunter..."

And then he's taking himself in hand, pressing his head against my heat and gliding gently over my entrance. He rocks against me, sliding his head against my wetness until I'm desperate. Then his hands find mine, our fingers intertwine, and his wide, green eyes cling to mine.

"Baby." I feel him, hard and hot against me. Then with a press of his lips on mine and a thrust of his hips, he pushes in. It stings—badly. I gasp. He's wincing, still pressing my hands against the mattress. His eyes close as he pushes once more, deep, and I'm impaled.

"Oh God."

"Are you okay?"

He leans down for a trembling, open-mouthed kiss, and I can feel the vibration from the movement deep inside me. It makes me...want to move. "Oh...Hunter."

It still hurts, but as I rock against him, just a little, it also feels really, really good. Like I might burst. I open my legs a little. Gently lift my hips to take in more of him. I'm rewarded by a strangled groan, and Hunter's forehead falls against my cheek.

"Jesus Christ, you're so fucking tight."

He kisses my lips; our tongues stroke, and then he's pumping in and out. I'm moaning—loud, deep mews that spring from my mouth unbidden. As we find a rhythm, I begin to lose myself. This is not like other things we've done. This is...hypnotizing. We're rocking together, and I'm clinging to his shoulders and he's bowed over my chest. He drops a quick kiss on my mouth, gasping as he rocks in such a way that his shaft glides down my clit. It feels so good, I grab his ass. I want him all.

"Hunter," I pant. I'm flying high, my eyes squeezed shut, raising my hips, scratching his back. "Hunter!"

"Libby."

"Hunter!"

His thrusts come harder. My legs are boneless as I push against him. Heat blooms inside me, sweeping through my body like a tidal wave, and my eyes flip open. I can see his nipples tighten as I feel him stiffen. He groans. "Libby." I think he shudders, but I don't know. I'm shivering, half sobbing and he's panting so hard. And then I'm aware of him pulling out, leaving me stinging and empty, but it's okay because he's pulling the covers over me, pressing his body against mine.

"Thank you," he breathes.

"Oh my God." I laugh. He grins, and I can see his hair is damp and sticking up. His eyes glow with deep warmth as they look into mine. "That was amazing," I say.

He smooths the covers over me. "I hope it didn't hurt too much."

"It was perfect." He kisses my lips and then my hair, and then he's getting up.

"Hunter?"

"Just grabbing some food." I watch him walk, in all his naked glory, to a small refrigerator that looks like a wooden chest. He returns with a big bottle of DeVille bottled water and a bowl of strawberries. He lies on his side and offers me the bottle.

I grin as I take a long swig. "This stuff's handy."

"Never even have to leave my room." He winks.

"Oh, I bet you keep this stuff in here for just you," I tease.

"I do," he says seriously, and I remember. He's had sex with mostly escorts—who wouldn't care if he provided good food afterward. He feeds me a strawberry, and I shut my eyes as I chew. I want to lie here forever.

"Will you shower with me?" he asks.

I lean my head against his chest. "I actually just remembered...Cross drove me, and he's probably waiting. He'll notice and I'd be embarrassed." I flush. "I think I'm already going to be embarrassed."

He toys with a strand of my hair. "Well you look beautiful. Can you stay here for a minute? Let me get a warm towel for you?"

I nod. "Thank you."

I watch him disappear into the bathroom, and I think how different I feel from last time I was in this room. Abruptly, I wonder about Cross. There's a window to my right, and I can see out of it if I lean off the bed and peek between the wooden blinds. I sit up, feeling kind of woozy, but very sated.

As I turn to face the window, I see movement on the other side of the room. I freeze. The door leading from the hallway to the bedroom opens, and I find myself staring at one Michael Lockwood.

Holy shit.

Chapter Forty

~HUNTER~

I did it. I had sex with Libby—and it was incredible.

I clean up in the bathroom, then find a glass bowl, rinse it out, and fill it with warm water. I go search my cabinet for the softest towel I can find. As I sift through washcloths, I'm surprised to find my hands are unsteady. I'm excited. I can't wait to get back in bed with Libby.

My thoughts naturally return to our conversation about Rita. I might always blame myself, but knowing Libby doesn't—knowing she can look past it—is an unexpected gift. I'm surprised I feel better, getting it off my chest. And the Cross thing—that might be a lucky break. I felt pessimistic about it at first, but at this moment it's hard to feel anything but hopeful.

I wrap myself in a robe and grab an one for her. I'm already smiling like a moron as I push the door open. My eyes fly to the bed, eager to see Libby's face. But she's not there. I stride into my room and turn a full circle. Empty. The blinds to the right of the bed are cracked, and Libby's clothes are on the floor where I tossed them. The bedroom door is open, so I wonder if she went to another bathroom.

I stride into the hallway. "Libby?"

I look right, but there's no noise farther down the hall, toward the great room. The only thing that's to the left is the foyer. I take a few steps down the hall before I notice the blood spots on the hardwood.

*

~ELIZABETH~

Lockwood has a cloth in my mouth before I can scream. Something burns the inside of my nose, and everything goes dark.

When I come to, the first thing I notice is the dim roar of a small plane. I wince, because it makes my head throb. Why am I flying when I have such a bad headache?

My eyes snap open and I bite back a scream. I suck in a few shallow breaths through the cloth that's tied around my mouth. I listen, but hear only the plane. I see...a ceiling. It's round, of course, and not too wide. I shut my eyes again, hoping for some clarity, but there's nothing. I remember making love to Hunter...and then Lockwood was there.

Holy cow. I can't believe this really happened.

I open my eyes a little wider and look down at my body. I'm lying on a narrow cot, with my arms bound in front of me, and holy crap, I'm almost naked. I'm wearing an oversized, dirty green t-shirt, but it barely comes to my upper thigh. I register some soreness between my legs before my eyes are bouncing around the space again. I slide them to my right, I see Cross. He's lying in a recliner beside me, slumped over on his side, facing the wall. He's not moving. Seeing him so still makes me panic. I gasp, and when I do, I smell the bitter scent again. Some kind of chemical. That must be what put me out.

I turn my head a little, ignoring the skull-splitting ache, and try to get a better look at Cross. But there's nothing to see. He looks...limp. Slowly, with great effort, I turn my head to the left, hoping—no praying—I see Hunter on the bed beside me. When I don't, I feel a rush. That's a good thing, I remind myself. If Hunter was with us, who would rescue us?

And someone has to rescue us...don't they?

That's the last thing I think before the door to our room opens, and Priscilla steps in, a smile splitting her face.

"You're on your way to Mexico," she says.

She steps a little closer to me, and I shy away. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you." She walks behind me chuckling. A moment later I feel a pinch in my upper arm, and her face, above me, starts to blur.

I don't know how much time has passed when I wake up and find myself lying on my back in a dingy motel room. Long enough to land a plane, and long enough for my stomach to cramp with hunger, despite a brain-killing headache and the stench of garbage.

I glance down at my aching body. Wrists still tied; ankles now tied. My gaze drifts up to the cracked ceiling, and then back to my body, which feels weak and strange, like I haven't moved in years. I'm lying on a twin bed, on the most disgusting pale yellow bedspread I've ever seen in all my life. Right in front of me, pushed against a cracked yellow wall, is a rickety-looking wooden table with a chipped ceramic flower vase on top. I assume based on the heat that we've arrived in Mexico.

God, are we really in Mexico? Part of me can still see Hunter moving over me. Taste the strawberries. How did this happen—and why?

I summon the energy to lift my head and glance over to my right, where I find Cross, lying face-down on the other bed. He looks so...still. My pulse starts pounding.

"C-cross?" As soon as I say it, I wish I hadn't spoken aloud. I lie there for a minute, tense, worried that Priscilla or Lockwood will burst through the warped wood door. When no one does, I try to sit up. Maybe if I kick and strain enough, I can get myself untied. Unfortunately, I find that with my arms tied in front of me and my legs bound, plus the effects of whatever drug I've been given, I have no balance. I can barely even get my shoulders off the mattress.

I press my hands together and try to get some slack in the dirty rope that's squeezing my wrists. No luck.

Oh shit. Now I start to panic. What's going to happen to us? Is Cross okay? Where is Hunter? Even thinking about him makes tears spring into my eyes. I need him so much right now. What if he can't find us?

If he can't find us, I tell myself sternly, you will save the day. You don't need a man to save you. Hunter may have no idea how to reach us; I can't wait for him. If I can just get Cross awake, he and I can try to come up with a plan. In the meantime, I shut my eyes and try to figure out Priscilla and Lockwood's game. Is Cross's dad in on it? Surely not. He and Cross don't get along, but I can't imagine him wanting to hurt his own son. So it's just Priscilla and Lockwood.

I take a deep breath and glance around the room once more. I cast my eyes on Cross, looking desperately for the rise and fall of his shoulders. He's breathing, thank God, but his face seems to be pressed into a pillow. I think about the monitors Nanette had to take off of him for our field trip today. One was for his pulse, the other for his blood oxygen saturation. I forgot what the other one monitored. Nanette said he really didn't need them anymore. He's doing extraordinarily well, but that was before this. What if the drugs he got today make him go back into his coma?

I inhale deeply. Positive thoughts, Elizabeth. You'll find a way out of this. I can't really vanish into Mexico—can I?

I hear a creaking sound, and before I can think to play dead, Lockwood strolls through the door. He's wearing dirty-looking brown workman's pants and a gray button-up shirt. He's got on some kind of big, floppy cowboy hat, which shields most of his sunken-cheeked face. I also notice he's wearing a gun on his belt.

Of course.

Belatedly, I want to shut my eyes, but his gaze is already on me. "What do you think?" He spreads his arms out. "You like your comfy little Mexican hideaway?"

I swallow back a string of curse words. I need to appear calm or he might put me back to sleep. "My wrists hurt," I answer.

"I didn't ask about your wrists. I asked about your room." He looks up at the cracked ceiling. "Believe it or not, this is big shit in Mexico."

"Where are we?" I ask him.

He grins, looking genuinely amused. "You think I'm telling you? All you need to know is this is where we sell 'em. You'll fetch a good price. He may, too," he says, nodding at Cross's broad back. "He's got nice blue eyes."

Hearing this news, I feel nothing. Maybe I'm in shock. The only thought I have is that I want to get more information from him. Not want to, have to. I have to stay in control if I want to get away. I try a simple statement. "You killed Sarabelle."

"Only because I had to," Lockwood says, hooking his thumbs through his belt-loops. "I was gonna take her here to market but she got too frisky. Conniving little pussy. Acted like she was going to give me head and bit my cock." He grimaces, fondling himself, and I grit my teeth. "Sarabelle, she wasn't like the last one, little Miss Lucky."

When he says her name, I remember it. She was the escort who went missing a

little while before Sarabelle. I raise my eyebrows and paste on a surprised, slightly impressed look. "You took Ginnifer Lucky, too?"

Lockwood nods, standing up a little taller. "She fetched a good price. But you... well, they're paying better these days. All that drug money." He grins, revealing stained teeth.

I try my best to keep my disgust off my face. I want to sound curious, keep him talking but not make him mad. "You're the one behind Missy King, too, aren't you?"

At the mention of her name, his eyes dance. "Missy? Yeah, I sold her. She's still in country, actually. Somewhere," he says, grinning. "She was a good fuck, that little Missy. Spirited. Gave the governor trouble, that's what happened to that little lady. Bet she's keeping some Mexican drug lord real happy."

That thought makes my stomach churn. "What's the point of selling Cross and I? People will notice we're gone. If you need the money that badly, I recently came into some—"

He interrupts me with a coarse laugh. "I was disappointed to see the deal was already done." I really might be sick this time. I clench my legs together and ignore the humiliation I feel. So far, the shirt's still covering my goods, but if I move, it won't be. This is a man who raped Sarabelle. "You would have fetched a much higher price yesterday."

"I have money!" I say desperately.

He snickers. "We're moving you two downstream because you're all up in our business. And I do mean business. Tail like yours goes for high dollar." He grins, like he's proud of himself, and I squeeze my legs a even closer together.

Lockwood is definitely leering at me. He walks a little closer to my bed, so when Priscilla strolls through the door, I actually feel almost glad.

"How's our prince and princess?" she asks.

Lockwood's dark eyes rove over her body, clad in a skin-tight black dress, before he glances back at me. "This one's a Curious Cassie."

I scowl at Priscilla. "I can't believe you help him sell women into sex slavery."

She laughs. "You over-estimate my moral code, darlin'. Besides, sex with strangers isn't as bad as you think."

"It is when you're forced to do it!"

She gives me a patronizing grin. "I guess you'll find out."

"I just don't understand," I say evenly. "What's in this for you?"

"You should know I'm not in it for the money," she chides. "In fact, I'm usually not involved in Michael's extracurriculars at all. But this situation needed some tidying up."

"I used to work for that kid's dad," Lockwood says, pointing at Cross. "Missy was his mistress before she started wanting too much. I had worked for him in security, and then I moved to Vegas to work in the porn biz. Priscilla wanted the governor and after a night of drinkin' she and I got the idea. It was really more my idea," he says with a little nod. "The governor asked me to take care of it, and, like that—" he snaps "—a new enterprise was born."

"I never liked her anyway," Priscilla says. She rolls her eyes, like Missy was such a twat, and I realize she's psycho. They both are.

"But you dated!" I exclaim to Lockwood.

"More like fucked." He shrugs. "It made it even easier to get her across the border. She never knew what was coming."

"And after that, Governor Carlson got to be with me," Priscilla says.

"He didn't stay with you," I point out.

"Yes he did." She grins. "He just got better at sneaking around."

I don't know what to do with this information. I glance at Cross, glad he's still asleep, and then a horrible thought occurs to me. "His father doesn't know about this, does he?"

Priscilla shakes her head. "Definitely not, but if he did, I'm not sure he'd try to stop me. I've got enough dirt on him to fill the Grand Canyon."

I need time to process all of this, but time I do not have.

"Why is Hunter involved?"

She shrugs. "He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, really." She knocks Lockwood with her hip, and I want to vomit. "Besides, it's Michael's fault, not mine. I have restraint. He doesn't. When he heard what I did to your cocky little poker player, he made a rash decision, and then I had to cover for him. If he gets charged with something, it could lead back to Carlson."

As Priscilla explains things to me, Lockwood pulls her dress aside and kisses her breasts. "Oh, hell yeah."

He starts to hump her, and she steps back, leaving him panting like a horny dog. "Do you know what time it is?" she asks him.

"We've still got an hour," he says.

"Until what?" I nearly shriek.

Priscilla smiles. "Don't you like surprises?"

Lockwood laces his fingers through hers, and together they leave the room. Cross is still asleep. My mind is racing. I can't believe what Cross's father did. I can't believe Priscilla is such a monster. I can't believe we're trapped here. Everything about this situation is horrible.

Hunter. Where are you?

I try to wake up Cross. I call his name, I try to talk to him, I even sing Katy Perry songs. He hates Katy Perry. I'm thrilled when, after only a few minutes, he rolls onto his back, giving me a full view of his unbound hands. Why didn't they tie him? His eyes flutter at the ceiling, and he grimaces like he's in pain.

"Cross?"

He moans, then rolls back on his stomach. Crap!

I hear Priscilla's voice outside and she comes back in, holding a bottle opener. She opens a cooler on the other side of Cross's bed and pulls out a bottle of beer.

"What did you give him?" I ask as she opens it.

She shrugs. "A tranquilizer. Not everyone has a good reaction to it."

"What do you mean, not everyone has a good reaction?!" I've managed to sit

halfway up now. I jerk against the binds around my wrists. I want to slap her.

With another shrug and not a glance my way, Priscilla saunters out of the room. "Cross," I call.

He moans. "Cross, wake up! Please!"

But he doesn't move or say another word. Why did I take him with me to Hunter's house? He said he wanted to see the outside world, and I didn't think it would take longer than an hour. I try not to feel too guilty, though. That was my first chance to have sex. So what if I took it? It's not my fault a crazy guy kidnapped us.

I push my breath out. Suck in another one.

It's okay. At least I won't die a virgin.

I laugh out loud. Only for a second, but it's enough to draw Lockwood's attention. He saunters back sans hat, giving me a full view of his rotten, shit-eating grin.

I glare at him. "What's happening in an hour?"

"The buyers are coming."

"To get me and Cross?"

He shrugs. "Maybe just you. Depends on if they want a guy."

"And if they don't?"

"Maybe I'll cook him and eat him." I can feel the blood drain from my face. Lockwood bursts out laughing. It's jerky and gassy, and makes him sound kind of like a choking bird. "Naw. Naw. That's not the plan."

"You tried to kill him, didn't you? That's why you didn't tie his hands." Horror washes through me as I realize this makes sense.

He nods. "Nothing personal. But he knows things he shouldn't."

"How do you know he knows?" I challenge.

"His father told Priscilla. She don't keep secrets for anybody."

Of course. Freakin' Priscilla. Oh my God, I want to slap that bitch.

From somewhere behind me, I hear a clock ticking. I guess it's mounted on the wall. "How much longer?" I ask Lockwood. It's kind of ridiculous to ask, but I figure why not.

His gaze drifts over my head. "Looks like about thirty-seven minutes, seniorita."

I shut my eyes, and a minute later, I hear a rustling in the cooler, followed by his footsteps and the closing of the door.

Holy cow. This is really about to happen. I'm really getting sold! Not my V-card; me. I strain my abs and get myself half-sitting. I pull against the binds so hard my wrists sport blood-red lines. I've got to do something!

As I work my wrists against the rope, the ticking of the clock threatens to drive me crazy.

Try as I might, I just can't undo the freakin' knot! It's complicated and tight.

I wiggle my ankles. Nothing.

I'm lying there, praying and trying to regulate my breathing, when I hear a moan. My eyes flip open. "Cross!"

He sits up, looking dazed, and I think I might pass out from glee.

"Cross," I hiss, trying harder to be quiet. "Come untie me!"

He blinks at me, and my heart sinks as I realize he's not really seeing me.

"Cross," I whisper. "It's me—Lizzy! I need your help!"

He blinks, the slack look on his face never changing as he rolls his shoulder. Squinting, he looks slowly around the room. "I feel...stiff." His voice is croaky. His eyes wander over the ceiling and the walls, and then finally to me. They widen. "Lizzy?" He flinches as he notices my binds, and I can see some of the stupor fading. "What the hell is going on?"

"You don't remember?"

He frowns. "I fell asleep, waiting for you." He looks around the room again, but I hiss. "Cross! Come and untie me! I'll explain later, but you have to untie your feet and then help me!"

He swallows as he blinks down at his feet. He leans over, placing one palm on his ankle, and I urge him, "C'mon! You've gotta move fast!"

"Okay." He gives me a concerned look while his fingers grapple with the rope. "Damn," he mutters, "I'm thirsty."

"I'm so sorry, Cross. But Priscilla Heat and Jim Gunn have us!"

His eyes bug out. "Holy fuck." He grits his teeth and goes harder at the ropes on his ankles. "Where are we?" he asks while he works.

"Mexico."

"Are we getting sold or something? Because that would be unbelievable."

I nod. "I really think we are. Except you..." I'm about to speculate on why they didn't feel a need to tie Cross's hands when the door opens again, and a tall Mexican man walks in.

Chapter Forty-One

~ELIZABETH~

He's wearing all black, from his boots to the fedora-like hat on his head. He has light brown skin and Spanish features. Once I see the dead look in his eyes, all I know is that he's not here to help us. In fact, he's probably here to buy us. Shit.

His assessing gaze flicks over me, then over Cross, who I quickly realize has managed to slump over on his side. Did he do that in time to fool the buyer? I'm not sure, because I wasn't watching him. I watch the buyer's face; he's looking down his thin nose at Cross. I don't think he's spared a look for me yet.

He steps closer to Cross, poking his bicep with the tip of his black leather boot.

Then he turns toward the door, flicks his fingers in a come hither motion, and two other men walk in. Neither is as tall as the buyer, and it's clear they're working for him, rather than the other way around. They're wearing black like he is, but they don't look as clean or well-groomed, and where he points, they scurry.

I tense, terrified because I expect them to skip right over Cross and come to me, but instead they each grab one of Cross's shoulders, and they roll him over. He's so limp I wonder if he actually passed out. One of them starts to unbutton his blue jeans, and I shriek.

The buyer's gaze snaps to me. "You can't do that!"

"You be quiet," he hisses. His accent makes his voice sound like a snake.

"He's not for sale."

"What about you?" He steps closer to me, taking my face in his hand and running his finger over my cheek. "Are you for sale?" he asks me. "We get many requests for feisty girls." His gaze flicks between my legs. "They told me you are barely used."

I blink up at him, feeling like I might be sick.

He releases my face and chuckles. "She is just a baby."

Abruptly he's leaving my bed and walking toward the door. I glance over at Cross, and I'm relieved to find his jeans still zipped.

The buyer struts toward the door. He pulls something out of his back pocket, and as he reaches the doorway, two men lean in to hear what he has to say. I gasp as I see they're both holding machine guns.

The shock of it is so horrible, I forget to translate what he's telling them. The two sidekicks move to stand behind the buyer, and all of a sudden they're all talking at once. Then the three of them step back, and Priscilla and Lockwood come in. It looks, from the little I saw, like the gunmen actually had to admit them.

Super.

You would know they're guppies in the big pond.

This time, I can hear their conversation clearly.

The buyer speaks in Spanish: "We'll take them both. The man, especially, will fetch a good price in a larger market. Possibly Europe. Dark hair and blue eyes is a good look. For the woman, I am thinking Asia. I can see she is lacking in experience."

I keep my eyes trained on the ceiling as my heart races. I dare a quick glance over at Cross. He seems asleep, but is he really?

Lockwood says, "How much?"

The buyer makes a tscking noise and continues speaking in Spanish. "I want to see more of them. A fresh woman is a fresh woman, but what is the size of the man's part?"

"He is large," Lockwood says in Spanish.

Oh my God. Does he actually know that? My cheeks and head feel too hot, like any moment now, steam might start flowing from my ears. Please, no.

"What is the quality of the girl's tits?"

"You can feel for yourself," Lockwood says, also in Spanish.

He waves at me, and Priscilla holds her arm out like a game show display girl.

I'm swallowing convulsively. The man nears me, and I wonder if I throw my legs up, if I can kick him with my knees despite my tied up ankles. He scrutinizes my face and then he reaches for my chest.

As his hand comes down to grope me, I experience my first real moment of hopelessness. What if this is really my new life? His fingers are inches from my breast when I close my eyes, but his hand never makes it. He crashed to the floor, knocking me off the bed, and his two sidekicks start yelling. The buyer jumps up as I fumble onto my knees, leaning my shoulders on the bed. I'm shocked to see Cross standing, clutching a handgun.

It must belong to the buyer, because the buyer's face is a mask of shock as he reaches into his shirt.

For the longest moment in the history of moments, Cross and the buyer stare each other down. Then, out of nowhere, Lockwood fires a shot at Cross. Cross ducks, and the guards at the door come in and start screaming. One of them has Lockwood on the ground in seconds, aiming what looks like an AK-47 at his face. Priscilla is screaming, sticking her arms in the air, her huge boobs bouncing as she jumps in place. "I give blow jobs! Don't hurt me! I'll give you a blow job!"

At first I think she must have lost her mind, but one of the gunmen actually lowers his rifle and makes a grab at her crotch.

She thrusts toward him, leaving Lockwood, me, Cross and the buyer in our standoff. I shift my attention to translating Cross's Spanish, and I'm stunned to realize he's negotiating some kind of deal.

I catch something about, "Giant stockpile of guns" and "American airplane, not far from here" before my eyes and my attention drift to the buyer.

Part of me will always regret that I don't get to see that play out. When the

guards start going berserk again, Priscilla is on her knees, Lockwood is on his back, and Cross, only days out of a coma, has elicited a respectful—if skeptical—expression from the buyer, who is obviously more interested in getting an airplane loaded with weapons than he is in whatever money he could make from us.

The buyer is wearing his skeptical-but-coming-around expression, and Cross is owning it, and I am just sitting there, not like a badass heroine at all, wondering if they're just going to kill us when they realize there's no plane, when another man with a big machine gun runs into the room and cries, "Chota!"

"Chota?" the buyer says.

"Chota!"

"CHOTA!"

And, just like that, the buyer, his sidekicks, and his gunmen run like hell.

I'm freaking out now, too, so I struggle to stand up, and Cross grabs me and pushes me under the bed. Right before my face mashes into the dirty, tile floor, I notice Cross's ankles are still bound, and he's balancing on the outside of his soles.

Then there's a gunshot...but it's not Cross firing. He's in the process of crouching down behind me; I can feel something sharp between my skin and the rope, first on my hands and then my ankles. Then I turn to find Cross freeing his feet. Then he stands and whirls toward the door, where the sound of footsteps echoes.

He mutters a confused-sounding curse. "Hunter West?"

I jump up and get a glimpse of Hunter, leaning in the doorway. I know the exact moment he sees me, because relief makes his eyes widen and his mouth fall open. His gaze flies over me, and he rushes toward me. I'm already anticipating his arms around me. I can practically feel them. But before he reaches me, a loud boom wrenches the air, and Hunter flies into the wall.

"OH MY GOD!"

I watch in horror as he slumps down to the floor, his face twisting in agony as his right hand fumbles toward his bright red, left shoulder. He lifts his head, and his wild eyes comb the room until they settle on my face.

"Hunter!" I rush him, noting dimly as I fly across the room that Cross is on top of Lockwood, pummeling his face.

"Hunter! HUNTER! NO, no, no, no, please!" I grab his body, shocked and terrified by how limp he is already.

"Libby." His hands grab at me as he starts panting, which quickly turns to horrible choking. "Libby..." he gasps, "you...okay?"

That's the last thing he says before his eyes roll back into his head.

I start to scream, and somewhere far away, I hear one of my would-be kidnappers cry: "Chota!"

Chapter Forty-Two

~HUNTER~

I must have died and gone to hell, because I'm burning. The fire spreads through my upper body, quickly overwhelming all my senses. Then I'm dragged down into darkness. How many layers of hell are there supposed to be? I can't remember, but I must be going deep.

The burning is more intense now. I hear a man moaning and wonder if it's me. I hear a woman moan, too, and I'm worried the woman is Libby. I scream her name over and over, but I don't get an answer. Libby's not here. Michael Lockwood took her.

I relive the moments after she disappeared from my vineyard. I'm outside screaming her name, and Dave is there almost immediately. By chance he'd picked up Lockwood's trail that morning and eventually followed him to my home.

When Lockwood was able to gain easy entry—because I didn't lock the door behind Libby when she came inside—Dave hid his bike and tried to get a peek. He was at the side of the house when he heard two cars pull up, and he got to the front just in time to see a silver Audi he didn't recognize spirit Cross and Libby away.

We jump on Dave's bike and give chase, but we haven't caught them by the time we leave the neighborhood. Dave has an idea. A terrible one. Lockwood spent two hours at a tiny airstrip before coming to my house.

We arrive just as a Lear Jet goes airborne. I call the FBI, and it takes them almost an hour to give the local cops the clearance to examine the flight records. They arrive in time to spend another hour figuring out the records have been falsified. The plane claimed to be headed north, toward Redding, California, but tracking software shows it actually went south.

The FBI has to wait for orders, but I don't. Hal and I get on my plane. It's several hellish hours before the plane we're chasing lands—in a rural area outside San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico. My pilot, Victor, lands in a field, and Hal and I start trying to trace a path from the empty plane to Libby. Fifty bucks gets us a hotel name, and two hundred gets us a dinged up dirt bike. We pull out just as another plane—the FBI, Hal says—flies low overhead.

I'm moaning again, and just like before, the woman is crying. There's something clutching my hand. Someone, and I feel sure it's Libby. She's crying.

I squeeze her hand as hard as I can, and the crying stops. "It's okay, Libby."

I have the strange suspicion that I'm only managing a whisper. She's crying again. I mean, she is really going at it. I squeeze her hand, and the crying turns to sobbing.

Damnit, Libby.

Her sobs make the burn worse. Darkness starts to fade, and I can see white

flames. I feel like I'm choking and I start to struggle against the invisible hands that hold me.

Fuck—oh fuck. I don't like this. Not at all. There are so many voices rising up around me. Someone slaps my face, and I don't think it's hard, but I'm already on edge.

And then there is light. Fluorescent light.

Holy shit. I turn my head left and right, squeezing my eyes shut against the searing pain, and there is Libby, bent over me and crying. And I really must be confused about what's going on, because she's wearing scrubs. Libby looks beautiful in scrubs.

*

~ELIZABETH~

Hunter is in and out of consciousness for almost two days. They say it's not that long considering the bullet's trajectory—through his left lung—and where it lodged, by one of the branches of his axillary artery. He almost bled to death in the hour-long helicopter ride to UC San Diego hospital, and when we got here, they wheeled him straight into surgery, which lasted four excruciating hours.

The nurses let me stay by him in the ICU when he comes out. I'm not sure why, but it probably has something to do with Marchant Radcliffe telling everyone that I'm his fiancé.

His first forty-eight hours in the ICU, Hunter's mostly sleeping. The incision, on his back, around his shoulder blade, is called a thoracotomy and is supposed to be one of the most painful sites for surgery. So they have to keep him sedated. I hate it, and spend probably too much time sitting by his bed, crying. Cross stays with me for most of the first day, but he has to go back to rehab the next. Suri gives me some company, too, and of course Marchant is in and out.

The weirdest thing that happens in the first forty-eight hours is that my mom visits. She's wearing a pants suit—my designer-loving mother's definition of drab—and her hair, which she normally pulls into a dramatic up-do, is flowing down her shoulders, much like mine. I meet her in the ICU waiting room, and when she hugs me, I start sobbing. I have to say, it's one of the weirdest experiences I've had in years. It's even weirder when she says she's staying.

So that's what happens. While I'm asked every imaginable question by the FBI, my mother keeps me fed and brings me clean clothes and tries to make me get some sleep.

On the second night after we arrive—the night Dave tells me that Michael Lockwood, AKA Jim Gunn, AKA a few other names, is being charged with the abduction of Missy King, Ginnifer Lucky, Cross, and I, and the murder of Sarabelle Meyer—I'm a teary mess. I cry a lot, and Marchant charms his way in so the two of us sit side by side in plastic chairs and talk about the mess Hunter's been in. We also

speculate over Priscilla, who hasn't been seen since Mexico.

I go into the waiting room and eat some fast food with my mother. This is when I find out that she knows what I did at the ranch. I guess she overheard one of the investigators talking about it. When she first brings it up, I sort of freak out, but it turns out, all she wants to say is sorry.

"I'm so sorry for what I've done to our family with my addiction, Elizabeth. I can't stand to think of how much money I've wasted. It makes me sad that you were so desperate."

I try to explain to her that I wasn't just desperate—I was also tired of being a virgin—and to my surprise, she says she understands, at least a little.

That actually feels good.

Later in the night, I talk a lot to Hunter. His stats are looking better now, and they want to see some improvement in his breathing, so they've started weaning him off some of his medicines. I'm sitting by his bed, staring at his monitors, when all of a sudden he moans, and I get a peek of his green eyes. He's been squeezing my hand since yesterday, but seeing his eyes...it's amazing.

"Hunter," I whisper.

He grimaces and turns his head toward me. His eyelids are heavy, his eyes barely open, but I can see him trying to focus on my face. His hand, in mine, squeezes. He gives me the smallest little smile, and in his hoarse voice, he says, "I missed you."

Tears fill my eyes. "I missed you, too."

The third day, sometime in mid-morning, Hunter opens his eyes again. He looks dazed, and then panicked.

I rub his fingers. "Hi. Are you okay?"

He frowns, then looks around the little room. His eyes return to mine and his hand squeezes me a little harder. "Libby... I don't know where we are."

"That's okay." I stroke his palm. "You don't remember because you got hurt."

He looks me over. His brows are drawn together and his lips look dry. "I saw you. You were wearing scrubs."

I nod. That was before I had my own clothes, shortly after we got here. "I just borrowed them to wear for a little while."

I can see it dawn on him. His face loses some of his color, and his heart rate rises just a little. "Lockwood got you."

I nod. "Yeah, but then you came."

He makes a sour face. "That bastard shot me."

I blink through tears. "Yes, he did."

Hunter frowns, looking down at our hands before meeting my eyes again. "Did I shoot him?"

"I think you did. Cross says you leaned into the room and got a perfect gut shot."

Hunter's eyes are slightly wide. He's nodding, but I can tell he's not completely following, or more likely, he just doesn't remember.

I hesitate before asking my next question. "Do you remember anything from the helicopter?"

After a second squeezing my hand, he shakes his head. I'm not surprised. In fact, I'm glad. The times he was conscious were horrible. I wish I could forget them, too.

"Did you go with me?" he whispers.

I nod. I have to bite the sides of my tongue to keep from crying, because as I sat there in the helicopter, watching those FBI people—or "chota", as the Mexicans were screaming—work on him, I really, really thought he was going to die.

"I was with you," I finally manage.

His eyes close as his fingers squeeze my hand. "Stay."

*

~HUNTER~

Gentle hands are playing in my hair. It feels so good, I want to keep my eyes closed, but I miss Libby and I need to know it's her.

Damn the effort it takes to get my eyes open. And when I do, I have to struggle to focus on her face.

"Libby..."

She looks up. She's so pretty. I'm so glad she's here.

She smiles her sweet smile, the one I've only ever seen her smile for me. "Hi, you."

My throat's dry, and I start to cough. Libby holds out a cup with a straw, and I gulp down a few sips of water. I feel really...stiff, so I try to shift my body weight. Pain like a hot poker lances through my shoulder and I have to bite my lip to keep from whimpering like a pussy.

Now I'm in a cold sweat.

"Do you want some more pain meds?" Libby looks concerned.

I nod once, then shake my head. I already feel dizzy. If I take a pain pill, I might fall asleep.

"Are you sure? You look a little rough around the edges." She strokes my hair off my forehead, and I shut my eyes. All I can think about is Lockwood taking her. I have another awful thought: What if I'm arrested for skipping the country? Who will watch out for Libby then?

I swallow and crack my eyes open. "Am I being arrested?"

She shakes her head. "But Lockwood has been."

"For what?"

"For Sarabelle," she says quietly. "And all the abductions. Human trafficking, they called it."

"No shit?"

She nods. "That's right. Actually, I think your dad had a hand in getting it done quickly. Lockwood was taken as soon as they got him back into the states. And, for the record, you just missed your father."

I blink my gritty eyes. "He was here?"

Libby nods. "Yep. And he had news. He's resigning."

My shock makes my back hurt. "What the fuck?"

"Apparently he's fallen in love with one of his aides. She looked a little younger than him, maybe in her thirties."

I snort. "Oh."

"But I don't think that was all. He told me he had some personal things to settle. He's coming back to talk to you tomorrow."

I nod, because I don't expect much from that bullshit. If my father is resigning, it's probably because certain people in the FBI know about the Rita cover-up. I shift my weight again, testing the pain around my left arm. It streaks through me, and I find myself panting.

"You need pain meds." Libby's frowning.

"No. I want to know...about Priscilla."

Her frown deepens as she leans a little closer, resting her chin on my bed rail. "She's missing, Hunter. We didn't get her out of Mexico. Cross says she might have gone with some of the locals."

I shut my eyes. That's fucking weird.

"Dr. Libby has been here. So has Marchant. And Loveless."

I'm surprised. Not about Marchant, but about the others. "How is Loveless?"

"She left you those," Libby says, pointing to a bouquet of yellow flowers, "and the others will all be back to see you tomorrow."

Libby's fingers stroke my face, and I reach out and grab her arm. I tug her closer, and she leans over the rail and presses her face into my side. She eases an arm over my waist. With my right hand, I reach out and touch her pretty dark brown hair.

"What about you?" I whisper. "How long have you been here?"

"A while," she murmurs.

"The whole time?"

"Maybe."

I smile a little, tightening my grip on her. "I can't get rid of you."

She sits up, so I can see her face. "You can't," she whispers, smiling. But her eyes look serious.

"I didn't really want to," I confess.

Epilogue

~ELIZABETH~

It's one of the first warm days in March, and Hunter has a poker tournament this afternoon. This one's at the Wynn, which is convenient since that's where we've been staying. After he was discharged, we sort of took a two-month vacation here.

He offered to take me home to Crestwood Place and recuperate in Vegas on his own, but there was no way. After everything that's happened, I just can't stand to be away from him.

Suri understands.

Cross is here tonight, wedged between Marchant and I. Marchant invited him. It's pretty weird how they've gotten to be friends. Maybe it's motorcycles. I didn't know it until recently, but Marchant has six.

It's taken Hunter the last two months to return to play. For the first few weeks, he had trouble raising his left arm. Once he was completely healed, he went through a brief phase where he didn't want to be seen on TV.

"Everyone thinks they know my whole life-story now," he complained. "How can I have a poker face?"

And it's true—the part about everyone thinking they know Hunter. Everywhere we go, I feel the stares. People outside Vegas and California and D.C. and New Orleans might not know what happened, but around those parts, we're notorious. When I came downstairs tonight with Cross and Marchant, about thirty minutes after Hunter and the other players began filming, we were ushered to front-row seats marked for family only, and I saw the camera get a shot of us.

There are more poster-board signs in the small audience tonight for Hunter than for any of the other players, and I get my drinks for free.

Priscilla Heat finally surfaced a few weeks ago, trying to cross the border with a Mexican drug dealer. She was arrested, and is now awaiting her trial, along with Lockwood and his LVPD cousin, Josh Smith. Priscilla's production company has been shut down, and I've heard her nasty films are selling for twice their old price. Further proof that the world doesn't make a bit of sense sometimes.

In the last two months, so much has happened between Hunter and I, sometimes it's hard to remember that's what really brought us together.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if he'd simply won my bid, we'd had sex, and I'd left his house a few hours later, the way the V-card-losing

experience was designed. I like to think we would have found our way back to each other no matter what. When I asked Hunter what he thought, snuggled up in his hospital bed a few days before he finally got discharged, he smiled and winked and said he would have thrown another house party.

"You're mine, Libby DeVille. That's how it's supposed to be."

Ever since he woke up after his surgery, Hunter hasn't been shy about saying things like that. Neither have I. Some mornings I wake up beside him in his penthouse here and I'm amazed at what we have together. It isn't always easy, but I can honestly say it's always fun.

His wounds have healed up perfectly. Except for a small, round scar on his chest and the Captain Hook slash on his shoulder-blade, you'd never know he collapsed a lung or a bullet that barely missed a crucial artery. The FBI has completely closed its files on Hunter, and on one of those early days in the hospital, his dad even offered an apology of sorts for not doing more to protect Hunter from Rita. I'm not sure how much Hunter cares, but it's a first step, anyway.

Marchant has given Dr. Libby one day off each week, and on that day, she comes to Hunter's penthouse to talk to one or both of us. I think it's doing Hunter good to talk to her again, and I've even begun dealing with the resentment I've always carried toward my Mom. It hasn't been two months yet, but she's still sober.

Tonight, after the tournament, we're flying back to Napa. I haven't seen Suri in weeks, and Hunter and I need to spend some time in the vineyard house together. I think we both need to make some new memories there, since the last one involved Lockwood.

Marchant and Cross get along like old friends, talking about cars and bikes and women as I train my eyes on Hunter's infamous poker face.

"Can you tell if he's got a winning hand?" Cross asks me.

I tell him, "no, of course not, silly," but the truth is—I kind of can. I'm getting to know all of Hunter's tells.

It's fun to watch him play. Even with that fixed expression on his face, I can tell he's in his element. Maybe it's because of his experience with Rita, but Hunter likes a certain element of control. Playing poker seems to give him just enough so he can handle the lack of it in other areas.

The tournament passes quickly as I sip my diet and bourbon and Cross and Marchant load up on the straight stuff.

This is Cross's first time out since leaving rehab. The good news is, he's doing great. The bad news is, his hand's still not back to normal. Suri tells me he hasn't re-opened his bike business, and I don't think he's ridden yet, either. Every time I've seen him, he's put on a good act, like he's doing fine—no more of that sullenness he had in the weeks after he first woke up—but I'm not betting on it. As far as I know, neither of his parents have made a move to reconcile with him. The FBI's investigation doesn't appear to have reached past Lockwood, to the governor, and since the day we had our talk in Hunter's room at rehab—right before the day we both got nabbed—he hasn't mentioned anything about going forward with whatever

evidence he may have. I can't imagine that's good for him. To make things worse, now that my mother is living in her house again, Cross has moved into his bike shop. I'm hoping when Hunter and I get back to Napa, I can try to get a better feel for what's going on. If Cross needs help, I'll be there.

Hunter wins the final hand and he, Cross, Marchant, and I have a few drinks in one of the lounges before Cross and Marchant head to—dear God— the ranch—and Hunter and I make our way toward his plane. As we drive his Aston Martin to the airport where he rents a parking spot and stores his plane, he holds my hand tightly and looks at me often. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was tense, but Hunter is always tired and relaxed after a good game.

His eyes flicker across my face once more before he turns onto the road where the airport is located. "Are you sure you're not too tired to go tonight?"

I nod. "I'm sure. I miss Napa."

We roll into the airport parking lot, and his face grows serious. "Are you sure it's not Crestwood you miss?"

I frown. "Yeah, I'm sure. Suri is a great roommate, but it's nothing compared to living with you." As soon as I say it, I wonder if the question was more about Hunter than me. "Why? Do you think I should go back to Crestwood?"

Things have been going so well the last few weeks, I haven't really thought about them changing. But maybe I should have. Maybe Hunter's decided it's too soon for us to be spending all our time together.

I force a smile. "Are you getting Libby overload?"

His eyes widen. "Oh, no. Hell no. You're not getting sick of my ass, are you?"

I giggle at his wording. "Your ass—yes. Totally sick of it. The rest of you I'll take, but not that ass." I stick my hand into his seat, grabbing at it, and Hunter's hand captures mine and guides it to the bulge in front.

Hunter hits a button on his steering wheel, and the door to the car garage lifts as he drops his head back against the seat and murmurs, "Mmmm."

He guides the car into his spot—three walls of cement and a drop-door, a lot like a unit in a storage shed—and darkness closes over us. I laugh and unbuckle as he shifts us into park. I throw myself onto his lap and go straight for his belt.

"Get this off so I can show you what a real win looks like," I say, grinning.

"Yes ma'am."

I had my mind on something oral, but Hunter opens his door and pulls me out onto the cement slab. There's a window and door here in our little garage, but with the lights out in here, I don't think anyone could see us. Which is a good thing, because Hunter pushes my skirt up and lays me spread-eagle on the hood.

The warmth of the motor burns a little bit against my ass, and Hunter's mouth burns somewhere else. It's not long before I'm gasping for release. He doesn't give it to me, so I sit up and grab at him until I get my hands on his pants. I tug them down, lie back, and beg him: "Please..."

"What the lady wants..."

"The lady gets," I finish, panting.

I gasp as Hunter pushes inside me, and when we start to rock, I gasp some more. The sex tonight is hard and fast, a little rough. I like it this way. It's not long before I'm screeching Hunter's name, and he's shuddering over me.

When we leave the garage and walk back out into the parking lot, I'm feeling sleepy, but totally satisfied. I squeeze Hunter's hand as we come into view of his plane.

He squeezes back. "It'll be nice to get back to the vineyard."

I look him over, studying his face, but it's one of those moments where I just can't read him—so I ask. "Do you think you're ready?"

He shrugs. "It's my house."

"We'll have to christen it." We did the same thing at the penthouse, making love in all the spots where he was with Priscilla. At first it was hard for me to know details like that, but any doubts I might have been carrying are all gone now.

We follow the row of runway lights, and Hunter helps me into the cabin, then goes out and talks to some of the techs. A few minutes later, he comes back in, with his hands in the pockets of his black pants. I'm surprised to find he looks tense.

I walk over to him and wrap my arms around his neck, rocking my hips into his. "You okay?"

He nods. "Yeah." He leans down for a hungry-seeming kiss, and we're still going at it in one of the chairs when the pilot turns the 'buckle seat belt' light on and we have to take our seats. I slide the arm rest up, so our two seats are more like one, and lean my head against his shoulder. Hunter's arm goes around my back.

"Thank you for coming with me," he murmurs as he kisses my hair.

"To Napa?"

He nods.

"Of course. You know I would go anywhere with you." I lace my hand through his.

"Would you?" he asks. I search his face for hints of teasing, but he's not.

"Hunter, what's wrong?"

He shuts his eyes and leans his head against the seat.

"Are you feeling bad?"

He shakes his head.

"What is it?"

He takes a deep breath and unbuckles his seat belt. At first I think something's wrong—we're still climbing into the sky—but when his face goes pale and he gets down on one knee, my heart starts pounding.

"Libby, I was going to wait for some time memorable and romantic, but I don't think I can keep this to myself anymore." He reaches into the pocket of his pants and I stop breathing. "Libby—will you marry me?"

He takes my hand and squeezes my fingers, while his other hand brings out a small, red box. I expect him to open it, but instead he closes his fist around it and looks into my eyes. "I know you're young and you've still got some school to finish. You might want to do things you haven't done, but we can travel. We can do anything you want. Anything it takes to make you happy. If you want to sell the

place in Vegas, we can. If you want to—"

"YES!" I throw my arms around his neck. "Hunter, we don't have to do any of that. Yes, I'll marry you!" I smash my lips against his, and I'm laughing. I can feel his smile under my mouth. He deepens the kiss, and I can feel him shudder as I wrap myself around him.

"We don't have to do anything different," I murmur. "I don't want to." I lean down to kiss his temple and he locks his arms around me. His forehead presses against my throat, and I kiss his cheek.

"How long have you been thinking of this?" I ask.

His eyes flick up to mine, and slowly, a grin spreads across his face. "You really want to know?"

"Um...yes."

"I designed the ring when you would take naps at the hospital. It shipped to Dr. Libby and I got it from her weeks ago." He arches one eyebrow. "I would have dropped it on you earlier, but I was worried you weren't ready."

"I'm ready! Hunter, let me see it!"

With one arm locked around me, he opens the box, revealing a beautiful, oval ruby ringed by diamonds.

His green eyes hold mine as he fumbles with the box and slides the ring on my finger. I giggle and wave my hand around, buoyant enough to float through the roof and into the sky. "Thank you." I throw myself into his lap and straddle him, and Hunter's face burrows into my shoulder.

We sit there wrapped up in each other as the plane soars through the clouds, swooping lower as we near Napa—our home.

After a few minutes of blissful silence and lots of little kisses, Hunter looks down at me, smiling a little slyly. "I kind of already made some preparations."

"That confident, were we?" I smirk, and he grins. I poke his ribs. "C'mon now. Out with it!"

"I had our room re-done...and I got you a new car. I hope you're not upset."

"Upset?"

"I know how loyal you are to your Camry. This can just be a weekend car if you want."

"What kind of car is it?"

"A Porsche." His eyes are dancing as he thumbs my cheek. "One time I fell in love with a woman in a Porsche."

"I don't think that happened until a good bit later."

He smiles, looking lazy and comfortable and handsome. My fiancé. He looks into my eyes. "I don't know when it happened, but I'm damn sure glad it did."

"Me too." I snuggle up against his hard, warm body as we soar through midnight clouds. "Me, too."

ABOUT ELLA:

Ella James is an Alabama author who writes teen and adult romance. She is happily married to a man who knows how to wield a red pen, and together they are raising a feisty twenty-month-old who will probably grow up believing everyone's parents go to war over the placement of a comma.

Ella's books have been listed on numerous Amazon bestseller lists; two were listed among Amazon's Top 100 Young Adult Ebooks of 2012.

To find out more about Ella's projects and get dates on upcoming releases, find her on Facebook at facebook.com/ellajamesauthorpage and follow her blog, ellajamesbooks.blogspot.com. Questions or comments? Tweet her at [author_ellaj](https://twitter.com/author_ellaj) or e-mail her at ella_f_james@ymail.com.

*

ABOUT EDITING:

I love almost everything about being an indie author. One of the few things I don't love is lack of access to the number of editors available to a traditionally published author. Did you know traditionally published books are often edited by four or more different editors? There are editors for storyline continuity and editors for grammar. Indie authors pay their editors out-of-pocket—and they usually have only one or two. Even the best editor can't stack up against four or five of them, and if you've read indie books, you've probably noticed that they usually have more typos. As an author, I know typos can distract from a good story, and I hate them. If you find a copy error in one of my books, please e-mail me. My e-mail address is ella_f_james@ymail.com. I would welcome your keen eye—so much so that I'm offering to pay you 5 cents for every typo you spot. (The only caveat is we have to agree that it's an error). This message is at the end of the book rather than the beginning because I don't want you to go looking for errors. (There are easier ways to win money from me. Check out my Facebook page!) But if you are the sort that notices every error, my apology to you is this offer.