HEARTS: THE LAST BEAT
Book 7, Angel Fire Rock Romance series
Dedication

This book is dedicated to my one and only—my amazing and wonderful husband.

Thank you, my dearest love, my heart and soul, for putting up with me, for believing in me, and for loving me.

You pushed me when I needed to be pushed. You supported me when I felt discouraged. You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself.

If it weren’t for you, this book never would have come to life.
Books by Ellie Masters

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- Heart’s Desire (book 2)
- Heart’s Collide (book 3)
- Hearts Divided (book 4)
- Hearts Entwined (book 5)
- Forest’s FALL (book 6)
- Hearts The Last Beat (book 7)

Contemporary Romance

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  (Kristy Bromberg’s Everyday Heroes World)

Billionaire Romance
Billionaire Boys Club

- Hawke
- Richard
- Brody

Contemporary Romance

- Cocky Captain
  (Vi Keeland & Penelope Ward’s Cocky Hero World)

Romantic Suspense

Each book is a standalone novel.

- The Starling

~AND~
Science Fiction

Ellie Masters writing as L.A. Warren

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The End
EVER SINCE BASH’S DAUGHTER, Angel, moved into Insanity, life’s been one nonstop cluster-fuck of frustration and never-ending desire.

Every molecule in my body vibrates when she’s near. Every breath fills with her tantalizing essence. She’s a siren with an angelic voice reeling me in, far closer than I have the right to be.

Every beat of my heart tells me to walk away.

She’s beddable—fuckable—and the daughter of one of my closest friends. That alone should tell me to stay away.

The daughter. Bash’s daughter.

Yes, I’m very well aware who she is, who she belongs to, and who she doesn’t. That should make me steer clear, and yet, here I am—a man on a mission.

What are you going to do?

You know damn well what I’m going to do.

I can’t get over the way her strawberry-blonde hair cascades down her shoulders and bounces just above the crack of her tight little ass. It makes my fingers twitch to run through those loose curls.

She drives me insane.

I shouldn’t think about her rosebud lips or how they’ll taste once I take what I want from them. Or the beauty of that angelic face of hers, with smooth flawless skin sweeping into the most enchanting eyes. A mesmerizing shade of hazel-green, almond-shaped—they draw me in and make me crave indecent things.

Like taking those glossy-smooth ringlets of strawberry and gold in my fists. Yanking her head back. Watching her rosebud lips round in surprise as I lean down and take what I need. My fantasies don’t stop there. They go on, growing darker, filthier, and more
insistent with the passing of each and every day.

Turn around. This is a mistake.

Getting caught is the mistake.

I won’t get caught.

It’s inevitable.

I give a shake of my head and press my palm against my forehead. That voice in my head is right. Unfortunately, I’m beyond the point of no return.

My feet keep moving, sending me on a direct collision course with the worst possible decision of my life. It’s an epic mistake, but I don’t care. I don’t stop. She is my goal.

A low groan rumbles deep in my throat, and my eyes pinch with yet another moment of weakness.

Sick in the head, you are. Walk away, you must.

The Yoda voice in my head is not appreciated.

It’s good advice, but I won’t take it.

I can’t help but pursue what’s forbidden.

And she can’t help but tease and reel me in.

Angel’s made no effort to hide her interest. It lingers in the way she looks at me and in how she tries to sit next to me at every opportunity.

So far, I’ve been strong. I’ve resisted. I’ve ensured we’re never alone, using the guys, and their wives, to create a safe buffer zone. I’m the last bachelor standing, and the urge to find my mate increases each day.

Is Angel the one?

Hell if I know, but this irresistible force can no longer be denied. Maybe I just need to work her out of my system? Sink into her wet heat, take my fill, then slide on out and move on to the next woman?

Only the idea of any other woman turns my stomach.

I crave Angel’s company. I drown in the lightness of her laughter, the beauty of her smile, and in the desperate longing in her eyes when she thinks I’m not looking. The thing is, I’m hyperaware of her presence. I notice when she’s near.

This attraction is some sick chemistry at work, drawing us inexorably toward a destructive, and life-altering, implosion.
Walk away!

Ignoring the warning in my head is not only foolish, it’s catastrophic, but I’m powerless to refuse.

Everything about Angel makes me weak. I’m tired of lying to myself. I’m tired of acting like nothing’s going on. I ache for her on a level I’ve never experienced with any other woman; it’s as if she’s already fused to my soul.

Yet, she’s not mine.

She’ll never be yours.

Three days.

That’s how long I lasted this time.

The moment I knew we’d be alone in the palatial estate that is Insanity, I packed a bag and left town, running from inevitability. I knew I’d be weak if I stayed. Turns out, I’m weak when I walk away.

I’m not wrong in how I feel, even if she’s younger than me. Even if she’s only eighteen. I’m twenty-nine and she just turned eighteen.

That’s the real rub. The thing that keeps me up at night.

Back when Ash, Bash, Bent, Noodles, and I tore up the town, we partied all night and fucked nameless groupies through dawn. Alcohol flowed as freely as the nonstop smorgasbord of willing female flesh. We drank. We fucked. We had a good time.

Most of the chicks we brought backstage were young. As long as they were legal, who cared?

How many eighteen-year-olds did Bash bang when he was twenty-eight? How many did I sleep with? The thing is, we lost count. We lost count because it didn’t matter.

Doesn’t mean shit, asshole.

The pain behind my eyes pinches. Sharp and stabbing, it settles into a low throb, like someone pounding a drum inside my skull. That’s not something I can blame on Bash. Our drummer is not home.

Nobody is home. No one except Angel.

Bash and Holly are taking a bit of time for themselves. The rest of the guys are out with their girls, sneaking in a couples’ retreat while we’re on hiatus.

Even Forest is ensconced within his private abode with his wife, Sara, and his companion, Paul. Those three have an interesting dynamic. That’s a massive understatement, but it’s nothing compared to the depravity of a twenty-nine-year-old rock star stalking an
eighteen-year-old girl.
She’s a full-blown obsession.
Hard to believe it’s been a year.

A year ago, Bash didn’t know he had a daughter. His high school flame, Valerie, kept Angel a secret, denying both him and Angel the knowledge of the other’s existence. Only when it became clear Valerie would lose her battle with stage four breast cancer, before her daughter would become a legal adult, did Valerie tell Angel who her father is.

My heart aches for Angel. She grew up believing her father was a deadbeat dad who skipped out on her mother before Angel was born. Instead, Valerie disappeared from Bash’s life when Angel Fire started taking off. She did it for Bash, letting him pursue his dream, instead of tying him down with an unwanted pregnancy and a kid who’d slow him down.

I’ve searched all of *Insanity*, but there’s no sign of Angel. I head outside and put on my sunglasses to block out the bright rays of the California sun. High noon, it stands directly overhead, baking the summer air until it shimmers. Not a cloud to be seen, deep blue caps the sky. It arches overhead, diving down toward the horizon where it fades out in a band of mist and merges with the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean.

It’s a calm day. No storms lurk out to sea. No wind kicks spray off the waves booming along the rocky shoreline. Even the water of *Insanity*’s massive pool, with the infinity-edge cantilevered over the cliff, is mirror-smooth.

I thought maybe she would be outside, enjoying the sun, but she’s not here.

Bash would rip my balls off and shove them down my throat if he knew half of the things going through my head when it comes to his daughter.

With no sign of Angel, my shoulders slump. It gives me a moment to think.

Why risk everything when life is otherwise great?

Angel Fire is on top of the charts with no sign of slowing. The guys are more like brothers than friends. We live together, eat together, tour together, and with the exception of me, the last bachelor standing, they’re all getting a start on creating the next generation with their wives. That was the big news last Christmas. The entire chick brigade is preggers.

Our band of brothers is definitely moving on, adding children into the mix. Ash and Skye already have little Zach. Now they’re adding a second to the mix. Bash and Holly, Bent and Piper, Noodles and Mitzy aren’t far behind. They’ll all be welcoming new additions to the family by fall. Even Forest is expecting, only he’s going to have twins. We’re going to have to build on a daycare to keep all the kids contained.

I scan the grounds and scratch my head. The gondola leading down to the beach is not at
its station. That means someone took it down to the beach. It could be Forest, Sara, and Paul, but I’m hoping it’s not. Knowing I should turn around, I march over and call the gondola back up the steep slope.

Walk away.

I lost that battle over a year ago.

The moment I laid eyes on Angel, the earth shifted beneath my feet. I let the guys think I was still out chasing tail, but the reality is far different. I haven’t slept with another woman since Bash brought his daughter home. Even then, I knew she was the one, even if the attraction I felt for her was wrong.

The gondola finishes its climb up the steep slope, and I step on board. With one last chance to turn around and stop this foolishness, I press the button that will take me down to the rocky beach.

I’m so goddamn fucked.

She’s too young.

That warning voice in my head won’t shut the fuck up. I remind it that I’m no saint. I’ve dipped my dick in more eighteen-year-olds than I can remember. If it was okay then, why is this any different?

Because she’s not yours.

Fuck off.

I rap my knuckles on the glass, irritated with myself. The fallout from this epic disaster will be catastrophic, yet it’s not enough to make me turn away. Not when the thought of living another day without Angel makes me sick in the stomach.

Why should I be denied my One when the rest of the guys found theirs?

I didn’t get in their way. I may have stepped in Ash’s way with Skye, but what he did, getting married after three days, was crazy insane and needed an intervention.

A crackle of energy shoots through me as the gondola slows. The high-voltage snap of alternating current makes me jump. I’ve heard the guys speak about it—it being that crazy connection between them and their wives.

It’s funny to think that in the year since Angel came to live at Insanity, that I’ve never felt her touch. We’ve sat next to each other, swam in the pool together. We’ve cooked meals side-by-side, but I’ve never felt her touch. No doubt it’ll feel like a bolt of lightning.

I do a double take when I see her and can’t help but blink. It’s not possible, but she’s even more stunning than I remember.

When she turned eighteen, I high-tailed it out of Insanity on one of my private jaunts. No
way could I handle that temptation.

Breath-stealing, soul-searing, heart-pounding, jaw-dropping gorgeous, her hazel-green eyes widen as she stares at me. Her full, kissable lips press together, and the tip of her tongue darts out to wet them.

Her eager eyes betray her interest, but she quickly schools her features. Despite my current state of frustrated arousal, I’ve spent the majority of this last year feigning disinterest toward Bash’s daughter.

The few times she tested the waters, flirting with me, I shut her down with a scowl. Always, I stalked off.

I walked away.

But not today.

Today, I walk toward her instead of away.

Angel tugs at the hem of her denim cutoff shorts. They’re indecently short, showing off her cheeky ass and gape in the front. Like if I can catch the right angle, I’ll be able to see beneath the frustrating fabric.

I swear she does it to see how I’ll react. Bash hates those shorts. Says they’re indecent. And even though I agree, I think he’s out of line, considering the chicks he used to bang wore far more revealing clothing.

Angel holds my stare and bites her lower lip. Her pretty eyes dance with desire and spark with lust. They always have, from the first time our gazes slammed into each other. And just like that first time, I’m lost inside their pleading depths.

She begs me to give in. I never do.

Always, I shut her down. I feign disinterest and push her away.

She cant her head sideways as if trying to decide if she should try again. Wondering if I will again dismiss her. I see it all in the turbulence of her eyes as she demands answers to her unspoken question.

I draw back beneath the weight of that gaze. There is no going back if I move forward.

And the repercussions?

It’s going to be a game-changer.

With difficulty, I tear my gaze from hers. In my mind’s eye, I can’t help but imagine what her breathy moans will sound like when her hot body wraps around mine. Or how her hands will feel as they sear my flesh.

Will she be wild and free, shameless in her quest for pleasure? Or will she be demure and
shy?
And then it hits.
I don’t even know if she’s a virgin.

Just like that, my passion is doused by the coldest water. That would change everything, but how do I find the answer to that burning question?

As this runs through my mind, she strolls toward me. So damn sexy with her long, toned legs, hips a man can grab hold of, a narrow waist that pinches in before her nubile tits flare out again. I ache to torture and tease those tits.

I step out of the gondola as she steps onto the platform.

“I knew you’d come.” She pulls a lock of hair over her shoulder and slowly twines the strand around her finger.

Her lashes flutter as she boldly takes me in. Her gaze is determined, taking me in from head to foot, down my broad chest, hard abs, and to my groin, where her attention lingers without shame. She peeks back up at me, biting her lower lip as her green gaze heats.

“W-why is that?” I clear my throat, embarrassed by the way my voice catches.

“Because, we’re finally alone.” She approaches and places the pad of her finger in the middle of my chest. “Because we can finally be alone.”

It’s the first time we touch, and an electric jolt shoots through my body. The air crackles between us as that energy surges along my nerves, firing up all my senses.

Slowly, she drags her finger downward. The entire time, she holds my gaze. Heat shoots through me, licks along my nerves, and burrows deep.

All that electricity arrows south, encouraging blood to rush and fill my cock. Her gaze pulls apart from mine and dips back down where there’s no way to hide what she’ll find. Her finger stops at the waistband of my shorts, where it twists in a lazy circle.

“You feel it, don’t you?” Her head snaps up, and our gazes once again lock together.

“Feel what?”

She nibbles at her lower lip, sucking it indecently into her mouth. I swear she was born to be a seductress, and damn if I don’t spin in her web.

“Us.”

It’s one word. One tiny word and it rocks my world.

Her finger stops drawing on my belly and moves down on a determined path. Before she reaches the tip of my cock, I grab her wrist. It’s the first time I’ve touched her, and I’m
not prepared for the flood of sensation washing over me.

This is such a bad idea.
TWO
There's only one word to describe Spike.

Dangerous.

Wanted by millions, he's sex on a stick with that bad boy vibe nailed down to a T, and boy, do I want him to nail me.

He's been an obsession of mine forever. His sculpted face, those mysterious piercings, the tattoos covering his arms, he's deadly gorgeous and has been charming women into his bed probably from the day his voice started to deepen, and the very first hair grew on his chin, or—down there.

My gaze slips to his shorts and lingers. It's more than simple charisma, more than his powerfully honed body; his sex appeal comes from his eyes. The way one look can devastate as it cuts deep, laying me bare before him.

When I think of sex, I think of Spike. He's potent, virile, masculinity wrapped in a devastatingly handsome package.

There's only one problem. He won't pay attention to me. Any time I think there might be something between us, he shoves me aside.

But I don't do that now.

He came down here, looking for me.

He's either going to admit his attraction is real, and not all in my head, or he needs to put me out of my misery. I can't keep living like this.

"Don't." His deep growl threatens.

I can't help but pull back. Only he doesn't release me. If anything, Spike's grip tightens as he drags in an unsteady breath. I watch with avid fascination as he struggles to pull himself together and regain control.

Now, why would he need to do that?
What a heady sensation seeing all that heat and virility calmed by the force of his will. That’s how I see him. It’s how I’ve always seen him. From the very first day he stood by my dad’s side, hearing the news my mother hoped she’d never have to share, Spike captivated me.

He still captivates me.

He’s older, but I’ve always been attracted to older men. First, the teachers at my school drew my eye, then my coaches, and finally, men on TV. I never watched the tweezy shows growing up with pubescent boys pretending to be men.

When I was twelve, I lusted over the stars who were in their twenties, not their teens. As a teenager, my preferences continued toward men in their prime, fully developed, virile, confident men, not uncertain boys navigating the pitfalls of becoming men.

My attraction to Spike isn’t because he’s older, more mature, and more experienced than me. It’s in his bad-boy vibe, searing gaze, and no-fucks-given attitude. It’s in the way he prowls instead of walks.

A whole-body shudder overtakes me. Sexy and good looking, he doesn’t take his eyes off me. All hard angles and even harder muscles, he’s bigger than me, stronger than me, incredibly, overwhelmingly, and unapologetically sure of himself. He takes up space like he owns it, whereas I feel apologetic for existing. That’s what draws me to him the most. His confidence and assurance that he’ll take whatever it is he wants.

I’m not like that, but damn if I don’t find it sexy as hell in a man.

I can’t believe I’m standing here, alone, with him for the very first time. Every time he looks at me, the banked fire in his eyes turns to an effusive blaze. It flows out from him and slams right into me with incredible force, stealing my breath and making me want filthy things.

I am not imagining it. I feel his hunger.

My insides clench and my breath catches. My skin sears beneath the heat of his gaze. My nerve endings sizzle as that gaze sweeps across my body. It’s a powerful force, sinking into me until my soul burns for him.

How can he not feel the same thing?

Isn’t it odd how we’ve never been alone? I moved in nearly a year ago, yet we’ve never been in the same room together without someone else also present.

How can that be?

How many nights have I dreamed of putting my hands on him?

Now that I have, the desire to run my hands up and down his body overwhelms me. I crave him with a crazy desperation and hold back a moan with the greatest difficulty as I...
imagine what it will feel like when he kisses me.
When he slips inside of me.
When he joins our bodies and rocks into me with a cadence set to meet only one goal.
That familiar, and agonizing, ache pulses between my legs. My breasts tingle and are heavier than moments before. My entire body reacts to his presence, instinctually preparing for the inevitable union of our flesh.
I’ve obsessed before, but never with this gnawing ache.
I’m not making this up, right? It’s not a silly fantasy? I lick my lips and wonder how a man like him kisses.
What will those piercings feel like on my mouth and lower down, between my legs? I can’t help it. I ache in the worst possible way.
He has to feel this weird energy buzzing in the air, crackling in the space between us, infusing the air we breathe with the promise for so very much more.
Or am I making it all up? Again?
How many times have I lusted over him, only to convince myself later that those feelings were achingly one-sided? I always managed to convince myself he felt the same longing, but day after day, week after week, and month after month, Spike avoided me.
To say this past year has been torture is an understatement. Adding the sexy, brooding Spike into the mix only complicated things.
This crazy, intense attraction I’ve been dealing with cannot be one-sided. I know this for a fact now. The proof is right there between us.
He’s hard for me, and all I did was touch his chest. With his thin shorts, there’s no hiding what’s beneath them. And holy hell, he’s packing. Not that I’m an expert in dick sizes. I’m curious by nature, and hello, there is the internet. I’ve done my searches like any other living, breathing girl on the planet.
“Don’t what?” I drag my gaze upward, moving over washboard abs, a broad chest, powerful shoulders, to the ticking muscles of his jaw.
“Don’t touch me.”
“Why not?”
He releases my wrist and takes two steps back. Spike spins around, fingers stabbing into his spiky black hair. I love the way his hair glistens in the sunlight—raven dark and mysterious, like the rest of him.
“Because this is wrong.” Spike takes a step, moving away from me.
It takes a moment for what he says to settle in. Then it hits me like a punch in the gut. My confidence soars.

“You feel it, don’t you?” I take a step toward him. “You’re attracted to me.”

“I’m not.”

“But you’re…” Not comfortable saying it out loud, there’s no mistaking his current, aroused state.

“Hard? Aroused?” He glares at me. “Is that what you want to say?” He glances down at his dick, and my gaze follows. His eyes cut to me. “I’m a guy. I get hard when the wind blows. Doesn’t mean shit.”

My heart trips on a beat, and I waiver on my feet. Cutting and harsh, I don’t understand his anger.

“You’re being mean.”

“You think this is mean?”

“You came down here, looking for me, getting…” I wave toward his groin.

“You can’t say it, can you?” He cocks his head to the side.

“I can.”

“Then say it.” He stares at me, demanding an answer.

This is usually when I back down. Intimidated doesn’t begin to describe how he makes me feel, but I’m also very aware that this is the first time, the only time, that we’ve ever been alone. If I don’t tell him now—if I don’t tell him what I want, then when will I?

“Fine.” I ball my hands into fists. “It’s me.”

“What’s you?” His eyes pinch. The bastard is having fun with me.

“I made you…”

“Made me what?”

It takes a moment. I swallow twice before pressing my lips together. Then I squeeze my fists and look him square in the eye. “I make you hard, and you came down here to finally...”

“Finally, what?”

“To take me.”

“You sure about that? Is that what you want? For me to take you?”

The bastard intentionally pushes me, like this is some game to him. What he doesn’t
understand is that I’m not backing down. This may be the only chance I have.

“Pretty damn sure.”

“And why is that?”

“Because, you want to fuck me.” The words are soft, so soft I’m not even sure if I said them.

Spike’s entire body twitches.

His eyes pinch, and an agonized expression ghosts across his face. He takes another step, practically running away from me. He runs his fingers down his face and ends by cupping his jaw. The piercing in his lower lip glints in the light.

I love the edginess of his metal and wonder what it means to him. Spike doesn’t have just the one piercing on his lower lip. There are multiple pieces of metal decorating his face. Three metal rings on his lips. A row of studs and tiny rings embedded in the corner of each brow. There are metal studs along his temple and his ears are filled with studs and rings, which flash every time he moves.

I want to ask him what they all mean, but it feels like too intimate of a question. Why would he pierce his face? Is it an act of rebellion? Something he did when he was a teen? Or is there more to it than that? And let’s face it, I want to know if there’s anything else he’s got pierced. My internet research was varied and thorough.

“What makes you think I want to fuck you?” He’s so damn casual talking about sex that it’s sexy as shit.

“Other than your raging hard-on?”

Spike arches a brow. He can’t be serious. In for a penny, in for a pound, there’s no backing down now.

“Yeah, other than my raging hard-on, why do you think I want to fuck you? You’re just a kid.”

“Because that’s what I want. You want me, and I want you. You want to see where this thing between us can go.”

“There is no us.”

“And why not?” Indignation fills my voice as I prop my fists on my hips.

“Why not, what?”

“Why isn’t there an us?”

“Because.”

“Because, why?”
“Do I need to state all the reasons it’s a bad idea?”

“Tell me one reason we can’t be together, and don’t you dare tell me you don’t feel what I feel.”

“I have no idea what you feel, so I’m pretty confident I don’t.” Harsher than it should be, his words cut deep.

“Bullshit.” I roll my eyes and give a shake of my head. “Why did you come down here if not because you were looking for me?”

“Maybe I wanted to walk on the beach?”

“You never come down here.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’ve never seen you down here.”

“That’s because I don’t come when you’re here.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“Why?” Pleased with myself, I rock back on my heels.

“Because you’re dangerous.” A haunted expression fills his face. He spins around, giving me his back again. “Because fucking you is a really bad idea.”
THREE
The sudden heat that flashes in Spike’s gaze makes me take a step back.

Holy hellfire, that’s hot.

“I’m not dangerous. You’re dangerous.” My voice drops to a whisper as it hits me. We’re talking about us; about this crazy, insane, and ridiculous attraction. More importantly, he admits he feels it too.

It’s not just me.

That makes me want to jump and shout it to the world. Spike wants me. I didn’t dream that up.

Spike scrubs at his face again. “That’s damn straight, and you’ll do well to remember it.”

“What, that you’re dangerous?”

“You have no idea what I want to do to you.”

“Well, I have a pretty good idea you want to fuck me.” I play with my hair, twirling my long, spiral curls on my finger. “It’s what I want, and we’re consenting adults. Why can’t we...”

“Be careful.” He prowls toward me.

“Why?”

“Because you’re barely legal, and you have no idea what I want.”

“No idea about what? What kind of lover you are? That is what we’re talking about, isn’t it?” I cross my arms and smirk when it draws his eyes to my cleavage.

“We’re not talking about making love. I don’t make love. I’m not your lover. Get that foolish thought out of your head. I fuck.” I gulp as he closes the distance. “I take what I want, when I want, how I want, and then I leave. If you’re looking for love and fairy tales, you’re barking up the wrong damn tree. There’s nothing gentle about me. Nothing
soft. Nothing more than gratuitous release. If you’re looking for a lover, a boyfriend, move on. That’s not what I am.” He uses his words like weapons. As if that’s going to steer me away from what I want.

“At least you admit you want me.”

“I admit nothing.”

“And what if that’s what I want?” Do I want the fairy tale? Yes. But when it comes to Spike, I’ll take whatever I can get. “What if all I want is a rough fuck from you every now and then? Did you ever think about that?”

He stills. Although, I swear his entire body—vibrates. It’s like he struggles to hold himself back. Maybe it’s not smart to bait him?

“It was wrong to come down here. I should leave.” But he makes no move to return to the gondola. Instead, Spike’s stare heats up as he takes me in.

Slow, purposeful, his gaze slides from my face where it dips to my chest. There it lingers for what feels like forever. My attention locks to the heat flaring in his eyes, the way the muscles of his shoulders bunch, and the way his fingers curl and flex. He’s riveted by me—or my breasts. Either way, there’s no denying his interest.

Most men try to play it off when they check out a chick’s tits. Their eyes dip, grab an eyeful, slide away, move back for a second run, then slowly return to a girl’s face looking like guilty pigs.

I get checked out a lot, and I’m used to it, but Spike doesn’t hide his interest. His hand drifts to his groin, then jerks away like he’s been stung. The muscles of his jaw tic, but he doesn’t stop his perusal of my assets.

“The things I want to do to you are positively sinful, practically illegal.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” His heated gaze slowly lifts.

“Say it.”

“And what is it you want me to say?”

“That you can’t stop thinking about me. That you obsess over me the same way I obsess over you. That there’s a reason you’ve never let yourself be in a room alone with me. That you actively avoid me because you want me as much as you do.”

“Is that really what you want me to say?” He smirks. “Those are things love-struck boys say, and if you hadn’t noticed, I’m no boy.”

“I want you to tell me why you came down here. Were you looking for me?” My fingers curl with frustration.
“Never said I was looking for you.” The corner of his mouth ticks up in a smirk.

“Really?” He’s not getting away with that. “Look me in the eye and tell me that you didn’t come down here looking for me.” I stamp my foot and glare at him.

“And what would that prove?”

“You’re infuriating.”

“And you’re a child.” He gives a shake of his head and glances toward the gondola.

“I’m a legal adult. Not a child. There’s no reason we can’t fuck. Is that why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why you avoided me?”

He runs his fingers through his hair again.

“Among several others reasons; the most damning being that your father is one of my closest friends.”

I take a step back, covering the fluttering in my belly with my hand. “My dad has nothing to do with us.”

“He has everything to do with us. Especially when I’m fucking his daughter. He’s the number one reason why there can never be an us.”

My pussy clenches with that comment. I very much want Spike to fuck me. It’ll be as raw and brutal as he says it will be. That doesn’t scare me away. If anything, I crave him more. The harder, darker, more depraved, the better. I did a lot of research online. There are many things I can’t wait to try.

“And if he wasn’t in the picture?”

“He’s most definitely is in the picture, babe.”

“But if he wasn’t?”

“What is it you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me what I feel isn’t…”

“Isn’t, what?”

“That it isn’t wrong. That you feel it too. That there’s no reason there can’t be an us.”

“There are four—no, five, very big reasons there can never be an us.”

“What does that mean?”

He counts off on his fingers. “Your father. Then there’s Ash, Bent, Noodles, and let’s not
forget Forest. Each of them would feed me my balls if I touched you. The five of them together would pulverize my ass for even thinking about sliding inside of you."

Sliding inside of me?
I may orgasm from his words alone.
Yes, please. I want that.

Tingles of sensation lick through me, shooting along my nerves, arrowing down to my sex where they pulse and throb and burn.

"But you do think about touching me?" I’m not giving up. I may never have another moment alone with Spike. "You want me."

"I do." He admits his desire openly, but the way he says it makes it feel like it means nothing to him. "That should scare you."

"Scare me? How many times do I have to tell you that’s exactly what I want?"

"You should fear me."

"Why?"

"Because when I get a taste of you, I’m going to take what I want. When I’m inside of you, fucking you, you’ll come violently on my cock. You’ll love it, and it’ll ruin you forever."

"So?"

"I don’t do relationships. I’m not boyfriend material."

"So?"

"You deserve a man who can love you."

"Show me. Touch me." I spread open my arms. "Kiss me." I take a step forward. "Fuck me. Ruin me for all others. You want me? I’m begging for you to take me." Please put me out of my misery.

"Don’t."

"Don’t, what?"

"Don’t beg."

"I’ll get on my knees if I have to."

He takes a step back.

I stamp my foot, frustrated with the way this conversation keeps moving in a circle.

"I’m not some kid at your school that you go steady with. I’m almost thirty. Think about
“That for a minute.”

“You read that byline in a book? Fancy slogan, but it’s a pretty fucking huge number.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me.”


“Watch that mouth, young lady, or someone will wash it out with soap.”

“Don’t young lady me. You’ve slept with girls my age before. All of you have.”

“We were younger then.” His scowl deepens.

He’s lying. He knows it. I know it. And he knows I know it. Eighteen isn’t the issue.

“Okay, answer this one question.” Not that I’m happy asking about what he’s done with his groupies, but it is pertinent to this conversation. “In the past year, have you slept with any girls who are my age?”

“That’s not a fair question.”

“Why not?”

“Because I haven’t slept with anyone in the past year.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

I definitely heard him, but I don’t understand.

“Why?”

“Because…” Spike rushes me. One moment he stands over there. The next, he towers over me. He fists my hair and yanks my head back, forcing me to look at him. “All I want is you.”

“Me?” My heart bangs away inside my chest, terrified and excited by what he says.

“You want me to fuck you? Shove my cock in that pert little mouth? Maybe slip it in your tight pussy, ride you rough, and take what I want? Is that what you want? You want me to walk away, like fucking you means nothing to me?”

“Spike…”

“What?”

“You’re scaring me.” Honestly, I don’t know if we’re talking, arguing, or agreeing with
He releases my hair and wraps me in his arms.

My body stills at the press of his lips on the crown of my head. His body heat sinks into me; a calming presence overlying terrible passion.

My entire body shivers as his hands mold around the curve of my hips. His thumb drops down, accidentally or on purpose. All I know is he’s technically, almost, touching my ass.

Instead of relaxing in his arms, tension mounts in my body. It comes from him, knotting my shoulders and making every passing second seem like an eternity.

I like this. I love his dark, sultry scent. I could stand like this forever. It’s just a hug, but it feels like the beginning of something amazing.

Raw, pained, and hoarse, he whispers, “You terrify me.” He tugs me tight and holds me fast to his hard, muscular, one hundred percent virile male body. “But only because once I have you, I’ll never want to let you go.”

My heart heads into a frantic sprint, banging around inside my ribcage like a crazed beast.

“What if that’s what I want, too?”
FOUR
I'M FUCKED. Totally, absolutely, one hundred percent fucked. Once the guys get wind of this, they'll rip me a new asshole. Bash will beat my head in. He’s new to the dad gig, but he’s got one thing down pat.

Nobody touches his daughter.

Nobody.


Our little stare-off lasts a few seconds. Her lips part and the faintest pink rises on her neck and colors her cheeks. She blinks. It’s slow, sensual, and erotic as fuck, then her gaze cuts down and to the side, demure, submissive, perfect for me.

Shit, I know what that means.

Angel’s totally out of her league, but she’s willing to stand her ground. I can’t deny it. She chooses me, willingly, even if the thought of it scares her.

All her bluster is just that. She desperately wants to meet me on equal ground, but it doesn’t change one important thing. When it comes to sex, I hold the advantage, but as far as relationships go, I’m unprepared.

I’ve never dated. Angel Fire took off my last year in high school. I barely graduated, let alone messed around with dating girls. I was all about fucking them, hungry and voracious to make my mark on the world and strut my stuff. I had sex with as many chicks as I could, as fast as I could; a cocksure asshole with shit to prove.

In this, Angel terrifies me.

I’m not prepared for the next step, and that has nothing to do with sex. It’s difficult to swallow past the lump in my throat, but I manage. And in that time, I make a promise.

If I’m going to do this, and for whatever reason unknown to me I want a relationship with...
this amazing woman, it’s going to be done right.

“Wel’re going to have to be careful.”

Shit, did that really come out of my mouth?

I tense as she shifts in my arms. Her palms rest on my chest and her fingers spread apart. I like her hands on me. I like it a lot.

Angel’s lashes flutter. She blinks and her eyebrows tug inward. I love the tiny grooves forming across her forehead. She’s thinking. Her green eyes practically glow as the realization sinks in. Happy eyes. Joyous eyes. They lick along my body, making my body shudder and come alive.

“You smell even better up close.” She buries her nose in my shirt and makes a show of sniffing me. “Dark, masculine, yummy.”

“Yummy?” A laugh escapes me. “Is that what’s going through your head? How I smell?”

“You smell really good.”

“You smell sweet and light, like strawberries and lilacs.” And all kinds of bad news.

I cup the back of her head and pull her to me until her head rests on my chest.

Angel’s a good deal shorter than me. I’ll have to stoop to kiss her or lift her until her legs wrap around my hips. Damn, the images going through my mind are positively sinful. I can’t wait to peel her out of those cheeky shorts and wrap her legs around my hips. I’m strong enough, and skilled enough, to make that work.

I mentally mark it on the list of all the ways I want to fuck my girl. It’s growing by the second.

Hard and aroused, it takes all my concentration to keep from fucking her right here, right now.

I’m not massively built like Forest and his Guardians, but I’m taller than most, lanky. Some would say wiry. Corded muscles twine up my arms. I’ve got a chest most guys would die for, a six-pack that drives the women wild, and a cock that...

Holy shit, what is Angel going to think when she sees that?

I don’t advertise all my piercings. That one is going to be interesting. It’s fun watching the shock on a girl’s face when she sees it. Even more fun when she finds out what it can do for her.

Angel looks up at me as her fingers explore the dips and valleys of the muscles on my chest. Christ, if her eyes don’t make my skin heat and shiver. Up close, there’s more green in them than tawny brown. Mesmerizing, I want to fall into their depths. Feathered with thick lashes, she blinks with tender innocence, reminding me she just turned
A week ago, I wouldn’t have blinked at banging an eighteen-year-old.
I take her hand in mine and lift it to my lips. “We should probably talk first.”

“About what?” Her pupils dilate, emphasizing the green rim of her incredibly beautiful eyes.

“Us.”

“I see you finally admit there is an us.” She peeks up at me through the thick fringe of her lashes. Shit, that’s fucking sexy.

“Don’t push your luck.” I can’t help but snicker.

She totally has me wrapped around her finger and doesn’t understand how much power she holds.

“Let’s start with your dad.”

“Ugh.” She completes a dramatic eye roll with a pretty little snort at the end. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

“We need to.”

“What’s there to say? I can see whomever I want, and sleep with whomever I want. He’s not the boss of me.”

“This kind of thing, it can break a band.” Impossible to believe I’m actually considering doing this behind the guys’ backs. Hell, there’s no considering. I pushed right past that obstacle. This is happening.

“So, we don’t tell him.” She says it like it’s going to be a walk in the park.

“We live in the same house. You think nobody is going to notice we’re fucking?”

“I’m not an idiot. I can keep my hands to myself.”

“And how about the way you look at me? With those mushy eyes.”

“Mushy?”

“Googly eyes.”

“I don’t have googly eyes. Jeez, you think I can’t keep this a secret? And as for googly eyes, yours are positively sinful. They smolder.”

“Smolder?”
"When you look at me. I can feel the heat from across the room. You think no one’s going to notice when you look at me with your fuck-me eyes?"

"Fuck-me eyes?"

"Yeah, devastatingly handsome, with no regard for what anyone thinks. You look at me differently than any of the others."

"I hope so." I can’t help but laugh. "I don’t want to fuck any of the guys."

"I wasn’t talking about them. I was talking about Skye and Holly and Piper and Mitzy and…"

"First off, they belong to my buddies. I don’t take what’s not mine. Second, that’s gross. Third, the chick brigade is part of my family. They’re like little sisters to me."

"Exactly, when you look at me, it’s different. Can you keep us a secret?" She throws my words back at me, trying her hardest to prove she’s more experienced than she is.

"I asked first."

She bites her lower lip and looks up at me through her thick lashes. So fucking gorgeous. My cock takes notice, growing long and hard again. This is such a bad idea.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If you ever actually get around to fucking me. It’s been a really loooong year waiting for you."

"Tell me about it." I tug at the hoop piercing my lower lip. "Talk about blue balls."

Everything about this is a bad idea, but here I am. Holding Bash’s daughter in my arms and talking about sex. It almost violates my moral principles, if I had any. Noodles says I’m a hedonist, driven to seek pleasure above all else. Not sure that I disagree with him.

Reality is setting in, slowly at first, then rushing full speed ahead.

Bash isn’t going to kill me. He’s going to gut me, dismember me, and nobody will know where my body’s buried.

The thing about Bash is, he and I, along with the rest of the guys, share a history. A history filled with backstage, post-concert orgies. Contests based around fucking.

There was a time when we lived the high life, indulging in everything and anything under the sun. Nothing was off-limits. And Bash knows I have very few limits.

For the most part, we steered clear of the drugs, but booze and sex were free-for-alls. He
knows exactly what I’ll be doing with his daughter. He’s watched me do it to hundreds of girls throughout the years. He also knows I love living on the edge. My tastes run dark, and he knows about the piercing in my dick.

Shit.

“We need to talk.” I release her, but she’s not ready to go. Angel loops her hands around my neck and lifts on tiptoe.

“I don’t want to talk.” Her body sways into mine, brushing right against my hard, rigid length. With effort, I drag my eyes away only to choke when she rocks her pelvis against me. “I want you to kiss me.” There she goes, nibbling on her lower lip. “Then, I want you to fuck me.”

“Stop that.” My body jerks, and I almost lose it like a thirteen-year-old virgin. This woman does things to me. I’m too eager. Too aroused. My control slips when I’m with her. That can’t happen.

“Stop, what?” Her impish expression stirs something carnal within me.

“You know what.” My cock twitches with the stimulation.

“This?” Her pelvis rocks forward, trapping my beleaguered cock between us.

I bite my lower lip and worry a metal stud with my teeth.

“So…” She leans into me, shamelessly pushing herself against my cock. “When are we gonna…”

“Gonna, what?”

“You know…” Her gaze flicks down between us. “Do the deed.”

She’s curious, but shy.

A groupie would have her hands on my dick already. Hell, I’d be banging her mouth and knocking around her tonsils by now. Angel hasn’t even tried to touch me. Not that I’ll let her make the first move.

If I’m going to put everything on the line, then I’m going to do things right. Take things slow, which is totally not my speed. I’m obsessive when it comes to sex. Full speed ahead. Leave your inhibitions at the door. I move fast.

But I sense that’s going to be too fast for Angel. More importantly, I’m not interested in a wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am kind of thing with Angel. Two reasons come to mind. First, we live in the same house. A fuck-and-done scenario will crash and burn. Second, and far more importantly, we live in the same house, and someday I hope we live together.

That’s a major first for me. With Angel, I see a promise for more, the potential for a forever. If we can somehow survive the fallout, I see having what the guys have. It’s
something I’ve never known. For the first time ever, I see a forever stretching out before me with Angel by my side.

The only question is whether I risk destroying the band with a relationship that, from the start, is full of dangerous pitfalls and perilous speed bumps.

In an act of supreme self-control, I dig through the potent perfume that is Angel’s signature scent. I push past the fog of male arousal clouding my judgment, and somewhere in there, I find my brain.

It’s no secret I’m a fan of women. Unlike Bash with his selective taste in redheads, I love all women. From their graceful legs to their round asses, to the swell of their tits and their luscious, pouty lips; I love skinny, curvy, short, and tall. Blondes, brunettes, and those with midnight-black hair. I love them all. The more eager and adventurous, the more I pursue. Not that I ever had to work for it.

From the moment my voice deepened, the girls couldn’t stay away. From hand jobs at thirteen, to blow jobs at fourteen. I lost my virginity at fifteen, old by my standards, and never looked back.

“If you can’t say it, we can’t do it. What is it you want?” I hold her attention with my sternest expression. Takes a goddamn force of will not to crack, but I persevere and learn something about Angel.

“I want you to kiss me.”

“Just a kiss?”

“Well, a kiss to start.” Her fingers twist together, and she nibbles on her lower lip.

As even more blood rushes to my dick, a lump forms in my gut as my brain kicks in. She’s nervous. More nervous than she should be.

“How many boys have you slept with?”

“How many girls have you slept with?”

“I’ve slept with a lot of women, not girls. Now answer my question.”

If she’s a virgin, I’m out of here. That carries a shit ton of responsibility, and it’s not for me. My body knows only one speed, and that’s not slow and gentle.

“Why?”

“It’s a simple question. How many boys have you slept with?”

“Is this the sex talk? The I’m clean. You’re clean. We’re all clean kind of thing? If you must know, I’m on the pill. And nobody called me back to tell me I had anything. How about you? Are you clean?”
“Pristine. I never go without protection, but answer my question.”

“What question?”

“How many boys have you fucked?”

“I’ve slept with three boys.” The hitch in her voice draws my attention.

“Slept with, or fucked?”

“Well, one of them couldn’t get it up. The other couldn’t keep it up.”

“You’re a virgin?” I place distance between us.

“God, no. Billy got it up and kept it up. It was just…”

“Just, what?”

She shrugs. “Underwhelming?”

Underwhelming?

“Are you telling me you’ve never had an orgasm?”

“I’ve had a…” She pulls back. “What’s with all the questions?”

“It’s what adults do when they’re going to fuck. Maybe you’re not ready?”

“Oh no, you don’t.” She reaches between us and grabs my dick. “I definitely want you to fuck me.”

So much for making the first move, and now that her hand’s on my dick, all coherent thought leaves me.

“Happy to oblige, but…”

“But, what?”

“We do it my way.”

Somewhere in the fog of arousal, I find a blissful moment of clarity and make a decision. I’m not going to fuck Angel, at least not today. Her sexual education is sub-par at best.

Three boys. Not one orgasm?

Hell to the no, as far as that goes. By the time I’m done with her, Angel will be coming on my fingers, my face, and finally my cock, but I’m going to take my time. I’m going to make this last, and I’m going to fucking blow her mind.

“Why do I get the impression your way means no fucking?”

“You’re too eager to slide into home plate. Trust me, sweetie, the journey is definitely where the fun is. Don’t be so quick to reach the finish line.”
“So, no sex?” Her brows knit together in confusion.

“Oh, baby, we’re going to have lots and lots of sex.”

“I don’t get it.”

“And you won’t, unless you promise to let me take the lead.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Only that we’re going to have a lot of fun, but we move at my pace.” And for the first time in my life, that means taking things slow.

It’s official.

I’ve totally gone out of my mind.
MOVE AT HIS PACE? What does that even mean? As far as I know, Spike’s pace is lightning fast, but instead of stripping us out of our clothes, he takes my hand.

My hand.

Not even a kiss?

“What are you doing?” I glance down at the way our hands fit seamlessly together. His are calloused from playing the guitar; his fingers long, strong, and supremely talented. If those fingers are as good at playing a woman’s body as they are a guitar, I’m in luck.

“What just went through that head of yours?”

I can’t help but bite my lower lip. It makes the throbbing between my legs more tolerable.

“Why?”

“Because, I want to know.”

“Can’t let you know all my secrets.”

“Honey, you’re about ready to keep zero secrets from me. You can either tell me, or...” He doesn’t finish whatever it is and just arches an imperious brow and patiently waits for me to fill in the gap.

“I was thinking about how our hands fit so well together.”

“I’m sure that’s not all that’s going to fit well together.” He huffs out a laugh and shakes his head. His black hair swishes in front of his eyes and he gives a practiced flip of his head. Those dark eyes of his land back on me, where they smolder and spark with lust.

“That’s what I was thinking about.” I twist around, taking a look at the ocean. “We could stay down here, fool around a little, fuck...”

He pulls to a stop and faces me. Taking my other hand in his, he stoops down until we’re
eye to eye. That’s another thing I love about Spike. I love how he’s so much taller than me. It makes me feel small and feminine. The perfect counterpart to his tall, dominating frame.

“Here’s the first rule.”

“Rule?”

“Yes, rule number one.”

“Why are there rules?”

“Because, I’m going to find it very difficult saying no to you.”

“Isn’t that what the chick says? The guy wants sex and she says no?”

“Are you saying no?”

“Well no. I mean, yes. I’m definitely saying yes, just don’t understand why we have to have rules.”

“Because, I have very little control when it comes to you.”

“Honestly, that doesn’t sound like a problem to me.” I tug on my hands, ready to show him exactly how ready I am, but his grip tightens and he refuses to release my hands.

“Oh, no you don’t.”

“Don’t, what?” There’s no way he can know what I was about to do.

“No way are you peeling that top off your hot, little body.”

“I wasn’t...”

“You know you were, and temptation like that will most likely work. Like I said, my restraint is hanging by a thread.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “Break the thread, Spike. Break the thread.”

“Not happening.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve never had a proper orgasm.”

“Um, isn’t that exactly why we would fuck?”

“I’m going to drown you in so much pleasure you’re not going to be able to see straight for weeks, but we’re not jumping into bed together.”

“That’s totally fine with me. I’m more interested in jumping your bones than jumping in bed.”
“Jumping my bones?” He snorts and releases my hands. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Well, I’m serious. Let me climb all that masculine perfection and...”

“Learn to walk before you run, babe. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

“I’ve always fantasized about getting fucked against a wall. Or just standing.” Or really, just getting absolutely fucked by a man who knows what he’s doing. Not the bumbling fools I’ve had so far.

“That’s another thing we’re going to discuss.”

“What’s that?”

“All your filthy fantasies.”

“Oh, hope you have pen and paper ready.” I clap my hands and bounce a little.

This is easy with Spike.

Fun.

I never talked about sex with any of the guys I’ve been with before. We kind of just fumbled our way through.

Awkward and disappointing, it left me wanting. Spike’s not like that at all. He approaches sex openly, eagerly, with no apologies given and no beating around the bush. I don’t feel weird telling him what I like.

“Really?” His brows arch, and his eyes sparkle.

“I’ve got a long list.”

“Good to know, but we’re still taking things slow.”

“I don’t want slow.” I pout and bat my lashes at him. His response is a grin and shake of his head.

“You’re too eager, but I’m not interested in being your fuck buddy.”

“You’re not?”

“Hell no.” He grabs my hand and leads me to the gondola. “You’re mine now.”

“Yours?” My heart lurches to a stop, then a kick of adrenaline slams into it, sending it careening around inside my chest.

“Is it sinking in yet?”

I gulp, because it is. In my wildest fantasies, I only ever thought I’d have a moment with Spike. An hour or two in his bed, then stinging disappointment as he moved on to the
next in line. But this? The possession in his voice isn’t something I can ignore.

I like it. Like, I really, really like it. Like snuggling into a warm blanket on a cold winter’s night kind of like it. I’ve never belonged to anyone before. I’ve never had anyone who wanted me with that kind of possession. It’s delicious and yummy and hot.

“Yeah, it’s sinking in.” I swallow and press my free hand to my belly.

Spike drags me along to the gondola while the world tilts beneath my feet. Lightheaded, I don’t realize we’re inside until the door closes behind us.

I open my mouth to say something, only to feel the heat of Spike’s lips covering mine.

Holy hell, we’re kissing, and damn if he doesn’t have a talented mouth. Clean, woodsy, a hint of something darker, his taste slams into my senses, sending me on a rollercoaster of incredible highs and steep toe-curling thrills as we plunge into the abyss.

My head spins with the suddenness of his kiss, the unexpectedness of it. Like a warm, wet, sensual caress, his tongue laves across my lips and demands entrance to my mouth.

We ascend in the gondola, wrapped in a private bubble, lips tangling, arms grappling, legs—shaking.

Sensation sparks everywhere. My entire body comes alive. I feel like climbing his hard body, but he pins me in place, setting our pace.

His lips trail over mine, hungry at first, then he slows down to meander as if he has all the time in the world to lock our lips together. Damn, if he can kiss like this, how will the rest of it feel?

The incursion of his tongue inside my mouth is both delicious and maddeningly erotic. My insides clench as his greedy mouth takes control. Gasping as he licks and nips, stabs and strokes, he’s not kissing my mouth, he’s fucking it with his tongue.

I’ve never experienced anything like this, and while on the one hand, he’s madly hungry, he’s also tantalizingly slow. A diabolical sweep of his tongue takes me unaware and pulls a gasp from my lips. My legs buckle, but he grips me by the waist and holds me upright. Spike swallows my gasp and forges on, taking, claiming, dominating, and generally driving me insane.

The suddenness of the kiss knocks me off my feet. He leans nearly his entire weight against me, pressing my back against the glass of the gondola. Our upper bodies collide.

Chest to chest, he splays one hand against the glass beside my head, while the other one twines around my waist. He pulls me to him as he leans in and takes what he wants.

When he does that, the hard length of his arousal presses into my belly. I reach for it, but he growls and grabs my wrist. First the left, then the right, he loops my hands around his neck.
“Don’t fucking move.” Simmering hot, his order makes my belly do a little flip. With my hands where he wants them, he leans in and takes my mouth again.

His lips move, kissing and sucking, making my entire body burn beneath the raggedness of his breaths. An expert kisser; this is nothing like any of the fumbling kisses I’ve endured in the past.

He licks in a way that’s madly erotic instead of squeamishly gross. He strokes with intention, driving me wild, and when my tongue gets confused and tangles with his, he slows down, lets me catch up, then starts all over again.

Patient, determined, relentless, and engaged, his entire body participates in the kiss. My fingers can’t help but dig into the skin of his shoulders as I struggle to hold on beneath the onslaught.

When did my body start trembling?

I shake from head to toe, my legs quivering with tiny tremors. And those moans, do they really belong to me? I’ve never moaned during sex, let alone a simple kiss, but there’s nothing simple about this kiss.

He shamelessly grinds against me, and I match him move for move. He may not allow me to touch him with my hands, but our hips are definitely engaged in a battle of their own. Heat spears through me, concentrating between my legs, where I ache for him. Where I’m—wet?

Holy shit. I’m wet for him.

My entire body stills as Spike devours my mouth. He notices the sudden change and breaks the lock he has on my lips.

“What’s wrong?”

I bite my lower lip and grin up at him like a fool. “Nothing.” I’m so deliriously happy, I don’t know what to say.

“That wasn’t nothing.”

My face heats, and normally I’d feel really nervous about it, but I don’t with Spike. Somehow, he swept aside any fear, hesitation, or awkwardness I might have.

“I’m wet.”

“I know. I fucking smell you. Can’t wait to taste you.”

I grip his bicep and shake my head. “You don’t understand.”

“What, babe?”

“I’ve never... That’s never happened to me before.”
Spike pulls back. His gaze darts between my eyes. “You’ve never gotten wet for another guy before?”

I shake my head and nibble on my lower lip. “I haven’t. That’s good, right?” Not liking how that comes out, I cringe a little and avert my gaze. I don’t like being reminded how much more experience he has than me.

“It’s fucking fantastic.” He drags the back of his hand over my jaw and gives a little shake of his head. “Hold still, baby. Don’t you dare move.”

The gondola jerks and rocks back and forth as it chugs its way up the hill. It must climb nearly a hundred feet up the steep cliff, and it takes its time in its struggle against gravity.

I stand with my back to the glass wall and watch the rocks go by as we ascend. Spike gets a view looking out over the ocean, not that he pays attention to anything but me.

His knuckles brush across the angle of my jaw. His fingers flutter down the sweep of my neck where they stop momentarily and tighten. But they soon move on. He avoids my breasts, dragging a finger between my cleavage. He splays his hand across my belly as I squirm beneath his touch. He’s everywhere at once, teasing, seductive, maddening in his desire for more.

Each sensation triggers something new. A light, fluttering shiver. A whole-body shudder. The tiny hairs on my arms lift as he runs his palms around to grip my ass. I bite my lower lip and squeeze my eyes shut as he finds the hem of my shorts.

His calloused fingers skim across the curve of my ass, making their way around to the front of my upper leg. Staying just beneath the hem of my shorts, his fingers meander to my inner thigh and up to the juncture of my leg. My skin tightens, and my body shakes.

“Spike…”

“Easy, girl.” Without hesitation, he slips his fingers over my sex and fingers the slippery folds. “Christ, you’re dripping for me.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head as he slips first one, then another finger inside of me. The pad of his thumb presses against my clit, lifting me to my toes as pleasure spikes and surges through my body.

Unprepared for it, the most intense rush of pleasure washes through me. My head bangs against the glass as my belly contracts. My legs shake, and I nearly collapse as wave after wave of sensation courses through me.

Spike withdraws his fingers as I pant, not really sure what just happened. He waits until I peel my eyes open, then slowly slips first one finger, then the other into his mouth.

“Fucking incredible. You taste like heaven.”
“Spike, was that... Did I?”

He sucks on his fingers, and his brows lift. The piercings dance with the movement. “If you have to ask, then I didn’t try hard enough, but I have to say, I wasn’t trying to make you come.”

“Holy shit.” I press my palm to my forehead and shake my head. “That was fucking incredible.”

“No, babe, you’re fucking incredible.” He glances over his shoulder, looking up toward the top of the cliff. Stepping back, he leans against the other side of the gondola and crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re fucking dangerous.”

It takes a moment before I fully recover. We’re nearing the top, and I see a shock of white-blond hair peeking over the edge.

“Shit!”

“What?” Spike casually kicks a heel across his ankle.

“It’s Forest.”

Spike pushes off and looks up. “Shit.” Turning around, he points at my shirt. “Straighten that out and fix your hair. You look like you’ve been fucked, and the last person who needs to know about us is that man.”

Quickly, I comb my fingers through my hair and straighten out my shirt. Spike adjusts his shorts and tucks the evidence of his arousal beneath his waistband. The tip sticks out, and something shiny glints at me. Before I can wonder about that, Spike yanks his shirt down to cover everything up.

He leans over and opens the side window and waves his arms like a madman.

“What are you doing?” I stare at him like he’s lost his mind.

“It smells like sex in here.” His arms flail as I lean back and roll my eyes.

Spike’s deathly afraid of anyone finding out. I get it. I really do. I’ve gone over the thousands of reasons we can’t be together. Doesn’t change one damn thing.

I want to be with Spike. I know what’s at stake. I tuck myself into a corner of the gondola as we crest the rise and slowly inch the final few feet. Spike has the door open and jumps out before we stop.

Forest looks at Spike. His glacial gaze sweeps over to me huddling inside the gondola. I tuck my chin to my chest and exit. Fingers curled into fists, I march out and stride past the gentle giant without a word. Not once do I look at Spike.

“What’s up with her?” Forest’s deep gravelly voice makes the air rumble.
“Who the hell knows?” Spike gives a shrug and follows behind me. Just like always. We’re together without being together.

And I hate it.

“Hold up for a second.” Forest’s booming voice hitches my shoulders to my ears. I pull to a stop, but he continues. “Not you, Angel; I need to have a chat with Spike for a moment.”

Feeling like I’m getting away with something, I leave Spike to deal with Forest. Truthfully, Forest scares me more than my dad. I can deal with Bash. We certainly clash over enough things that adding more fuel to the fire won’t matter.

But Forest... Yeah, I’m not proud, but I leave Spike to fend for himself. Not that he’ll have a problem with Forest. Spike doesn’t give a shit what anyone thinks about him.
SIX
The last thing I need is a conversation with Forest. Angel scurries off, lucky little shit. Not that I can’t handle Forest. I pull up short and brace for whatever it is Forest wants to talk about.

“What do you need? I’m a bit busy.” Like, there’s a girl I’m very interested in pursuing. That kiss rocked my world, and the taste of her lingers on my tongue. No way am I leaving her with one tiny orgasm. By the end of the day, I plan on making her scream my name.

I try to step around him, but he places his massive paw of a hand on my shoulder and stops me in my tracks. Stop is generous. Forest holds me in place. There’s no escaping when he gets it in his head to talk about whatever’s on his mind.

Forest’s glacial gaze follows Angel’s retreat, then sweeps back to take me in. Can’t help it, but I suck in my gut, puff out my chest, and stand a little taller. That lopsided grin slips as I brace for a verbal beat down.

At six-foot-two, I’m tall for a guy, but next to Forest, I’m small. That does something to a guy’s confidence. Erodes it. Puts it in perspective.

I don’t like it one bit. Never have. Never will.

“I can see you’re busy.” Forest’s attention swings back to Angel’s retreating backside, and I follow the direction of his gaze, appreciating the sway of Angel’s hips and the way the creases of her ass cheeks peek out from beneath those shorts.

Now that I know what lingers between those luscious legs, I’m eager to continue my exploration. I’ve tasted her, and her essence lingers on my tongue. With great force of will, I refrain from putting my fingers in my mouth to get one last taste.

For the first time, there’s no frustration over not being able to touch her. Instead, an intense anticipation to take her in every filthy way invades my thoughts. I’ve imagined a lot of things since the day I first laid eyes on her.
“You’re playing with fire if you insist on getting busy with her.” Forest’s low rumble slams into me.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” I play it off, denying what Forest has to say. He’s got no right passing judgment on me.

“Whatever.” Forest gives a snort. “I smell her on you. It’s your funeral. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Don’t need you to warn me about anything.”

Lord knows, I’m more than capable of passing judgment on my actions. There’s no need for him intruding on my personal life. Anything he has to say is something I’ve already said to myself. I’ve weighed, measured, and discarded the best advice. I’m actively ignoring it when it comes to Angel.

The long and short of it is that I want her with a desire that can’t be defined. It settles deep within me, merging on a cellular level. She’s mine. That may, or may not, make me an idiot, but I crossed that line when I claimed her as mine.

“You’re a goddamn fool.” Forest’s glacial gaze is not for the faint of heart, yet I meet it with resolute determination. Angel is mine. I’ve known that from day one. “I’d tell you to keep your hands to yourself, but I see that’s already wasted breath. Anything I have to say is just me pissing in the wind. You’re going to do what you want, regardless of what happens next.”

“And what would you do if you were me?” I want this mountain of a man to tell me that I can’t have what I want, especially when he has a wife and a man on the side. Forest has no business telling me what I can and cannot do.

“I’d think this through, follow it to its logical conclusion. How does sleeping with a rock star alter the trajectory of her life? How does it affect the future of Angel Fire? I get you want to get your dick wet, but look someplace else.” A warning growl rumbles in the back of his throat. Forest’s hard stare demands answers I’m not prepared to give.

I simply want what I want.

I swallow, only because I don’t need my voice to squeak when I respond to Forest’s challenge.

“It’s none of your goddamn business what I do, or don’t do.”

I could pretend he doesn’t know, but Forest isn’t like the rest of us mere mortals. That brain of his operates on a completely different plane of existence.

He knows shit before any of the rest of us have an inkling something’s happening. More importantly, he can stop everything before it begins with one misplaced word.

I hate the power he holds.
Not that I’m admitting anything, least of all to him.

Technically, all I did was kiss Angel. Nothing else happened, which means I don’t have to lie to Forest.

“There’s nothing going on between us. You’ve got your panties twisted in a wad over nothing.”

“Don’t.” Forest points toward Angel.

Angel makes it to the edge of the pool, stops, and looks back. She pauses for a second, then scurries out of sight, escaping this confrontation.

“Don’t, what?”

“Pretend you’re not going after her. I wasn’t born yesterday, and when I said I smell her on you, I mean exactly that. You reek of sex.”

“I’m not fucking Angel.” It’s a truth I can speak with absolute conviction. “Don’t make shit up just to stir up trouble.”

“I’m not the one stirring shit up. You stay on this path, don’t come running to me when it blows up in your face.”

“I’d never run to you for anything. As for stirring up shit, are you going to be a problem? Are you going to run to Bash and speak shit about his daughter?” I will go toe to toe with Forest if needed.

“I’m not one to blab. Besides, I don’t need to do anything. You’re going to fuck up. You’re already messing with the Bro-code.”

“The Bro-code? What the fuck you talking about?”

“Don’t have sex with your best friend’s daughter, for one. But if you’re going to do this, and I already see it scrawled all over your face, don’t get caught. If you fall in love with Angel, or God forbid she falls in love with you, don’t break her heart. Don’t be the one who walks away. You do that and it won’t be Bash you’ll have to deal with. I’ll be right by his side feeding you your balls. As will Ash, Bent, and Noodles. Once we’re done with you, Skye, Holly, Piper, and Mitzy will be there to gouge out your eyes and castrate you. You’ll be out. Out of the band. Out of our lives. Out.” He crosses his massive arms over his broad chest and looms over me. “Is fucking her really worth taking that risk?”

“I’m not interested in just fucking her.”

“Well, at least we’ve sorted that out. You’ve definitely got your head up your ass. I’m serious; this is a bad idea. Walk away.”

“I’m not walking away.”

“Why not?”
“Because she’s mine.”

“I see.” Forest gives a slow shake of his head. “Another fool is born. Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

“Are you gonna tell Bash?”

“I don’t need to say shit. You don’t need my help to make a mess of your life.”

“We’re going to be discreet.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the way the two of you look at each other. It’s written all over your faces. That smirk you sport, when you think about what you’re going to do to her, pisses me off.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but for the record, I haven’t done anything. We’re not fucking.”

“Yet.” Forest shakes his head, then places the tip of his finger to my chest. “You’ve got a good thing going here. Great friends, wonderful career, don’t mess with success.”

“I don’t seem to remember asking for life lessons from you.” Damn, that man puts a lot of power behind a finger. That hurts. I grip his wrist, and instead of pushing him away, I take a step back and to the side.

He makes a point of sniffing the air. “She’s not a toy.”

“What the fuck?”

“I’m serious. She’s not some plaything. She’s not a groupie you can fuck and forget.”

“Take that back.” I shove him, but only succeed in pushing myself back a step. The man’s massive. “That’s not what this is.”

“For all our sakes, I hope not.” Forest takes a step to the side. “You’re a grown-assed man who can do as you like, but Angel is ours. She’s a part of the family. You fuck her over, you fuck us all. Don’t come crying to me when this all goes to shit.”

“I said, there’s nothing going on.” I grind out the words, desperately trying to get him to buy into a lie.

“Right, about that—if you’re going ahead with this madness, learn how to lie. You suck at it.” With a huff, he marches past me.

Forest squeezes his large frame inside the gondola and yanks the door closed. Keeping his cold gaze on me, we stare at each other as the gondola lurches into motion and slowly takes him down to the beach.
SEVEN
Spike

Once Forest is out of sight, I run a hand through my hair, hating how my hand shakes. Forest’s got me. He’s right about everything.

Doesn’t stop me from racing after Angel. If Forest’s back, that means the house will fill up soon. Finding time to be alone with Angel is going to be difficult, if not impossible.

I move past the pool and draw up short at the door leading into the kitchen.

As expected, Skye, Ash, and Mitzy are back. Whatever mission they had with the Guardians must’ve gone well from the smiles on their faces.

When they return from a mission with frowns filling their faces, I escape to my rooms, because that’s never good, but today is a good day. I’m thankful for that. I can’t handle their scowls on top of Forest’s judgment.

Angel’s with them, smiling, laughing, and looking fabulous as always. She turns toward the door and sees me standing outside. Her shoulders lift in a shrug. No need to wonder what’s going through her mind.

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” I join my friends. “Another success?”

They turn to me with bright eyes and relaxed faces.

“Another great day at the office.” Mitzy flaps her hand in a wave hello. Her spiky psychedelic hair makes me blink twice. “Got back days sooner than we thought.”

I know, and I don’t like it one bit. I need time alone with Angel.

“Glad to hear.” I purse my lips and glance around the kitchen, unsure what I should do, where I should stand. My instinct is to drift toward Angel, stand beside her, but Forest’s words echo in my mind. That would get noticed, especially considering how I usually leave the room when Angel’s around.

I don’t know what the guys think about that. Honestly, they probably don’t give a rat’s ass about it. The chick brigade, however, notices everything.
And, I disagree with Forest.

I’m more than capable of keeping secrets. I’ve been keeping a pretty big one all to myself since I was Angel’s age and turned eighteen.

Forest built the Guardians from the ground up. A private hostage rescue organization, they work to rid the world from human traffickers. They also rescue foster children from abused homes. Then, they rehabilitate their rescues, providing any and all services they need to recover from their trauma.

Saving others is a part of Forest’s lifelong quest to make the world a better place. It should be no surprise that protection extends to Angel.

As for making the world a better place, I do my part, but on a much smaller, personal scale. I’ve saved two lives in my lifetime, not that anybody knows. It’s a secret I keep close to my chest. Something I do because I can, because it’s my duty as a human to help others.

Most days, I’m a self-absorbed, pretentious prick, indulging in the rock star lifestyle, but there’s still a part of me that wants to make a meaningful impact on the world, something more profound than playing in a rock band.

And I like to keep that little bit of myself to myself.

Nobody knows. Like nobody. I doubt I’ll ever tell Angel. The best way to keep a secret is to never speak of it. I can keep secrets, and despite what Forest says, I know how to lie. I’ve been lying to the guys for ten years about my trips.

Got the rock star image to maintain.

Besides, Lucy and Trevor don’t need the chaos association with a mega-rock star would bring. They don’t want it, and I do everything I can to protect them both.

I may not be Forest with his billions at my disposal, but that doesn’t mean my contributions are any less important than his.

I glance around the room and decide what to do. We’re between albums, taking a break, which means my time is my own. I’d ask Angel to join me for lunch. It’s what I intended when we got back up here as part of my going slow plan.

But there’s no way I can ask her out now.

I head to the counter, opposite Angel, and pull out a stool. “Tell me about the mission. Did you get the bad guys?”

Ash answers before Mitzy can open her mouth. “Dude, it was so cool.”

“Tell me about it.” I lean back and cross my arms. Somehow, I need to find a way to get Angel alone. We have unfinished business.
He gesticulates wildly mentioning Mitzy’s tiny drones. “Dude, she calls them dragonflies. Isn’t that cool?” Ash goes on to explain how the drones searched the massive ship within minutes. He breaks it all down, and I have to say I feel like I was there. Mitzy and Skye exchange amused looks.

For them, this is another day in the office, but I’m with Ash. The Guardians are fucking badass.

“And then, I was thinking we could use drones like that during our concert.” Ash continues talking. “You know, like get more pictures of the audience? Like the ones farther from the stage? Make it interactive, like a kiss cam at a game? Mitzy says the drones have audio. We could have the fans sing with us during a concert. It would be totally epic.”

“Oh, that’d be cool.” Ash is brilliant when it comes to playing the crowd. He was born to entertain.

We veer off into how that might work and monopolize the conversation.

Mitzy and Skye pull things out of the fridge, lunch meats, cheeses, breads, and condiments. Instead of having lunch with Angel alone, we all line up, build our plates, and sit down at the kitchen table.

With floor-to-ceiling windows, the view out over the ocean is spectacular. I’d enjoy it, except I sit with my back to the glass. Angel sits across from me. She keeps her attention on Mitzy and Skye, but her gaze darts toward me every now and then.

I signal her to be patient. We’ll have our time. Until then, we keep up the appearance of general disinterest toward each other.

Lunch ends. Ash and I clean up while the girls head off to the great room, where they continue talking about the mission.

“Sounds like you had fun.” I put away the food while Ash tackles the dishes.

“Not sure if I should say it was fun, considering why we were there, but it really opened my eyes.” He glances toward the great room. “I’ve always been impressed by what Skye does. She saves lives every day, but to see her work with those girls.” Ash’s mouth twists. “What they did to those girls was horrendous. I want the band to do more for their rescues.”

“Like, what?”

“I don’t know. That Facility of theirs is well thought out. Noodles is already working with some of the kids.”

“He is?”

“Yeah, he teaches them how to surf. You know, normal kid stuff. I just wish there was some way we could all contribute.” Ash goes into details too dark to repeat about the
abducted girls. They were rescued from a life of misery, and fortunately, their story ends well.

“So, they really rescued all twelve girls?” I’m still a little in awe.

“Yeah. Totally badass too. Infil was by air.”

“Infil?”

“Infiltration. They’re all ex-military special ops. Infil. Exfil—that’s extracting from a location—I felt like I was a part of it.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Dude, those Guardians are something else. They hooked up their zodiacs to parachutes, chucked them out the back of the plane, then parachuted after them. They landed in the water.” He gives a fake shudder. “I’m cool with water, but parachuting into the Gulf, at night, wearing full body armor? Dude, it was awesome.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“Me neither. It’s why I asked Skye if I could tag along. I want to understand what it is she does. And you know how I hate having her in harm’s way, especially now that she’s pregnant again, but she totally hangs in the back. I feel a little better about it. But those Guardians, they splashed down and somehow found the boats in the dark. They hooked up with the ship. Scaled the outside. I’ve never seen a more focused group of men. Lethal as shit. Saved the girls like it was a walk in the park.”

“Do you ever wonder what you would’ve done if Angel Fire didn’t take off?”

“Have you?”

“Yeah.” I scratch the back of my head. “It was a toss-up between enlisting and becoming a teacher. I figure I probably would’ve enlisted, ‘cause you know how I felt about school. I would’ve had to go to college to teach.”

Ash laughs. “Yeah, you hated school. Why the fuck would you want to be a teacher?”

“It’s funny, but I always thought I’d do a better job than my teachers. Not that it matters now.”

“Yeah.” Ash stretches his neck, making the spider web tattoo flex. The dragon catches my eye. I’ve got ink, but nothing like that.

“So, what would you have done? You know, if Angel Fire didn’t take off?”

“Don’t laugh, but I always thought I’d follow in my dad’s footsteps.”

My eyes widen. “Go to seminary? Become a priest?”

“Not a priest, but a pastor. I always looked up to my dad. I like the way he touches other
people’s lives.”

“You were the wild child, bucking authority and driving your parents crazy. Can’t see you as a pastor.”

“I know, right? Different lives. Did you know Noodles wanted to be one of those Doctors Without Borders kind of people?”

“That’s less surprising than you becoming a pastor.” I finish putting the food up and help Ash with the rest of the dishes. “Just think how our lives would be different if we never formed the band.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Our success?” I blow out a breath. “Not really. We travel the world, and not that we’re saving lives or anything, but I like to think our music inspires others to do great things.”

“That’s how I see it too.” Ash folds the dishcloth and hangs it to dry. “I guess Bash would’ve been a teen dad. His life would’ve been hugely different if Valerie hadn’t skipped out on him.”

“Yeah, I still don’t really know what to make of it.”

“I don’t think he does either. He finds out he’s a dad, but instead of a baby girl, he gets a headstrong teenager. Whenever they’re in the same room, I swear it’s the beginning of World War Three.”

“Do you think he regrets bringing Angel here?” I certainly don’t. Or maybe I will when the guys find out about Angel and me. Life-altering is the understatement of the century.

“I think he regrets not being there for her, but I don’t think he and Valerie would’ve lasted. I always got an odd vibe between them. I think Bash wanted to be in love with Valerie, but she wanted her own life.” Ash shrugs. “Anyway, it is what it is.”

“That’s the truth.”

In more ways than one.

“Looks like you and Angel are doing better.”

My breath hitches, and I go over every second of the last hour. If we can’t fool our friends for the first hour we’re together as a couple, then we really are doomed. I might as well start packing a bag and high tail it out of here before Bash gets back.

“What does that mean?”

“Only that you actively avoid being in the same room with her. Hanging out with groupies is one thing, but living with a teenager is totally different. Like they’re totally different creatures. Moody as shit. Volatile. I totally get why you want to steer clear.” Ash’s brows knit together as he watches the women talk in the other room. “I’m just glad I’ve got
“little Zach instead of a girl.”

“Why’s that?”

“After everything we’ve done with chicks?” Ash huffs a laugh. “Let’s just say any daughter of mine will be locked away until she’s thirty-five. Boys are trouble. Men are worse. And rock stars are definitely forbidden. If my daughter goes anywhere near a rock star, I’m feeding that bastard his balls.”

My balls shrivel at that comment. If I thought I’d find any support with Ash, that’s the beginning and end of it. He looks at Angel as if she’s his kid, not the woman I intend to make mine.

I’m so totally fucked.

“I don’t avoid her.” For some reason, I feel a need to defend my actions.

“I figured you got tired of the way she looks at you. I wouldn’t want to be around that day after day. Like I said, it’s different with a groupie. They’re in, out, and gone, but don’t worry, Angel will move on when she finds a boy that attracts her interest. Her little crush on you will be yesterday’s news.” He bumps my shoulder. “Guess that’s what you get for being the last man standing.”

“How’s that?”

“Bash’s kid isn’t crushing on the rest of us, only you. But then, we’ve all got wives. You’re open season.”

I rub at my arm and parse every word Ash says. Not as intuitive as Forest, he certainly picked up on the way Angel looks at me. That means everybody knows.

Totally fucked.

“You said lunch was different. How?”

“Well, she barely looked at you, for one thing. And you didn’t rush to get out of there. Didn’t feel the same tension between you that I normally feel.” He shrugs again.

Ash isn’t nearly as perceptive as Forest. There’s tension, all right. Tons and tons of tension; the sexually frustrated kind.
EIGHT
I don’t want to eat because I don’t want to lose the taste of Spike on my lips. My entire body sparks and vibrates with him sitting across from me.

Everyone must feel this crazy energy, but they act as if nothing’s going on. Every now and then, Spike catches my eye. He winks or presses a finger to his lips, reminding me where those fingers were not too long ago.

So sexy, I squirm with the memory of finally being in his arms. I want to shout and let everyone know how deliriously happy I am, but I keep my mouth shut. Too hard not to grin like an idiot when I look at him, I avert my gaze as much as possible.

Can people tell?

I look for telltale clues, but nothing. Like always, nobody shows any interest in me.

I’m grateful Bash brought me to live at Insanity. The social worker said I’d only have to spend a year in foster care. I could’ve petitioned for emancipation, but Mom’s medical bills drained our accounts.

I literally had nothing and no way to pay for the rent on our tiny home. Emancipation wasn’t an option and given the choice between foster parents and the father, who was a stranger and only just found out about me, I opted for the house of a rock star.

Bash and I definitely bang heads. I’m too independent, and he’s too controlling, making up for a lifetime of parental supervision over the span of days. We prowl around each other, trying not to set the other one off.

It’s an uncomfortable truce, but he didn’t kick me out when I turned eighteen and shows no inkling to do so. For that, I’m thankful, and maybe I can tone down the attitude just a teeny-tiny bit.

Maybe.

There’s just one problem. I never thought I’d fall in love with one of his bandmates. Initially, I assumed it was a crush like any of the many crushes I had on my teachers.
As the days, weeks, then months passed, it became clear that wasn’t what was happening. If anything, I fell harder and deeper in love with Spike.

He was kind to me when I first arrived. Asked me how my room was, if I needed anything. He hovered around, making sure I was comfortable. Drove me to town when I needed an escape, and then he slowly pulled away, distancing himself.

I understand now why he did it. Never in my wildest dreams did I think he might like me too, and I get the age thing. I really understand, but there’s no reason to hide from it now.

Except for my dad, and everybody else.

Tales of the Guardian’s last mission fill up the lunch hour. When we finally finish, I think Spike and I will have a chance to steal away. The only stealing that happens, however, is when Ash asks Spike to work on a new song with him.

Knowing Spike will be ensconced in the studio all day, I let Mitzy and Skye convince me to join them for retail therapy and a day at the spa.

With them picking up the tab, I indulge. Not one to really fuss about things, the thought of Spike getting a look at my entire body makes me nervous about pretty much everything. I want him to be pleased with everything down there.

For the first time in my life, I get a wax job. Not just a bikini wax, but a full Brazilian. Holy shit that hurts.

Mitzy and Skye say nothing about my choice, indulging in their own thing. I worry what must be going through their minds. My lack of boyfriends over this past year is some source of concern. But how could I date a boy when Spike fascinated and captivated me?

And now, all those dreams no longer feel like fantasies. He kissed me. He put his hand on me down there. He doesn’t just want to fuck. I think he really wants a relationship. Talk about blowing my mind.

My skin tingles with the memory of the first orgasm a man’s ever given me. It’s nothing like what I can do on my own, and I never felt anything with those other boys. Frankly, I thought maybe my body was broken, that I was incapable of feeling pleasure.

Now, I know that’s not the case.

Walking out of the spa, my skin burns everywhere, especially my tender bits, which are now as smooth as a baby’s bottom. My pussy throbs with anticipation over Spike’s reaction when he touches me again. I hope he approves.

“Your head is in the clouds.” Skye bumps my elbow and draws my attention back to the conversation.
We’re down in Santa Monica, taking our time enjoying the day. Mitzy found an amazing restaurant for dinner. We sit outside, our newly manicured toes digging in the warm sand. I don’t think we’re supposed to do that, but they don’t seem to care. Umbrellas shade us from the setting sun, and our waiter keeps our drinks full.

“Sorry.” I gaze back out over the beach. “Just thinking about stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” I like Skye. She’s laid back and cool. You’d never know she saves lives because there’s nothing pretentious about her.

No way can I tell the truth, so I give them what everyone seems to want these days. Now that high school is behind me, everybody asks about my plans for the future.

I have no plans.

Anything that takes me away from Insanity is no-go land for me. Unrequited love is a bitch, and I can’t leave Spike behind to “find my destiny.”

Those are my dad’s words. Bash keeps on me to “find my destiny.”

I can’t stay at Insanity forever. At some point, I need to leave, get a job, or go to school, make a life for myself. But, I’m not in any hurry.

Especially now.

“I was thinking I should get a job.” I take a sip of my cool, refreshing iced tea.

“Is that what you want?” Skye tips her head back and lets the sun shine down on her face.

Her eyes close, and she takes in a deep breath. I calm down, watching her. Maybe I need to join Noodles in one of his morning yoga sessions? He doesn’t talk much to me, but he wouldn’t turn me away.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “Feels like I should do something.” But I don’t want to leave Insanity. Not now.

“What about school?” Skye lifts her head and raises her hand to get the attention of our waiter. “It’s not too late. You can still apply for college.”

“I suppose.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” Mitzy slurps the last of her virgin margarita. She sets it on the table and orders another from the waiter when he arrives. Skye does the same, and I ask for regular, boring, non-alcoholic iced-tea.

“Did you know what you wanted to be when you were my age?” It’s a silly question, considering Mitzy isn’t much older than me.

“I always knew I liked computers. There was just something about them that drew me in.
That and games. Honestly, I struggled. Never did the college thing. I worked for a private investigator for a few years before coming to work for Guardian HRS.”

“Really? I didn’t know that. That must’ve been exciting.”

“It was, and it wasn’t. Kate Summers was a great boss, but most of what I did was front office secretary stuff. Rarely, was I able to help her on a case. There was this one, a murder she was working that turned south in a bad way.”

“How’s that?” I lean forward, interested.

“It was a total mess. Kate was kidnapped.”

“Oh my God.”

“It was a turning point for me.”

“How so?”

“I stepped up to help find her. Used what I knew about the digital world to help out. That was a pivotal moment for me. I suddenly saw how I could make a difference. Through Kate, I met Forest, and with his Guardians, the rest is history.” Mitzy nibbles on a piece of bread. “That’s all to say that there are many paths to finding what you want to do with your life. School wasn’t for me, but Skye here…” She waves at Skye. “She hit the books. Did an accelerated six-year bachelor/MD program and—well, you know how that turned out.”

I turn my attention to Skye. “When did you know you wanted to be a doctor?”

Skye’s eyes fill with pain, but it’s gone before I barely register it. “Definitely when I was young. I wanted to help people. It’s always been a part of me.”

“Wow.” I think about Skye’s desire to heal since she was a girl and Mitzy’s fascination with computers that drove her, and discover I have no interests. “I guess I don’t know what I want to do.”

“There’s no rush.” Mitzy exchanges her empty margarita for another virgin drink. He fills my tea and places a fresh drink in front of Skye.

I thought it would be fun living with rock stars—wild parties, drinking all day long.

Drugs.

Little did I know that would not be the case. Not that there’s no alcohol at Insanity, it’s just that the guys don’t drink that much. Right now, none of the women drink either. Everyone but me is knocked up. Ash, for sure, doesn’t drink. He’s a recovering alcoholic and addict. The other guys drink, but it’s just not a big deal.

“You definitely need to do something.” Mitzy sips from her drink. “I know it was hard switching schools your senior year, but you need to get out there.”
"Out there?"


"And if you’re having that kind of fun," Skye adds, "make sure you use protection."

"Oh my God, are we really having this talk?" I squirm in my seat, overly aware of my new, hairless, girly bits. The sting and burn is slowly fading, but I notice everything. It’s as if all my senses are enhanced after getting plucked like a goose at the spa.

"You’re eighteen. A grown woman, and we’re not stuck in the Stone Age. Dating means kissing, and kissing means..." Skye gives me a look.

"Lots and lots of sex." Mitzy giggles.

"I was going to say that we don’t need any more unexpected pregnancies around here." Skye pressed the flat of her palm against her belly. "Use protection. That’s all I was going to say. If you’re not on the pill, we can fix that, but condoms are a girl’s best friend. They keep all those STDs away."

I’d feel uncomfortable if this was a conversation I was having with my mother, but Mom’s no longer here. We never talked about sex. Mitzy and Skye are different. They feel more like hanging out with my best friends and talking about boys.

"So, if I’m wrong, just say so, but the Brazilian?" Mitzy pokes me in the arm. "Does that mean there’s a boy in your life you’re trying to impress?"

My breath catches. That’s exactly the kind of question I don’t need. Lying is not a strong suit for me.

"Is there?" Skye leans forward. She stirs her virgin margarita. Plugging the top hole of her straw, she lifts it and empties the frozen goodness into her mouth.


"Just because I got waxed down there..." I lower my voice, not wanting the tables near us to hear what we’re talking about. "Anyway, it doesn’t mean I’m seeing someone."

I think we’re done with that bit of conversation, but Skye and Mitzy exchange knowing expressions. I roll my eyes and look away while they snicker.

Skye places her hand on my arm. "We’re just teasing, but that’s a pretty intimate place to wax. You don’t have to say anything. Your secrets are yours, but if you ever want to talk, we’re here for you."

I doubt that. Spike and I are playing with fire. Will Skye and Mitzy really stand by my side?
I need someone in my corner.

"To be honest, I’ve never been interested in boys my age."

"Really?" Mitzy slurps through her straw. Her eyes pinch, and she waves her hand in front of her face. "Brain freeze!"

"I thought maybe it was just difficulty adjusting to the loss of your mom." Skye places her hand on my arm. "New school. New, crazy family. Not having your mom here to share it with you. There’s no rush about anything. You’ll figure things out on your own time."

"Well, please tell that to Bash. He’s always on me about college or working or... He’s just always in my business."

"It’s what dad’s do."

"It’s not like he’s my real dad."

Skye’s eyes soften. “He would’ve given all of this up to have been there for you from the beginning. Give him a little slack.”

"It’s just—ugh, everything is difficult with him. I’m glad I haven’t brought a man home. I can just see how that will go."

"A man, huh.” Mitzy leans back. “How much older are we talking?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said you’ve always been attracted to older men, not boys, and you said bring a man home. Not what would happen if you brought a boy home. Are we talking college-aged or more?" Her brows lift. She’s far more inquisitive than I’d like.

"Age is just a number, and boy just sounds wrong," I say.

"So there’s no absolute number.” Mitzy winks at me. "Are we talking a few years? A decade? Or do you have the hots for silver foxes?"

Skye laughs. “Stop messing with Angel.” She shakes her head. “Whoever you fall in love with will be the perfect man for you. But if you’re bringing home anyone older than your dad, you’re going to need backup."

"Why?"

"Because no man wants his daughter dating someone his age or older."

"And why not? If he’s the perfect man for me?"

"Because boys aren’t as experienced as men, and every dad on the planet would love nothing other than to lock his daughter up until she’s thirty-five. It’s just the way they’re wired.” Skye takes another sip then cradles her drink in her hand.
Mitzy and Skye exchange a look I can't decipher, although I'm pretty sure I don't want to know what they're thinking.

I lean back and cross my arms over my chest. With a deep breath, I lie to them. “Well, there’s no need to say anything to Bash about anything, or anyone. I’m not dating. No college kids and no silver foxes.”

That’s technically not a lie; Spike is right in the middle of that age range.

If we can get everyone to forget about the age difference and see that we’re both deliriously happy, how can they not approve? But from this conversation, it’s obvious there will be problems.

It’s not fair, and as far as this day goes, it really sucks.

Spike sought me out. We kissed.

Ash stole him from me, and Mitzy and Skye took me from Insanity. It’s like the universe conspires to keep us separated.

Not that I’m going to let that stand. The moment I get back to Insanity, I’m going to stalk the halls until I find him. I don’t care if we have to hide in a broom closet; I will steal a moment of privacy with him. I need more than a simple kiss.

I need him to touch me again and prove this isn’t all a dream.
Ash keeps me in the studio for hours. He’s working on a new song and wants to bounce a few ideas around. I’m a good sounding board. Unlike him, creating music is hard for me, but when he needs the sound refined, I’m his go-to guy.

Ash is the focal point for our signature sound. He writes the lyrics, then he and Bash work on them some more. They come up with the background beat that carries the emotion of the song. After Bash has his go with the drums, they send it to me to tweak and smooth out the rough patches. Then it’s Noodles’ turn. He finds the melody in all of that, turning amazing into fucking brilliant. Bent doesn’t have much to do with the creation of our songs, but he catches places where it falls flat or needs more oomph injected. We live and work as a team, an unbreakable bond of brotherhood brought together by our love for music.

Ash and I finish sometime around supper. Without looking like I’m looking for Angel, I take a stroll around Insanity. She’s nowhere to be found, and I make two full passes. I even head outside to the pool, but only see Noodles sitting in lotus pose staring out toward the horizon while the sun sets. The gondola sits at the top of its tracks, so I assume she’s not down on the beach.

It’s like walking around a ghost town. Nobody is around.

Ash stays in the studio. Bash and Bent are out with their wives for another few days. I settle in one of the loungers and enjoy an amazing sunset as Noodles finishes his meditation.

I wish I could be more like him, able to soak up tranquility. Instead, I’m a mess of nerves, more so now with my thoughts wrapped up in Angel. I’ve wanted her since before it was okay to want her, perveing on a seventeen-year-old girl and wrestling with what that said about me as a man.

But I controlled my urges and practiced restraint. For the better part of a year, I did
whatever it took to place distance between us. And it’s not like I jumped her bones the day she turned eighteen.

I tried to walk away. I convinced myself she wasn’t worth the destruction our relationship would cause.

But, no matter how long I stayed away, in the back of my head, I always knew we were fated to be together.

With that thought in my head, the last vestiges of my restraint cracked and fell away. I tracked her down and kicked the door wide open for whatever is going to happen next.

Even though I did that, I’m not prepared for the way she makes me feel. I ache for her. Physically, I’m a mess, but it goes deeper than that. She’s destined to be a part of me. I know that with the surety of the sun rising and falling each and every day.

Noodles finishes his sun salutations and joins me by the edge of the pool.

“Howzit goin’?” He stretches out his lanky form. Leaning back, he props his head in the cradle of his hands. “This sure is a pretty awesome place to call home.”

“I suppose.” My heart isn’t up for a conversation. I feel detached, like something’s missing from my life. I know what that something is; I just can’t talk about her with anyone.

“Your aura’s buzzing, dude.” Noodles’ spirituality is a fluid blend of Zen-esque philosophy, new age spiritualism, and Christianity. He claims to see auras and commune with sharks. I think he’s full of it.

“You know I don’t believe that shit.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re spiking red and black. Something’s got you twisted in knots. You gotta sort that kind of shit out fast before it messes with your energy.”

“If you say so.” I link my fingers together and model his pose, cradling my head in my hands. We stare at the sky and wait for the first stars to appear overhead. “I’m surprised Mitzy isn’t out here with you.”

Ever since Noodles hooked up with Mitzy, that crazy ball of female energy joins him for morning sun salutations and evening—whatever he calls it.

“Nah, Mitzy and Skye went into town to chill after the mission.”

“Ah. I was wondering where everyone was.”

“Yeah, Forest is with his... Whatever we’re calling that love triangle. I guess Ash grabbed you to work. I had an amazing day in the water. Talked to Old Joe for a bit, really cleared my head about a few things.”

“What things?”
“Stupid stuff. You know, getting older, becoming a dad, doing this gig. How life might have gone if Angel Fire never took off.”

“Funny.”

“How’s that?”

“Ash was talking about the same thing earlier.”

“He was?”

“Well, it was more about how Bash and Angel bang heads. He mentioned how Bash would’ve willingly given it all up to be there to raise his daughter.”

“I can definitely see that. Angel was definitely a surprise, and he’s been trying too hard to make up for not being there back then when he should’ve just tried to be there for her now. Girl lost her mom to a horrible disease. Then she loses all her friends, her school, and her home. That’s a lot to handle at seventeen. She needed Bash to be a friend, or at least a comforting presence, instead of a guy she doesn’t know trying to step up to be her dad. I’m surprised they’re both still standing, to be honest.”

“Tell me about it. Why do you think I give her a wide berth?”

Noodles gives me the side-eyes, but doesn’t say anything for a bit. “At least the chick brigade stepped up.”

“How so?”

“Take today, for instance.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, Skye and Mitzy booked time at a spa. They didn’t have to take Angel, but they included her. Made it a girls’ day out. Angel needs that kind of shit.”

“What kind?”

“Feeling like she’s a part of something more than herself. She and Bash knock heads, but at least the chicks stepped in to make her feel like a part of the family. As crazy as our family is, it’s hard when you lose the only family you have, harder still when you’re brought to live with another family and made to feel like an outsider. You keeping your distance may not be the best thing.”

“Come again?”

“Angel needs to feel included. You always leave the room first chance you get when she’s around. It’s more than obvious you can’t stand her.”

“It’s not that I can’t stand her.” If I tell Noodles the truth, he’ll be third in line, behind Bash and Forest, to castrate me. Hell, they’ll have to take numbers. Noodles is all about
going with the flow and not messing up the balance. He won't forgive this.

For now, I'll go with his version of things. It's much more palatable than the truth. The reason I always left a room was because if I didn't, my thoughts would drift. I'd think of inappropriate things. Or I would stare at Angel, enraptured by her angelic face.

Either way, there was no way I was going to get caught sporting a woody for Bash's daughter. I'd rather everyone think me hostile toward Angel than the alternative.

At least now I know where Angel is and that she's not actively avoiding me. Things got a little tense down on the beach and absolutely blazing hot in the gondola. And to think that was just a kiss.

"I was wondering why it was so quiet." I cross my ankles and continue staring at the night sky. With the sun well below the horizon, stars begin to pepper the night sky. A warm breeze blows off the ocean, and all in all, it looks to be another amazing summer night. "Guess it's just you and me for the night."

"The girls will be back soon." He lifts his phone and shakes it. "Mitzy texted when they left Santa Monica. Should be back in a few minutes. More than enough time for you to disappear."

"It's such a nice night." I say it as if I'm reluctant to leave. Instead, electricity skates along my nerves, the sizzling energy revs me up with the knowledge Angel will be here soon.

"They're meeting me out here for drinks. If you stay, Angel will be here. If you're going to ditch, might be better to do that before they get here."

"I don't hate the girl." That's a truth I can speak.

"No, but you sure make yourself scarce when she's around."

"Well, I didn't think it was that obvious, and now that you mention how important it is for her to feel included, I feel like a royal ass."

"Whatever."

"I can tolerate the girl." I lean up and put my feet down on the ground. I do that because thinking about being around Angel sends blood racing to my cock. I'm so fucking screwed. "You know what? I'm going to go for a swim." The cool water of the pool is exactly what I need to get control of one, overly eager, piece of my anatomy.

"Right." Noodles gives me the eye. "That way you can be here, without having to be here. Works for me."

"You can really be an ass, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one."
“I’m putting my suit on. You going to be getting in the water? I was thinking about turning on the hot tub and watching the stars. Perfect night for stargazing, and I think there’s one of those meteor shower things going on.”

“There is, and I would, but Mitzy just got home from a mission. We’ll probably retire early.” He snickers and gives a knowing bump of his brows. “This pregnancy is really turning up the heat, if you know what I mean?”

I don’t, but at least someone will be getting action tonight.

If I wanted, I could probably get Angel in bed, but that goes against my taking things slow pact I foolishly made with myself. The thing is, I’ve only ever known one speed. The chicks I’ve fucked went along for the ride, too eager to sleep with a rock star to care about messy emotions. With Angel, I want what Noodles has with Mitzy, and Ash with Skye. I want what Bent and Bash found with their girls. I want someone who’s mine forever instead of mine for the night. Or hell, mine for the next ten minutes.

“I’m putting on my suit. If Angel goes in the water, don’t leave me hanging.”

“Dude, I’d never leave you hanging. Bro-code, right?”

“Right.” Only I’m about to break rule number one of the Bro-code that says you’re not supposed to date the sister of your best friend. Well, I’m doing far worse than that. I’m dating the daughter.

When I return, the girls still aren’t back. Never one to take things slow, I dive into the pool. Despite what he said, Noodles also changed into his trunks. We splash at each other. I try dunking him. He takes me to the bottom of the pool, where my lungs scream for oxygen as I thrash in his grip. Fucker is a master in the water, above and below.

He releases me, and I kick to the surface to gulp air. As I heave for breath at the edge of the pool, there’s a change in the air.

Energy crackles and sparks. No need to look up, not when I feel her presence. I blink away drops of water clinging to my lashes and stare into a heart-shaped face smiling just for me.

Noodles follows me to the surface and ruins the moment when he splashes me. “You never learn, do ya?”

“Whatever.” I kick off the bottom and flip to my back. Before making like I’m ignoring her, I give a little jerk of my eyes. Hopefully, she’ll get the hint and join me in the pool. It’s not much, but it’s a way to be together, but apart.

“Did you ladies have fun? Noodles said you went to a spa?” I focus my attention on Skye, pointedly ignoring Angel, and wait.

“We did.” Angel pipes up, answering for the girls. “Got manicures.” She flashes her fingers
“Pedicures.” She slips off her sandals and wriggles her toes at me. “And waxing.” My eyes just about bug out of my head when she says that. Angel bends down and runs her hand along her shin. “Smooth as a baby’s bottom.” Her gaze holds mine, and I gulp, not sure if she means what I think she means.

That she would think about something like that is good. Not because she waxed, but because she did it for me. Suddenly, the cool water no longer does the job of keeping my dick under control. I’m hard and aching again, and damn happy to be in the pool, rather than sitting beside it.

Noodles kicks lazily in the water, staring overhead. Well past dusk, the stars are out and on full display. “You wanna join me?” His question is for Mitzy, who shakes her head.

“I’ll be there in a second, but first anyone want a drink?”

“I’m going to pass.” Skye glances around. “Is Ash still in the studio?”

“He was an hour ago.”

“Sorry, Mitzy, but I’m going to join him. He’ll be there all night unless I can convince him to go to bed.”

“No problem.” Mitzy gives a little flap of her hand and turns to Angel. “What do you say? Up for a little swim under the stars?”

“Um…” Angel looks at me, taking her lead from me. As far as everyone is concerned, she and I are borderline hostile around each other. Not that I agree with the word hostile. I’ve never said a bad word to Angel.

“The water’s warm.” I glance up. “And there’s supposed to be a meteor shower. Perfect night for stargazing.”

Mitzy gives me a look, then her attention shifts to Noodles. They exchange thoughts in the way only a married couple can.

“Come on, Angel. Let’s get changed. We’ll be back in a second. Any drink requests?”

“Beer for me.” Noodles swims to the edge of the pool. I stay where I am, keeping my distance just like Noodles expects.

“Same here.”

“Beer it is. Come on, kid, let’s change and see if we can’t see any shooting stars to make wishes on.” Mitzy executes a precise pirouette and walks off. Angel glances at me, then follows Mitzy.

“See, I can be nice.” I join Noodles at the edge of the pool and watch the women retreat. Or rather, one woman in particular, as she walks away. Still wearing those cheeky-assed shorts, my mouth waters to get a taste of her as my dick stands up, ready for action.
All I have to do is find a way to get rid of Noodles and Mitzy so I can have Angel all by myself. And I need to do that without looking like I want to spend any time with her at all.
TEN
“YOU DON’T MIND HANGING with Spike, do you?” Mitzy practically prances back to the suite of rooms she shares with Noodles.

“No. Why?”

“Just wondering. He can be a bit prickly.”

“He was really sweet when I first arrived.”

“That man has a heart in him somewhere. I’ll agree with that, and I remember how he used to talk to you. It just seemed after a month or so that he distanced himself.”

“Who really wants to hang out with a kid? It wasn’t just him. All the guys kind of did the same. Well, except Bash. He wouldn’t get out of the way.”

“You really should give your dad a bit of slack. He was as prepared to accept a daughter into his home as you were to live with a man you knew nothing about. It’s not ideal, but I have a sense things are settling down.”

“Yeah, I don’t argue with him all the time, and now that he’s gotten off my back about ‘what the future holds,’ things are easier.”

“Good to hear.” She pulls up short at the door to her suite and enters the code to get in.

“Now hurry up. Don’t leave me alone with the two of them.”

“Why, you don’t like Spike?”

“No. I love Spike and all his weirdness. But if you leave me alone with them, Noodles will get all handsy, and that will lead to sex, and that will leave you and Spike alone. Remember what Skye and I said? We’ve got your back.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. I can handle myself around Spike. Worst he can do is leave. I’ve never seen a meteor shower before. I’m not going to miss out on that.”

“Then let’s get changed and head out there together. Meet me here, okay?”
“Gotcha.” My rooms are buried back a bit from where the band lives. I have further to go.

When I came to live here, Bash changed one of the guest suites into my personal suite of rooms; yes, that’s plural. Not that I needed them to go to all that fuss. I was used to a small closet of a room and a shared bathroom with my mom.

Now, I’ve got a palatial suite that swallows a king-sized bed and has a sitting area in the bedroom. That doesn’t even count the adjoining living room and, of course, I have a private bathroom with a separate shower and Jacuzzi tub.

It was overwhelming when I first arrived. I thought they made a mistake, but now that it’s been a year, it’s amazing how I’ve gotten used to the space. Best part about the whole thing is that if I want privacy, I’ve got it. Nobody bothers me in my rooms. Not even Bash.

The moment I shut the outer door, I’m blissfully alone and race to change out of my clothes and into a bikini. I could go with one of my many one-pieces, but I’ve got a man to impress. A very sex, devilishly handsome man.

I tie a gauzy sarong around my hips. When Spike sees me, I want his jaw to drop. Rushing back the way I came, I knock on Mitzy’s door and wait for her to open it.

Probably the most interesting person at Insanity, she’s easily the most fun. Her sharp wit and biting tongue stay one step ahead of the guys. And she takes everything they dish out, giving as good as she gets.

Skye’s quieter, gentler. More of a thinker with a solid presence about her, she intimidates me the most. Piper is a lot like Mitzy, a bit wild and unpredictable, but most days she’s busy with Bent or with her job as a physical therapist.

Holly—I steer clear of her. At least she never tried to step in as my stepmother, but she’s tied too close to Bash. Therefore, I don’t trust her to keep any of my secrets. Not when she’s sleeping with my dad.

“You ready?” I knock on the door again.

“Coming. Sorry.” The door opens and I blink at the white one-piece suit Mitzy wears. If I saw that suit on a rack, I would think nothing about it and would move on to the next thing, but on her, contrasted with her psychedelic hair, it’s breathtaking.

“Wow.” I take her in head to toe. “Sorry, don’t mean to stare, but you look hot in that suit.”

“Thanks. Noodles picked it out. Said it would smooth out my aura. I thought he was whacked, you know how he is about his auras, but it’s the first suit that actually makes me look like a chick.” She points to her breasts. “Small breasts, slim waist, I look like a boy most days. This makes me look like a chick. Well, at least until I start showing.” She glances down at her belly. It’s flat as a board, with no sign she’s pregnant. But it’s early.
It’s early for all the women at Insanity.

“Don’t know about that, but you’re a knockout in that suit.”

“Thanks. I told Noodles he was in charge of all my shopping from here on out. As far as knockouts go, you sure you want to be wearing that string bikini?”

“Why?”

“Sweetie, you’re a knockout in baggy clothes. In that…” She shakes her head. “I feel sorry for whatever boy decides you’re worth the risk.”

“What risk?”

“Bash, Ash, Bent, Noodles, and even Spike. You may not realize it, but the moment you came to Insanity, you became theirs. Any boy who gets near you will have one overly protective father to deal with and four impossible uncles to face down. And I totally left Forest off that list. You can imagine how that would go down.”

“My other suits were wet. This was the only one that was clean.”

“Come on. The guys are probably wondering what we’re doing and where their beers are.”

We loop arms as we head back out to the pool. Sure enough, Spike and Noodles are out of the water. They sit on the edge of the pool and dangle their feet in the water. They’ve already opened their beers.

Noodles holds up a caffeine-free soda for Mitzy, while Spike hands me a soda. Or at least, that’s what he should do. Instead, his jaw drops, and he gapes. Mitzy and Noodles miss the whole thing as they swap spit and kiss.

I wish I could do that. I’d give anything to walk down to the pool, loop my arms around Spike, nuzzle his neck, and get pulled into his lap where he thoroughly mauls me.

Spike heads over to grab two floats. He flings the floats out into the pool. “Come on, let’s leave the lovebirds to smooch. I’m sure you’d rather watch the stars than that mess.”

“Dude, my wife just got back from being away for days. It’s just a kiss.” Noodles comes up for air but then leans down to kiss Mitzy again.

“It’s sloppy, that’s what it is, and there’s no need to subject Angel to all that lip-smacking going on.”

Mitzy giggles as Noodles buries her under another barrage of kisses. Spike comes to me and whispers. “Get in the water before they come up for air.” He lowers himself into the water and waits for me.

I slide in the refreshing water. Forest keeps the pool heated year-round so that it’s perfect no matter what time of the year.
“Come on, I’ll hold it steady while you climb on board.” Spike grabs the long piece of foam while I settle myself. There’s nothing graceful about my awkward crawl, and I almost fall off, but Spike holds the foam steady. “Love the suit. Makes me hard.” He winks, and the piercings in his brow glitter.

Once I’m situated, lying on my back and staring up at the stars, Spike gets on his and floats beside me. He reaches out and grips my hand. I glance over to the edge of the pool, but Mitzy and Noodles aren’t paying us any mind. They’re lost in each other’s arms.

“I missed you today.” He gives my hand a little squeeze.

“I missed you too.”

“Tell me what you did.”

“I already did.”

“I know. You went to the spa.”

“Where I got a Mani and Pedi…”

“And waxed.” His voice deepens. “Any chance I get to see what you did?”

“That depends.” We keep our voices low, not that we need to worry about Mitzy and Noodles.

“On what?”

“On whether you’ve changed your mind.”

“About what?”

“Going slow. Because if you go slow, you’re not going to appreciate all the pain I endured getting waxed for you.”

“You’re killing me.” He reaches down and adjusts himself. “Glad it’s dark.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t need them looking over here wondering why I’ve got a boner.”

“A boner!” I can’t help but giggle. “I haven’t heard that in a long time.”

“Well, as for going slow, while we have an audience, it’s slow-mo or no-go land.”

“Do you think we’ll ever be like them?”

“How so?”

“Able to touch each other openly. Hold hands. Kiss?”

“I hope so. Are you upset that we’re not telling everyone?”
"I thought I should be, but they’re not ready for us. Mitzy and Skye talked to me at dinner about life, boys, and other stuff."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and after I mentioned I’ve always been attracted to older men, they started talking about silver foxes and to never bring a man home who was older than my dad."

"Technically, I’m a couple years younger than Bash. I’m still in my twenties, at least for a few more months."

"Yeah, but I just got a sense they wouldn’t understand."

"We’ll get there, love. Just give it time. Once they see this thing between us is solid, they’ll have to accept it."

"I hope so." A flash of light overhead catches my eye. "Oh! I just saw one."

"One what?"

"A shooting star."

"Did you make a wish?"

I bite my lower lip and turn to look at him. "I sure did."

"About us?"

"About you." I reach for him, and our fingers interlock beneath the surface of the water. "About us. About how it will feel when we..."

"Sweetheart, I’m barely holding on as it is. Do not tempt me."

"And why not? It’s what we both want. I want to feel you inside of me."

"Truth, but let’s enjoy the journey. Take things slow and get to know each other first. I’m not looking for a one-night fling, and neither are you. When we decide to come out as a couple, let’s make sure we’re one hundred percent positive first. Muddying that with sex complicates things that are already terribly complicated." He suddenly points overhead. "There! Did you see that one?"

"No, I was looking at you and wondering what it was going to feel like when you kiss me again."

"You will be the death of me." He groans and reaches for his shorts. His hand hovers for a second, then he grips himself. "I need to cool off." He flips off his float and ducks under the water. When he comes up for air, he glances over at Mitzy and Noodles, who continue to grope each other. "Come."

Spike gestures for me to follow him. He swims toward the portion of Insanity’s pool that’s cantilevered over the edge of the cliff. The bottom of the pool transitions to glass, and it’s
not for the faint of heart.

He props his arms over the infinity edge and stares out toward the ocean.

“We should give them privacy,” he says.

When I glance back, I quickly avert my gaze. Mitzy straddles Noodles lap, and I’m not sure, but they may, or may not, be having sex. If they’re not, that’s one hell of a grind session they’ve got going on.

“Damn.” I settle in beside him, making sure to place a good foot between us. There are enough questions circling as it is. No need to feed that fire. I glance at him. “Maybe we could go down to the beach?”

“Not good. Forest headed down there not too long ago.”

“The gondola is at the top of the cliff. If he did, he already came back up.”

“What’s on the beach?”

“It’s not what, but who isn’t on the beach.” I spin around to look at him. “I get you want to take things slow, but I’ve been waiting a year for this. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of waiting; besides, there’s no one down there who can hear me scream.”

“Scream?”

“I hope so.” I give a vigorous shake of my head. “If the gondola was just a taste of what you can do, I’ll definitely be screaming. Better there than where others can hear.”

“That’s what you might think, but all the suites are soundproofed.”

I bite my lower lip. “Is that so?”

“It is, and I see the gears whirling in your head. We’re not fucking in Insanity.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no way I’m risking your father, or any of the others, catching you leaving my rooms or me leaving yours.”

“Then what are we going to do?”
ELEVEN
The book "What We Do Is Play" by Spike is a gripping narrative that explores the dynamics between its characters. The narrative's protagonist, Angel, is portrayed as a character who is not afraid to speak her mind, even if it means raising eyebrows. The setting of the story is a small town, where the characters navigate the complexities of love, friendship, and the challenges of adolescence. The dialogue is rich with emotional depth, making the characters feel real and relatable. The author successfully weaves a narrative that keeps the reader engaged, drawing them into the lives of the characters and their struggles. Overall, "What We Do Is Play" is a compelling read that offers insights into the human experience.
“Is that so?” I gulp.

This is so not me. A glance toward the house reveals no lights on. All of Insanity has gone to bed. We can be discreet.

“You should probably turn off the pool lights.” She loops her arm through the bikini bottoms and reaches for my hand. “It helps to view the stars.” She places the palm of my hand on her belly and gently presses down, encouraging me to take the rest of that trip on my own.

“You’re playing with fire.” It’s the only warning I’ll give because it’s dark, no one’s out, and we’re far enough from the house that no one will see us.

“I want you to make me burn.”

Fuck if I can stop from doing just that. “Stay right there. Don’t you dare move.”

“As you wish.” She loops her arms over the edge of the pool. Slowly, she lets her lower body rise, giving me a blurry glimpse of her bare pussy beneath the water.

“Do not do that.”

“Do what?”

“I’m not kidding. Ass to the wall. You won’t be showing your pussy to anyone but me.”

“Technically, you’re the only one out here. So…” She lets her hips rise again, tempting me. “You’re the only one who gets to see, and feel, my soft as silk skin.” She kicks her leg out of the water. “Even did the legs.”

“You’ve got a choice to make.” Time to rein her in and take control.

Her brow lifts, curious but challenging.

“I can either turn off the lights to this pool and come back where I will do very filthy things to you, or…”

“Or, what?” She lets her knees break the surface of the water, and I hold back a curse.

“Or, you keep teasing me like that, and I leave you here, alone.”

“You wouldn’t.” Her eyes widen.

“I will.” I lean in close. “Something you’re going to learn is that I’m not much of a follower when it comes to sex. I like to take the lead. We do this my way, or not at all. Maybe I didn’t make that clear earlier today.”

“I thought…” She slowly lowers her naked lower half back under the water.

I lean in close and whisper in her ear. “Whatever you thought is wrong, and you’re going to love doing as I say. I’m going to make you ache for me, and you’ll definitely burn.” I
nip at her ear and smirk when I see the effect my words have on her body.

Her nipples draw into tight little buds, and her legs scissor beneath the water trying to ease the ache my words caused.

“What’s it going to be?”

I love the way her pupils dilate. It’s heady and intoxicating. Fortunately for me, the controls to the lights are nearby. I cut across the pool, stroking through the water with barely a sound. I stride out, cut the power, and plunge the pool into darkness. Without a word, I swim back to my girl.

Angel waits for me, eyes fixed on my body as I prowl the last few feet toward her.

“Now, put your feet on the bottom of the pool. Shoulder width apart—”

“But…”

“Do as I say, Angel. That’s my one rule.”

There goes her lower lip again. She glares at me but does exactly as I say. With a glance over my shoulder, I’m virtually certain nobody can see us. The only people who know we’re still out here are most likely fucking each other’s brains out. It’s a shame I don’t have a condom on me, but I’m cool with waiting.

This may not be slow, but I’m still going to show Angel what she’s been missing, fumbling around with those boys who don’t know how to give a woman a proper orgasm, and no way in hell am I wasting this opportunity.

Electricity pumps through my veins and heightens my senses. I want this woman with a passion that doesn’t make sense and a hunger that can’t be denied. I want to scream her name to the heavens, loud enough for the stars to shudder as I own this moment.

This won’t be a simple kiss. Nothing like the ride up the gondola. Soon, she’ll be in my hands, under my power, bowing beneath my demands.

But I still won’t rush this. I brush a lock of strawberry-blond hair from her face, loving the way she trembles beneath the pads of my fingers.

Relief flows through me. An odd emotion for this moment, but it feels as if a great weight lifts from my shoulders. After this, there is no more evading. No more pretending to leave the room because I don’t like her. There is no going back. I scan her face and make sure she won’t have regrets when we’re through.

“Do you want to burn?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ache for me?”
“Yes.”

“Did you get your pretty pussy waxed for me?”

“Yes.” Her head tips back and a little moan escapes her. “Please, Spike, touch me.”

My skin tightens and tingles. My dick throbs. My balls draw up, aching and wanting. I whisper in her ear as I kick her legs farther apart.

“Your nipples are tight for me.”

“So tight.”

I brush my knuckles across the red fabric of her bikini top. “This stays on.”

It’s a risk doing this out here, but nobody can see out this far from the house. We’re in total darkness and somewhat safe. Before she can react, I yank the triangle of fabric to the side, exposing her left tit to me. I take half a second to admire her perky breast before bending down to suck it into my mouth.

Her body jerks beneath me, then her back bows as I lave the tip of her nipple with my tongue. I free her other breast, pushing the fabric to the side, and wrap my fingers around the soft swell of her breast.

I stand in front of her, stepping between her legs, as I knead first one breast and then the other. I kiss and tease her nipples with my tongue until she’s panting beneath the onslaught. It doesn’t take long before she writhes beneath me.

The moment she lowers her arms, I stop, forcing her back into position. This is my time. Not hers. And she’ll touch me when I say, not a moment sooner.

It’s not that I’m some gallant lover. I demand it because I’ll blow my load like a one-pump and done virgin the moment she gets her hands on me. I don’t want to embarrass myself. We’ll get there, but first, I have several—multiple—orgasms to give my girl.

Not to spend all my time on her tits, I stroke her cheeks, her neck, and run my fingers across her belly. I can’t stop touching her, and with each touch, a transformation comes over her. No longer sweet and innocent, she turns into a carnal creature begging for more.

That’s hot.

My heart squeezes, churning blood through my veins while I force myself to take things slow. Back in the day, the guys and I had contests about who could get their chick to come first. I became proficient in the female body and how to draw out its pleasure.

I’m in no rush tonight. Honestly, I could hold her in my arms forever and do nothing other than kiss her, but her body writhes and the volume of her moans increases. Responsive in a way I’ve never known before, I feel attuned to her body. I bet I can make her come
from breast play alone. Not that I’ll waste this moment. We can explore that later. For now, my fingers feather along her collarbone. Her pulse spikes and flutters beneath my touch.

Her body rocks, seeking friction, but I’m very deliberate in how I touch and where. Her hazel-green gaze sparks with arousal as her lashes flutter and her lips press together.

“Spike, please…”

“Please, what?”

“I need you to touch me.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere, but you know what I need.”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ll make you fly. Trust me to make you feel good.” I lower my lips to the angle of her jaw.

Nibbling back, I play with her earlobe, sucking, biting, and making her jerk beneath my touch. Then I meander back to her lips, settling my mouth over hers.

A soft, gentle caress, this is more reverent than the hasty kiss I stole in the gondola. I kiss her face. Nuzzle her neck. My hands continue their exploration, running up her arms, sweeping across her shoulders, gripping her neck, and circling her breasts.

Angel lifts on tiptoe and cries out in frustration.

“You’re killing me.”

“Oh, you’ve felt nothing yet. Do you burn for me?”

“More than I can stand. Please, fuck me.” Her hips jerk forward, but I anticipate the move and shift away. Her frustrated scream fills the night as I chuckle. This is really so much fun.

She loses it for a second. Her hands fly to my head, where her fingers twine in my hair. She drags her mouth against mine, and the taste of her explodes on my tongue. I pinch her nipple, knowing it’ll make her squirm, but I need to regain control of that kiss before I do something I can’t take back.

The only reason I agreed to this at all is because the lack of a condom forces restraint. There will be no fucking tonight, but that doesn’t mean I won’t acquaint myself fully with every square inch of her body.

She groans, letting me kiss her. Our lips fuse together as our tongues tangle and dance. I lift her into my arms, then set her down again, but only to press her back against the edge of the pool. I’ve shifted us. The pool is safe, but I get the distinct impression she’ll try to climb me to get what she needs. No way am I risking an accidental fall over the
That's not how this night is going to end. I toy with the curly strands of her hair, loving how they twist and float in the water. Our kiss continues as I trace out every ridge of her ribcage. I really struggle to slow everything down.

But with her skin glistening and her breaths panting, I make one more sweep of her breasts. My thumbs roll over her nipples. They tighten for me, hardening for my mouth. I bet she throbs for my tongue, both to take her nipples in my mouth as well as someplace else. She rises to my touch, arching her back to bring her tits closer to my face.

“You’re killing me,” she says.

“Killing you softly with my touch.”

“Please tell me you didn’t recite some corny song lyrics.”

“Fine, I won’t.”

She jumps when I slip a hand between her thighs. It’s what she wants, but not what she expects, considering how slow I’ve taken things thus far. Immediately, her legs snap together as she moans. Hot and clenching, her tight pussy welcomes the intrusion of my fingers.

“Oh my God.” Angel’s head tilts back as she moans. “Oh my God.”

I go to work, using my fingers to ignite sparks of desire as she rocks against my hand. My goal is to keep her on the edge, delirious with the need to come, but unable. Holding her on the cusp will heighten her pleasure. I know exactly what I’m doing.

And I love every delicious moment.

She’s gorgeous to watch. Drops of water skate down her skin as she bucks and thrashes. Her impatient hands, freed from where I verbally bound them, grip my shoulders and dig in. She rises to my touch, pants against the slow strokes I use to tease her, and cries out when I bring her right to the brink.

Her moans drive me wild. The heat of her pussy, such a contrast to the cool water, clenches around my fingers. I can’t wait to taste her and debate making her wait until I can figure out how to do that without drowning. No way am I taking her above the surface of the water.

This is risky enough without her naked body writhing on my face. I lick between her breasts, slowing down the assault of my fingers so she can focus on the heat of my mouth and my warm breath on her skin.

“Do you need to come, love?” I can’t help but snicker.

“You are doing this on purpose.” She slaps at me ineffectually. “You horrible, wretched
man. You’re making me crazy.”

“That is my intent.”

“Just kill me now. Put me out of my misery. I can’t handle much more.”

I feel the truth of her words and debate giving her relief. I’ve made a decision, something going against everything I’ve said all night.

There’s no way I’m not sliding in her wet heat tonight. I didn’t misspeak when I said the rooms were soundproofed. I can take her in my room. The only question will be sneaking her out again.

Hot and clenching, I take her over the edge and watch as rapture flows through her with her release. She comes in waves as the walls of her pussy undulate against my fingers. Her body bucks, and her moans escalate into cries of pleasure. I stroke her through the orgasm and imagine how good it’s going to feel when I finally take her to bed.

Her arms loop over my shoulders, and she pulls herself close, burying her face against my neck.

“That was spectacular.”

“You liked that?” I can’t help but puff out my chest for a job well done.

“I feel…” She looks up and stares at me. “I’ve wanted to do that forever. I can’t believe this is really happening. I can’t believe I’m finally in your arms, touching you, loving you…” Her expression softens. “I’ve never been happier.” A meteor blazes across the sky, sparking in a million pieces as it falls. “Quick, make a wish.”

There’s no need to make a wish, not when I have everything I’ve ever wanted in my arms.

“Come.” I take her bikini bottoms and pull them off her arm, loving how much thought she put into that small act. This is much better than having to search a dark pool for the tiny thing. “Put those on.” I glance back toward Insanity. “Just in case anyone is up, I’m going to get out of the pool. Meet me in my room.” I give her the access code. “We’re nowhere near near done.”

With her wide-eyed stare watching me go, I plan out how I want the rest of this night to go. My only problem is there are so many things I want to do that I don’t know where to begin.

I don’t look behind me as I exit the pool. Angel’s smart, and she knows how to be discreet. If anyone is going to fuck that up, it’ll be me. I’m simply too eager.

I make a beeline for my suite but pull up short when I see Forest in the kitchen. He shoves a chocolate chip cookie into his mouth, glacial gaze harder than ever.
“Where the fuck do you think you’re going, lover boy?”
Well, fuck.
TWELVE
My skin tingles like tiny sparks dancing along my skin. Those electrical jolts gather to vibrate and buzz, between my legs, over my breasts, deep within my heart. I feel Spike everywhere.

The last vestiges of that coursing wave of pleasure roll through me, leaving a blissful, languid feeling following.

Absolute bliss.

I watch Spike walk away, my greedy eyes taking in his muscular frame. He's heartbreakingly gorgeous. Dangerous. And mine.

He knows how to touch a woman. How to make his words turn into toe-curling vibrations fluttering across my skin. Those vibrations reverberate within me as I remember the decadent feeling of his mouth moving across my breasts. I shake with the amazing way it felt to be held by him, controlled by him, teased, tormented, and ultimately pleasured by him.

While he walks away, I put my bikini bottoms back on with shaky hands. I still haven't fully recovered from that mind-blowing orgasm.

Who knew it felt that good?

Our evening is not over. Instead, it's only beginning, and I can't wait to feel his hands on me again, and that scruff of his beard between my legs, maybe? I know he'll indulge me.

That thought makes my skin tighten and my nipples peak with excitement. My body responds to him on a carnal level and throbs with residual sensation for him. I ache to finish what we've started—to be fully his when our bodies finally join as one.

Unrequited love sucks, but this is like opening the door to something exciting and wonderful. There are no longer doubts. No longer any endless pining for a man I thought couldn't stand me. Now, I know he feels the same—has always felt the same. I guess there really is no stopping true love.
A sigh escapes me as I clasp my hands to my chest. I feel like every little girl in her own fairy tale. Only, I’m no longer a girl, and this story is, most definitely, not rated G.

And I can’t wait to see him naked. To touch him. To hold him. To taste him. I want to see his eyes roll to the back of his head as I return the favor of that powerful orgasm and make him come apart. I imagine his hooded eyes simmering with sensual hunger as I stroke his hardness and take him into my mouth. I want to feel his body shake and tremble as the last of his restraint falls away.

I’ve actually never done that—given a man a blowjob. Seems kind of strange, but my sexual experiences are somewhat limited, geared more toward the fucking part of sex rather than the discovery of everything that goes with it.

Sparks of delirious anticipation ignite within me as I eagerly look forward to the rest of our evening. It’s hard to wait, but I give him a few minutes before following him inside. The code to his suite sears itself into my brain, and my fingers itch to type out that code and enter his private domain. All the filthy things we can do there... They run through my mind, stealing my breath and making me giddy and eager for more.

I’ve never been in his private space before, but I’ve walked past it a million times, aching, wanting, and lusting over the man I could never get out of my thoughts and who starred in my dirtiest, most erotic fantasies. This feels forbidden, which makes it all the more exciting as a result.

I take my time swimming across the pool. Water sluices off my body as I step out. I take the skimpy sarong and tie it around my waist. Pulling one of the towels out of a cabinet, I wring out my hair and pat it dry as best I can. I don’t want to be dripping water all through the house. Like leaving a guilty trail behind me leading right to Spike’s room.

Yeah, that won’t do. No matter what happens, I need to be mindful of keeping our secret.

A thrill runs through me thinking how a day’s growth of whiskers on his face tickled my skin when he kissed me. What is it going to feel like brushing up against my inner thighs? My pussy throbs thinking about it, and I’m not really paying attention to where I am.

Low, masculine voices locked in an argument pull me to a stop.

Spike stands with Forest in the kitchen with a scowl on his face and anger dancing in his eyes. Arms crossed, shoulders rolled back, his angry gaze cuts to me. It falters and slips, to be replaced by anguish.

Forest’s head swivels, slowly, methodically, taking forever to swing my way. His icy gaze freezes me mid-step.

“Angel, go to your room, it’s late.” His gravelly voice instills fear, demands obedience, and commands that I do exactly as he says.

But I hold my place.
My attention shifts to the defeated look filling Spike’s expression. I used to think how ferocious he looked with all the piercings in his brows and lips, but all I see now are the swirling currents of emotion sweeping across his handsome face.

“What’s going on?” My voice cracks a little, sounding small and unsure.

“Just having a chat with Spike. That’s all. Go to your room.”

“No.” My back straightens at that comment.

I mirror Spike’s pose, crossing my arms and puffing out my chest.

“Not up for discussion,” Forest continues.

“Look. I don’t know what bug crawled up your butt, but you don’t get to tell me what to do.”

The expression on Forest’s face freezes in place. It’s like his brain is trying to figure out how to process what I just said. I imagine there are very few people who say no to the ferocious giant. I’m tired of the men in this place telling me what to do. Then it hits, and my arms fall.

I glance at Spike. “I take it he knows?”

Spike returns a curt nod.

“The fuck I know!” Forest shouts. “The two of you aren’t exactly pulling the wool over anyone’s eyes, and it stops now.” Forest points toward the hall leading deep into Insanity and eventually to my rooms. “Get your ass in bed while I have a conversation with lover boy here.”

“I’m not going anywhere, especially since that conversation involves me.” My voice shakes at first, but it gathers steam and firms up with determination.

“Keep your voice down.” Forest’s growl thunders between us.

“Or what? Who’s going to hear?” My flippant remark is met with a pinching of Forest’s brows.

“Everyone.” Forest’s ice gaze splinters as he realizes I won’t be standing down.

“Bullshit. Noodles and Mitzy are busy fucking each other’s brains out. I suppose Ash and Skye are doing the same. Either way, I know all the suites are soundproofed from the rest of the house. You’re the only one meandering around at night, and this isn’t even your house anymore. Don’t you have people to fuck in your own little love nest? Leave Spike and me alone.” My fingers curl, and I take in a deep breath.

Spike snorts, and I swear he’s laughing. By the end of my little speech, a massive smirk fills his face. I can’t help but love how I surprised him. I bet he never thought I’d face down Forest.
As for Forest, he doesn’t know what to make of me, but before he can bluster on and tell me what I can and can’t do, I continue.

“You have no right ordering me to bed as if I’m a child. I’m a grown woman who can make up my own damn mind.”

“You’re an insolent brat more concerned about what you want rather than how it affects those around you.” Forest points between me and Spike. “I get you’re attracted to each other, but think really long and hard before you go too far with this.”

“Or what?” I prop my hands on my hips. “I don’t care what Bash thinks. He’s not the boss of me, and for that matter, you aren’t either.”

“You’re correct, little one, but I am the manager of the band, and you’re stepping in band business, stirring shit up that shouldn’t be stirred. Do you really want to be Angel Fire’s Yoko Ono?”

“That’s a low blow. Take it back.” A warning growl sounds low in the back of Spike’s throat. He exchanges his smirk for a deadly expression.

“I’m not wrong.”

“You’re dead wrong, and I don’t need to say anything. I’m having fun watching Angel dress you down, but you insult her like that again, and I will throw down with you. That’s my girl you’re talking about, and we’re figuring things out. Neither one of us wants that to happen.”

“Don’t fuck shit up.” Forest pokes Spike in the chest.

“You’re out of line.” Spike closes the distance and gets in Forest’s face. “Are we going to have a problem?”

I can’t help it. Spike’s fierce when enraged, but he’s still going up against a giant of a man. I’ve got to diffuse this situation, and soon.

Forest’s eyes pinch. He’s about to say something when I jump in, too afraid whatever he has to say will lead to fists flying, or worse.

“Forest, please don’t tell anyone. I get what you’re saying. Lord knows I’ve thought about all the reasons Spike and I shouldn’t be together. At first, I thought it was nothing more than a crush, but over this past year, it turned into something more. I get you want to protect the band. I really do, but we’re not doing anything wrong.”

“He’s literally old enough to be your father.”

“My father was a young teen when my mom got pregnant. Spike’s not that much older than me.”

“He’s a lot older than you.”
“In a few years, that won’t matter. Look, you of all people should understand.”

“I understand you’re only thinking only about yourselves. You don’t give a shit about how the two of you hooking up affects anyone else.”

“If someone told you that you had to choose between Sara and Paul, would you be able to choose?”

He snorts. “No fucking way.”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly, what?”

“The heart wants who it wants. You can no more ask Spike and me to stop seeing each other than I can ask you to choose between the loves of your life. You, of all people, have to understand. Love doesn’t give us a choice. It slaps us in the head, spears us through the heart, and tells us to hold on tight for the wildest ride of our lives. We’ll be careful.”

Forest’s whole body shakes, but he stands down. He takes a step back and runs his fingers through his hair. “I’m not going to help when they kick your ass. I’m going to stand on the sidelines and cheer them on. You know how Bash is going to take this. It’s bad enough you’re fucking his daughter, but keeping all this from him… You’re totally fucked.”

“I know.” Spike shifts his attention from Forest to me. “But the hell if I’m walking away from Angel. She’s mine, and I’m hers. If it means I have to leave the band…” His eyes simmer with passion. “There’s no debate. You can get in my face, yell at me, hell, take a swing at me, kick my ass while you’re at it, but I’ll still crawl back to her. I love her.”

My heart trips on a beat with his proclamation of love.

“She’s too young to know anything about love, and you’re too jaded to know the difference between lust and love.”

“Says the man with a wife and a Dom. Don’t tell me I don’t know the difference between lust and love.”

“Don’t you dare bring Paul or Sara into this. That’s different.”

“Bullshit.”

They face off against one another again. The air turns lethal, and I jump in the gap.

“Forest, please don’t tell anyone.” I wring my fingers in front of me. “We know this isn’t going to go over well, and we’ve already talked about giving it time—making sure this is going to last between us. This isn’t some random, meaningless fling. We love each other.”

“Then you’re both fools.” He shakes his head. “I won’t tell anyone, but I won’t keep your
secret if someone asks me outright.”

“Please...”

“That’s as good as you’re going to get from me. I’m not happy about this. I don’t like keeping secrets from Skye, and I sure as shit can’t share this with her. She’ll tell Ash, and he’ll...” He turns and slaps his massive hands on the granite countertop. Hanging his head for a second, he says nothing. “Bash is going to kick your ass.”

“That’s fine by me. If that’s what he needs to do...”

Spike and I exchange a look. I raise my hands up, silently asking him what we’re going to do. He shrugs in response.

We didn’t make it an hour before somebody found us out. How are we going to keep our relationship a secret? Forest won’t tell, but he won’t keep our secret.

Forest blows out a deep breath. He takes us both in. Lifting an imperious finger, he points to us both. “I won’t say anything, but only if you promise one thing.”

“What?” Some of the tension in Spike’s shoulders eases.

“No fucking at Insanity. No kissing. No hands going places they shouldn’t. Nothing like what you were doing in that pool.”

My gut clenches with his demands.

“You can’t ask that.” Spike takes a step toward Forest, but Forest stops him with an upraised finger.

“You want my silence, that’s the price.” He looks between us. “If this is love, you can wait. Maybe slow the fuck down? Find a way to be together that doesn’t risk a major band implosion. If it’s lust, and the two of you can’t keep your hands to yourselves, then you need to take a huge-assed pause. If you want a forever with each other, don’t fuck it up by letting your hormones get in the way.” He points to Spike’s groin. “Keep your hands to yourself and your dick in your pants while you’re at Insanity.”

“And if we don’t?” I prop my fists back on my hips, daring him to stop us.

“Then you prove that I’m right, lust wins over love, and that means this thing between you isn’t about love. Not to mention, I’ll have no problem telling Bash what his daughter is getting up to.”

“You wouldn’t,” I screech at him and want to claw his eyes out.

“Try me.” His gaze turns glacial cold. “The rest is up to you. I suggest you don’t fuck things up.”

With that, he spins around and storms out of the kitchen without another word.
I glance at Spike. “What do we do?”

“We do exactly as he says.” Spike blows out a breath. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure things out. In the meantime, we should probably go to bed—alone.” His eyes simmer with passion but fill with resignation.

“Promise me, we’ll figure this out.”

“I promise.” The corner of his lips turns up in a smirk. “Don’t worry. We’ll find a way to be together. Just let me figure it out.”

“Fine. I’m going to bed, but under protest.”

“Goodnight, Angel.”

“Goodnight, Spike.” Only there’s nothing good about tonight. Or rather, there’s all kinds of good, except the way it ends.
THIRTEEN
Cock-blocked by Forest is not the way I want to end our night, but in some small way, I agree with him.

Angel and I are too new to each other, too eager, too willing to take risks when caught up in the moment, and therefore, we lack appropriate caution.

That thing in the pool can never happen again. I shouldn’t have let it happen in the first place, but she was such a tease, and let’s face it, I wanted to do it. Even though I knew we shouldn’t.

Look how that turned out?

As for spending the night together, her rooms are buried way back in Insanity. Mine, like the rest of the guys, spread out along the side facing the ocean with its sweeping views. There’s no reason for me to be seen coming from her rooms and no reason for her to be seen coming from mine.

With all the creative energy around here, nobody keeps normal hours. From Noodles rising before the crack-ass of dawn to greet the sun, to Ash’s all-night composing sessions that last through and past Noodles’ sunrise meditation, it’s either a ghost town around here or Grand Central Station. It’s impossible to know who is up, who’s asleep, or who’s just fucking around.

That’s something I, and especially Angel, don’t need to explain at one, two, or three in the morning as we race to our respective rooms. Hell, we don’t need it at noon, three in the afternoon, or as the sun sets.

We don’t need it at all.

Considering we were exceptionally careless, caught up in the moment, or as Forest so aptly said, our lust, it’s a recipe for disaster.

Where does that leave us?

Again, that can never happen again.
Maybe if I repeat it enough, it'll sink in. As much as I want to kiss Angel goodnight, I lift a hand and wave goodbye. I exit far left, and she exits far right. In the morning, I’ll have a solution on how, and where, we can be alone.

Needless to say, I have a horrible night. I toss and turn until I finally crawl out of bed in frustration. Exhausted, I make my way to the kitchen in search of caffeine. The pungent aroma of coffee percolating into caffeinated goodness draws me like a zombie from my room.

I enter the kitchen in pajama bottoms and a loose-fitting T-shirt. Not my choice. I sleep in the nude. But Mitzy, Skye, Holly, Piper, and even Forest’s Sara laid down the law. No naked men allowed outside our rooms.

Yeah, things have really changed.

I’m the only single man standing, and yet I’ve been pussy-whipped into adhering to a string of rules that, honestly, make little sense. But this is the way of things now.

“Hello.” I yawn as I enter the room. Rubbing at my eyes, I catch a flash of psychedelic pixie dust.

“Hey, Spike!” Mitzy’s exuberance is far too much for my bleary brain, especially this early in the morning.

“Please tell me that’s a fresh pot. I’m not too late, am I?”

“Nope. You’re the first up. Well, the first after Noodles.” She wriggles her fingers out toward the pool.

“I’m surprised you’re not out there with him. I thought he roped you into his sun salutation thing.”

“I drew a line.”

“Huh?”

“You know, a line in the sand. I can’t do that seven days a week. Not when I’m up until three or four in the morning.”

One might think Mitzy meant that she was working those late hours, but she’s the queen of online games. In that tight-knit community, she’s something of a legend. At least, that’s what she tells us. I wouldn’t know.

“I see.” I take in a deep breath and glance outside. Don’t know why. Noodles isn’t out back. The sun rises to the east and we look out west toward the ocean. He’s on the other side of the property greeting the sun. “I would really love a cup.”

“One cup coming up!” Damn, Mitzy’s perky today.

“Thanks.”
She pours me a cup, and I load it with sweet shit and cream until it’s barely recognizable as coffee. The whole time she gives me the eye, and I grow more and more nervous. The thing is, she and Forest are thick as thieves.

What if he told her?

I trust Forest to keep his word, at least as long as Angel and I adhere to his terms. The issue is Mitzy’s connected to the chick brigade and they can get chatty.

With my senses alerted, I keep a wide berth and go about stirring my morning concoction of caffeine, sugar, and way more cream than coffee deserves. Finally, I can’t handle her stare and turn in a huff.

“What gives?” Sharper than I intend, she flinches.

Mitzy can be a ballbuster, but my tone gives her pause. I return a slow blink and remind myself not to be a jerk. “Sorry, give me a second to get this caffeine in.”

“No worries.” Mitzy waltzes around the kitchen island and plops down right beside me.

“Damn, girl, you got something to say, spit it out.” I’m not playing mind games with Forest’s tech guru, but I brace for reality. Forest probably blabbed to Mitzy the first chance he got.

Fucking Forest.

“I want you to tell me.”

I pause, cup lifted to my mouth, while my heart bangs away inside my chest.

“Um, tell you what?” I don’t want to dance around this too much. If I’m going up against the firing squad, let’s make it quick and as painless as possible.

Holly wanders in, rubbing at her eyes and yawning. “Coffee. Now.” Her springy red curls bounce around her shoulders as she takes a seat beside me.

Great, I’m sandwiched by the two women I don’t need to be around. Not after what I did to Angel last night.

“Am I too late for fresh coffee?” Holly blinks and scrubs at her eyes again. “It’s decaf, right?”

I look at my coffee and sigh when I realize all the caffeine has been stripped from it.

“It is. Just made a pot. I’ll get you a cup.” Mitzy flounces off her stool and grabs a cup for Holly.

“You’re a light saber,” Holly says with a yawn.

“You mean life saver,” I correct.
“Do I?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s Bash and his damn ComicCon obsession slipping out. I’ve been around geeks wielding light sabers all weekend.”

“I thought you were on a couple’s retreat.”

“We were.” She regards me through a blurry eye. “Or, at least that’s the lie he told me. He wanted to stay until tomorrow, but I put my foot down. I played the pregnancy card. I think we dragged ourselves in a little after one in the morning.”

One?

That’s less than half an hour after Angel and I had our stand-down with Forest in the kitchen. I rub at my face, realizing how incredibly close we’d been to imminent destruction.

“Well, it’s good to have you back.” Mitzy sets a steamy cup of coffee down in front of Holly. “Spike was just going to tell me how Noodles got his nickname.”

“Huh?” My brows scrunch, not following Mitzy.

“It’s what I want to ask you. Noodles won’t tell me. Absolutely refuses. I’ve asked Ash, and he won’t spill. Bent ignores me. Bash…”

Holly laughs. “Bash doesn’t know. Noodles had the nickname before the guys met him.”

“That’s true, so don’t ask me.” I shrug and play along. The thing is, I’m the only one who does know. Not that I’m saying a word, and I kind of like how Noodles is making Mitzy crazy by not telling her.

“Come on. You and him are best buddies.” Mitzy hops up and sits on the kitchen counter. She glares at me. “Tell me!”

“Tell you, what?” Noodles waltzes in, alert, refreshed and looking like he just stepped out of a spa. Unlike the rest of us who are desperately injecting decaffeinated coffee into our bodies, one sip at a time. He wears board shorts, no shirt, and flings his shoulder-length blond hair out of his eyes.

“Your girl is trying to get me to spill about your nickname.” I take a sip. “Nobody asks how I got mine.”

Mitzy gives a flap of her hand. “You’re easy. It’s because you’ve got all those piercings spiking your body.”

“I’m not that easy.” And the nickname came from one piercing in particular spiking through my body. Not that I share. Not that it’s a secret. The guys have all seen me naked back in the day of post-concert orgy sessions.
Again, it’s unbelievable how things have changed.

“Well, isn’t that where yours comes from?” Mitzy demands an answer.

“Yeah, but...”

“But nothing.” Mitzy pouts. “Why do people call you Noodles?” She directs her comment to Noodles rather than me. “I’m your wife. We’re supposed to share everything.”

Noodles goes to his wife and pulls her into a hug. “But where would the magic be if I spilled all my secrets?”

Her eyes pinch. “I will find out.”

“Find out, what?” Angel wanders in, joining the rest of us. Her smile brightens when she sees me, but then it slips as she remembers we’re supposed to be distant when in front of the others.

I totally get it and palm my cheeks in response. My reaction to seeing her isn’t something I can contain. She lights up the whole room, and I respond to that with joy coursing through my veins and a smile filling my face. With effort, I remind myself to be disaffected by Bash’s kid, but it’s hard. It’s so damn hard when Angel makes the world come alive.

Speaking of, Bash makes an entrance. He goes to Holly and wraps his arms around her from behind. She leans back and tilts her head for a kiss. Noodles stands beside Mitzy, making some sort of green grass smoothie not fit for human consumption. I sit on my stool, warming my hands on my cup of coffee, and wish I could hold Angel in my arms the way Bash holds Holly. This really sucks major, hairy monkey balls.

With a huff, I do what I’ve been doing for nearly a year and remove myself from the conversation. Instead of leaving the room entirely, I plop down at the massive kitchen table and look out the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows.

Like everyone else, I take bets on how long Angel and Bash can go without arguing. He tries to control her. She bucks his authority. And neither one of them gives an inch. So far, they appear to be coexisting quietly, but that will surely change.
It’s another beautiful California day. The faint haze covering the ocean is lifting, getting burned off by the heat of the rising sun. A few birds are out, soaring overhead.

I’ve yet to solve the dilemma of how to get Angel alone. One of my thoughts is to head into Santa Monica for the day, but I can’t come up with a reason why I’d take Angel.

Or rather, why I’d take only Angel.

A text buzzes on my phone, and I glance down. It’s Lucy. She invites me to her baby shower. My face fills with another smile.

I respond with a quick Yes and ask for details. Lucy is my first bone marrow recipient. At eleven, she was at death’s door battling leukemia when I got the call to donate.

I donated bone marrow, a simple procedure under anesthesia, then gave a second donation of stem cells to aid in her recovery. She’s happily married to a really great guy, and they’re pregnant with baby number one on the way. None of that would’ve been possible if my bone marrow hadn’t cured Lucy of a lethal disease.

I visit her on the anniversary of Donation Day and have been a part of her life since her transplant. Her folks are amazing. I reached out and they happily included me every step of the way. Lucy’s like a little sister to me, although none of the band know about her.

All they know is that I mysteriously slip away a few times a year. I don’t tell them where I’m going, or when I’ll be back, but it’s never more than a few days. I went to her high school graduation, was one of the groomsmen for her new husband, and the first person they told about the pregnancy, before their parents even. And now, I get to go to my very first baby shower.

I do the same for Trevor. He developed leukemia when he was fourteen. Angel Fire was big time by then. I flew back in the middle of a European tour when I got the call. I was twenty-one.

The guys got pissed, more so when I wouldn’t tell them why I was leaving, or where I
was going, but I didn’t miss a concert. Trevor got the bone marrow transplant he needed to live and I was back on stage to play for the fans. I was at his high school and college graduations and was the best man at his wedding.

As to why I don’t share this part of my life, it has to do with having one thing that’s just mine. It’s not for the fans. Not for the guys. It’s just mine, and I don’t want anything in the papers about it. I donated because it was the right thing to do, not because I wanted any recognition for it. I’m happy to have two very special friends as a result.

All three of us keep up with one another, sharing all the major moments of our lives. They’re the only people on the planet, with the exception of Forest, who know about Angel.

Like, they know everything. More than what Forest knows.

We have a group chat and I’ve sought their advice on what to do from the very first day Angel moved into Insanity.

Lucy convinced me to do everything in my power to hold off until Angel turned eighteen. Trevor told me how to do that.

Trevor texts that he’s able to go—and he has a surprise announcement—which brings a grin to my face. I need to update them on the new developments with Angel. But I’ll get to that later, probably when I see them at Lucy’s baby shower.

What the fuck do I get for a baby shower?

Voices rise behind me. I tune them out until I realize it’s Angel and Bash going at it again. A glance at my watch says it took less than five minutes this time.

“I would get a job, but you won’t let me drive.”

Angel didn’t have a driver’s license when she came to live here, but it was one of the first things Bash made sure she got. He was concerned about her feeling too dependent on him and thought having a car would help with that.

Unfortunately, she crashed two cars within the first two weeks of obtaining her license. Funny how I filed that fact away and forgot about it. Here I’ve been obsessing about her for what seems like forever, but forgot that she lost her driving privileges.

“You crashed two cars in two weeks.” Bash’s temper rises as does his voice. “I told you what you needed to do to get your license again. I’m not putting you behind the wheel until you take a driver’s safety class.”

“Those were not my fault.” Angel’s voice rises in frustration. “It’s like you want to keep me trapped in this place. Holding on to me for as long as you can. What if I don’t want that? What if I want to be free?”

“This isn’t a prison. You’re free to go whenever you want, but I’m not letting you leave
unless you have a solid plan, a job, plus savings for first and last month’s rent. Not to mention utilities. You’re too damn eager to leave.”

“Does it look like I’m rushing out the door?”

“No, but you should be. When I was your age...”

“Don’t start with that. Nothing about your life is normal. You can’t compare me to being a fucking rock star.”

“Language, young lady.” Bash’s tone turns low, ominous. He’s seconds from blowing his cool.

Why isn’t one of the chick brigade stepping in?

Mitzy cups her coffee, blowing on the hot liquid. Holly says nothing. Her lips press tight together, but she holds her tongue. Nodles leans against the counter, sipping his green grass, while his gaze bounces back and forth between father and daughter.

I’d step in, but I’d step on the wrong side of that argument. Wrong from Bash’s point of view, but right from mine.

“Fuck you. I don’t hear you keeping your mouth clean. You cuss all the damn time.”

“Look, if you want out of here, nobody is stopping you, but you will do it with a plan. Get a job...”

“What if I want to go to school?” Angel stands straighter and juts her chin out, challenging him.

“Have you applied? Because most kids do that at the beginning of their senior year. Not after they’ve already graduated. If that’s something you want to do, then show a little initiative. Get off your ass and...”

“Ugh! You’re impossible. I didn’t apply because I was dealing with other shit in my life. Like burying my dead mother.”

“Look, I get it.” Bash backs down. His voice softens. “But it’s been over a year. At some point, you can’t use your mother’s death as an excuse for not getting on with yours.”


This is turning ugly.

I want to defend her against Bash, who’s only trying to be the best parent he can be. Which is hard, considering Valerie never let him know he had a daughter. But these are treacherous waters. The last thing Angel needs from me is to take sides with Bash, but I see his point.
“She can borrow my car.” I toss the comment into the middle of the fray. For a moment, I don’t think anyone hears me above the shouting, but Bash responds.

“She lost her license.”

“Again, it wasn’t my fault.” Angel shakes her head in frustration. “And I didn’t lose my license. You took it.”

“You were on your phone, texting. The cop’s…”

“Don’t know shit. That truck rear-ended me. How was that my fault?”

“Because the light turned green.”

“And the truck driver couldn’t step on the brakes? You’re not pinning that one on me.” Her frustration is palpable.

“What about when you ran off the road? You were lucky you were coming back from Santa Monica and ran into the side of the cliff rather than off it. If you’d done that, you would’ve gone over the cliffs and…”

“And yet I didn’t.” Angel stamps her foot. “That wasn’t my fault either. You put me in a used car with shit for tires. The tire blew out. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Except your phone…”

“Wasn’t on.” She vents a frustrated growl. “How many times do I have to say it before you believe me? I turned it on when I crashed to call the police and you. Someone I thought might care, but no, you were pissed off because it was my second wreck.”

“In two weeks!” Bash’s face turns beet red.

“Well, maybe if you’d bought me a new car instead of that clunker, that wouldn’t have happened.”

“The car was sound, and I didn’t have a new car when I started driving.”

“Oh, I know. You tell me that all the time. You were poor, struggling to make ends meet when you were sixteen. Well, I didn’t have the luxury of driving at sixteen. I was too busy taking care of Mom. And you have gazillions but won’t spend a penny more than to pay crap on a crap car for a daughter you never wanted.”

“You have to earn…”

“Oh, I know all about earning my way. You make me feel like I should be gracious and thankful for all of this.” Angel spins in a slow circle. “Mom never made me feel like I was a burden. With you, I have to beg for scraps. It’s impossible.”

“Because you’re ungrateful.” Bash’s voice cuts, and I can’t help but cringe. He’s doing nothing to deescalate the situation. If anything, he fans the flames, making Angel angrier.
and angrier.

“And you’re an ass. I wish you’d died instead of her.” A tear trickles down her cheek.

“Angel!” Holly jumps in. “You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” Angel’s angry words turn to sobs.

I’m on my feet.

Everyone else goes silent.

“Look, I’m not doing anything during this downtime,” I say. “I can give her pointers. Take her out and practice driving?”

I feel her pain but tread a very uncertain line. Given a choice between her and the band, there’s no question that I choose Angel, but this isn’t the time to die on that sword.

I’ll give up Angel Fire if I have to, but I want to keep both. “What do you say, Angel? Do you mind spending time with me?”

God, I hope her emotions aren’t too enflamed that she doesn’t see this is exactly what we need. And I’ll do more than teach her to drive. I’ll show her how deeply Bash cares. If I can smooth over their relationship, maybe it won’t feel like such a betrayal when I tell Bash the truth about me and his daughter.

The thing is, we’re family. I don’t want to break that up. We built Insanity as a group home because we’re closer than family, bound together by fate and the crazy insanity that comes from playing in a band.

Angel swipes her tears from her face, and I can see she wants to run to me for comfort, and I want to give that to her.

But I can’t.

And she can’t.

I face Bash. There’s no mistaking the hurt on his face. He’s stuck dealing with a daughter he never knew he had, mourning the loss of seventeen years of being there for her, and Angel’s words cut deeper than any weapon. His pain is palpable.

“Bash, what do you think?” I press the point, happy they’re not arguing anymore.

“If you want to put your life on the line, go for it.” He turns to Angel. “If I could, I would’ve taken your mom’s place, died instead of her, if only so that you never had to go through the pain of losing a loved one. You’re not alone. I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. I would never wish that on another person, least of all you. But I can’t. You’re stuck with me, and I’m sorry that you hate it here.” He hangs his head and leaves without another word.
Holly hops off the stool, takes a step to follow Bash, but turns around to confront Angel. “You’re a selfish, little brat. Next time you want to spout venom at the man who’s trying to step up and do the right thing, think twice before you open your mouth. And don’t you ever throw your mother’s death in his face like that again. There are many things you don’t know about your dad. Maybe you should stop and think about that. He only wants what’s best for you. These little tantrums are killing him, one small piece at a time. You don’t deserve him.”

My stomach drops. I turn toward Angel, mouth gaping. Is it possible she doesn’t know about Bash’s twin brother? Well, shit. I pull my hand down my face and watch Holly stalk out after Bash.

Mitzy grabs Noodles’ hand, and they make a quiet exit, which leaves Angel and me alone. And that feels all kinds of weird.

Angel and I are never alone.
FIFTEEN
My entire body shakes. That’s never happened before. Bash and I yell. It’s what we do. He pushes. I push back. We scream at each other, and then we move on. I’ve never seen him so—defeated.

“What just happened? I feel like I crossed a line and set off a grenade.” I try and focus on what was said, but I was too heated. All I remember is Bash walking away.

Spike looks around the empty kitchen and draws his hand down his face. The piercings in his brow shimmer under the harsh light of the fluorescents overhead.

I want to run to him and dive into his embrace. Nothing can hurt me when he’s around, and I don’t know why, but I feel like I need comforting. Like I fought a war and lost.

Not because of anything Bash said, but because of something I said. And Holly? She never gets between me and my dad. It’s like she’s too damn scared to step into that stepmom role.

She’s basically useless, but damn if she didn’t just dress me down. Unlike Skye and Mitzy, who feel like friends and treat me like an equal, she and I have failed to connect on any level.

“Angel, do you not know about his brother?”

“He has a brother?”

“Had.” Spike shakes his head.

His voice changes, becoming soft and solemn. Not that it’s what I should focus on right now, but he’s simply, heartbreakingly gorgeous. His half-lidded eyes, with the piercings in his brow, gleam with sin and seduction, revealing an edge beneath his exquisite beauty.

His thumb runs across his lower lip, making the pierced ring bounce. “Bash had a brother. A twin.”

I try to focus on what he says but find that difficult. He makes it impossible.
Hot and clenching, my thighs press together, aching, wanting, remembering how his fingers ignited sparks of delirious pleasure late last night.

I wish we were in the pool now. Better yet, a bed. What I wouldn’t give to finally feel him sliding inside of me, filling me, taking me. My teeth gnash at the unfairness of it all. Why can’t Spike and I enjoy the simple pleasures the others do?

Because it’s forbidden?

Who cares?

Nevertheless, he can’t touch me when they’re around. He can barely acknowledge me in their presence. It’s not right. Especially when he looks at me like that. Potent male virility wrapped in the undeniable package of a very distracting man. Damn, that smolder in his eyes shouldn’t be legal.

Although he stands apart from me, his scent invades my nostrils. Someone should bottle that scent up and sell it. They’d make millions. It’s a mix of clean and woodsy, wrapped up in potent, raw, virile man. From the casual way he holds himself, all cocksure and arrogant, testosterone practically wafts off him and spears right into my brain, where I want to beg him to do very naughty things to me.

He clears his throat. “Angel, did you hear what I said?”

I snap my focus back to the topic at hand, even as I imagine how his scruffy whiskers will feel between my inner thighs.

“Angel?”

“I’m sorry.” I give a shake of my head to dispel the images swirling there and pour through what Spike said. Then it hits. I missed something important.

“He had a twin? Past tense? What happened?”

“I thought you knew?”

“I didn’t. How would I know? And what do you mean by had?”

“His brother died.” His brows tug together, and his lips press tight.

“What? How?”

“From cancer.”

“Holy shit.” I cover my mouth and crouch down. “I didn’t know.”

“He never talks about it, but it’s the reason why he shaves his head.”

“I thought he was bald.”

“Lots of people do, but he shaves his head in memory of his brother and the chemo he
endured. Look, I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a complete ass, and I totally don’t mean it that way, but you need to give Bash a break. He’s dealing with a lot of anger toward your mom for not telling him about you, and he can’t unload that anger on her because she’s no longer here. He sure as shit can’t unload it on you. It’s no more your fault than his. He’s doing the best he can, and is making a shit ton of mistakes, but please try not to use your mother’s death like a weapon. That wasn’t cool.”

“How dare you?”

“I told you it was going to sound like shit.” He holds up his hands in surrender. “I’m trying to be sensitive here, but I don’t know how else to say it without sounding like a dick.” His voice drops to a whisper. “I want to comfort you, and tell you it’s all going to be okay, but I can’t, because we’re not supposed to be... Well, you know.”

I breathe out slow as I realize what I did. “What do I do? Do I go after him? I’m not good at saying sorry.”

“I think you need to give him space, but yeah, you need to go to him, and while you’re at it, ask him if it’s okay if I give you some driving pointers.”

“I don’t need pointers on how to drive.”

“Angel.” He shakes his head again and laughs. “Think about it for a minute.”

Anger rises within me. “I don’t need...” Then it dawns on me. “Oh damn, you’re brilliant.”

His head lifts and there’s a cheeky grin on his face. “Kills two birds with one stone and doesn’t make it awkward that we’re suddenly spending time together. It also gives me a reason to not have to leave the room when you’re around. We’ll build things slow, let everyone get used to seeing us together. Then we’ll spring it on them. It can work.”

“You’re brilliant.” I clap my hands and run up to him, but he puts out a hand to stop me.

“Not yet. They’re used to me keeping my distance. We take it slow, give Forest no reason to out us, and in the meantime, it gives us a reason to be alone.”

“And all because I dumped my shit on Bash.”

“Kind of, and I want to talk to you about that if I could.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you think maybe he has a point? I mean, I get why you’re still hanging around here, and I’m not complaining. Especially since we just started to figure things out, but he’s looking out for your future. Have you thought about what you might want to do?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah, lay it on me.”
“I’ve thought of nothing else but being with you. No job. No college. It all stops with you.”

He takes a step back. “That’s—it’s something all right.”

“You don’t like that answer, do you?”

“Didn’t say I don’t like it. It’s just a lot to take in. I don’t want to be the reason you don’t pursue your dreams.”

“I don’t know if I have any dreams.”

“Well…” He rubs the back of his neck and peeks at me from behind the fringe of his dark raven hair. “You don’t need to have all the answers. There’s plenty of time to figure things out. In the meantime, why don’t you find your dad and smooth things over?”

An odd feeling comes over me, the weight of the difference in our ages peeks through the curtain.

That’s something an older person would say. Someone with more life-experience. Something Bash would say. I forget Spike’s nearly the same age as Bash, with years of life experience I don’t have. He’s been an adult, doing adult things, since before I started growing breasts, let alone started to think about boys as anything other than a nuisance.

“He’ll just argue with me again. Tell me I’m spinning my wheels.”

I don’t know if I’m talking to my boyfriend or—an older man. I tug at my lower lip, thinking about it. Or rather, not wanting to think about it.

Truthfully, I can’t call Spike my boyfriend. He’s more of an obsession. We’ve done none of the usual, normal things men and women do who date. All I’ve done is lusted over him from afar, building fantasy on top of fantasy. While I hate to admit it, some of what Forest said might be true.

Maybe we’re rushing too fast, professing love when we should be taking a step back to assess where we are and what we want?

Spike’s question kind of throws me for a loop because I have no dreams beyond being with him.

What does that say about me?

Is my world that small? Does it need to be bigger? Am I lost? Adrift? Most days, it feels that way, as if I merely exist within Insanity, surrounded by strangers, one of whom donated the sperm that gave me life.

What I don’t feel is the weight of family. The permanence of it all. The connection and roots that go deep and spread wide.

“There are a lot of kids out there that would give anything for a parent to care about them as much as Bash cares about you,” Spike continues. “Go talk to him, and when
you’re done, come find me. I’m aching to take you for a ride.” The corner of his mouth tilts into a roguish smirk.

Just like that, all I see is the man I’m desperately head over heels in love with. The years between us fade away. I know exactly what’s on his mind, and I’m more than up for taking a ride on Spike.

“I’ll be back in a bit.” I bounce on my toes, eager to spend time with him.

“Good. I’ll be out back by the pool.”
SIXTEEN
A sense of peace washes over me. Spike provides the anchor my life lacks. I want to loop my arms over his shoulders, press myself tight up against him, lift on tiptoe, and press my lips to his mouth.

But with that feeling comes a spike of fear. I’m terrified to lose what we have. Which is all the more terrifying because we’ve barely begun exploring this thing between us.

Will we stand the test of time? Or, like Forest implied, will our lust run its course and leave two broken hearts in the damage left behind? I suppose there’s no way to know the future. All we have to decide is if it’s worth the risk.

“You scare me,” I say.

“Come again?”

“You and me?” I gesture between us. “Us? Coming together? Falling apart? I’m terrified to lose what we have, especially when we don’t really have it yet.”

“I feel the same way, but I feel it in here.” He stabs at his chest, right over his heart. “I feel you in my heart, in my breath, settling in beneath my skin. We’ve got this. Together, we’re stronger than when we’re apart.”

“You’re a pretty amazing guy, you know that, don’t you?”

“I plan on showing you just how amazing I can be, but we need to get out of here. I plan on doing some pretty filthy things to you.”

“Promises. Promises.”

“Talk to Bash. Tell him you want me to help you become a better driver. We’ll get out of here and see where this thing between us goes.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

He heads out to the pool while I head deeper into Insanity to find my dad. My mind kind of trips on itself when I think of Bash as my dad. Not having one for pretty much all of my
life, it feels weird having one now. When Bash gets pissed, he hits the drums. I head back to the studio portion of Insanity and feel the vibrations of the drums long before I hear the low beat. The walls around here might be soundproofed, but nothing can contain the furious power of Bash on the drums.

I pull up short when I see Holly watching Bash from the hallway. The recording studio portion of Insanity has, among many things, private studios for each of the band members. Smoked glass windows allow people to look in without disturbing the musician inside.

Holly tears her gaze from her husband and levels it on me. She takes a step forward and raises her hand.

“You should go.”

“I just want to talk to him.”

“He needs his space, and so do you for that matter.” She puffs out her chest and glares at me. Her protective instincts engage as she prepares to bar my way. “Your words cut deep.”

“That’s what I want to talk about. I need to apologize for what I said.” I puff out a breath. “I didn’t know he had a brother.” My gaze casts to the ground and my voice softens. “I didn’t know his brother died.”

“Who told you that?”

“Spike.”

“That’s a surprise.”

“Why’s that?”

“Spike doesn’t tend to stick his nose in other people’s business and likes the favor returned.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” She draws strands of strawberry curls over her shoulder and threads her fingers through their long length.

Holly’s striking, more than gorgeous, an ethereal presence surrounds her, and reminds me of my mother. I’ve heard the stories about Bash only dating redheads. How groupies would dye their hair red just to have a crack at him. Holly’s ginger hair doesn’t come from a box, and her wild curls make me jealous.

My hair is strawberry blonde, a mix between Bash’s blond and my mother’s red hair. I get my curls from my mother, but they’re loose and flowing, whereas Holly’s are springy and
I’m sure you’ve picked up on it. Spike’s a private guy. His name doesn’t just come from the metal piercing his flesh. He’s prickly and standoffish. Doesn’t like others poking in his business. As a result, he seldom meddles in the business of others. I’m just surprised he said anything at all. That’s not like him.”

“Well, he said a few choice words to me. Told me about Bash’s brother and how my words were insensitive. Only, I didn’t know, and I wanted to apologize. Things haven’t been easy, and sometimes I...”

“Angel, I like to get to the point. Beating around the bush really isn’t my thing. You and me, there’s friction there, and I get it, but I’m not your enemy. Bash isn’t either, although you treat him as if he’s the worst thing that ever happened to you. Your mother made choices for the both of you that...”

She runs her fingers through her fiery hair. “Well, let’s just say, they make things complicated. Bash doesn’t have a clue how to be a dad, and you’re not making things easy on him. You’re too headstrong to let run wild, more likely to make poor choices than not. He’s trying to rein in all that passion of yours and stepping up as best he can. But you resent the authority he has over you. As for me, I’m not your mom. I don’t want to be your mom. I had nothing to do with her death, and I sure as shit didn’t steal your dad from her. You’ve been nothing but prickly to me and I’ve let it go. Figured you had a lot on your plate to figure out. I’m here if you need a sounding board, but I can no longer stand by and let you get away with being a spiteful brat.”

Her green gaze pierces and cuts. “Be careful where you direct your anger. Nobody here is your enemy. Least of all Bash. Certainly, not me. I didn’t take Bash from your mom. She did that, and then cancer took her from you. Life isn’t fair. It sucks. It’s painful. Sometimes it leaves you adrift and struggling to find your place in the world. You have a chance to do something very few people ever get to do.”

“What’s that?”

“You get to choose if you want to be a part of this family, but if you do, stop beating us up for things that aren’t our fault. You want him to treat you like a grown woman, then stop acting like a child. Take responsibility for your life.”

“I am taking responsibility.”

“No. You’re spinning your wheels. You have no plans for your future. Get your shit together and stop beating him up for something that isn’t his fault.”

My shoulders slump because she’s right about it all. Only, I still don’t know what I want to do with my life. My junior year in high school, when all my friends were checking out colleges and planning their futures, I was nursing my mother as she battled cancer and ultimately lost. Most of last year is a fog of grief, and the rest is filled with tons of anger.
I’m angry about everything: mom getting sick, dying on me when I needed her the most, losing my home, coming here, the complete absence of friends. It’s overwhelming. I’m so damn angry about all of it. I blow out a breath as Holly’s words sink in deep.

“I don’t know what I want.” But I know who I want.

After everything Holly says, doubts creep in about Spike. It doesn’t feel like we’re rushing into anything, considering we’ve both been holding back for well over a year, but still. Maybe we need to slow things down while I figure out what I want to do with my life?

“It’s okay not to know.” Holly places her hand on my arm. For the first time ever, I don’t flinch. “You have plenty of time.”

“Time enough to tell him I’m sorry?” I point toward the window where Bash gives hell to the drums.

“I suppose time enough even for that.” Holly steps to the side. “A word of advice?”

“Yes?”

“Be a part of the solution. Sorry is good and all, but actions are what matter. Show him you’re ready to do something. Try to be a little grateful for the sacrifices he’s made. He’s a really great guy with a heart of gold.”

“I will.” I take a step. “And, Holly?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She opens the door to Bash’s private studio and peeks her head inside. Bash stops midbeat, his body tensing at the intrusion.

His gaze cuts to the window, then I see him give a barely perceptive nod. Holly steps back into the hall.

“He’s all yours.”

I take in a deep breath and brace for a conversation with my dad.
While Angel Heads out to find Bash, I make my way outside. It’s early and I feel the need for a little sun therapy. Maybe, I need to clear my head.

I don’t buy into Noodles’ whole Zen philosophy about communing with nature, but I believe in the rejuvenating properties of the sun on my face, the ocean breeze blowing across my skin, and the smell of a crisp new day filling my lungs.

If that’s Zen, I’m a convert.

I embrace the moment and let it wash away my stress.

My attention swivels to the far end of the pool, the part where it hangs over the edge of the cliff. A serene smile fills my face when I think about what happened there last night.

It was our beginning.

It’s not like I fucked her and made her mine, but something definitely shifted between us. To be honest, I’ll take last night over fucking her brains out hands down.

Yeah, that doesn’t sound like me at all.

Thus the whole foundational shifting thing going on inside of me. Old Spike would’ve been down only for the fucking and the physical release it brought. New me craves the connection Angel and I formed.

Somehow, holding her in my arms, kissing her, and exploring her body with my hands, fingers, and mouth, feels more intimate to me than shoving my dick inside her for a quick fuck. Not that I don’t want that too. Still a guy. Still with a massive libido to feed.

With her, I want more.

I crave every sensation when I’m with her. Skin brushing against skin. Lips pressing against lips. Tongues tangling. The silky feel of her hair sliding through my fingers. The tiny gasps spilling from her lips.

I crave all of it.
Not that I can’t wait to slide inside her, but I’m in no rush. We’ve got the rest of our lives to figure everything out.

She’s mine now.

That statement evokes a visceral reaction, something indescribable, but poignant. Angel belongs to me, and I’m never letting her go.

Never.

Lucy was right. She always is. It was worth the wait. I could’ve taken Angel any number of times before. I could’ve taken what I wanted and been done with it. If I had, I would’ve cheapened things. Destroyed things. I would’ve turned us into something dirty and vile.

Disgusting.

By waiting, a burden’s been lifted off my shoulders; I know I did right not to push. In letting Angel make her own decisions, this thing between us feels right. Like the very act of waiting, of not rushing, and taking, we’ve been given a beautiful gift.

If Angel can get Bash to agree to me supervising her driving, it gives us a reason to be together. The others will become accustomed to seeing us with each other. We can laugh. Share jokes. In time, a casual touch on the forearm won’t draw an eye. Maybe a quick embrace will be tolerated. Holding hands can follow.

And then?

At some point, my hope is they’ll accept the growing intimacy between us. Nobody needs to know what happened last night or what I intend to happen very soon. That can be the private side of our story. The public part will come with time.

There is no rush.

“Yo, how ya’ doin’?” Noodles surprises me. I didn’t see him lounging in one of the chairs by the side of the pool. “What’s the deep look for?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing my ass. Your aura flipped. You’re all warm blues and yellows now, like you finally worked through what was bugging you the other day.”

“Is that so?” Maybe there’s something to Noodles’ aura thing after all? Who knows? Maybe I’m less tense?

I certainly feel different.

Instead of beating myself up over my thoughts concerning Angel, I look forward to all kinds of exploration with her, and not just the sexual variety.
I’m looking forward to getting to know everything about her, and maybe I can help her figure out what she wants to do with her life.

Hell, maybe in a few months, a few weeks if we’re lucky, I can volunteer to take her on a college tour. There are tons of great schools in California, which translates into lots of road trips we can take where traveling together won’t raise inquisitive eyebrows.

I take a seat beside Noodles and stretch out. “It’s going to be another awesome day.” I lace my fingers together and place them behind my head.

“Yeah, I was gonna go have a talk with Old Joe. Got some stuff to sort out.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“Sure?”

“Is Old Joe real?”

“Sure as shit he’s real.” Noodles snorts with indignation, like I asked the dumbest question on the planet. “What do you mean, is he real? Dude, why would I make something like that up?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like many people have a pet shark to pour their hearts out to.”

“You needing someone to confess your sins to? Cause, I can take you out to have a chat with him.”

“Ha, no, thanks. First off, I’m good in the water, but not such an idiot to put myself in those waters. Second, I’m not talking to a shark.”

“Old Joe doesn’t really talk, but he’s a great listener. If you need to offload, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. I figured out a big piece of it last night.”

“I can tell.”

“How so?”

“You’ve been grinning like a fool all morning, like a cat who finally caught the mouse and is getting ready to tease and torment it.”

“Don’t know about that, but tease and torment sound like fun.”

“Odd.”

“What’s odd?”

“Sounds like you got bit, but I don’t see any chicks hanging around. Does this mean one of your secret trips is finally bearing fruit?”
"What does that mean?"

"It’s just that when you disappear, we all kind of suspect it’s a girl you don’t want any of us to know about. I figured it wasn’t really serious because you’ve been playing the field, but that seems to have dried up over the past year."

Dried up isn’t the right word. I’ve simply been preoccupied by Angel. The need to go out and get laid lost its appeal.

For a man used to a different woman in his bed every night, that says something. Honestly, I’m not interested in touching, holding, kissing, or fucking, any woman other than Angel. It twists my insides thinking about it.

I finally understand how the other guys feel about their girls.

“So?” Noodles leans forward.

“So, what?”

“Am I hot, cold—warm?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Well, seeing how you’re no damn gentleman, I’m going with pussy-whipped, and I’m going to say it’s been about a year.”

“Kind of a precise timeframe there.” Damn, he is perceptive.

“Just observant. That’s when your aura started spiking. Seeing how you’re all calm blues and soothing yellows, I’m also going to say you’ve come to some kind of accommodation.”

“Accommodation? What the fuck does that mean?”

“Only that I see another secret trip in the near future, and I bet within the year, probably a whole lot sooner, we’ll be adding one more to our family.”

“More than one, with the chick brigade all getting ready to pop out a bunch of kids.”

“I know, but I worry about Mitzy. The Guardians keep her plenty busy. We weren’t looking to start a family anytime soon, and now we are. It’s a lot to process, but we’re not talking about me. Do you, or do you not, have a girl on the side?”

“Not answering.”

“Fine.”

“Are you going to be slipping away again soon? One of your little trips?”

“Maybe.” I’ll give him that much, and for what it’s worth, it’s not a lie. Lucy’s baby shower is still some months away. She’s not due for months, but I’m still one gift short, and it
needs to be epic.

I wish I could ask one of the girls, but that kind of question would raise all kinds of red flags. Not about Angel, but would jeopardize Lucy and Trevor’s anonymity.

The one thing I love about them is they know what I do, who I am, but don’t care about any of it. It keeps me grounded, and it’s nice to be treated like a regular guy. As for that baby gift, special doesn’t mean expensive; quite the opposite. It needs to be out of this world, knock your socks off, unique.

Maybe I can ask Skye what her favorite baby gift was when she was pregnant with little Zach?

Noodles and I shoot the shit for a while, steering the conversation clear of kids, chicks, and the rest. He’s excited for our next tour. I am too. I settle in and close my eyes as I soak up the warm rays shining down on me.

Just as I get comfortable, I feel her. One minute, I’m soaking up the California sun, working on my tan. The next, my senses are on full alert. That crazy energy crackles in the air, alerting me to her presence.

But I play it cool, aware Noodles sits right beside me.

“Hey, Spike?” Angel’s soft voice floats on the morning air. It rolls over me like a warm embrace.

I wait a beat, playing the bored rock star before answering. “What?” I don’t look in her direction. I make no move I care she’s here at all.

Noodles does. He flips around in his seat. “Hey, baby girl, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing much,” she says.

I stir and turn in time to watch her sweep her amazing curls off her face. Her hair floats around her heart-shaped face. Those hazel-green eyes of hers sparkle. The way the sun shines down on her hair makes it look like an ethereal halo floating over her head.

My angel.

“You still upset about your dad?” Noodles jumps to soothe Angel while I bite my tongue. He’s always been the peacemaker of the group. But the thing is, that’s my place, not his, but then he’s not supposed to know that yet.

“Yes and no.” Her attention sweeps back to me. “Bash said you could help me with my driving. What do you think?”

“What’s the status of your license?”

“I didn’t lose it. He took it, but I still have it.”
“Proof’s in the pudding.” I hold out my hand and flick my fingers. “You got a license, I’ll take you out. If you don’t, that’s a no-go on my end.”

“I don’t have it on me.” She gives a little snort of indignation, but I hope she’s not getting mad at me. This is the game we need to play, at least until we can get everyone on board about us being a couple.

“Well, if you wanna drive, I suggest you find it.” I pray she gets I’m just playing at being a jerk.

“You have time now?” Her lids flutter as she peeks at me. No need to worry. She’s playing her part too damn well. I know she’s just as anxious as me to be alone together.

“Do I look like I’m busy?” I make a shooing gesture. “Grab your purse, make damn sure you have your license, and I’ll take you out.”

“Gee, thanks.” She practically jumps up and down, a little too eager for my taste.

Acutely aware of Noodles watching the whole exchange, I grit my teeth. He’s my best friend in the band. If I can’t keep our relationship secret from him, we’re fucked.

Angel disappears, practically skipping inside the house while I take a deep breath and brace for comments from Noodles.

“You know…”

Here it comes. I brace for what he says next.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t be so sharp with her.”

“How so?”

“You’re prickly by nature, but positively bristle when she’s near. Makes your aura do that spikey thing again, and just when you were so chill.”

“I don’t believe in that shit.”

“Don’t have to believe in it to make it true. Whatever issue you’ve got with Bash’s kid, bury it. That girl isn’t going anywhere. She’s a part of our crazy family. Might as well get used to her. Would it kill you to be nice?”

“Didn’t think I was being an ass.”

“She withers when you’re around. All her bright pinks and pastel yellows dim when you’re around. The girl’s been through a lot. Doesn’t need you making her feel unwelcome.”

“It’s been well over a year. Don’t think me welcoming her matters.”

“Everything matters. Try to be a little nicer.”
“I’m taking her driving. How is that me not being nice?”

“Doing something under duress is one thing.”

“Actually, I remember making the offer. If that’s not me being nice, don’t know what is. Cut me a little slack. She and Bash are the ones who make things tense around here. I’ve got nothing to do about that.”

“I feel like I should join you.”

“Why?” No way in hell is that happening.

“You make her nervous.”

“So?”

“You really want a teenager nervous when she’s behind the wheel?”

“You make her sound like a kid. Need I remind you, Angel’s an adult?”

“She’s eighteen, technically still a teenager.”

“Technically, an adult.”

“Just don’t be a dick.”

“Me?” I stand and give him a look as I back away. “I’m warm and fuzzy.”

“My ass.”

“Don’t know about your ass. Don’t want to know anything about your ass: furry, warm, fuzzy, or otherwise. And I’ll be the perfect gentleman with Angel.”

I have no intention of being a gentleman.

Noodles gives me a long look, like he’s not buying my shit. He shouldn’t. I’m lying my ass off, but I’ve kept secrets from him before.

I can damn well do it again.

Unable to contain my excitement, I race inside, where I draw up short. Bash stands at the kitchen island. He turns at my entrance and crosses his arms.

“Yo.” He gives a chin bump in greeting.

“Yo?” I return a much more hesitant reply.

Bash runs his hand over the top of his shaved head. “I wanted to thank you for taking Angel out. I’d do it, but we can’t be in the same room without it turning into World War III. Put us in a car together?” He shakes his head. “It’s worse.”

“It’s no problem. Honestly, I’m feeling a bit cooped up. It’ll be fun to get out.”
"I want to ask a favor."

"Shoot."

"She won’t listen to me. She avoids Holly like the plague. Skye and Mitzy tried to talk to her, but she closes up like a clam."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"I don’t know." He presses his palms on the kitchen counter and stares at his reflection in the glossy surface. "Listen?"

"I can do that."

"Maybe guide her?"

"What do you mean?"

"I’m worried she’s stuck. What happened to her sucked, but she’s totally checked out on her whole life. No school. No job. No interest in anything. She just hangs around Insanity, and that’s not good. She’s never around anyone her age, and she sure as shit doesn’t want to listen to what I have to say. Says I’m a ‘poor role model’ because my life ‘isn’t normal.’ Whatever that means."

"I’m not sure what you expect me to do? And she has a point."

"About what?"

"At eighteen, we were playing to sold-out venues. Nothing about that is normal. We were young and famous."

"Well, yeah." He scratches his head. "I don’t even know what I’m asking you to do, but if the conversation goes there, you could maybe encourage her."

"I can try." I should say something like, I don’t know what eighteen-year-olds like, but my goal is to minimize the age gap, not draw attention to it.

"Thanks." Bash looks up as Angel enters the kitchen. She changed into a dress, and I’d bet a million bucks she’s not wearing anything under it. I’m not the only one of us who’s eager to see where things lead.

"You ready?" I turn my attention to Angel.

She holds up her license. "I am very ready."

"Well, let’s hit the road." I gesture for her to go ahead of me, then pause. "I’ll keep her safe."

"Thanks."

"No problem."
Only Bash has no idea that I mean what I say. Nothing bad will ever happen to Angel, at least not while she’s with me. I’ll protect her with my life.

That may be a bit overly dramatic, considering we’re headed out for a morning drive, but I mean every word.
EIGHTEEN
My entire body tingles with excitement. It’s almost better than last night when Spike blew my mind with his exceptionally talented, and dreadfully skilled, fingers. He blew my mind in more ways than one, and I can’t wait to blow his...

Well, blow him, and his mind, in more ways than one.

All night, and all morning, my fingers itched to wrap around his cock. Horny doesn’t begin to explain the eagerness with which I look forward to our little drive beyond the confines of Insanity.

We’ll be free. Free from judgmental eyes. Free from disapproval and disappointment. Free from societal norms which dictate who may, and may not, love one another.

As for blowing my mind, I’m eager to see what that glint of metal is that he’s hiding under his pants. If it’s what I think, things promise to be quite fun. I can’t wait to dive into his twisted mind. Hell, I can’t wait to be the victim of that devious mind.

“How long are you going to be gone?” Bash can’t help himself. He’s got to stick his nose in things, demanding accountability for every little thing. Spike is his friend. I know my dad doesn’t trust me, but doesn’t he trust Spike?

Okay, that’s kind of funny, considering. I bet he trusts Spike with his life, and mine, by extension. If he only knew what we plan to do the moment we get out from under the watchful eyes of Insanity.

Being with Spike is definitely on my mind, and from the glint in Spike’s eyes, he and I are on the exact same page.

What if Spike and I decide we’re never coming back?

What if we decide to drive to Vegas and do what every other man in the band has done?

What if we get hitched?

That would be a shock.
Bash can’t stop us, and he can’t interfere if we’re legally wed. Honestly, I just want his nose out of my damn business.

When a mother smothers her child, it’s call smothering, but when a dad does it? Do we have a word for that? Nothing comes to mind.

“Actually…” Spike rocks back on his heels. “I was thinking a few hours, maybe more.”

“Why?” When Bash questions Spike, my teeth gnash together.

“Well, I thought a drive to Santa Monica might be fun. Would give Angel plenty of time behind the wheel. Depending on what time we come back, we might stop for a bite to eat. So, later this evening?” His molten gaze cuts to me. “Unless, you can’t stand hanging that long with me?”

I want to bounce on my toes. He’s talking an all-day excursion. “As long as I get to drive, I’m good.”

And sex. Plenty of sex.

Containing my excitement proves impossible. Thankfully, Bash thinks it’s because I get to go behind the wheel again, supervised of course, but who the fuck cares? I get to be with Spike.

Bash pulls his phone out of his back pocket. “Just keep your phone charged.” That comment is for me. He couldn’t care less if Spike keeps his phone charged. Yet another instance of the overwhelming smothering Bash lays on me.

“Promise.” My grin is wide and full of I-won’t-behave.

Bash doesn’t know the grin is on my face because Spike’s, hopefully, going to fuck my brains out. I’ll let Bash assume my eagerness is because I get to drive.

“Ready, Freddy?” Spike gestures toward the garage.

“Let’s hit the road, Joe!” I gleefully clap my hands, looking more immature than I’d like, not that I care. Spike and I are headed out, and that means we’re finally going to fuck.

“Never come back, Jack.” Spike winks at me.

I love our easy back and forth. It’s crass. I know. But, I’ve been waiting well over a year for this. I might be romanticizing this more than I should, but he’s everything I’ve ever wanted. A little bit edgy, a little bit rock and roll, ignore the cliché, he wants me and I want him. What else matters?

Spike shakes his head as I race out of the kitchen. All I want is to grab his hand and run, tear his clothes off and slam him against the wall. Better yet, have him slam me against the wall. That makes my lady bits tingle and ache.

Can people really fuck like that?
It’s one of my fantasies, but the mechanics appear complicated. Not to mention it’s got to take a bit of strength. My lower lip curls beneath my teeth as warmth spreads through me.

“I’d love to know what’s going through that head of yours.” Deep, throaty, powerful, and all male, Spike’s comment sends my stomach into a free-fall.

“I bet you can figure it out.” I tease him, daring him to speak the words. The words which say he wants me as much as I want him. I’m so addicted to him, I can barely be still.

His gaze cuts to the wall beside us, and his smile breaks into a full-on grin.

“Let’s put that on the list.” He holds up a hand, effectively putting me on notice. “Behave.” Pointing to one of the many surveillance cameras peppered throughout the house, he reminds me of the not so passive monitoring Forest installed.

I forget about the cameras. They fade into the background most days, but it’s a good reminder.

We must be careful.

Nobody monitors the cameras. At least, that’s what Forest says. They were installed back when Insanity was built. Back when the guys partied nonstop and before they, ever so slowly, one by one, began to fall to the women in their lives. It was a security device installed to protect against intrusive groupies seeking more than the all-access backstage pass they enjoyed.

Those cameras record on a 72-hour loop. Nobody monitors them anymore, but they can if they want to. That remains imprinted on my mind. I can’t sneak into Spike’s rooms, and he can’t sneak into mine without the cameras recording it. For that matter, we can’t sneak out of each other’s rooms. There is a record of that activity, tracking our movements throughout the estate.

Yet another reason to remind me that we must be cautious.

When we get to the garage, Spike stops. “Pick one.”

My jaw drops. “You can’t be serious?”

The garage at Insanity is as insane and over the top as the rest of the place. Tunneled into the ground, the garage holds well over a score of supercars, hypercars, and other collectable cars, some of which cost well over a million dollars.

“Well, none of Forest’s babies, but your pick.” Spike’s eyeballs mimic my own. There are cars you drive. Cars you look at. And then there are cars you stay well away from.

I casually stroll through the collection. The first time I saw this place, I nearly got my hand chopped off. Evidently, you’re not supposed to touch the cars. Something about the paint and my fingers leaving oils behind, and then there’s the thing about my fingers
acting like fine-grit sandpaper? All I know is look but don’t touch. Lesson learned, and we all adhere to those rules. No exceptions.

Whatever. I will never understand men and their cars. Instead, I lift on tiptoe to whisper in Spike’s ear.

“Which one is the best to get fucked in?”

“I like the direction of your thoughts, but I’m not fucking you in a car. At least not for our first time.”

“Why not?”

“Because I intend to savor our first time, little brat.”

He pokes my nose with his finger. I love the way the corners of his mouth twitch into a smirk and how his eyes heat and spark with devious thoughts. There is so much he knows that I do not, and I can’t wait for him to introduce me to the deviousness of his mind.

Sex with Spike isn’t going to be a physical interaction. It’s going to be life-altering. I can feel it.

“Fine, but something comfortable. There’s something I want to try.”

“What’s that?”

My gaze cuts to his groin. “Just been wondering what you’re packing.”

“I’m hard enough to drill a hole in these pants.” Spike, unapologetically grabs his crotch. “Now, pick a car. It’s time we both get a little relief.”

“The Porsche?”

“Red or black?”

“Hmmm, red for speed?”

“Won’t be any speeding today, young lady.”

“I meant the speed it takes to get into my pants.”

“Red it is.” Spike grabs the key fob for the red Porsche and jogs over to the car. He opens the passenger side door and gestures for me to enter.

I prop my hands on my hips. “I thought I was driving?”

“Not around these cars. I’ll pull out, and we’ll pull over the first chance we get so you can…”

“I hope you don’t pull out. I’m looking forward to finally getting fucked by you.” I curl my lower lip and bat my eyes. Keyed up describes only the tip of the iceberg when it comes
to how much I want him, and by the time we’re done, there’ll be a full arctic thaw underway.

“Get in the damn car.”

The way his words come out, in that low, throaty growl, makes my insides melt. His tongue sweeps over his lips, making the metal piercings dance. I squeeze my legs together, excited to finally feel the scruff of his beard burning between my legs and all the things that wicked tongue of his can do.

With a little squeak, I get in the car. I buckle in before he makes it to the other side. By the time we drive out of the palatial garage, my hand rests on his thigh.

He glances over at me and winks.

“You’re all mine now.”
NINETEEN
I squirm in my seat. “I can’t wait for you to make me burn, but first...” I slide my hand up Spike’s thigh and love the way his muscles clench. When the tips of my fingers brush over his hard length, he reaches down and grips my hand.

“Easy now.”

“I don’t want easy.” I lick my lips as I look at him. “I want it hard, unyielding, and I want you in my mouth.”

He presses his lips together and his entire body jerks as I sweep my fingers up and down his hard length. The fabric of his shorts grows taut as he grows longer, harder, and more insistent.

“I aim to please.” His eyes grow dark and hooded as he removes his hand. “But word to the wise, you’re playing with fire and I’m driving. How will it look if we get in a wreck not five minutes out?”

“How will you feel when I swallow your cock and suck you dry?”

“For the record, I intended for today to be a lady’s first kind of day.”

“Santa Monica is a couple of hours away. I can wait.”

“We’re not going to Santa Monica.”

“We’re not?”

“I rented a house. We’re ten minutes out.”

“Then I’d better get busy.” I reach for his zipper.

Part of me thinks he won’t let me do this. Spike is a take-charge kind of guy, but he doesn’t stop me as I flick open the top button of his fly, or when I lower the zipper. The low rasp of the metal sends the butterflies in my stomach into a frenzy.

This is it. There is no going back.
I finally get to see—him. Christ, but I need to get a grip. It's happening. No longer a foolish crush. I have him in my hands. Soon, he'll be in my mouth. My chest swells with warmth. We're finally going to do this.

He adjusts the way he sits, slouching back a bit. His attention shifts from the road to my hand, to my eyes, and back again. The pull of his breaths changes, growing deeper and more aroused by the second.

"You're going to be the death of me." His heated gaze follows me as I reach in and pull out his turgid length.

"Oh my God, is that..."

"That is something you're going to fall in love with." The devilish grin on Spike's face tips into a full-on, smug-as-shit smirk. I want to crawl into his lap right now and see if it's true. There may have been a little behind the scenes research going on after I first spied that flash of metal.

Swollen and hard, a silver ring pierces the flesh of his cock. I stare in wonder, not sure what to say. Are questions allowed?

My fingers sweep over the tip and move the metal. Spike hisses, drawing in an unsteady breath. His hand comes down, gripping my wrist. My hand doesn't move, but my fingers continue to explore, running all over the bulbous head of his cock and tweaking the ring of his Prince Albert back and forth.

"This may not be the best idea." He huffs, barely able to concentrate. The car swerves a little, and I kind of agree. Not that it changes anything. I'm completely, and utterly, entranced.

"I've heard about these, but never..." I roll my lower lip inward and bite down. "Does it hurt?"

"The only thing that hurts is how much I ache for you." He scans ahead, tackling the curving roadway with controlled precision.

"Does it ever get caught on things?"

"What things?"

"Well..." I squirm as the ache between my legs turns ungodly. "Down there."

"Never."

"What about..." I point to my mouth.

"Music to my ears." His mischievous eyes twinkle. "I'm sorry. Was there a question?"

"Like..." Too shy to say it outright, I point to my mouth. "I can go down on you, right? It's not going to get caught?"
“Oh, darling, I can’t wait to fuck your pert little mouth. And no. Doesn’t get caught on a thing, but you might want to watch your teeth.”

My eyes widen. I swear they practically bug out of my head. Spike laughs as we speed down the road. He removes his hand and places it back on the wheel.

“I love your hands on me.” His deep voice sends tremors shooting down my spine.

“You do?”


That last bit is a question. I don’t know the answer to it. My sexual experience doesn’t hold a candle to his, but I’ve researched. I’ve watched Piper and Bent. Those two embrace the lifestyle, and yet it never intrudes on the lives of the rest of Insanity’s unique clan. I admit it holds some appeal, but I’m full of questions.

I lick my lips. “I want to taste you.”

Glancing out the front window, I debate the pros and cons of going down on him in the car. We’re headed south, which means we’re on the oceanside of the road. One misstep and we’ll careen off the cliffs.

As much as Bash annoys me, his concern over my well-being is appreciated. Not that I’ll ever admit that to him.

“I love the stimulation of your hand,” Spike says. “It drives me wild, but go too far and...”

“I get it.” I lean back and glance out the window.

To the left, California’s coastal hills undulate toward the horizon, where they will eventually buckle and rise to become the formidable Rocky Mountains. To our left, the cliffs drop a hundred feet onto the rocky coastline and certain death. The ocean continues on toward the horizon from there, calm on the surface, mysterious underneath.

Caution is our friend.

As metaphors go, there is none more formidable than that one.

“Give it ten minutes. Ten minutes and we’ll be at a place that’s ours for the day.” Spike urges caution.

It’s something I should heed, but the truth is, I’m invested. I’m one-hundred percent, totally, invested in him. There’s no way to express how much he means to me. I’d call it a schoolgirl crush, but there’s more lingering beneath the surface.

He’s my rock, the stability I seek. My anchor, he’s the one who keeps me grounded. In the desperate lows following my mother’s death, he’s what got me up in the morning to face the next day. Even when I thought he couldn’t care less, I struggled to rise on the off
chance I would run across him sometime during my day.

I’m the rope. He’s my anchor. But somewhere, in all of that, he’s also what sets me free. I know it makes no sense, but isn’t that what love is about? There’s freedom in letting go.

“Just the day?” I want eternity.

“Well, I had to rent it for the night, but a sleepover on our very first time out together might raise a few eyebrows.” I feel his discouragement. Like him, I’m ready for us to begin, but we’re trapped.

Trapped within the expectations of the family that surrounds us. The family that loves us. The family we desperately want to be a part of. Running away doesn’t solve anything. If anything, it creates more problems than it solves.

The last thing I want is to come between Spike and the band. I won’t be that girl; the woman who destroyed everything.

Talk about having a weight on my shoulders. The agony of it all wears me down. Us together sounds wonderful. Us, not together, feels like the seventh circle of hell.

I’m terrified of losing him, but if I’m the reason Angel Fire falls apart, I’ll be the first person running out that door. There’s selfish, and then there’s stupid. I may be young, but I’m not blind, or dumb. There’s more at risk than a silly girl’s fantasies.

I lean back in a huff. “Why can’t we just be together?”

“We can, and we will, but it’s going to take time.”

“It’s not fair.” I release him and cross my arms over my chest in a pout.

“The only thing that’s not fair is how much I ache for you. It’s unbearable.”

“I ache for you too.” I reach over and sweep my fingers down his sculpted bicep. “You’re all I ever think about.”

“When I look at you, my thoughts tumble. After all these years, all those women, why are you the one who makes my heart ache?” He reaches for me and kisses the back of my hand. “My past will never go away. It’s a lingering shadow that will always haunt us, but I never want you to feel less because of it. If I could, I’d erase it.”

“I don’t want you to do that.”

“Why not? It’s complicated and ugly...”

“And brought us together. I know who you are, or were; either by reading about it in the tabloids, or piecing it together. You’re right. It’s out there. A ghost of your past, but I’m not interested in your past. I want to be your future.” I grip his arm. “But Spike...”

“Yes?”
“I can’t be one of many. I need to be the one. If that makes me selfish, or foolish, you need to tell me now. If you can’t commit to me—please let me go.” I hate the way my voice shakes. I hate the way my body trembles. Never in my life have I been this transparent. This kind of openness is for the birds. It’s hard. It’s painful. It’s raw and overwhelming. I quake in my seat, needing him to reassure me and convince me I’m not crazy.

His smile softens, and the features of his face relax. “You’re the first thing I think of when I wake and the last thing on my mind when I fall to sleep. My past is my past. It’s there, but it’s not our future. It’s not who I am. This isn’t a fling. You’re not a fling. You keep me up at night. Stir my thoughts. Make me crazy. And you make me reckless. I hope that’s not what you think?”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re just a fling.” He grips my hand and kisses my knuckles. “I don’t know what love is. I don’t know what we are, but when I think about living without you, my chest seizes. My bloods chills. My heart stops. If that’s love, then you’re my future.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to think.”

“You’re my today, tomorrow, and all the days that follow.”

“Are we crazy?”

“How’s that?” He glances at me, then grips the wheel as he maneuvers around a hairpin curve.

“The things I feel for you—they’re soul-sundering. There will be no walking away from you.”

“I won’t...”

“Stop.” I grasp his arm. “You have a past. I have a past. Yours is much more colorful than mine, but it’s not a part of my experience with you.” I blow out a breath, not sure if I’m adequately communicating what I feel.

There’s nothing but to push through these strangled emotions.

That’s what I do. I lay it all on the line. Spike will either break my heart or make it whole. There is no middle ground. I embrace that and brace for it. Although, I pray there’s no need for that.

“What do you need?” He grips my hand and raises it to his mouth. His soft lips graze my knuckles.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you need to know, to believe, that you are mine?”
“I honestly don’t know.”

And that’s as honest as I can be with him. I want forevers tied into neat little bows, but that’s not Spike. It will never be him. He’s all hard edges and rough spots. Things to be wary of and things to love. He’s the thing I love, and with that comes the power to destroy me.

I should run, but I flock to him like the poor, desperate moth drawn to the flame. He holds the power to destroy me, but I don’t care. As long as I have one moment with him, I’ll die happy as I burn.

Don’t judge. It is what it is. He holds the power to destroy me. Are his womanizing ways behind him? Or am I simply the latest dalliance easing his current bout of boredom?

I cling to a fantasy like I believe I’m some magical creature. That I’ll be everything he’s ever dreamed about. My pussy is a thing of magic, which will make him eschew all other pussy forever.

Does that sound desperate?

Deep within me, darkness lingers. It whispers and mumbles and demands attention.

You will never be enough.

It says he will cheat. He will fail. He will hurt me in the end.

It’s for me to stand fast and believe in what he says.

Spike loves me. I love him.

We are perfect together.

At least, that’s what I hope.

In the back of my mind, there are the rumblings of doubt.

I will never be enough. Happiness is not mine.

And I hate every treacherous thought.
TWENTY
Driving with my dick hard and throbbing challenges the last vestiges of any restraint I may have left. I ache to slide inside Angel and feel her warmth wrap around me as I make her mine. As much as I enjoy the feel of her hand on me, I tone things down, but only because there’s no place to pull off the road.

If there was a pullout, or a lookout not already occupied by early morning tourists, I’d be there, sliding into Angel with this terrible need within me.

Fortunately, the house I rented isn’t too far. Jaw clenched and fingers wrapped around the wheel, I tamp down my need and focus on getting us there safe and in one piece.

It’s with great relief when I finally pull up the drive. No lie, it feels as if my dick’s going to explode.

Angel sits beside me, eyes wide as she takes in the seaside home. Propped on the cliffs, it overlooks the Pacific. Nothing like the sprawling estate that is Insanity, it’s nonetheless an extraordinary home. Tiled roof, stucco exterior, flares of architectural tidbits here and there to make it visually interesting.

Like many of the homes along PCH-1, there are few windows facing the road. All these houses take full advantage of the amazing view overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Which means, there’s little reason to worry about curious eyes watching us during our little retreat from the world.

I glance at Angel, taking it all in. I want to hold this moment as long as possible. Any hesitation on her part will come now. That’s what I watch for, and if there’s any, we’ll leave, because the moment we cross that threshold, she knows exactly what will happen.

“We can always turn around.” It’s important to me that she doesn’t feel rushed. That’s the last thing I want. Her tongue sweeps between her lips, drawing my eyes to her rosebud lips.

“I don’t want to turn around.” Her hand goes to the door handle then pauses. “I’ve waited too long.” Shifting gears, she leans toward me and cups my face. Her gaze sweeps to
mine, dips to my mouth, then returns to stare deeply into my eyes. Angel leans in, and I let her take the lead. Lord knows I’ll take control soon enough. She wets her lips and presses them against mine. There’s not much room in the Porsche, but she maneuvers herself onto my lap. I reach down and activate the seat control, sliding all the way back, to open up space for her between the steering column and my body.

She kisses me softly, light and hesitant, while I palm her backside and help her place her knees to either side of my legs. My fingers splay around the globes of her ass, gripping possessively while guiding her to me. I meet the tentative strokes of her tongue, not too hard, not too soft, but damn if her little nibbles and hesitation aren’t the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced. She fills my arms, moving sinuously in my grip as she settles first one knee and then the other on either side of my hips.

“**We could go inside,**” I whisper between kisses.

“I need you now.” Her desperation is hotter than her kisses.

My cock rises to meet her passion, and I slowly slide the fabric of her dress up around her legs. She needs no encouragement and reaches down to help me out.

In one fluid movement, the fabric slides up and over her hips, rises above her tits, then continues on over her head, revealing her naked body to my hungry gaze. At least we’ve answered the question of what she’s wearing beneath that dress.

There are no barriers between us. My dick weeps for her, desperate and throbbing to sink within her wet heat.

Angel is fully and completely bare to me. The heat of her pussy radiates to my dick, making me ache in the best possible way.

“**Fuck, you’re going to be the death of me.**” An agonized groan slips from my lips. Fast and furious, that’s how I’ve fucked before. Divest the chick of her clothes, slide on a bit of protection, warm her up with my fingers, rarely ever my mouth, then slide in to home base. A bit of furious fucking to generate enough friction, then come and done.

Somehow this feels different. In no rush to hit a home run, I revel in every step we take, every sensation flowing through my body. Each hitch of her breathing is music to me. Each undulation of her body drives the beat of my heart. Angel’s beyond gorgeous. Straddling my lap and naked, she’s a force of nature.

“I need you in me.” Her soft, seductive voice holds no hesitation. Instead, it fills with desperation and need. I echo her thoughts and grip her hips. “**We can do slow later, but for now...**” she pleads with me.

Thankfully, I want this too.

“**Hang on.**” My dick is out, wet, and weeping for her.
Someday, I’ll fuck her with nothing between us. Until then, we’ll use protection. She leans back as I reach around to my back pocket.

There’s so little room in the Porsche. Why is our first fuck out here when there’s a perfectly good bed inside? Good question, but Angel doesn’t seem to be in the mood to wait.

I rip the foil packet and sheath myself with one hand. It’s something I’ve done hundreds of times, but this time everything feels different. When I glance up, Angel stares down at me. Her strawberry-blond curls cascade over her shoulders and bounce with her movement.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I crave to have her in every way, and it goes far beyond sex. It’s deeper, carnal, and possessive. I desire to make her once and for all, mine. “Are you ready?”

She needs no encouragement, but there is the faintest hesitation.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just, you’re so big. Is it going to fit?”

Best damn words for any man to hear. I can’t help the wolfish grin spreading across my face. “It’s going to fit just right, but we’ll go slow. Okay? Let me know if it’s too much.”

Angel bites down on her lower lip. That’s easily the most seductive thing on the planet.

I place my hands on her hips, lifting, and guiding. I place her hot opening right over the tip of my dick and wait for her to commit.

I would’ve taken this much slower, warming her up with my hands, mouth, and so much more, but Angel doesn’t want slow. She’s hot and wet, dripping for me. Her arousal fills the air, curling around me and filling my nostrils until I’m intoxicated with the promise of sex.

She grips my shoulders, holding me, as I gently, relentlessly, lower her down on my cock. In this position, she’s in control, but she allows me to lead.

“Spike…” Her breaths come out in staccato bursts as I simultaneously lower her down on my cock and thrust upward. Her thighs tremble.

“You okay?”

I’m not hung like a stallion, but I’ve been blessed. I’m long and thick. Some women have trouble tolerating my girth. I don’t want to hurt her.

As I ease in, I watch her face for the telltale pinch of pain as I stretch her tender flesh. Instead of pain, she tilts her head and bows her back. A low moan escapes her as I slide her down another inch. Her fingers dig into my shoulders as I thrust upward and sink
I'm in her, not yet buried to the hilt, but the warm, welcoming heat of her body surrounds me and fills me with the urge to rut. Holding back is hard, but I want to make this as good for her as possible.

The air crackles with electricity, and the temperature rises in the car, heating the air between our bodies. I kiss her softly, rubbing my tongue against hers as the delirious sensation of filling her runs through me. I capture her breaths as her body opens and draws me deeper. I swallow her whimpers as her hips undulate with the need to move.

Her grip tightens on my shoulders, holding me, keeping close. I ache everywhere, hungry for her with a need I'll never sate. A madness overcomes me, fueled by lust and flamed by desire. With great difficulty, I hold the madness at bay. This is my Angel. She's mine to fuck, to love, but ultimately, she's mine to care for and worship above all else.

I cradle her ass and caress her with the pads of my thumbs. Her breasts grow heavy, and her nipples peak and tighten. Her belly flutters with tiny ripples of pleasure as she lowers down.

Heat shoots through my loins and my body jerks, needing to go deeper, until fully seated inside her tight body.

"Fuck, you're tight."

"You're huge."

"You feel amazing wrapped around my cock."

"You feel incredible inside of me." She bites her lower lip. "It's never felt like this before."

Slowly, she lifts her head until her gaze settles on me. My attention never leaves her face, except to kiss her warm, welcoming mouth. The slippery caress of our tongues mix and twine with the heat of our passion. Her tiny moans morph into panting groans as my intrusion continues.

She flattens a palm against my chest and draws back, looking down between our bodies. "Christ, it feels..." Her lids close, and her mouth parts as she slides further down my shaft. "So good."

I won't tell her how much better it will feel once we start moving. The metal ball of my piercing will stimulate her inner walls, dragging against her g-spot, until she comes apart. My skin draws taut, sensation everywhere, as her body undulates over mine.

"Spike, it feels—you feel—ahhh." Her head tilts back.

Her back bows. Those luscious tits push forward until I can no longer resist. I lick the pebbled flesh and flick the tight peak of her nipple.
Her sighs trip in the air until light laughter follows.

“You like that?” I give another flick of her nipple then draw it into the heat of my mouth.

“Very much.” A smile fills her beautiful face, blinding me. “I can’t believe we’re fucking. It’s better than I ever imagined.”

“Hun, this is nothing. Wait until we move.” To demonstrate what I mean, I roll my hips back, pulling out a few inches, then thrust upward. Her eyes roll back.

“Oh my God. That feels... Is that the...”

“Yeah, sure is. Just wait until I can really fuck you. Once I get you out of this car, I’m going to show you a whole other world.”

“You’re bigger than I thought.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” I lick between her tits and shift to the other breast, needing to give it equal attention.

“It’s just, the other boys... They didn’t feel like this.”

“Making comparisons?”

“No—well, yes.” I love her openness and the shyness that comes with it. “They were not like this. I didn’t feel them filling me like you do.” She glances down, between us. “You’re still not all in?”

“Easing my way in. Don’t want to hurt you.”

Angel nibbles on her lower lips. “My whole body is trembling. Like little bolts of electricity zinging through me. Sex never felt like this. This. You.” Her head tips back as her mouth opens. “You feel amazing.”

“As do you.” I slide her down the last inch and let her settle there. “You okay?”

“Mm, more than okay, but Spike...”

“Yes?”

“I’ve never done it like this. Do I move? Or do you? Or...”

I thrust upward, needing to bury every inch inside of her. With my hands on her hips, I don’t need any help.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you want.”

“Right now, I just need you to move.”
“Happy to oblige.” My hips rock back at the same time I lower her down on my hard length.

Angel’s eyes close, and she gasps on a strangled breath. For a moment, I think I hurt her, but then she slams her body down taking me all the way to the hilt.

No need to help, Angel finds a rhythm, lifting and sliding back down. Her hips roll as her tits bounce. I’m in heaven watching her fuck me. Her body writhes in a wordless plea as she seeks her pleasure.

I trust her to know her limits and meet her stroke for stroke. Her movements fuel my hunger and send liquid heat shooting through every extremity. It sparks in all my pleasure centers, gathering at the base of my spine, where it’s primed to explode.

My balls grow heavy, and I know it won’t be long. Unwilling to come before her, I kiss her tits and dominate her with my tongue. Moving from exquisitely soft licks to harder bites with my teeth, I stimulate her, own her, and drive her wild.

Angel barely holds on, arching against me and thrusting her breasts against my mouth. She whimpers, mindless with the need to come. I meet her as she slams down on my cock, thrusting and rocking to meet her relentless rhythm. Like her, I’m desperate to fuse our bodies into one.

She’s definitely wet. Rivers of her arousal coat her inner thighs and drench my shaft, lubricating our movements as we seek completion.

My hands cup and caress her breasts as my mouth devours her soft cries. She moans beneath my kisses, cries out beneath my touch, and mewls with every grind of our bodies. Her excitement rises. The muscles of her thighs tremble with pulses of pleasure.

I kiss her deeply, wildly, wielding my tongue, mouth, and lips like weapons with only one goal in mind; our mutual detonation as we seek our release.

The friction of our bodies sliding together grows sharper, centering all sensation where our bodies meld together. Her breaths burst forth and morph into cries as she finally falls over the edge and gives in to the pleasure coursing through her.

I don’t stop. My hips continue to thrust. My fingers grip her hips as I alternately slam her body down on my cock and lift her up.

Pleasure builds in the deepest recesses of my body and spreads outward, peaking and crashing over me. My fingers dig into her hips as my balls tighten and draw up.

My skin feels as if it’s on fire as the pressure within my dick builds. It swells and pulses as all that pleasure rushes through me. I come violently, groaning and jerking as I thrust inside of her, fucking mindlessly as I ride that wave. My legs tighten, feet press to the floorboard as my toes curl. My body jerks. My heart melds with hers as I realize a solid truth.
Angel’s mine as much as I am hers. Our souls not only connect, they fuse into one.

We come down from the incredible high together, clinging to each other long after the tremors in our bodies subside. With her weight on me, she leans against me, laying her head on my shoulder. Together, we catch our breaths as we float on the high of our union. Her head lifts and her soft lips press against my neck.

“That was...” She lifts and nearly separates us, but my fingers clamp down on her hips, and I pull her tight against me. Semi-hard, I’m not ready to be separated from her.

“I’m never letting you go.” I draw back until our gazes connect. “You’re amazing. You know that, don’t you?”

The faintest pink fills her cheeks. “Not nearly as amazing as you.”

I reach over and grab her dress. “Put this on.”

It’s a shame to cover her nakedness, but fucking in the car was risky enough. My girl will be covered for the short trip from here to the door, but once inside, there will be no need for clothes.

I hold back a groan as Angel pulls off my cock. She crawls back to her seat and draws her dress down over her head and back around her body.

I exit the car first, glance around the perimeter, then move around to help her out of the car. Holding hands, we walk to the front door. I input the code I was given and hold the door as she walks inside. Glancing outside, I can’t help but grin. For the rest of the day, Angel is all mine, and I’ve thought about this moment for a very long time.

I can’t wait to begin.
TWENTY-ONE
I walk like a drunkard and hang onto Spike as he leads me inside. My arms and legs feel like limp noodles, blissfully sedated and still riding the heavenly glow of that orgasm.

That is a first for me. I’ve never come from penetration before. Usually, I need a long warmup, sometimes far too long; so long, I’ve lost the interest of my partner before. Hey, I’m not proud. I’ve had very few real orgasms.

I don’t know what it is with Spike. Why is he different? Maybe it’s because of the epic buildup. I’ve lusted over him for the better part of a year. Maybe that was my buildup? Foreplay spanning an entire year?

Could be.

The door closes behind me. Spike wraps his hand around my hip and holds me firmly against him. I place my hands on his shoulders and take a moment to peruse his face. I wonder at the piercings. Is there a story there? Or are they simply a young boy’s rebellion as he underwent the arduous process of becoming a man?

My leisurely perusal ends at his eyes. I stare at him. He stares back. I breathe out. He breathes in. Neither of us moves as we drink the other in.

Heat rises within me. That weird crackling in the air returns. We continue to stare at each other, breathe each other’s air, both of us unblinking as our breaths synchronize and the truth wraps around our hearts.

Something shifts within Spike. I’m unable to put a finger on it; one moment, his eyes smolder with the most powerful love I’ve ever experienced and then something lets loose within him.

In the blink of an eye, he launches at me. Our mouths crash together. Our teeth click. Tongues spear and stab. Hands grapple. Kissing, scratching, pulling off clothing, our bodies grind together like deranged lovers.

He divests me of my dress. I pull off his shirt. He kicks off his shoes while I grasp and
fumble at his pants. Together we remove all our clothing until we’re both naked.

Hard again, his dick presses against the juncture of my thighs, demanding entrance as my pussy throbs with need. I ache from our first time, but crave to be filled by him again.

The burning demands of my body call out as he spins me around and presses me against the door. He thrusts a hand between my legs, plunging his fingers deep within me, fast and furious until I rise on my toes as another orgasm rips through me. With my body still jerking, he rams inside of me and ruts like an animal.

His bold touch drives me wild. The terrifying fury of his cock drives me insane. He licks the back of my neck, sucks my earlobe, and drives into me until a third orgasm slams into me.

Wild and driven by the most primitive need, Spike fucks me against the door, spins me around and carries me to the kitchen counter, where he drives into me some more.

Our day continues from there. He fucks me on the floor. Fucks me on all fours. He fucks my mouth and takes me on the bed. We clean up in the shower, where he drives me insane with the talent of his mouth and the magic of his fingers.

We fuck outside on the balcony where my cries of pleasure meld with the raucous calls of gulls flying overhead. We fuck on the couch and again on the floor as the sun slowly sinks to the horizon.

Spike holds me in his arms, speaking of forevers and tomorrows without end. The sensation of our bare skin pressed together is more than I can bear.

Several hours later, we return to an empty home.

Nobody stirs at Insanity.

Nobody except Forest.

He catches us outside as we gaze up at the stars. We lounge on separate chairs, fingers intertwined, and jerk apart with a start.

Forest says nothing as he moves past us and disappears inside the kitchen. Nothing except for the severity of his expression and the slow shake of his head.

“He knows.” Spike breathes out a shaky breath.

“There’s no way he can know about today.” I twist in my seat, trying to lay eyes on Forest.

The kitchen door opens, and Forest stalks past us. He says nothing, but his glacial gaze lands on Spike. With a slow shake of his head, he mumbles something I can’t hear and disappears into the night.

“He knows.” Spike squirms in his seat.
“How?”
“Who knows how Forest knows anything?”
“Is he going to tell?”
“He won’t say anything as long as you and I keep our hands to ourselves while here.”

I lean back with a groan and already miss Spike’s fingers playing with mine. I thought that was something I could do—behave myself while at Insanity—but after today, it feels wrong not to touch Spike.

“How?” With a huff, I draw my knees close. “It’s not fair we have to hide what we are.”

“You know what will happen if they find out.” Spike keeps his voice low, even though there’s no one outside to hear. “We’ll take things slow. Today was a test.”

He goes on to explain how he sees things progressing. Conversation. Laughter. Tiny touches. Short embraces. Spike lays it all out, obviously, he’s been thinking hard about how to break the news he and I are a couple to the rest of the gang.

It warms my heart, knowing he obsesses about us as much as I do, but it hurts as well. There’s no reason for us not to be together. No reason except for one overly protective, overbearing asshole.

I appreciate Bash. I’m thankful he opened up his home to me. I’ve even forgiven him for abandoning me, and I know he didn’t, but I grew up thinking my father left me. That isn’t Bash’s fault, but it’s still something I had to let go.

And I have.

I’ve let it all go.

But he’s still not my father. We’re not real family. There’s nothing but a bit of shared DNA tying us together.

No memories.

No past.

Nothing.

And now he’s the thing—the person—standing in the way of my happiness.

I’m not happy about that in the slightest.

I don’t like having to wait. I hate that Spike and I can’t be honest about us, but I understand why we can’t jump in and proclaim our love.

We take things slow. Spike no longer leaves the room when I’m around. He stands closer
to me than ever before, but it feels like he’s on the other side of the world.

We settle into a routine. Each morning we share breakfast, sometimes alone, most times with any of a number of Angel Fire’s odd clan. After breakfast, Spike takes me driving.

One week turns into two.

We spend that time fucking each other’s brains out at the same house Spike rented that very first day. We’re like horny teenagers, wild and curious, who can’t get enough of each other. Then we return to Insanity and resume our routine.

No touching.

Very little talking.

It’s a living hell, full of unnecessary space separating us. But we adhere to Forest’s rules. No touching. No kissing. No hugging. No fucking. It’s torture.

We sit around the kitchen table, eating breakfast in relative silence. Today, like most days, we’re not alone. Skye is here with Ash and little Zach. A pile of Cheerios sits in front of little Zach. Instead of eating them, he discovered a new game, throwing them one at a time off the table while squealing with glee.

Spike sits at the opposite end of the table from little Zach’s highchair. Something on his phone distracts him. He keeps looking at the phone and responding to texts as they light up the screen.

I sit toward the middle of the table. It’s the closest I dare get to Spike. Ash laughs, encouraging little Zach in his mayhem, while Skye shakes her head and gives up.

“You…” She points at her husband. “You get to clean this up.”

“Oh, come on. It’s just a little fun.” Ash pouts, which is a really funny sight considering he’s all lean muscle with that fabulous tattoo crawling up the side of his neck.

Mitzy breezes in from outside and grabs some fruity yogurt as she rushes past. “Hi! Bye! Gonna be late for work!”

A few minutes later, Noodles joins us, plopping down across from me. He glances at the box of Cheerios and grabs a handful straight from the box. Little Zach watches and stretches out his hand, pouting when Noodles doesn’t surrender the box.

“You two going driving again? Can I catch a ride?” Noodles tosses a Cheerio in the air and catches it with his mouth. Little Zach squeals with delight.

“Actually,” Spike rubs the back of his neck. “I gotta ditch driving lessons today.”

“Why?” I blink at him, surprised. This is news to me.

“Something came up. I’ve gotta go.”
“Where are you going?” I try not to sound like I’m prying, but it comes out all wrong.

Noodles gives me a look. His gaze swivels to Spike. “You disappearing again?”

“Yeah.” He rubs at the back of his neck.

I’m learning Spike’s tells, and that one says he’s keeping something from me.

“Dude, we’ve got prep work to do.” Noodles rolls his eyes. Something about his posture says Spike’s done this before, not that Noodles likes it. Of course, that gets my attention.

“Do it without me.” Spike rises from the table. “I’ll be back in a few days.” Without another word, he leaves.
TWENTY-TWO
THE URGE TO follow Spike wars with my need for discretion. In the scheme of things, Spike canceling my driving lessons means nothing. Therefore, I need to act like I couldn’t care less.

The only problem is that I do care. I care a ton, and it doesn’t matter we have to keep our relationship a secret. We’re still in one, and I deserve some sort of explanation. Like, where the hell is he going?

Discretion wins, but that doesn’t mean I don’t fish for answers.

“Does he do that a lot?” In the year I’ve lived here, I may have obsessed over Spike, but I never tracked his every move.

“Yeah, sometimes Spike just disappears.” Ash joins us at the table. He snags the cereal box from Noodles and lets little Zach grab the handful of Cheerios he’s been dying for ever since he saw Noodles do it. As his sticky toddler hand disappears inside the box, I make a mental note not to eat from that box in the future.

“What does that mean?”

“Just something he’s always done. Once or twice a year we lose him.” Ash shrugs. “Sometimes more.”

“Lose him? How do you lose a rock star? Don’t you keep tabs on each other? Don’t you know where he goes?”

“Not when it comes to our private lives.” Ash kicks back. “I don’t know. It’s always been that way with him. Hey, you remember that time in Berlin?” He looks to Noodles.

“Oh yeah, he up and left in between concerts. Didn’t tell us where he was going, if he was even going to be back in time to play the next venue, and kept us waiting until the last minute when he waltzed back in like he hadn’t been gone the past forty-eight hours.” Noodles rolls his eyes. “It happens. It’s kind of his thing. He leaves. Is gone for a few days. Comes back like nothing happened.”
"That’s weird." Why aren’t they more concerned about where Spike disappears to?

"It’s Spike." Ash gives another shrug.

"Well, I guess I have the day to myself." I try to make that sound like no big deal. Except it is. It’s a very big deal.

"He’s not bugging you, is he?” Noodles asks.

"What?” I stop in my tracks. "Spike? He’s not bothering me at all."

"Good. He can be a little intense.” Noodles gets up from the table. “I’m headed out. What time you want me back?”

"Guess it doesn’t matter now. I wanted to run through the setlist and prep, but with Spike gone, that’ll have to wait."

I slowly ease my way out of the kitchen. I want to find Spike before he leaves. Maybe he’ll take me with him. Or tell me where he’s going?

I’m snooping, and I hate it, but that does nothing to stop me from seeking him out. Instead of going to his suite, which would raise eyebrows, I head to the garage. Unless he’s taking the helicopter, he must come through here if he’s leaving Insanity.

A few minutes later, my patience is rewarded when he turns the corner. My eye goes to the overnight bag he carries.

"Hi.” I lift my hand and give the weakest wave in history.

"Hi.” He shoulders past me and opens the door to the garage.

"Where are you going?” I shouldn’t ask. I sound needy and a little bit obsessive, but I can’t help myself.

"I just have to go.” His gaze cuts to the cameras and reminds me we’re being watched.

We’re not. Nobody mans those cameras, but they do record. If anything were to happen, those tapes can be reviewed.

This is where I should turn around, but I follow him into the garage.

"Where are you going?” I rock back on my heels and wait, like I’m not hanging on his answer.

"I just gotta leave for a bit. I promise I’ll be back.”

My lips press together as he tosses his bag in the front trunk, or frunk, of the Porsche. I always thought that was a silly name.

"How long are you going to be gone?”

"I don’t know.” His attention shifts to the surveillance cameras. "Look, Angel, you really
shouldn’t be here. This doesn’t concern you. I’ll be back when I’m back.”

“Will you text me? Can I call?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Look, just hang out for a few days. I’ll see you then.” With a dismissive shake of his head, he leaves me. The door to the Porsche shuts, and the low, throaty growl of its engine fills the garage.

Before I can react, he pulls out and disappears from view, leaving me confused and concerned.

Where are you going, Spike?

Over the next few days, while I know I shouldn’t, I pry. I ask everyone questions about Spike’s odd disappearances, trying to make it sound natural—normal—and work it into conversation whenever I can.

All anyone tells me is this is what Spike does. Ever since the band hit it big, there have been times when Spike dropped everything and disappeared. He never gives a reason and never speaks about it afterward.

This morning, I work on Mitzy. She always seems to know everything about everyone. A technical genius, Mitzy has her shit together. I admire that, just as I admire Skye and her career as a physician. Unlike them, I’ve done nothing to further the trajectory of my life.

“Your job sounds amazing.” We sit around the kitchen table talking about nothing serious.

“I can’t imagine doing what you do.”

“I like it, but it’s not typical.” Mitzy sips from her water. Dressed in yoga pants and a loose-fitting shirt, she left Noodles outside to finish his morning meditation.

“How’s that?”

“Well, it’s not 9-5, that’s for sure, but I don’t think any job is really 9-5.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not really.”

I glance outside. “What about Noodles? Does it bother him that you’re working all the time? Or that you have to drop everything when a mission pops up?”

“Not really, although I never really asked. I had this job when we met. Just started it, in fact. I guess this is normal for us.”

“I suppose normal for anyone in Angel Fire is unusual. Where else can you disappear for days at a time? Like Spike does? I guess he doesn’t have to ask his boss for permission to take a few days off.”

“Spike doesn’t disappear often. But you’re right and wrong. He’s not accountable to
“anyone, but all the guys are accountable to each other.”

“But isn’t it weird to just disappear like that? And no one knows where he is?”

“I’ve never heard of Spike’s trips being an issue.”

“Do you know where he goes?”

It’s subtle, and I probably wouldn’t have caught it if I wasn’t specifically looking for something, but Mitzy knows something.

“All I know is that it’s private. None of the guys ask, and he doesn’t say. He’s not the only one that up and goes at the drop of the hat.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Noodles does it all the time. If there’s even a hint of a good swell hitting the beaches in Hawaii or Australia, you can bet he’s on a plane to surf those waves.”

“I guess it must be nice for Noodles to go surfing whenever he wants.”

“True, and he takes off more than Spike ever does.”

“Do you join him?”

“No. That’s his time, and I can’t really be away from the Guardians for that long. Not to mention there would be nothing for me to do. Noodles is singularly focused when it comes to him and the waves.”

“He’s got a funny name.”

“Tell me about it, and the bastard won’t tell me how he got it.”

“Spike knows.”

“So I’ve heard.” Mitzy’s eyes narrow. “You know what?”

“What?”

“I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Noodles?”

“No. Get Spike to tell you. He’s the only one who knows how Noodles got his nickname.”

“Why would he tell me anything?”

Mitzy gives me a look, then shakes her head. “Sorry, forgot I’m not supposed to mention it.”
“Mention what?”

“That you and Spike are...” She makes a vague gesture with her hand.

“Are what?” All my senses go on high alert. “We’re not doing anything.”

“Riiiight...” Mitzy rolls her eyes.

“What do you think we’re doing?” My gut churns and bottoms out.

“You’re secretly dating.” She covers her mouth and lowers her voice to a whisper.

“Did Forest tell you? He wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. He promised.” This is seriously bad. I need to get a hold of Spike and let him know.

“Forest knows?” She sits back, shocked.

“Isn’t he the one who told you?”

“No, that bastard didn’t say a word.” She presses her finger to the table. “You’re telling me Forest knows?”

“Knows what?” Skye breezes in and grabs a banana off the kitchen island. She comes over to sit with us.

“Your brother knows about Angel and Spike.” Mitzy keeps her voice low, but she’s agitated.

“Forest knows?” Skye’s eyes practically bug out of her head. “How does he know?”

“How do you two know?” I rock back and forth, seriously concerned.

They glance at each other and exchange a look.

“Does everyone know?” My gut does more than churn. It’s in a total free fall. I glance between them. “Who knows?” This is bad. It’s so bad.

“I thought it was just us, but evidently, Forest has been holding out.” Skye peels the banana and takes a bite. “I can’t believe he kept a secret from me.”

“I can’t believe he kept it secret from me.” Mitzy scoots back. “That little rat.” Her eyes narrow, and I can practically see the gears whirling in her head.

“Who else knows?” I repeat my question, more insistent, but they’re more concerned about Forest keeping a secret from them than the fact my entire life is about ready to implode. “Does Bash know?”

“God no.” Mitzy gives a dismissive wave of her hand. “He’s oblivious.”

“What about Holly? Does she know?” If Holly knows, it’s a sure bet Bash will know soon enough.
“I don’t think so.” Skye takes another bite.

“Piper? Bent?” My entire body shakes. This is so bad.

“Doubtful,” Skye says. “I can’t believe Forest didn’t tell me.”

“Ash? Does Ash know?”

“Know, what?” Forest’s low rumble precedes him as he wanders into the kitchen.

Mitzy pops up out of her seat and walks up to Forest. She places a finger over his sternum. “You’ve been keeping secrets.”

“What secrets?” Forest’s gaze cuts to me then shifts back to Mitzy.

Mitzy gestures back to me. “About Angel.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He grips Mitzy’s wrist and make a show of moving it, along with her finger, off his chest. Grabbing a banana, he sidesteps her and joins me at the table. “What’s Mitzy going on about?” His normally icy gaze simmers with concern as he takes me in.

I could deny it, but there’s no point.

“They know.”

“About what?” Forest peels his banana.

“About me and Spike.”

“What about you and Spike?” He takes a bite.

“Oh, you can stop it, beanpole.” Skye blows out her breath. “Mitzy and I know all about it.”

“Know, what?” His eyes twinkle.

“You’re impossible. You know that?” Skye puffs out an exacerbated breath. “We know that Angel and Spike are secretly dating.”

“Is that so?” Forest takes another bite and chews deliberately as he stares at Mitzy and Skye.

“Okay, that’s it.” I place my palms on the table and stand. “I need to know what you know. How you know. Who you’ve told, and…”

“Calm down, Angel.” Forest tosses the banana peel on the table. “Skye and Mitzy won’t tell a soul. I told no one, and I’m pretty sure they haven’t either. The two of them are thick as thieves and love a bit of juicy gossip.”

“But, how?”
"It’s the way the two of you look at each other when you think no one’s watching,” Skye says. “And you’ve been spending a lot of time together lately.”

"Driving lessons."

"Girl, nobody needs that many driving lessons. The two of you need a better M.O."

"What’s that?"

"Motus operandi?” Mitzy rolls her eyes. “You know, another way of doing things. We caught on pretty quick. It won’t be long before Bash figures it out.”

"I need to find Spike.” I can’t believe this is happening. We’ve been so careful.

"Spike’s out of pocket,” Mitzy says.

"I’ll call him."

"He never picks up. When Spike is gone, he’s gone.” Forest pulls out another chair and props his feet on it. “Don’t stress about it.”

Forest’s wrong. If I call Spike, he’ll pick up.

"Don’t stress? How can you say that?” I glance at the three of them in turn and realize one important thing. “None of you seem to disapprove?”

"Why would we?” Skye shrugs.

"Do I really need to spell it out?"

Mitzy looks confused.

"She’s worried about Spike and Bash.” Forest leans back and cracks his knuckles.

"Why are you worried about them?” Skye finishes her banana, gathers Forest’s discarded banana skin, and tosses both in the trash.

"Um, because I’m Bash’s daughter?"

"It’s unconventional for sure.” Mitzy stands and stretches. “But I can’t see Bash having a problem.”

"You don’t think he’s going to have a problem with his friend dating his daughter?” I can’t believe none of them are concerned about that little twist.

"As long as Spike treats you right.”

"None of you get it. Bash is totally going to freak.” I’m freaking out right now, and I’m ungrounded without Spike by my side. “Do none of you know where Spike is?”

Mitzy’s lips press together, but Skye and Forest shrug.
“He’ll be back when he’s back,” Forest repeats. “You can try calling him, but honestly, it’s not a big deal.”

“What’s not a big deal?” Bash and Holly wander in holding hands.

Holly’s hair is wonderfully wild as it bounces around her shoulders and falls to her waist in a cascade of unruly, but perfectly beautiful, curls.

I love her hair. It’s free and not constrained, much like her personality. In contrast, Bash has no hair. I know why that is now. Yet again, I feel bad about the things I said to him.

“Nothing.” Not in a mood for a confrontation, I storm out and pray Forest, Skye, and Mitzy keep my secrets.

I need to get a hold of Spike as soon as possible.

But when I dial his phone, he doesn’t take my call.
IAN LOVECRAFT IS A VERY SICK, incredibly strong twelve-year-old battling cancer. When the call came in, matching me to Ian as a bone marrow donor, I didn’t waste any time. I dropped everything, even rushing past Angel in my haste to get to the hospital as quickly as possible.

Now, I sit with his parents and the doctors. Since this isn’t my first time donating bone marrow, the doctors’ explanations of what to expect answer more of the parents’ questions than mine.

“Kaleb, we really can’t thank you enough.” Ian’s mom takes my hand in hers. “This is just the most incredible gift…” Her voice trails off as tears pool in her eyes.

Kaleb is a name very few people know.

Outside of the bone marrow transplant physicians, and the families I help, nobody uses my real name.

I guess I’m like Noodles in that regard. He earned his nickname before the age of three. As a piano virtuoso, he learned to play before he learned to talk. His parents said he had fingers like noodles as they flew across the keyboard.

I don’t know if he even remembers his real name. I don’t, but I know the story. He had his name legally changed to Noodles when Angel Fire first started playing. It’s on all his official documentation, driver’s license, passports, school records—everywhere. Which might explain how Mitzy hasn’t uncovered his real name. Actually, I’m surprised with all her technical skills she hasn’t figured it out yet. I’ll never tell. I took a vow of silence when Noodles told me. We were twelve years old. The same as Ian is now. Although, instead of battling leukemia and spending our childhood from inside a hospital, we were out making trouble and stirring shit up, doing normal boy things.

Ian doesn’t have that luxury.

Regardless, Kaleb Crowne is my legal name, known to only a few. It’s the one piece of myself that I selfishly keep to myself. I don’t want the rest of the world to take that piece
of me away. It’ll get perverted and twisted, especially when people discover what I do for my bone marrow recipients. The thing is, matching a donor to a recipient is a roll of the dice. I can’t save the world, but I can meaningfully touch three lives.

Mr. and Mrs. Lovecraft didn’t know about my alter ego as Angel Fire’s lead guitar player until a few minutes ago. I like to keep that little fact tucked away, revealed only after everything is set to proceed.

They always find out, but we start off as me, Kaleb Crowne, an ordinary person doing an extraordinary thing.

My piercings are out. Don’t want to scare them, but Mrs. Lovecraft eyes my tattoos. I point to the one on my arm she’s been staring at.

“This is the first tattoo I got after Lucy’s transplant.”

“How is she...” Mrs. Lovecraft’s voice trails off.

I know what she wants to ask. She wants to know if Lucy survived. I’m here to give hope, and I believe in miracles.

“Lucy is twenty-two, married, and is getting ready to have her first kid.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” Ian’s mom’s eyes brighten. Some of the tension she’s been carrying in her shoulders eases. She now knows there truly is hope for Ian to lead a full life.

I’ve talked to Lucy, and Trevor, and they’re okay with me sharing their stories. It helped Trevor’s mom to know about Lucy, and I hope it helps Ian’s mom to deal with her son’s illness.

“I got my first piercing the day of her transplant.”

“Piercing?”

“Yeah, I have a few.” I point to the spots on my brows and temples.

I hold back on the lip piercings for now. I took them out because I didn’t want to scare Ian. They can be a bit intimidating. Although, they’re probably more intimidating to Ian’s parents than they will be to him.

“I didn’t mean to stare.” She dabs the corners of her eyes with a tissue.

I need to put all the piercings back in within a few hours. The face is well vascularized and heals super quick. I don’t want the holes to close.

“If it takes your mind off what’s happening, if even for a minute, stare all you want. I got this tattoo when I donated stem cells for Lucy. She had a rough time with her first transplant.”
“We just want to thank you for being here for Ian.” Mr. Lovecraft takes his wife’s hand in his. He’s a gruff man of few words. I can’t tell if that’s simply how he is normally or if his son’s illness makes him choke up. Honestly, it doesn’t matter.

“I can’t wait to meet him, if that’s okay with you. Before I do, I have a favor to ask.”

Mr. Lovecraft gives me a look, like he expects me to make some outrageous demand. I get it. I get the hesitation. Ian’s illness has traumatized his parents. They’re hesitant about accepting help, especially from a stranger.

“As you know, Ian is my third bone marrow recipient.” Most people only ever get the call once in a lifetime. Which is why I believe in miracles. “Trevor was my second, and I already told you about Lucy.”

I show them pictures of Trevor and explain the tattoos I got after his transplant. Then I show them a picture of me with all my piercings. As expected, it’s a bit of a shock to Ian’s parents, but not nearly as big of a surprise as when I told them what I do for a living.

“I’d like to keep this between us. If the media gets wind of this, you’ll be facing a media circus when you need to focus on Ian’s recovery.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying to process.” Mr. Lovecraft can’t stop staring. “You mean nobody knows you’re Spike, lead guitarist for Angel Fire?”

“No one but Lucy and Trevor, and their families, of course. Which kind of brings me around to asking a favor.”

“Um, yes. What is it you want?” Mr. Lovecraft squirms in his seat. “We were told everything was taken care of. That there wasn’t a fee.”

“A fee?” Then it hits me. “Oh God, no. That’s not it at all. I just want to ask two things, actually, and it’s totally okay to refuse.”

“You’re giving our son the gift of life. I’d say we’re in your debt.”

“I don’t see it that way. I see being a donor as the best gift I’ve ever received. Very few people sign up to be tested; fewer still are ever matched to a recipient. I see it as a blessing, and I’ve been extraordinarily blessed in life. If you allow it, I’d like to pick up the bill.”

“The bill?” Mr. Lovecraft’s brows pinch together. He doesn’t get it, but he will. I spell it out.

“Yes. For this hospitalization and any other outstanding medical bills you may have. Angel Fire does a lot of charitable work, but this is my personal contribution.”

“Kaleb, we would never ask you to do that.”

“This is part of the reason I like to keep my public life out of it. I have the resources to
help, both in my blood and my bank account. If that’s something you’d be okay with, I would really like to help with Ian’s medical expenses. Anything his insurance doesn’t cover...

“Stan…” Mrs. Lovecraft grabs her husband’s arm. Tears fall freely down her face now. He places his arm around her and hugs her tight. Seeing that they need a minute, I excuse myself.

“Um, I need to finish up the consents. I’ll give you a moment.” I haven’t yet been able to ask them about the other thing.

While I fill out the consents for the bone marrow harvest and anesthesia, Mr. and Mrs. Lovecraft talk to the doctors. Ian won’t get my marrow today. That procedure is scheduled for tomorrow, and I’m really hoping his parents will let me talk to him, either before or after the procedure.

Ian’s been on pretty heavy immunosuppressive medications getting his body ready for the transplant. His immune system is shot to hell. The last thing I want is to accidentally infect him with a virus I don’t even know I have, but I really want to meet the kid. He’s a fighter, and I pray he’ll be a survivor like Lucy and Trevor.

“Kaleb…” Mr. Lovecraft stands when I return. I’m dressed in scrub bottoms and one of those hospital gowns that gape in the back. A blue cap covers my hair as I prep for surgery.

For me, the harvest is simple. A little bit of anesthesia. A needle shoved into my hipbone. They take the marrow, and I wake up with a sore hip. His parents treat me like a hero, but I’m really not. I’m just a guy trying to do some good in this world.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for such a generous offer. It means the world to us.”

I did a little digging and Ian’s medical expenses are on the verge of bankrupting his parents. The only reason they aren’t financially devastated is because of the insurance Mr. Lovecraft’s company provides. I can help make their life a little easier.

“Thanks for letting me help out. I’ll send you all the details.” I shake hands with Mr. Lovecraft. Mrs. Lovecraft pulls me into a hug. It’s tighter, and more familiar than it should be, but that’s okay. I don’t mind one bit.

“Do you think I might be able to meet Ian? Afterward, I mean.”

I don’t want them to think my donation comes with any strings. And if they want to keep my identity from Ian, that’s totally cool too. My whole public persona comes with a lot of baggage.

“We’d really like that.” Mrs. Lovecraft’s smile is coming easier now. It’s my hope I’ve
helped to ease her burden in some small way.

“Mr. Crowne?” A nurse calls out my name.

“Well, this is it.” I stand and gather the awkward gown around me.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Lovecraft clasps her hands and holds them to her chest while she weeps.

“Thank you.” Mr. Lovecraft stands and shifts back and forth. He’s a strong man, a proud man, and completely devastated by his son’s illness.

I excuse myself and head back with the nurse. They place an IV, give me my anesthesia, and I wake up a little groggy on the other side. It’s really a rather simple procedure. I wish more people were willing to place themselves on the bone marrow registry.

Mr. and Mrs. Lovecraft are there when I get out of recovery and invite me to dinner. It’s there I tell them about the special bond I share with Lucy and Trevor.

“This is Lucy’s graduation.” I show them the photos on my phone, and this is when she went to prom.”

“It’s amazing how you’ve kept up with them through the years.” Mrs. Lovecraft takes a long time looking at my photos.

“We get together at least once a year to celebrate Donation Day.”

“Donation Day?” Mr. Lovecraft checks out my piercings. They’re all back in place.

“I look a little different now, don’t I?”

“I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to stare.”

“It’s no problem. Each means something to me. I got one for Lucy’s bone marrow transplant, then again when she needed stem cells. I got this one for Trevor.”

“Will you be getting one for Ian?”

“I’d like to.” They’re permanent reminders of how fragile life can be. I even got one after I met Bash and learned about his twin’s battle with bone cancer.

“You have pictures of Lucy with Trevor? All three of you together?”

“Yeah, when Trevor found out about Lucy, he wanted to meet her. He had a lot of questions for her. We meet up every year with each other on both of their Donation Days. That first picture was the year Trevor was officially pronounced cancer-free.”

“You’re an incredible man, Kaleb.” Mrs. Lovecraft wipes the corner of her eye. “What about their parents?”

“Here, let me show you.” I flip the phone to another set of pictures. “We all get together
at the annual Angel Fire Bone Marrow Registry drive. They get backstage passes to meet the band. It’s all kind of tongue in cheek.”

“Why’s that?” Mr. Lovecraft switches his perusal of my piercings to my tattoos.

“Because they’re all in on the secret, and they know no one in the band knows. It’s our little secret society reunion.”

“That’s crazy. I can’t believe it hasn’t been leaked out.”

“We developed a special bond through the years. Keeping it secret makes it more special.”

“I see.” Mrs. Lovecraft keeps flipping through my photos. “Is that... Will you do that for Ian?”

“Only if it’s okay with you. I’d love to meet him, but he still has a long road ahead of him. I would never want to intrude, but it may, or may not, help things if he knows who I am. Trevor told me that being a part of a secret society brought him a sense of being special, especially when things were rough. He said it helped him. I’d like to offer that to Ian.”

“Who’s this pretty girl?” Mrs. Lovecraft turns my phone around, and I can’t help but grin. My heart trips a beat when I see Angel’s face. It’s a cameo photo, one of many I took when no one was looking.

“That is Angel.” My heart swells just thinking about her.

“She’s someone special, isn’t she?” Mrs. Lovecraft watches my reaction and her expression softens in that way it does with women when they realize a man’s in love.

“She is very special.”

“Girlfriend?” Her attention shifts to my left hand where there’s no wedding ring.

“For now.”

“And for later?” Her expression brightens.

“I hope to make her my wife.” I take the phone back from Mrs. Lovecraft. “You probably don’t want to keep swiping right.”

Dinner arrives and we settle into talking about random things. I ask about Mr. Lovecraft’s job. He’s an engineer in Huntsville, working on rocket engines. Mrs. Lovecraft is a school teacher. Ian is their only son.

They edge away from asking about Angel Fire, but we eventually get around to it. I tell them everything, probably more than I should. And we talk all about Angel, Bash, and the band.

At the end of dinner, we part. I offer to pay the bill, but Mr. Lovecraft insists, stating since
I donated my bone marrow, and will be paying the medical bills for their son, it’s the least he could do.

“It’s been a real pleasure meeting you.” Mr. Lovecraft shakes my hand. “Life is short. Grab it by the horns, and if your heart is telling you that girl is the one, don’t hesitate. All the rest will sort itself out.”

“Thank you.”

I way over-shared during dinner, telling them all about Angel and my concerns with Bash and the rest of the band. They thought nothing of the age gap, but then I learned Mr. Lovecraft is twelve years older than his wife. If it’s not a problem for them, it shouldn’t be for me.

“Ian’s transplant is scheduled for early in the morning. I don’t know how he’ll be feeling afterward.” Mrs. Lovecraft hesitates, and I get her concerns. She’s focused on her son’s recovery and worried about the stress of meeting me. I step in and make things easy on them.

“Well, you have all my contact info. That’s my private number. Maybe when Ian feels better, and is stronger, he might be interested in meeting me. It might be best to wait, and I do have a—thing that I need to get back for.”

“Thank you. We appreciate everything, more than you know. You’re an angel.” She takes my business card and holds it close to her chest. “I definitely know Ian will want to meet you. He’s going to be so excited when he finds out who his donor is—and maybe he’ll want to get to know Lucy and Trevor too. It’ll be good for him to meet others who’ve been through the same thing as him. You know, something to give him hope?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

I’m a bit bummed I won’t be able to see Ian right away, but my presence isn’t something I’ll push on anyone. Ian needs to get better. Hopefully, this will be his cure, and his parents need to be focused on their son.

Not me.

Not to mention, I ran out of Insanity, and miss my girl.

After Mrs. Lovecraft’s comment about Angel, I make a decision. I can’t wait to get home and ask a very important question.
TWENTY-FOUR
IT’S BEEN days since Spike disappeared. Despite several texts and a few calls, there’s no answer, no response.

There’s a whole lot of nothing, and honestly, I’m trying not to freak out. I’m not a clingy girl. Or rather, I’d like to think I’m not, but I’m becoming this whole other person with his disappearance.

I check my phone every minute.

Obsessively.

Compulsively.

Like I’m in totally not healthy territory. So much so that it freaks me out.

That’s why I let the batteries run down on my phone and ditched it in my room. I’ll charge it later, and when it juices up, there’d better be some form of communication from Spike.

What if there isn’t?

Oh, hell if I know.

I hate being this needy, clingy, insecure thing. I hate that he has this much power over me. I’m not needy. I’m not clingy. And yet, I’m totally obsessed with Spike.

“Can you stop that.” Mitzy glances over at me and gives a shake of her head.

“Stop, what?”

We’re outside, chilling poolside, and reading. She’s got a gamer’s magazine and I’ve got an old-fashioned book in my hands. Not a romance. I can’t deal with that right now. I’m reading hard-core science fiction; something worlds away from anything relationship driven. Except it’s not. All fiction deals with relationships.

I’m totally obsessing again.
“All that huffing and puffing and flipping around.” Mitzy tilts her sunglasses down and looks at me over the rims. “We’re supposed to be chilling and relaxing.”

“How can I chill when Spike disappeared?” She does that thing again, pressing her lips together and looking away. “You know where he is, don’t you?”

“I didn’t say that, and I don’t technically know where he is.”

Ah-ha! “But you know something.” I sit up straight and swing my legs around until I face her. “Where is he?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“But you know something.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Come on, tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Mitzy is a horrible liar.

“Well, what do you know?”

“Nothing.” She puts down the gaming magazine she’s been perusing for the last hour in a huff. “I know nothing.”

“Fine. Just answer one question.” I wait for her to say something, anything, but she gives me a deadpan expression. Mitzy can be really infuriating at times. “Please tell me that this isn’t something I should be worried about.” I put my book down and curl the pages.

“You have nothing to worry about.” Her flippant response does nothing to reassure me.

“He’s not out with someone else, is he?”

“That depends on your definition of someone else.” She peeks at me from beneath the broad band of the floppy sunhat shading her face and eyes.

“Is he with another girl?”

“Angel….” She slowly swings her legs around until we face each other. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

“Do I need to be?” Yes, that’s exactly what I’m worried about, but I can’t admit it.

“I’m sure you have nothing to worry about.”

“You’re sure as in you know, or sure as in you don’t know?”

“Okay, I can’t follow all of that, but I can tell you with absolute assurance that I don’t know where he is right now. I don’t know who he’s with, but I really don’t think you have anything to worry about. Spike hasn’t looked at another woman since you showed up on
our doorstep. Why are you all twisted around this?”

I lean back and blow out a frustrated sigh. “Because I’ve never been in a real relationship before. And the ones I’ve been in before were superficial at best. I love Spike, like it’s hard to breathe when he’s not around kind of love, and that scares me.”

“That’s the best kind of love.” Mitzy spins back around and props her legs back on the lounger.

Over the past few days, I’ve confided in Mitzy. It’s been nice to finally have someone to talk to about Spike. Forest huffs and puffs. He’s full of frowns and disapproval. Skye is great, but she’s busy with the medical facility at Guardian HQ. Mitzy is the only one I can talk to. She makes her own hours and plays by her own rules.

“I’m obsessing again, aren’t I?”

“Obsessing is too soft of a word for what’s going on in your head. What’s the real problem? This isn’t about Spike.”

“I wish I knew.” And that’s what bothers me the most. Spike has been wonderful. He is wonderful. There is zero reason for me to worry about him. “Why am I obsessing?”

“It’s okay to have doubts,” Mitzy says, trying to soothe me. “The stronger your feelings are, the stronger those doubts will be, but you gotta dig deep and get to the root of the problem. He’s given you no reason to worry. Right?”

“Right.”

“And you said, that he said, that he hasn’t been with another woman since you came to live here. Right?”

“Right.”

“So, what does that tell you?”

“I don’t know.”

“It should tell you that he’s head over heels in love with you.” She rolls her eyes like I’m an idiot. “He has been since the moment he laid eyes on you. If he wasn’t, there’s no reason he wouldn’t have been out there playing the field. These men were certified man-whores back in the day. They definitely took advantage of the perks fame brought them.”

“I suppose.”

“So, what is it?” She looks at me expectantly.

“I wish I knew.”

“As far as Spike goes, I may, or may not, have an idea what he’s doing, but not where. At least this time, but I can say with absolute certainty, that you don’t have anything to
"Then why can’t you tell me?"

"Because I snooped where I shouldn’t. It’s a bad habit of mine, and it’s something he’s gone to great lengths to keep private. I can’t, in good conscience, step over that line. He doesn’t even know I know, so there’s no way I can tell you."

"I get that, but I really wish you would."

She laughs at that. “Girl, at least you know your secrets will die with me.”

"Yeah, I’m really thankful for that, by the way."

"We all need that one special friend who will keep our secrets for us. Now, about your issue...”

“What about it? You suddenly have any great insight?"

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Well, hit me.”

“Do you think your thing with Spike has anything to do with abandonment issues?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you have issues with men.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You sure about that?” She gives me the side-eyes and waits for me to fill in the gap. The only thing is I don’t know where that gap might be.

“Pretty sure.”

“Okay, listen for a second and tell me what you think.”

“Fine.” And I realize how that sounds, but Mitzy doesn’t take offense to the brush off.

“Your mother, as wonderful as she was, denied you a father figure. Worse than that, she told you that he abandoned you. No need to go into the truths behind that, but you grew up having no faith in men. To your developing brain, men left. It’s what they did. And as the daughter to your mother, you had her side in the great fight against all mankind.”

She gives me a long look. “Do you think maybe some of that is what you feel about Spike? Like he’s destined to leave you? Do you think it has anything to do with the reason you and Bash fight so much? You’re just waiting for him to abandon you and prove you’re right about how things work in the world?”

“Damn, you don’t hold anything back.”
"That’s not what friends do. And that’s what I hope I am to you. I will celebrate your success and call out your faults. Through it all, I’ll love you. But as far as Spike goes, he left, but he didn’t leave you. This is a thing he does. It’s something he’s passionate about. Everyone knows that every now and then Spike disappears. It’s what he does. And he always comes back. And he never skips out on his commitments. He did this before you came into the picture, and he’ll most likely continue to do so in the future. It’s something he’s kept close to his chest for a reason. You should focus on that instead of why he didn’t tell you. Does that make sense?"

"Give me a second.” I try to parse through what she says. Honestly, Mitzy’s comments kind of piss me off, but as I repeat her words in my head, she’s not wrong.

“I see the gears in your head churning.” Mitzy gives a self-satisfied smirk. “I’m thinking.”

“Go ahead, we’ve got all day.” She snaps her magazine open and turns to whatever article grabs her attention.

“I wish I had my shit together like you do.”

“You think I’ve got my shit together?”

“Don’t you?” I look at her. She’s brilliant, has a great job, is doing what she loves. She’s married to an awesome guy. She has everything I want.

“I struggle each and every day wondering if this is going to be the day I make that fatal misstep that results in either one of our Guardians getting killed or one of our rescues not making it home. My tech and intel have to be spot on. There’s no room for error. And as much as I want to hole up in my job, there’s Noodles to think of. He’s easy going, but he’s much like you. Not to mention the baby on board. We aren’t ready to be parents.”

“You aren’t?”

“Not at all. Noodles hovers. He wants to know where I am, what I’m doing. If I’m safe, especially now.” She touches her belly. “He wants to protect me and shelter me, and yet he can’t do any of those things. We didn’t plan this pregnancy, and it’s causing stress. Lots of stress. Don’t be fooled by all the perfection you see around you. Every relationship has its stress points. Yours has nothing to do with whether Spike is faithful but rather your faith in him. You need to give him time and let him decide when to open up this particular part of his life. If you push, he’s only going to get defensive and push back.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Hopefully, it helps. You need to decide if the man you’ve grown to love is capable of despicable things, or if maybe he’s a hero in disguise.”

I hang on every word, taking in everything Mitzy has to say. She sounds like she’s got the
answers to all the important questions, but I only hear doubt reverberating in my brain.

I’m such a pathetic loser.

Electricity in the air lifts hairs on the back of my neck. I know that feeling and stifle a gasp. Mitzy looks up and glances over my shoulder.

“On that note, I say my farewells.” She gathers her things, then mouths Good luck, and makes her departure. “Hey, Spike, what’s up?”
TWENTY-FIVE
Spike’s deep, melodious voice hits hard. My stomach clenches, and my heart trips on a beat. His smoldering gaze takes me in, and his voice wraps around me like sin. “Hi, Angel.”

I want to ask him where he’s been and who he’s been with, but I bite my tongue. I refuse to become that needy bitch. Instead, I’ll wait, and watch, and try to have faith like Mitzy said. Could it be true that my problems stem from abandonment issues?

“Sorry I ran off like that.” He sits in the lounge chair Mitzy vacated. “Did you miss me?”

“I did.” The urge to ask that tiny question wars within me, but I bury it. I don’t want him to think I’m the kind of chick who’s insecure and digs for information. If he wants to tell me, he will.

“I missed you too.” He stretches out his hand and lightly brushes my fingers. “It’s a gorgeous day, don’t you think?”

Every day in California is a gorgeous day. I bite back a snappy comment and simply stare into the sky. The sun’s not quite overhead. The sky is capped in blue with puffy white clouds drifting across the sky.

“You and Mitzy seem to be getting along.”

“We are. It’s nice to have someone to talk to.” I want to add ‘while you ditch me for whoever you went to see,’ but I manage to keep that vile thought to myself and smile at him instead.

“How do you feel about going for a drive?” His brows arch suggestively.

How do I feel about it? Going for a drive means going to the house he appears to have rented on a long-term lease to screw around. I’m too pissed to even think about having sex with him, but far too weak to refuse. The thing is, I miss him. I desperately miss him, and I need to reconnect before I go completely insane.

“That sounds wonderful.” I let a smile fill my face and ignore the pain in my heart. Mitzy told me to have faith in Spike, and I owe him at least the benefit of the doubt, but that’s
incredibly hard. I don’t know if I’m capable of it, and now that doubt has crept in, I don’t know how I’m going to rid myself of it.

Spike offers a hand to help me up. I take it, then walk ahead of him to the garage. We pass no one, which is nice. I don’t think I could keep up my charade in front of anyone else. The truth is, my heart is breaking, and there’s no justifiable reason. As far as I know, Spike’s done nothing wrong. The fault lies within me and my failure to trust that he won’t abandon me.

Mitzy sure hit that one on the head.

By the time we make it to the house, I’ve rid myself of most of the poisonous thoughts. It really does feel good to have Spike home again, and there’s no ignoring the static charge building in the space between us.

The moment we cross the threshold of our love nest, Spike’s lips are on me. He knows how to kiss. No denying that. It turns my brain inside out when he kisses me like that. He alternates between loving licks and ferocious nips. All I’m capable of is holding on and letting him take the lead.

“You taste like sin.” He kisses up along my jawline, nuzzles at the soft spot behind my ear, then trails a line of fire down my neck. I arch against him, pressing my breasts against the hardness of his chest.

“You feel like heaven.” I manage to get out a few words, but the talent of his kisses has me whimpering and crying out for more.

He gives me everything I ask, turning me mindless until all I can do is react. His desperation matches mine, an irresistible need to fuse every part of ourselves into one body, where our breaths, and the beating of our hearts, become one.

He leans into me. His fingers clutch my ass, yanking me against his hardness. I rise and meet his demands, meeting his desire with the same desperate need.

“Spike…”

“Hush, no words. I only want you to feel.” His words whisper against my skin. And I feel him. I taste him in my mouth. I feel the strength of his hands on my body. I see it in the burning desire simmering in his eyes.

And as he removes our clothes, my body heats for what comes next. I’m wet and wanting, ready to accept his dominating thrusts. He sheaths his hard, rigid length with a condom, then he lifts me until I straddle his hips.

This time, there’s nothing slow. He lowers me down and thrusts up at the same time as a cry of pleasure pours out of my mouth. I’m wet, aroused, and wanting. The squelching thrusts as he rams into me make my eyes roll into the back of my head. When he draws out, I clutch at him, feeling a horrifying emptiness, until he rams forward again.
It doesn’t take long before pressure builds within me. It’s intense, amazing, and wonderful. I feel us coming back together, uniting as one, and wonder why I ever doubted him at all.

Spike would never hurt me.

A groan breaks from Spike as he thrusts deep. His legs shake, and I can tell he’s close. I feel it too. The pressure builds. He captures my lips and sweeps his tongue inside to devastate and claim. One hand cups my breast, caressing and kneading the tender flesh. A moan escapes me as his kiss turns more impassioned, more loving.

Sex with Spike is nothing short of phenomenal. My blood grows hotter as the pressure within me builds. The pulsations within me grow as our bodies grind and connect. It feels so good, I ache with the need to come and grind against the friction of his cock as he slides it within me.

That pressure builds. The pulsations intensify. It starts deep within me, a wave of pleasure so intense it’s unbearable as it explodes within me. I fly over the edge and into an abyss of pleasure.

Spike’s with me, joined to my soul, as he shatters and surrenders to the pleasure arcing through his body. We cling together long after the tremors subside. He holds me in his arms as he carries me the rest of the way inside. Sitting down on the couch, I arrange my legs to either side of him as we do nothing other than simply gaze into each other’s eyes and float on our conjoined high.

“You’re my life.” The gentle caress of his fingers pushes the hair off my face. “I can’t seem to get enough of you.”

“I really missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

Despite reconnecting over great sex, unease trickles through my mind. I hoped he might open up to me and tell me where he spent the last few days, but Spike doesn’t seem eager to share. There’s no way I’ll push, which leaves me full of doubt.

Days pass. We spend those days wrapped in each other’s arms, enjoying the feeling of being together. But every time we slip away, I can’t help but wish we didn’t have to hide what we’re becoming.

When I see Ash fold Skye into his arms, my heart hurts. When Noodles and Mitzy head out for sunset meditation, jealousy stirs within me. That’s not something Spike and I can do together. There is no us, at least as far as the gang at Insanity is concerned.

Evenings down on the beach, when those of us that are home gather to sit around the fire, listen to the waves, and stare at the stars, I ache to sit beside Spike. Everyone separates into their individual pairs, while Spike and I sit alone, and apart.
It kills me, but it is what it is. At least for now.

A couple of weeks later, Spike and I enjoy yet another perfect California day at our house. I stand outside, enjoying the breeze, while he’s inside fixing lunch. Spike’s no gourmet chef, but he can make a mean sandwich.

I turn around and watch, loving the way the muscles in his back bunch. He wears headphones, dancing to music piped in through his phone, swaying his hips and shaking his ass. A smile fills my face.

That man is all mine.

Needing to feel his skin upon mine, I slip inside. Opening the sliding glass door quietly, I want to surprise him. Halfway across the room, the robe I wore is now on the floor. Naked underneath, I’m thinking lunch can wait.

I tense as Spike Stops the swaying of his hips, thinking he hears me, but he says something to someone on the phone.

“Hey, babe.” Light and bright, I’ve only ever heard that tone when he speaks to me. “What’s up?”

“You’re kidding?” Excitement runs through him. I watch the change in his body as my heart stutters and trips. “Yes! Definitely! I want to be there.”

He listens for some time while I slowly take a step back. Quietly, I bend down and gather the robe. I slip it on while he talks animatedly into the phone.

“I thought the baby wasn’t due for another few weeks?”

Baby?

I stop and listen, not proud of snooping, but what the fuck?

“Hey, yeah. I just got something to take care of here first, but then I’ll be right there... I’m so excited. I’ll be there as soon as I can... Love you, Lucy. Miss you. Can’t wait to see you... Bye, luv.”

I back away as jealousy rips through me. Who the fuck is Lucy? Why does he love her? And where is he going? We’re supposed to spend the rest of the day together. Hadn’t planned on getting back until just before dinner.

I trip over the sill of the sliding door and rush back outside, leaving it gaping. Tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. A roaring sound fills my ears as my heart accelerates, chasing jealousy and betrayal.

“Hey, Angel?” Spike calls out from the door.

I furiously wipe at my eyes and blink. Holding back the tears is harder than it should be.
Without turning around, I grip the rail in front of me, needing the support of the banister.

“What’s up?”

“Well, actually—something’s come up. I need to leave.”

“Leave? We just got here.” We fucked less than an hour ago.

“Sorry, but it’s... I gotta be somewhere.”

“Where?” I push for more information. Maybe I’m overreacting? Leaping to conclusions that aren’t real.

“Just a quick trip. I should be back by morning.”

Morning? This is an overnight thing?

Pain spears through my heart as I gulp past his betrayal.

“Um—I need to shower first.”

“Do you mind showering at Insanity? I can drop you off, and...”

“Fine.” I spin around with a false smile planted on my face. “Let me get dressed.” A glance over his shoulder shows me he didn’t finish making the sandwiches.

He’s in that much of a rush?

I don’t even want to know. I breeze past him, keeping my smile in check, and disappear into the bedroom. Shoving my feet into my pants, I fight against tears. He could’ve told me where he was going, but evaded instead. There is only one reason to do that.

Spike doesn’t want me to know where he’s going, let alone who he’s going to be with. Evidently, it’s a girl named Lucy, and she’s having a baby.

His baby?

The ride back to Insanity is quiet. I insist I drive. That way, I can pretend I’m focused on the road and can’t talk. When we pull up outside Insanity, I jump out of the car and grab my purse.

“So, I guess I’ll see you later tonight?” It’s a test. Part of me says I really am leaping to conclusions and should give Spike the benefit of the doubt.

I’m actually seething because Spike didn’t say a word to me the entire drive back. His head was buried in his phone and the flurry of text messages flashing back and forth.

He gets out of the car and moves around to the driver’s side. “I’ll probably be gone until morning. I’ll catch you then?” His eyes sparkle, and it almost looks like he’s going to miss me.

Miss me?
When he’s going to... No. He’s running to—another woman. And she’s having a baby. His baby?

Is it possible I’ve misread everything? Am I nothing more than a casual fling? Something to pass the time?

He leaves me, spinning out as he speeds away, while my heart breaks.
What I do is sheer madness, but it’s happening. I’ve turned into a crazy stalker. Envy burns through my veins with venom and fire, twisting me up from the inside out. Beneath all of that is this pathetic, strangled hope that I’m terribly wrong, that what I heard isn’t what I think.

Love you too, Lucy. Miss you. Can’t wait to see you.

He told that woman he loved her. He missed her. Every hateful word drives into my heart, stabbing and cutting and ripping me apart.

I thought Spike loved me. That maybe it wasn’t too much to think that he might love me back. I guess I was wrong. I was so very wrong.

No denying the intimacy of her words. Nobody uses Spike’s real name. I don’t know if anyone knows it. I had to dig to find it, snooping around like a crazy woman for details on the man I love. I’ve been in his arms, in his bed. I shared my most intimate self, and yet I had to hunt down his real name.

I feel like a fool.

Like a crazy stalker, driving two cars behind him as he winds his way through the California hills, kind of fool.

Bright and beautiful, like most days, today the beauty of California mocks me. It’s all too damn perfect while my life falls apart.

For hours, I trail behind him. He stops for gas, fills up, while I eye the gas gauge of my car. I’ll need to fill up soon, but I can’t do that at the gas station, or he’ll spot me. I hope we get wherever he’s going soon, or I’ll be stranded on the side of the road with a broken heart and no gas.

As the needle pegs Empty, we enter a modest residential community. I slow down, placing more distance between our cars, and pray he doesn’t notice. Spike pulls up to a one-story stucco house with a tiled roof, a manicured lawn, and flowerbeds overflowing
with color. When he gets out of the car, my heart squeezes in pain.

Who is Lucy? What does she mean to him?

The front door opens and a woman not much older than myself walks out. The moment she sees Spike, her entire face lights up. She clasps her hands in front of her swollen belly as a yellow Labrador races out of the house, making a beeline for Spike.

The dog dances around him, butt wiggling, tail wagging, tongue licking Spike’s face as he squats down to pet the dog. The dog jumps up, places his front paws on Spike’s shoulders, and wriggles into his arms. A smile fills his face as he lifts the dog, nuzzling it with soul-shattering familiarity.

If I had any hopes of this being a casual thing, that dog proves how wrong I am. Spike’s greeted like one of the family, but I know there’s no sister in his family. Cousin, maybe? Please let this be a cousin.

Spike puts the dog down and opens his arms. From where I’m parked, I can’t hear a word, not that I don’t roll the window down with the hopes of something reaching my ears.

Lucy approaches Spike, and I grit my teeth. My hand flies to my belly to quell the uneasy rumbles there. Like a train wreck, I can’t look away. He holds his arms out. Lucy approaches with a smile that beams with familiar intimacy. When he scoops her into his arms, a tremor shakes me. My heart shudders and slams to a halt. A tear slides down my cheek.

Those are my arms. His protection and warmth are mine to embrace, not this Lucy. I thought Spike and I had the beginnings of our forever. I felt secure in his arms. I felt loved.

Now? All I feel is the stinging burn of heartbreak.

They stand so close, closer than friends, closer than family. Lucy burrows into his embrace and nuzzles deep into his chest.

A sob escapes me as she pulls away and angles her head. She looks up at him, seeking Spike’s vibrant gaze, then ever so slowly, she lifts on tiptoe. Her hands go to his cheeks as tears roll down mine. Her lips press against his as a sob rips from my throat.

The kiss is short, fleeting, but devastating in the destruction it leaves behind. Spike breaks apart, then squats down to rub the dog. He stares at her swollen belly; says something I can’t hear.

With my vision blurred by tears, he leans forward and kisses her pregnant belly. No expert in pregnancy, the woman looks ready to pop out the kid any moment.

Maybe that’s why Spike broke off our plans to come down here? Is that his kid in there?
My brain wants to dissect their familiarity, her pregnancy, the timing of it all, but I refuse to head down that path.

Spike stands. He ropes his arm around Lucy and draws her in toward his chest again. A huge smile fills his face; tucking her head beneath his jaw, he caresses her hair. His fingers glide down her raven locks in strong, powerful strokes. Each touch ripping and shredding what’s left of my heart.

I know that touch. I’ve felt the intimacy of it as he’s comforted me, as the steady beating of his heart lulled me into believing in a future together. A cry escapes my lips, joining the soul-shattering sobs.

Agony like nothing I’ve felt before tears through me, searing my skin, shattering my heart, and wrenching horrible sounds from my throat. I hold a hand over my throat, trying to silence my weakness. I rub the back of my hand over my mouth, desperate to silence the blubbering emotions leaking out all over the place. I hate everything about this and despise my weakness.

I’d been such a fool. I try to tamp down my shameful reactions, but damn if my emotions don’t run rampant. Logic flees as my heart attacks with everything it has left. The onslaught drowns me, steals my breath, and destroys me.

Everything hurts; his betrayal is a relentless force carving a path of destruction through my entire being. I can’t catch my breath as deep, powerful sobs rip through me. I grip the steering wheel, needing something solid to hang on to, and struggle to pull myself together.

With my insides bleeding, my vision tunnels to black. Agony sweeps through me, but then it morphs into blinding rage. He can’t do this to me. I’m not some chick on the side. A fling to pass the time.

Was every touch and intimate whisper nothing more than a game to him? A way to get me into his bed? Did he feel none of the beautiful harmony I felt when we were together? Looks like I’m just some stupid girl with a crush on a rock star, who let herself get used to satisfy his carnal appetite for sex. But I don’t get it. Spike can fuck whoever he wants. It’s not like there aren’t a million willing women out there dying for a piece of him.

Why pretend with me? He told me what we shared meant the world to him. That knowing I was his meant the world to him

How gullible could I be?

Enough to believe his lies.

Everything hurts as I watch him with that woman. My eyes sting from the tears. My throat aches from my wretched sobs. My heart... Seeing him with another woman hurts far more than I thought it could. My heart crumbles.
There was always a part inside of me that wondered what Spike was doing with me. I suppose I was easy and he was lazy. With me around, he didn’t have to look outside the walls of Insanity to get laid.

Doesn’t change a thing, however, and that’s the worst part of all of this. I want all his kisses to myself. His affection and love are mine. No one else’s. I want his laughter and his openness to be mine and mine alone. He’s the first man I’ve known who saw me, really saw me, and made me feel as if I could be everything to him.

Not that I need a man to validate my existence, but I loved the connection, the sense of being a part of something bigger than myself. I liked being part of an us instead of just me. And more than anything else, I loved how Spike treated me as an equal rather than a silly kid with starry eyes and a fleeting crush.

With my heart shattered, I accept the truth. I turn the engine back on and pull away from the curb. I drive slow, needing to burn his betrayal into my brain. I’ll need that later, if a moment of weakness ever hits.

When it hits.

I’m weak-willed when it comes to him. Not to mention, my desire for a happily-ever-after is too strong. It just won’t be with him.

As I drive past the house, Spike turns.

Everything happens in slow motion. He pivots. Our gazes connect. His eyes round. His mouth gapes, and he gives a shake of his head.

I return the stare, injecting all my pain into that look. My eyes narrow into thin slits as my lips press into a hard line. I spit out all the venom and fury I can muster as I slowly drive past.

He shouts, but whatever he says is drowned out by the hollow drum pounding inside my skull. It’s swallowed by the aching pit where my heart used to reside.

The moment I turn the corner, my foot hits the gas. I race away from that place, tears falling, vision blurred, heart breaking, as I gain speed and put as much distance behind me as I can.

Five miles later, the car runs out of gas. I spend the next five hours waiting for roadside assistance to bring five gallons of gas. Then slowly, I limp home.

In retrospect, running out of gas turns out to be a good thing. All that time standing alone on the side of the road tells me two things. First of all, I don’t need anyone but myself. I’m fully capable of taking care of my needs. And finally, while my heart is broken, it will heal with time.

Bash wants me to get on with my life. In those five hours, I make a plan. I’ll spend one
final night at Insanity. It’s just enough time to pack my things. After that, I’m gone.
TWENTY-SEVEN
My heart swells with joy when I see Angel driving past, but the agony scrawled across her face cuts through that joy and turns it into eviscerating terror.

No. No. No. No.

My heart leaps into freeform panic, and I race down the driveway. I call out her name because I know exactly what she saw, and what it looks like.

Fuck me.

“Angel, stop!” My throat seizes as I trip over my own feet. “Stop!”

She speeds away. I chase, but she turns a corner and is gone. I bend over double, gasping for breath. This isn’t how I wanted her to find out about Lucy.

On my way over to Lucy’s place, I made the decision to include Angel in this part of my life. I want her involved in all the bits and pieces that make up who I am, especially this piece. It’s the most important part of who I am.

Angel Fire is a pretty big deal, but when it comes to my making a mark, Lucy, Trevor, and Ian are what I’m most proud of. Granted, I did nothing. All I did was sign my name to a ledger. The doctors and nurses did the rest. Lucy, Trevor, and Ian battled the disease. I waltzed in, took some pain relievers, had a needle driven into my hipbone, and left that day. My contribution was minimal.

But still, it matters.

I matter.

Lucy’s baby would never be if not for me. It sounds arrogant, but it’s true. Trevor would’ve never survived to meet his wife. Someday soon, I expect I’ll be standing by his side as his child is brought into this world. As for Ian? I can only hope he survives his disease.

It’s the one thing I’ve held onto, keeping it hidden from everyone else, but I want nothing
hidden from Angel. I want her to be a part of my life in every way. But my joy turns to this stomach twisting dread when I realize two things.

First off, why is Angel here? What brought her to Lucy’s home?

There’s only one answer to that, and my balls draw up in debilitating fear when I realize what must be going through Angel’s mind.

It’s all my fault.

I planted seeds of doubt through inaction and delay. My failure to share, to explain, and to open myself fully to Angel hurt her. I feel her pain reverberating in my chest. I know exactly what’s going through her mind, and those thoughts, those feelings, should never have taken root.

I don’t even care how she knows, or how she followed me. That’s irrelevant. I should’ve never put her in the position to doubt. I should’ve never given her reason to feel like she needed to follow me.

“Shit!”

“Kaleb…” Lucy’s soft hand grips my shoulder. “Was that Angel?”

“Yes.”

“I take it from the way she peeled out of here that you haven’t told her yet?”

“I’m such a fucking idiot. I should’ve told her when I donated for Ian. I should’ve taken her with me, included her in the whole process, and told her then.”

“You definitely should have, but the past is the one thing you can’t control. You can either stand here and beat yourself up about it, or you can go after her.”

“What about you?”

“Are you really worried about me right now?” She glances down and rubs her pregnant belly. “Jacob’s packing my bag now, and we’ll show you pictures when the baby is born. You need to get in your car and go after her.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to be there for you and Jacob.”

“Kaleb, if you don’t get in your car right now and go after her, I’m going to get Jacob to kick you in the ass. I’d do it myself, but…” Her brows pinch with pain, and her breaths deepen. “Holy shit, they’re getting stronger and closer together.”

I grab at her, lending as much support as I can while the contraction takes her breath. Jacob comes out the front door, carrying an overnight bag. His expression is two parts elation, four parts fear. I understand. I feel the same helplessness, and Lucy isn’t even my wife.
“What’s wrong?” He drops the bags and rushes over to us.

“Another contraction.” I gently give her into Jacob’s hands as Lucy pants against the pain.

“So soon?” He glances at me, then turns his attention back to his wife. Lucy grips his forearm, her knuckles turning white as she practices that breathing technique I’ve only ever seen on television. “They’re too close together. Should I call an ambulance?” Terror fills his face. Concern for his wife vibrates in his voice.

Jacob’s a mess.

My thoughts careen out of control as I try to process everything at once.

“J-just g-get in t-the c-car.” Lucy points toward their brand-new G-Wagon.

That’s my baby gift to them. I couldn’t think of anything spectacular and over the top, but that car is manly enough for Jacob, nice enough for Lucy, and over the top in safety ratings for all manner of crashes. I outfitted them with car seats as well; one for each stage their little one will reach before graduating out of car seats. And I took Jacob with me to the fire station, where the firemen showed him how to correctly install the seats.

“Kaleb, can you drive?” Jacob supports Lucy as they walk over to the passenger side of the SUV.

“Kaleb has somewhere else he needs to be.” The contraction must have passed because she’s back to speaking in full sentences.

“Huh?” Jacob’s brows pinch with confusion.

“Angel was here,” Lucy says, explaining what happened with Angel, including how she sped off.

“Shit.” Jacob opens the door and holds it while Lucy climbs into the front seat.

She leans back and buckles in. “Kaleb, get your ass in gear and go after her. We’ll be fine.” Her gaze cuts to Jacob and flickers with doubt.

I should stay. Jacob’s a great guy, but he’s young, a nervous soon-to-be dad, and I’m not sure he’s safe to drive. A car pulls up to the curb behind us, and Trevor leaps out.

“Yay! I’m not too late.” He runs up to the G-Wagon and grips Lucy’s hand. “I thought I wouldn’t make it.”

“So glad you’re here.” Lucy bends forward to give Trevor a kiss on the cheek. “We’re just leaving.”

Trevor steps back to open the back door, then looks over at me. “You coming, rock star?”

“Kaleb is not coming.” Lucy’s tone turns terse, but then I realize she’s in the grip of another contraction.
Shit, they are getting closer together.

"Why not?" Trevor looks at me, confused.

I want to go with them. In so many ways, they’re part of my family, but I can’t. I need to find Angel and explain. As I stand here, I’ve gone over what happened in my mind over and over again. I know what Angel saw, and I know exactly what it looked like.

I go to Jacob and pull him into a bro-hug. “Take care of your girl. I want tons of pictures. And for the love of God, let Trevor drive.”

He gives a huge grin and tosses the keys to Trevor. While they all pile into the G-Wagon, Jacob starts explaining why I’m not with them. I spin on my heels and get in my car. On the way to Insanity, I break every speed limit, but I don’t care. I need to explain to Angel what she saw and beg forgiveness for unnecessarily breaking her heart.

Communication.

It’s the key to success, and I vow to communicate the hell out of this situation. Only when I pull up to Insanity, there’s no sign of Angel. I race through our home, calling out her name, pounding on her door, then running back to the common areas. Nobody’s around. The place is a ghost town. No sign of Angel and no sign of anyone else.

I stop in the kitchen and pace, then return to the garage. Too focused on Angel’s agonized expression, I don’t remember which car she was driving. Noodles’ classic VW Bug’s parking spot is vacant. He’s probably out surfing the waves. Only one other parking spot is empty. It’s one of our black SUVs we use when traveling together, and the only car Angel would take out on her own.

My fingers tap the side of my jeans as I try to figure out where she might be. Twenty minutes later, after fruitless pacing, I decide to call in the big guns and march over to Forest’s place.

It takes a solid five minutes of banging on his door and smashing the doorbell before Forest answers the door.

“What the fuck you doing here?”

“I need your help.”

“My help?” He shrugs. “What for?”

As band manager, Forest helps out with all manner of things.

“I need you to locate the SUV.”

“Excuse me?” His lips press together, and the gears in his head start churning. “Why?”

“Because I need to know where it is?”
“Did you misplace it?”

“No."

“Then how did you lose it?”

“Didn’t say I lost it. I said I need to find it.”

“And why might that be?” He leans against the doorjamb and crosses his arms while looking down at me.

“Don’t be an ass. Can you or can you not locate the vehicle?”

“Sure. I can most definitely do that.”

“Thank you.”

“Is that all?” He kicks off from the doorjamb and starts to close the door. The way he’s acting sends alarm bells dinging in my head.

“Yes.” I look at him, trying to figure him out. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Are you going to tell me where it is? Can you do that from here?”

“Yes, I can do it from here. It’s a simple matter to activate the GPS and locate the car.”

“Okay, then let’s do it.”

“You misunderstand.”

“Misunderstand, what?”

“I said I could, not that I would.”

“What the fuck? Don’t be an ass.”

“Seeing as how you’re coming to me for a favor, calling me an ass isn’t really helping, is it, lover boy?”

“You’re a real tool, you know that?”

“Doesn’t matter. Yes, I can locate the SUV, but I won’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because I’m not getting in the middle of whatever fucked-up thing you did.”

“How do you know I did anything? It’s just a misunderstanding. that’s all, and I need to find her to explain.”
“Like I said, not getting involved in that drama. Whatever you did, or didn’t do, you made this mess, and I’m not helping you clean it up.”

“I’m not asking you to clean anything up. I’m asking you to find the damn car.”

“Spike, if Angel isn’t here, she isn’t here for a reason. Whatever you did to her, she’ll face you when she’s ready. I’m not going to lead you to her if she doesn’t want to be found.”

“And what if she’s crashed in a ditch or something?”

He pauses, and I think I almost have him, but he gives a sharp shake of his head as he comes to a decision.

“Nope. Not getting involved. Fix your own shit.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, thanks. Not interested.”

My fingers curl, but I turn around. If Forest won’t help me, maybe I can get someone else to help. The only other person I know who can track down Angel’s car is Mitzy, but no matter how hard I look, she’s not around.

In desperation, I call Guardian HQ, but she’s not there either. Evidently, she’s with Noodles. Maybe the two of them are out communing with Noodles’ pet shark, Old Joe. Not that it matters to me. It’s been an hour, more than enough time for Angel to make her way home, and there’s still no sign of her.

And hour turns into two. Two turns into three. Three turns into four hours, and I’m in a total panic. My comment to Forest about her getting stuck in a ditch was a melodramatic plea to get him to help, but now it’s all I can think about.

What if she ran off the side of the road? What if she crashed over the cliffs? What if she plunged to her death? What if her car is now teetering on the brink of falling over and nobody can see her?

Over the next hour, I imagine more and more gruesome possibilities while I pace the kitchen. Noise in the hallway catches my attention, and I spin around, hopeful it’s Angel. When Mitzy and Noodles pop into view, I rush Mitzy.

“I need you to find Angel.” I grip her hands tight.

“Hey, that hurts.” She tugs on her hands, and I release them.

“Sorry.” Blowing out a breath, I try to calm myself down. Over the past few hours, I’ve worked myself into a frenzy. “I asked Forest to help, and he wouldn’t.”

“Why are you looking for Angel?” Noodles plops down on one of the kitchen island stools and reaches for a banana. He peels it and takes a bite.
“What did you do?” Mitzy takes one look at me and crosses her arms. It’s exactly what Forest did.
“I didn’t do anything.”
“Then why am I chasing down where she is?” Unlike Forest, Mitzy pulls out her phone and starts tapping the screen. “What car is she in?”
“The black SUV.”
“We have five of those.” She gives me a look like I’m an idiot. “Number One, Two, Three, Four, or Five?”
“The one on the left?”
“Number One.” She rolls her eyes at me like I’m an idiot.
“Didn’t know they were numbered.”
“Everything is numbered, tagged, inventoried, and...” Her fingers fly over the screen. “Never mind. Just give me a second...” Her attention turns back to her phone.
I wait, hanging on what she finds, while Noodles munches on his banana. He takes another bite, chews slowly, then even more slowly, places the banana down on the counter.
“Holy shit,” he says.
“What?” My gaze cuts to him, pissed at the distraction.
“You and Angel.” His attention cuts to Mitzy. He raises an accusatory finger. “You knew about them and didn’t tell me.”
“What about Angel?” Bash wanders into the kitchen holding hands with his wife. “What’s up?”
Noodles’ brows practically climb his forehead as his gaze swivels between me, Bash, and Mitzy.
“That’s why your aura smoothed.” He nods as if he solved a great riddle. “But you’re spiking like a motherfucker right now...” He glances at his wife, then back to me. “You fucked it up, didn’t you?”
Mitzy looks up from the phone, but then her gaze cuts over my shoulder. Her eyes grow wide, and she takes a step back.
“You fucking bastard!” An ethereal halo of strawberry-blonde hair with the tortured visage of Angel inside of it launches at me. Fingers scratching, she claws at my face as she spits obscenities at me. “You’re screwing me while you have a bitch on the side, pregnant with your kid? How could you?”
I grab her wrists. Her nails do a number on my face, gouging my eyes and scraping skin. There’s a tug at my brow, then a sharp pinch of pain as she rips out the hoop piercing from the corner of my eyebrow. I cup the side of my face and feel blood.

“Angel, wait. It’s not...”

“What the fuck?” Bash bellows, fury coalesces in his tone and echoes in his expression as he turns on me. “What the fuck did she just say?”

Angel points at me. Blood drips down her pinky finger. As for my piercing, there’s no sign of it. Not that it matters.

“He’s fucking another woman.” Tears pour down Angel’s face. “And she’s pregnant.”

Bash is going to get whiplash from the way he keeps shifting between me and his daughter. “What the fuck does my daughter mean by you’re fucking another woman?” His face darkens with rage. “What are you doing to my daughter?”
TWENTY-EIGHT
THİS IS TOTALLY NOT how I saw this going down. The back door leading out to the pool opens. Forest’s dominating presence darkens the doorway. He takes in the chaos and plants his feet.

“I love her.” All I can do is state the truth and hope it somehow carries through the chaos.

“What the hell is going on?” Skye enters the kitchen. Little Zach straddles her waist, and Ash is only a few feet behind. Little Zach’s tiny fingers grab at her hair. It takes Skye less than a second to put everything together. “I take it he knows?”

“Knows, what?” Ash asks as he tries to piece together what’s going on.

Noodles pops the last bit of that damn banana into his mouth. “Evidently, Spike has been messing around with Angel.”

“No way?” Ash’s mouth gapes. “Dude, that’s so uncool.”

I hang my head. How am I ever going to recover from this?

Movement in my periphery makes me jerk. I barely miss Bash’s swing, but I duck his fist. He connects with thin air.

“Stop this!” Skye shouts and brings some quiet to the room. “No one is trading fists inside. Not in front of my son. You take it outside. Now, what happened?”

Angel sobs uncontrollably. Every now and then, I make out the words ‘fucked her’ and ‘his baby’ and ‘cheated on me,’ but much of what she says is a blubbering mess.

My shoulders slump. I want to go to her, but when I make a move, Bash steps in front of me.

“Touch one hair on her head, and you’re a dead man.” His voice vibrates with seething hatred.

“It’s not what you think.”
I put out a hand, but he looks at me as if I’m a despicable piece of shit. Unease trickles through me as I take note of the expression on Bash’s face. He can’t look me in the eyes. He takes a step back, and then another. Bash goes to his daughter.

For the first time ever, he collects her in his arms, comforting her. That’s where I belong. That’s my job, not his.

“Oh, for the love of God.” Mitzy jumps up on the kitchen island, towering over us with her psychedelic hair. “Will you just go ahead and tell them.”

“Tell us what?” Skye cranes her neck to take in Mitzy. Little Zach reaches for Ash, who takes him out of Skye’s arms.

“Spike, tell them.”

“Tell them, what?”

“Lord, are all men such fools? If you’d just open up and communicate, life would be so much easier.” She turns to Angel and sighs with dramatic effect. “Spike’s not cheating on you.”

“How do you know?” Angel sniffs and swipes at her cheeks. She looks to me, brows furrowed, and eyes full of questions. So much pain swirls in those eyes. Pain I caused due to a failure to communicate.

“Because I know where he was today, and with whom.” Mitzy props a hand on her hip and continues to stare down at the rest of us from her lofty height with an imperious gaze.

“You do?” Angel says.

“You do?” I echo Angel.

“Yes, dumbass. Do you want to tell her, or do I?”

“How do you know?” I feel my temple and grimace at the gaping hole where my piercing had been. That’s going to need stitches.

“What are you talking about?” Angel pushes out of Bash’s embrace and runs her hands down both cheeks, wiping at her tears.

“Lucy isn’t his girlfriend. He’s not fucking her.” Mitzy glances over at me. “Am I going to tell them, or are you going to man-up and explain?”

“He’d better start talking.” Bash’s fingers curl into fists. Seething rage makes his entire body vibrate.

I’m not getting any better vibes from Ash or Noodles. They’ve moved to stand beside Bash, supporting him against me. After all the ways I imagined this going, this is the one
scenario I feared the most; me against the band. The only one not here is Bent, but he and Piper are out for an extended couple’s vacation. Mitzy glares at me, demanding I speak up. I stare dumbly back at her and blink like a goddamn fool. Skye hovers at the fringes, gravitating toward Forest as Ash, Bash, and Noodles stare me down. Holly drifts over to Skye’s side. Their heads bow together while Skye whispers in Holly’s ear. I get the feeling Skye, and Mitzy, know all about Angel. “Mitzy’s right.” I lead with that, running out of time as fury bunches in Bash’s shoulders and gathers in his fists. “Then who is she?” Angel stands beside her father, placing a restraining hand on his arm. “I want to hear this.” Her touch is enough to get Bash to back down. I wipe the blood off my hands. “Lucy is my first bone marrow recipient.” “Your, what?” Angel’s brows pinch with confusion. “What does that mean?” “The day I turned eighteen, I signed up to be a bone marrow donor. Angel Fire had just hit it big, and I didn’t want that press spilling over on her family, so I kept it quiet. The procedure was simple. A few days of tests, then the harvest, and I was back and playing like nothing happened. A few months later, she regressed, and the doctors called me again for a stem cell harvest.” “You’re a bone marrow donor?” Skye cocks her head. “I never would’ve thought—but it makes sense. Although, it doesn’t explain all your disappearances. Donors rarely get called twice.” “I just made another donation a few months ago to a kid named Ian, Ian Lovecraft. He was discharged from the hospital a few weeks ago.” “I still don’t understand.” Angel pushes back her hair. Several tendrils are wet and matted from her tears. “Lucy is like family to me. I kind of adopted myself into her family. She’s having a baby. Right now, as a matter of fact, but it’s not my baby. She’s married to an awesome guy. Jacob and Trevor are with her right now. I’m supposed to be with them.” “Wait a second. Who’s Trevor?” Angel takes a cautious step forward. “Trevor is my second bone marrow recipient.” “I don’t...” Angel struggles to understand. Ignoring everyone else in the room, I close the distance and take her hands in mine. “After Lucy’s transplant, I went back a year after Donation Day to celebrate with her family. They started inviting me to all the big events in her life, things they wouldn’t have
been able to celebrate if not for the bone marrow transplant. Things like prom and graduation. I met her boyfriend, Jacob, and stood as his best man during their wedding. When I got called for Trevor, I introduced him to Lucy. He was fourteen, the same age as Lucy at the time, and it really helped him to have someone to talk to who’d been through the same thing. Over the years, the three of us bonded.”

“I wish you’d told me.” Angel grips my hands, the first positive response I received. She closes her eyes and breathes out. Then she takes in a long, steadying breath. “I overheard you talking to her. I heard you say I love you, Lucy, and my brain…” She releases one of my hands and makes a circling gesture near her ear. “It went to the darkest place. I know all about your past, and all those women are ghosts I battle each day. I still want to pinch myself knowing you love me, that you want me to be your wife.”

“Wife?” Bash’s growl comes low and threatening. “What the fuck?”

Out of the corner of my eye, Ash places his arm in front of Bash, urging him back. No matter how my conversation with Angel ends, I’m going to have to face the fury of my friend. That’s okay. I’m good with that. As long as Angel and I are good, I don’t care about anything else.

“I was going to tell you. I want you to know everything about me, and I want to share Lucy and Trevor with you. Well, and Ian too. His parents are on board with it. But Lucy called, she went into labor early, and all I could think about was rushing to be with her and Jacob. I couldn’t imagine missing out on that. But you have to believe me, out of everyone in my life, you are the one I want, and I want you to be a part of everything. Lucy and Trevor are eager to meet you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, they know all about you. They’re the ones who helped me keep it together the first year after you got here.” I draw Angel into my arms and ignore Bash’s furious snort. He doesn’t matter. I hold my entire world in my arms.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I caused you to doubt me like that. I would never do anything to hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

Angel tilts her head back, and my heart leaps when I see forgiveness in her eyes.

“You don’t have to apologize to me. I’m the one who snooped, who leapt to conclusions, and who didn’t give you the benefit of the doubt. I’m sorry I doubted you at all.”

“Where were you?” I smooth back her hair. “I came back and couldn’t find you. I was so worried.”

The corner of her mouth tics up. “I ran out of gas.”

“You, what?” I stoop down until we’re eye to eye. “Why didn’t you call me?”
"Because I was furious with you, silly. I felt betrayed, and... You know what? It doesn't matter. I was wrong. What about Lucy? You need to go, don't you?"

"I'm right where I want to be." I tuck her into my embrace and hold her tight. "I'm right where I want to be," I say again, and I mean every word.

"And BOOM!" Mitzy shouts from on top of the kitchen counter. "See what the magic of communication can do?" She hops off the counter.

"How the fuck did you know?" I still want to understand how Mitzy found out.

"Because I'm a terrible snoop. The moment Forest hired me and I knew I was going to be living in this house with a bunch of rock stars, I started digging. I know—everything."

"Except to tell your boss," Forest says with a snort from the door.

"Not my secret to tell." Mitzy defends herself from Forest's comment with an indignant snort of her own, but she flashes a grin. "Besides, it's all worked out now."

"Like hell it is." Bash responds with a low growl. "There's still the matter of you fucking my daughter. She's a child."

"Oh, get over yourself." Angel bursts with indignation. "I'm eighteen. Technically, I hit on him and he wouldn't touch me. Why do you think he was always running out of the room?"

"Looks like he did though. You realize he's nearly thirty?" Bash's voice rises.

"Age is just a number." Angel takes my hand in hers and swivels around until she faces her father. "I love him, and we're going to get married."

My heart seizes with that comment. Things moved so fast, I haven't had a chance to properly ask. All my Vegas plans got sidelined when Lucy called telling me she was in labor six weeks too early.

"A second ago, you were bawling your eyes out. Marriage doesn't sound like the wisest decision at this point." Bash's mouth twists on the word 'marriage."

"Doesn't matter. We're getting married, and that's that."

"I'm still going to bash his face in." The muscles on Bash's forearms tense.

"We really going to do this?" I blow out a breath, dreading this, but it's inevitable.

"Damn straight, we're doing it." He rises on the balls of his feet.

"Fine, but we gotta take it outside." I point to Skye. "She says so. And for the record, it's not going to change anything."

"Take what outside?" Angel grabs at my arm. "What are you taking outside?"
“Me and your dad are going to have a talk.”

“With words or your fists?” Angel steps in front of me, protecting me against the wrath of her father. “If you touch a hair on his head…”

“It’s not his hair I plan on messing with.” Bash is light on his feet. His range is shorter than mine, but the guy is stacked; the benefit of a lifetime at the drums. This is going to hurt.

“It’s okay. It’s how we communicate.” I grab Angel’s waist and step out from behind her.

“But he’s going to hurt you.” She whines and grabs at my wrist, wanting to protect me from a beating. Doesn’t matter. I deserve it.

“Damn straight. You and I are going to talk.” The redness in Bash’s face has spread to the top of his head.

Talk means I’m in for one hell of an ass-whooping. Not that I care. Bash needs to vent his frustration, and I knew this was coming. Frankly, I’m ready. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can make Angel my wife.

While the idea of running off to Vegas sounds great, I would never do that to Bash. I’ve got too much respect for the guy—even though I’ve been seeing his daughter behind his back. Despite everything, I’m not that much of an ass.

Nevertheless, this is going to hurt. I gesture toward the back door.

“Shall we?”
TWENTY-NINE
**Angel**

*What is it with men?* Are they born stupid? Spike marches past Bash and heads out toward the pool area. Blood streams down his temple from where I accidentally ripped out one of his piercings.

I have a feeling that’s the least of the blood about ready to get spilled.

Bash follows him out. Behind him, Noodles and Ash follow. I’m right on their heels, only when I get to the door, Forest lowers his arm and bars my way.

“Hey!” I shove at his arm, but it doesn’t budge. When I try to sneak under it, Forest is faster than I expect.

“You don’t need to be out there right now.”

“The hell I don’t. I’ve got to stop this.”

“You need to let this play out.”

“By having Bash beat the hell out of Spike?”

“If you care anything about Spike or Bash, you’ll let them sort this out the best way they know how. The future of the band is at stake. This could very well be the last beat of Angel Fire happening out there. Are you sure you want to interfere?”

“I can’t stand here and do nothing.”

“You can, and you will.” He refuses to let me pass.

I crane my neck to see where the men went, but I can’t see them from where I’m standing.

“Forest, if you don’t let me go right now...”

“Not doing it.” He moves to stand in the middle of the doorway. There’s no way I’m getting past him.
I turn to Mitzy and Skye. “Aren’t either of you going to help out?”

Skye corrals little Zach, who is overly interested in the commotion around him. “I’ve seen this before.”

“You have?”

“Bash went after Ash, beat him up pretty good until I intervened.”

“What?”

Skye proceeds to tell me the story of when she and Ash met and accidentally got married; accidental for her, not for Ash. He arranged for the band to meet them at an airport, and evidently, Bash wasn’t thrilled Ash got married after knowing Skye for less than three days.

“They threw a few punches—it’s what they do.”

“But you intervened. What did you have to do?”

“Oh,” Skye smiles with the memory. “I pinched off his carotid until he passed out.”

“You did, what?”

“It was a move Forest taught me. Nothing much. But Bash was beating on Ash, and Ash wasn’t defending himself...”

“Skye, don’t you think that’s what’s happening right now? We need to get out there and stop this. It makes no sense.”

“I need to take care of little Zach. I don’t want him exposed to that much violence.”

“Skye!” I turn to Mitzy. “What about you? Can you get Forest to move out of the way?”

“I could, but he’s obnoxious when he’s trying to make a point.”

“That’s not true.” Forest shifts in the doorway. He looks out and I wonder if he can see the men.

“Damn straight, it’s true.” Mitzy crosses her arms and shakes her head. “Forest is obstinate, stubborn, and...”

“Those mean the same thing.” He argues with her from his post guarding the way out.

“Doesn’t mean they’re not true.”

Keenly aware Spike is out there getting his ass kicked, I rush Forest and try to slip through the small gap between him and the doorframe. He blocks and pushes me back.

“Not getting by me.”

“You are a royal pain in the ass.” I practically hiss at him.
“Angel...” Mitzy says.

“Yeah.”

“That’s not the only way out back.” She gives a jerk of her chin down the hall leading out of the kitchen.

It’s a much longer trek, navigating the long hallways of Insanity, but Mitzy’s right. I glance at Forest and launch down the hallway before he can react. He lunges at me, trying to grab me, but I’m faster than Forest.

Not knowing if he chases after me, I race through the halls, winding my way around Insanity until I pop out one of the side doors. I sprint around the exterior of the building, leaping over the landscaping, as I run around to the pool where I see my dad kicking the crap out of Spike.

“Stop!”
THIRTY
Spike

BASH’S FIST slams into me. “You fucking pig!” My head snaps back with a fist to the jaw. “You touched my daughter.”

I tense, protecting my gut. He slams his fist into my gut, bending me forward at the waist. Bent over, my jaw presents another great target, and Bash isn’t shy about taking advantage.

Stars fill my vision with an uppercut to my jaw. I stumble back, blinking against the pain, and fall into Ash’s arms. The fucker steadies me on my feet, then shoves me back into the fray.

It’s a one-sided fight. I’m not here to trade punches with Bash. My only role is to accept judgment. My arms hang by my side. I don’t block. I don’t punch back. I simply take the beating.

“How long?” He roars as he comes at me. Hands on my shoulders, he steadies me so that he can ram his knee into my midsection over and over again.

I huff against the pain and clench my abs. It’s the only thing protecting me. He shoves me away from him, and I land on my ass.

Blinding pain is my universe. Hands reach under my arms and lift me to my feet. I’m pushed back toward Bash, this time by Noodles.

As I sway on my feet, Bash walks in a circle around me. Blood weeps from my temple, stinging my eye. His knuckles cut the skin of my cheek. Blood fills my mouth from the cut on my lip.

Right about now, I’m not too keen on my many piercings. Definitely a liability in a fistfight.

“I asked you a damn question. How long have you been fucking my daughter?”

I put out a hand, trying to stave him off, but Bash comes at me again. I fall under the fury of his fists and curl into a ball as he kicks me when I’m down.
"You fucking perv. She was seventeen. Seventeen!" Another round of kicks follow.
I curl around the pain, knowing I deserve this.
"Answer me." Bash steps away as I cough and spit out blood.
"It wasn’t like that." I huff out the words.
"How was it then?" He stands over me, body tense and vibrating with anger.
"I stayed away.”
"Liar.” His leg rears back.
"Stop!” A crystal-clear voice rings out through the air. I blink against the sweat and blood clouding my vision and smile.
I forget how easy it is to breathe when she’s near. How much the universe aligns when I’m in her presence. Ethereal and wonderful, Angel’s absolute perfection, and she’s all mine.
"There’s nothing you can do to keep us apart.” I spit out a wad of blood and look up at Bash. A delirious grin fills my face.
"You’re out. You are fucking out.” His face turns beet red. This time, when he lunges at me, Ash holds him back.
"That’s enough, Bash.” Ash turns his attention to me. “Is she really worth all of this?"
"Yeah, I’ll give all this up, if only to keep her in my life.” A weight lifts off my shoulders. It feels good to have the truth out there.
I can’t wait to introduce her to Lucy and Trevor. I want her to know everything and be a part of that secret world. Ian too. His parents say he’s making progress after the transplant. He’s expected to be discharged within another week or two. I want to share all of that with Angel.

There’s more.
I’m tired of sneaking around and hiding in the shadows. I want to shout out to the universe that Angel is mine. I can do that now.
Angel Fire may be in my past, but Angel is my future. I don’t regret it one bit.
What a goddamn relief.
I scan Insanity’s overwhelming presence. This used to be my home, not just the band, but the brotherhood we formed and the family we became. But families argue. They disagree.
Bands break up.
Either way, my future is with Angel.
Bash can either forgive me, or I'll move on.
Hopefully, he'll see the truth.
I want to remain a part of Angel Fire. We have so much yet to do, but I'll step aside. If that's the only way I can have Angel by my side, I'll take it.
Bash’s leg rears back, and I brace.
THIRTY-ONE
I race toward Spike, but an arm shoots out and grabs me around the waist.

“What the fuck?”

“Do not interfere.” Forest holds me tight against him. The bastard must have gone out the back and run around to meet me.

I kick against him, but I can’t get free. I scream at him and watch Spike’s head swivel toward the sound of my scream moments before Bash’s fist connects with his jaw.

Spike’s head snaps up. His body spins. It’s too much as he collapses on the ground. All I see after that is Bash’s back as he kicks Spike in the gut.

“Let me go! He’s hurting him.” I scratch and claw at Forest’s arm. I’m surprised when he lets me go. I trip over my own feet as I race to Spike’s side.

I launch myself at my father, grabbing his waist to pull him off Spike. As for Spike, all I see is blood. In addition to the tear in his skin at his temple, there’s a long gash over his cheekbone. His eye is swelling and is already well on its way to turning purple.

“Stop hurting him. I love him.”

Bash turns while Spike chokes and spits out far too much blood. His lip is split and swelling as well.

“If you touch him again, I’ll leave. You’ll never see me again. Spike and I love each other. I’m going to marry him.”

“What?” A tortured expression fills his face.

“You heard me.” Tears stream down my cheeks. “We’re getting married, and if you want to be a part of any of the rest of my life, you’ll stop hurting the man I love.”

“You don’t know him.” Anger fills Bash’s face, but there’s something else there as well. Fear. His voice drops to a tortured whisper. “You don’t know the kind of man he is.”
“Don’t I?” I look at my father like he’s an idiot. “Spike never tried anything with me. He stayed away from me for a year. A whole year! I tried to push myself on him, and he stayed away. At least until we could be together. It’s not his fault. What we have is real.”

“You don’t know him like I do.”

“You’re right. I don’t. I don’t see the guy you’ve spent the last decade partying with. I see something else entirely. I see a man who respects me enough to wait. A man with a heart of gold who’s saved three lives through a selfless act. I see a man who cares about me more than anything else. Who’s willing to walk away from all of this.” I wave my arms toward the house and beach, “because being with me means more to him than anything else in the world.”

I slap at Bash’s arms and kick his shins. I claw at him, dragging him back away from Spike, who moans on the ground.

Ash and Noodles stand to the side, neither one interfering. I point accusatory fingers at them.

“And you two? How long were you going to stand there while Bash beat on Spike?”

“Not a whole lot longer.” Noodles gives a shrug.

“What?” I scream at him, indignant by his flippant response. “What the hell kind of friend are you?”

“The kind who sees his friend hurting.” He takes a moment to look at Bash. The way he does it is weird, like he’s not really looking at Bash, but rather around Bash. “His aura was jagged and spiking something fierce. It’s better now.”

Like that makes any sense.

“Better?” I shove my father and race to Spike’s side. I crouch down on the ground and cradle his head in my arms. There’s so much blood.

“Yeah, better. For both of them.” Noodles speaks, but I’m not listening.

“And what about you?” I turn my attention to Ash. “How long were you going to stand there?”

“Until Bash was done.” He stands with his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans and stares at me like his answer is an obvious one, but it makes no sense to me.

“You’re all idiots.”

Mitzy, Holly, and Skye wander out and gather in a loose semi-circle around us.

“Are they done?” Mitzy props her hands on her hips.

“Looks like.” Forest’s low rumble vibrates the air.
“Fine.” Mitzy gives a clap of her hands. “You guys go inside and clean up. The chick brigade has it from here.” She makes a shooing motion with her hands, but when Ash and Noodles fail to move, she stomps over and bodily pushes them toward the door leading inside.

Holly grabs Bash’s hand. The skin over his knuckles is bleeding. She says nothing as she gently pulls on his arm until he ducks his head and lets her take him inside.

“Skye put little Zach down and is getting her medical kit.” Mitzy turns her attention to Forest. “Come on, let’s give them some space.”
It’s good that everybody leaves. It gives me a chance to talk to Angel alone. The way she looks at me empowers me to dream of a future together and to make it a reality.

She scans the area behind me, waiting for everyone to leave, then flings herself into my embrace. My arms fold around her. This is what heaven feels like.

“You’re bleeding.” She scans the damage to my face.

I can barely see out of my left eye. My nose may, or may not, be broken. My ribs hurt. They’re bruised and might be cracked. Either way, it hurts to breathe. I wheeze and brace against the pain when she hugs me tight. My ears ring and my lips swell.

Thankfully, Bash took out the majority of his frustration on my face and left my hands alone. It’s been a long time since I’ve had the shit kicked out of me; not something I care to repeat anytime soon.

With that in mind, I make a vow to always put Angel first in my life, to protect her, if necessary with my life, and to never, ever, give her reason to doubt me again.

I remember what Mr. Lovecraft said about grabbing a moment and making it mine. How love is the only thing that matters in the world.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” I hug her tight and revel in the feel of her hot body pressed against mine.

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I tried texting you, but you didn’t respond.”

“I know. I was mad at you at the time. I’m sorry I didn’t respond.”

“I want to know if you’re up for a road trip.”

“A road trip?”

“Yeah.”
“Where?”
“Vegas.”
“Vegas?” She goes still in my arms.
“Does that frighten you?”
“That depends. Are we going to play slots?”
“I was thinking about something else.”
“Spike…” Her breath whispers against my ear.

I get on my knee and do this right. “Angel, I need you in my life. It may be crazy, and it may be insane, but I don’t want to live another minute without you. I want you to be my wife.”

“Wife?”
“Pretty sure I didn’t stutter.” I try to crack a smile but wince instead as my cut lip protests the movement.

“What about the guys? What about Angel Fire?”
“Doesn’t matter. As long as I have you, I have everything I want.”
“You’d give that up for me?”
“I already did.”
“I can’t let you do that.” The smile slips from her face, and with it, her joy fades.
“I don’t think it’s really up to you. Or to me, for that matter. Either way, you’re all I want.”

“What about Lucy?” She nibbles on her lower lip.
“I ask you to marry me, and you want to know about Lucy?”
“We can get married anytime, but babies don’t wait.”
“I want you to meet her. Her husband is a really great guy. Their baby is going to be beautiful, but all I want right now is to make you mine. Let’s make it official, today and forever. We can meet Lucy’s baby later.”

“You really want to do this?” She pulls away from me and stares deeply into my eyes.
“Now?”
“More than anything. What about you? Is it too much?”
“Sounds perfect to me, but you’re pretty messed up.”
“Nothing a little cold pack can’t help.”
“You sure you don’t need stitches?”

“I have a pretty good idea Skye is going to stitch up what needs to be stitched.”

“Your face…” She scans the damage. “It looks like a hamburger grinder went to town on your face.”

“It’ll heal.”

“I’m sorry about your piercing.” She reaches for my temple and lightly strokes the skin. I pull away, not wanting her to get too much blood on her hand.

“Go get your things.” I get up and usher her inside. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” I stroke her cheek, her neck, and along her jawline, brushing her skin as if I can’t stop touching her.

A heated look simmers in her gaze. Her beauty is arresting. Angel is my addiction, and I’m happily her addict. Until the last beat of my heart, I will always love her.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous. You know that, don’t you?”

“Only because I see my love reflected in your eyes.” She squints at me. “Or at least in the one eye that’s not swelling shut. You sure you don’t need…”

“Skye’s going to take a look before we run off.”

“Is there anything I should pack?”

“Your driver’s license. You’re driving on the way there, and we’ll need it at the courthouse.” I’ve researched Vegas weddings. They don’t require much. I’ll get us a room, schedule the wedding, and anything else we might need.

It’s not the white church wedding Angel deserves, but that’s not how the men of Angel Fire roll. When we find our one, we don’t waste time. That’s our tradition; we elope, too eager to tie our women to us to wait for anything.

My heart aches. Not in a bad way. The foolish organ in my chest jumps with the thrill of finally making Angel mine. Like it’s tired of waiting and is excited that I’m finally on board. My fingers feather along her collarbone, but I withdraw.

She needs to pack, and I need—I need a moment to wrap my mind around what I’m doing.

Angel’s hazel-green eyes spark beneath the dazzling California sun. Heady warmth spreads through my body and gathers into the most delicious sensation. I want her. I want her with every fiber of my soul.

“Hurry up. Go pack.” I give her backside a little tap. If she doesn’t get out of my sight, I’m going to strip her down right here, right now, and damn the consequences. I stand, a little unsteady, and head inside. Skye waits for me, as expected, in the kitchen with her
“You going to let me stitch your face?”

“How bad is it?”

“Could be worse.” Her lips purse together. “Come. Sit. Let me do my thing.” While she gets to work on my face, Forest strolls in. He opens the fridge and stares inside.

“You and Bash good?”

“We will be.” One way or another.

“Good. You have a tour kicking off in less than a month. Better fix your shit with him before then.”

“I think I’m out.”

“Out?”

“Yeah, out of the band.”

“Hmm.” Forest peers inside the fridge. “We’ll see about that.”

Forest used to live with the rest of us at Insanity proper, but he built his own place when Sara and Paul moved in with him. The three of them tend to remain separate from the rest of us, rarely intruding on our lives. Nevertheless, Forest seems to hang around a lot.

He closes the door without taking anything out. “You look like shit.”

“No thanks to you.”

“You deserved every bit of that beat down.” He taps the countertop like he wants to say something but can’t figure out how to get around to whatever it is he wants to say. I need him to hurry up and leave before Angel gets back.

“You need something?” I wince as Skye stitches up the cut over my cheek.

“I sent you an email.”

“An email? Something you can’t share now?”

“Not really.”

“What’s in it?”

“Management stuff. You’ll see when you read it.” With those cryptic words, he leaves Skye and me alone.

“Your brother is weird.”

“Don’t I know it.” She laughs. “There you go. All stitched up.” Skye pops off her gloves.
and packs her bag. “The swelling is going to take a few days to go down. Use a cold pack to manage it. Tylenol for the pain. If your eye continues to swell or closes completely, you need to be seen by a doctor.”

“Why can’t I call you?”

“Really?” She gives me a look like I’m an idiot.

“Yes, really.”

“Forest is weird, but he’s intuitive. I have a feeling you’re not going to be around Insanity for at least the next few days. A word of advice…”

“Sure?”

“Take the time. After you’re done, take Angel on a romantic getaway. If I know Forest, he probably already got it arranged. But take the time now, just the two of you. Once the tour starts, there will be challenges.”

“Did you miss the part where they kicked me out of the band?”

“Did you miss what Forest said?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“Forest is a problem solver. By the time you get back, he’ll have talked with the guys and smoothed things over. They love you like a brother, and Angel is a part of our family. Nobody wants to see either of you go.”

“How did you know about us?”

“From the way you looked at each other when you thought no one was looking, and nobody needs that many driving lessons.”

“Guess we didn’t do such a great job at being discreet.”

“Mitzy and I figured it out pretty quick. I guess Forest knew for a while.”

“What do you think about it?”

“Any man willing to take that kind of a beating over a woman is a man who wants only one thing. It’s not hard to read your intentions. Be safe and take care of her. If not, it won’t be just the men coming after you. You’ll have to deal with the chick brigade.”

I can’t help but grin, even though it hurts like hell and tugs at the stitches she just placed. Of course, Skye would know what me and the guys call the women in our lives, and I totally get the protective vibe radiating off Skye’s slight frame. She’s not kidding. There will be hell to pay from the women if I ever step sideways with Angel again.

“Duly noted.”
“Good.” She cocks her head. “Now, I hear Angel. You’ll want to be quick if you plan on escaping before anyone knows what you plan.”

“I have a feeling it’s not much of a secret.”

“It’s totally not.” She puts a cold pack in my hand and presses both to my face. “Keep that on your face.”

“Got it.”
THIRTY-THREE
AFTER CHECKING into the penthouse suite, Spike takes me to get married.

First, we stop at a jewelry store. My eyes are on diamonds, but Spike picks out a black band for himself and a delicate ring for me.

“I plan on putting a rock on your finger later. Not through a place like this.” His comment earns him a dirty stare from the salesperson helping us. That stare turns into wide eyes when Spike picks out a set of diamond earrings and matching necklace.

He slips the ring box into his breast pocket then places the necklace around my neck.

“How do I look?” I hold up my hair and stare in the mirror.

“Like a million bucks.” Spike drags me out of the jewelry store.

Our next stop is a dress shop where he has me try on several dresses before picking out the one he likes best. It’s a beautiful gown, formfitting, with no room for anything underneath.

I think that’s the point.

Next stop on our tour is the courthouse. We exit the limo and get in line. It’s funny and not at all glamorous, but perfection nonetheless.

There are about twenty couples in front of us, dressed in anything from cutoff jean shorts and cropped T-shirts, to tuxedos and wedding dresses. We’re somewhere in the middle. My dress is more of an evening gown than a wedding dress, and Spike’s clad in a dark suit rather than a tuxedo.

Despite the line, it moves quickly. The clerks at the Vegas courthouse have this thing down to a science. In less than an hour, we’re back outside, officially married according to the state of Nevada, but we’re not quite done.

Spike takes me to ‘The Chapel of the Stars,’ for the official ceremony. Evidently, Spike splurged on the whole wedding package, coordinated through the hotel. I’m a little
bummed the gals aren’t here, but too excited by the idea that in a few short minutes, Spike and I will finally tie the knot—even though we already have the license.

“You know, we could skip the chapel.”

The limo pulls up to a quaint little chapel. Done up like everything in Vegas, the lighting outside is over the top. The small building has been assaulted with Art Deco, another over-the-top Vegas flare.

“No way am I not marrying you in a church.” It’s a little white church. Not my dream wedding, but perfect. “You ready?”

“Let’s do this.” I grip his hand, maybe a bit harder than normal, but I’m a bride. I get to be a little nervous.

Spike is not how I imagined my groom. The black suit fits him like a glove, but his face definitely looks like a meat grinder took a go at him. We had so many funny stares at the courthouse.

His eye is nearly swollen shut. It’s black and blue, only a shade lighter than the bruising over his cheek and the rest of his face. He has stitches at the corner of his brow where I ripped out the piercing and stitches over his cheek. His lip is nearly double in size and he winces when he walks.

It’s perfectly imperfect.

Definitely memorable.

“You ready?” Spike pauses at the threshold, perhaps giving me this one last chance to back out.

“Ready, Freddy.”

He opens the door, then hesitates. “Are you upset it’s just the two of us?”

“I’m okay with it.”

But I kind of wish Skye was here. Mitzy too. And even Holly. I feel like maybe the two of us can be friends given time. I don’t know Piper that well, but she’s tons of fun, and a lot like Mitzy. I doubt she even knows this is happening. She and Bent have been absent these past couple of weeks.

“You know I love you, don’t you?” He gathers my hands in his.

“I feel it everywhere.”

“Good. I don’t want any doubts.” He glances over my head, looking inside the chapel. “Come. I think they’re ready for us.”

I take in a deep breath and glance at the man I love. “You look like crap.”
“Well, you look like an angel.” He draws me inside the chapel, where an older woman greets us with a warm smile.

“Kaleb Crowne?”

“That’s me.” He grins and looks at me. “That’s my real name, by the way.”

“Good to know.” I can’t help but laugh.

I swear, Spike’s more nervous than I am.

“Right this way.” The woman guides us to a set of double doors. She puts up a hand, stopping Spike. “You go that way, sweetie.” Pointing to a side door, I assume that will lead to the front of this tiny chapel where he will wait for me to walk down the tiny aisle.

“See you in a second.” He kisses me on the cheek, then disappears behind the side door.

“Nervous, honey?” The woman takes a look at me and brushes my hair off my shoulders so it all hangs down my back. “You’re a beautiful bride.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re only missing one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“One second, okay?”

“Okay?”

A funny grin is on her face as she disappears back behind her counter. When she reappears, she holds a beautiful bouquet of white roses with sprays of baby’s breath. I think they’re fake until the soft perfume of the roses floods my nose.

“Wow, those are...”

“Perfect for a beautiful bride.”

Music sounds from behind the doors.

“You ready?” She gives me one last bit of primping, combing my loose curls down my back and tugging on my dress until it’s how she wants it.

“I’m ready.”

Her face practically beams with the huge smile on her face. I don’t get why she’s so excited. We’re total strangers, but the moment she opens the door to the chapel, I understand.

Forest, Sara, and Paul rise, as do Skye, Ash, and even little Zach. In front of them, Piper and Bent turn as one. Piper clasps her hands to her chest, and I swear there’s a tear
trickling down her face. Mitzy, Noodles, and Holly are in the front pew. There are only three rows in the teeny-tiny chapel. Spike stands all the way to the front, looking even more nervous than I feel.

“What?” I stare at my friends, overwhelmed and filled with the most intense joy. “I can’t believe…” Tears fill my eyes as I take in the family who took me in after my mother’s death. I came to them a stranger, and somehow found myself a part of their unique family. There’s only one person missing. I sniff as tears fill my face.

A throat clears behind me, and I spin.

“I think it’s customary for the father to walk the bride down the aisle.”

Bash stands behind me in a dark suit. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt. It looks totally wrong on him, and yet totally perfect.

“You’re here.” I spin back around. “You’re all here.”

I can’t help it. Tears blind me, spilling joy and love as they trickle down my cheeks. Bash steps to my side and pulls out a handkerchief from his suit pocket. He hands it to me, and I dab at my eyes. I’m overwhelmed, but then I laugh.

I laugh with happiness. I laugh with love. I laugh for the best wedding a girl could ever wish for, and I’m glad to have Bash by my side.

The music plays, and he walks me down the aisle. All I can say is someone had better record this because I float on cloud nine. Words are said. Rings are exchanged. Spike kisses me. It’s the first time we’ve openly embraced, openly kissed, in front of our family. Bash holds himself stiffly, but he doesn’t interfere.

There are pictures, laughter, and lots and lots of hugs. They celebrate us in a shower of bubbles and non-alcoholic champagne. Then it’s just me and Spike inside the limo. The door shuts, and we’re alone.

Spike cups the side of my face and kisses away my tears.

“Until the very last beat of my heart and beyond, I love you, today, tomorrow, and forever.” He leans in and shows me exactly what that means.

I think we’re headed back to the penthouse, but the limo takes us to the airport, where we board a private plane. For the next month, we disappear from the world, just me and the man I love.

When we return, I have a surprise for everyone.

Another heart beats within me.
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Thank you so much for your support!

Love,

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This book is dedicated to you, my reader. Thank you for spending a few hours of your time with me. I wouldn’t be able to write without you to cheer me on. Your wonderful words, your support, and your willingness to join me on this journey is a gift beyond measure.

Whether this is the first book of mine you’ve read, or if you’ve been with me since the very beginning, thank you for believing in me as I bring these characters ‘from my mind to the page and into your hearts.’

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