

LYNN GALLI



Imagining Reality

SPECIAL EDITION

Imagining Reality

Also by Lynn Galli

Wasted Heart

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Imagining Reality

Lynn Galli

Penikila Press

IMAGINING REALITY

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Chapter 1

Sometimes having an active imagination isn't a good thing. Like when you're trying to do your job and you can't concentrate because your imagination gets in the way. Twenty beautiful women and two attractive men, if you went for that sort of thing, bent over gripping their thighs, panting, sweating, and some moaning in my exercise class. I'd probably gone too far with that last round, but my mind drifted when I recognized the blonde in the second row. It'd been years, but one of my better trysts. Back when I had a series of better trysts. Now, I'm a business owner, a caring daughter, and a loyal friend. I didn't have time for better trysts, and more shocking, I didn't want them anymore. My imagination was enough.

"Mercy!" one of the bent forms groaned.

I suppressed an evil grin. Begging was such a turn on, or at least really, really fun. Four people had dropped to their knees. Okay, I get it already. I should pay better attention, but damn if the blonde wasn't hotter now than she'd been when we were together. Three weeks, I think, maybe a little longer. She liked the handcuffs, a little too much in my opinion, but for three weeks, it had been fun.

"You're paying big bucks for this class, you know," I told them, tongue firmly in cheek.

"I thought this was part of the membership fee?" a dimwit called out in all seriousness.

Had I still been just a personal trainer, I would have made some snarky reply. Now that I own the health club, the customer, no matter how stupid, was always right. Or so my friend, Kayin the accountant, tells me.

"It is, ma'am, I was kidding. Go ahead, everybody, cool down then hit the road."

Actual shouts of glee bounced around the exercise room. Either everyone was out of shape today or I really went too far with that last stint. I looked over at my friend Lauren for a little assurance that I hadn't been that awful, but she was glaring at me like she hoped the mirrored wall behind me would shatter and cut me into a million pieces. Supportive friends, the backbone of my existence.

I took them through a few cool down exercises and watched the class filter out. As expected, Goldie made a beeline for me. She probably thought we might have another go, but she didn't know that I'd gotten sick of my *modus operandi* a while ago. So far the lesbians in town hadn't figured out I was on strike. Not that I was hoping for something to happen as a result of this strike. Unless finding my own version of my best friend Quinn's marriage counts as a result. Until Austy, one of the three chronic singles in the group, recently found a replica, I didn't think it was possible. Now that she'd done it, I'd been having all sorts of crazy thoughts. The kind of thoughts that my friends would attribute to Lauren, who was constantly on the lookout for her love match. Why she hadn't found it yet, I probably wasn't deep enough to figure out. Hell, I wasn't even deep enough to figure out if I really wanted what Quinn had.

"Hi, Jessie," Goldie purred.

I couldn't remember her name because I'm a shit, so I resorted to my standby. "Hey, babydoll." I called all submissives "babydoll" because they seemed to like it. The rest of the spectrum I called "doll" because my slight southern accent made it sound charming.

"Mmm, you remembered how much I like that name." Was I lying?

"Of course." I tried moving us toward the door, hoping she'd get the hint that I wasn't into this conversation.

"When are we going to hook up again, baby? I had so much fun with you." Goldie batted her green eyes at me. She was as svelte as I remembered and ample didn't begin to describe her chest. They'd felt as addictive as memory foam when I had my hands on them.

"Me, too." I tried for noncommittal because I'm a shit, but I think I said that already.

"So, Friday? I got some new toys to play with." Goldie ran a finger down my bare arm.

"We had such a perfect time before I don't think we can top it. Plus, now that I own the club, I try not to make a practice of playing with my members."

She gave me a pout complete with lip curl. Why did women do that? The whine followed, "Aww, Jessie, I've been missing you desperately. No one knows how to work me like you do, baby. You won't break your rule for me?"

I smiled like I enjoyed her fake pout and baby voice. "You keep showing up in this class, and these people will want to kill you. I lost my head for a moment when I spotted you."

As expected, her lip curl turned into a glowing, prideful smile. I'm not exactly proud that my superpower is manipulation, but I've been trying to tone that down; so give me some credit.

"You always know the right thing to say. Give me a ring if you decide to break your rule." She wrapped an arm around me and began rubbing my back. I had to keep from shuddering. I couldn't stand when people rub my back without permission.

"Sure will," I lied because I'm good at it.

She pranced out of the class, hoping I'd be staring at her ass. Since it was right there, I might as well look. Full and round, some would call it luscious. Why she didn't have much self-esteem, I'd again need to be deeper than I am to figure out.

"Make another date with Tara for tonight?" Lauren asked while grabbing up her towel and water bottle. Tara? That was her name. How does Lauren remember the names?

I waved at the last few departing class members and turned my attention to Lauren. Strands from her long red hair

plastered themselves to her forehead and along her temples. Her hair always made me smile. It was red, only not just red. It was a shocking red, like the kind that kids have when they're little and are constantly teased with the name "carrot-top" because there's an awful lot of orange to it. Usually, by the time they reach puberty, the red darkens and becomes less glaringly red. Lauren's hair had not darkened much, with almost an equal mixture of red and orange.

Her cheeks flamed from exertion, dousing the faded freckles that sprinkled her entire face. Natural blush, she called it. Most redheads hated their freckles; Lauren embraced them. I liked that so much about her. She had a tall, thin frame, exquisite face with delicate features that exhibited pride, and turquoise blue eyes that contrasted her hair nearly to the point of overshadowing the color.

I loved her look not only because she was beautiful, but mostly because she was comfortable in her own skin. She never compared herself to how others looked, especially me. Not that I'm a model or anything, but I've been told I've got a face. I should be comfortable saying that I'm beautiful, but to me, beauty starts on the inside. And if you're a shit like I am, you can't really be beautiful.

"My work never ceases," I responded to her inquiry. No need to worry my friends that I'd been living the bipolar opposite of my usual dating pattern for months now, ever since I ran into my ex, Chloe, on a trip to Seattle. Seeing her ignited a harsh reminder of the love I'd thought I had and the life I'd thought I wanted. She'd been the reason I'd turned to mindless, meaningless, heartless trysts. I was still trying to figure out why seeing her after all these years made me discontinue those dating practices that had sustained me for the better part of a decade.

"She's a cutie," Lauren commented good-naturedly, stopping my tormenting thoughts. "I'm sure you'll have a grand ol' time." She never got envious, at least not that I could see.

"I'm sure you're right," I confirmed. "We still on for that movie tomorrow night? Quinn picked it, so don't blame me if it blows."

"I think it looks good. I invited Caroline because Sam has something going."

"The more the merrier," I chirped a policy that everyone affixed to me. I wasn't really a "more the merrier" type of person, or I stopped being that type, but why disappoint?

Lauren moved past me toward the door. "Have fun with Tara tonight. See you tomorrow, Jess."

"See you then, L." I watched her leave and didn't register until too late that I was checking out her ass. *What are you doing? She's one of your best friends. Rule number one: you don't check out your best friends. Rule number two: you don't sleep with your best friends. Rule number three: if you find yourself checking out or sleeping with your best friends, move far away because you've just reached your quota of being a shit.*

"Jess?"

The image of Lauren's ass was replaced by Sophie, my activities director. Like Lauren, Sophie was hot, but straight, not that it mattered. She was an employee, and I've given up sleeping with straight women. Okay, women that I know are straight, anyway.

"What's up, Soph?"

"Lost another instructor for Saturday night. Guess there's something big going on at one of the clubs in town?"

"I'll take the class," I offered, knowing I'd miss the annual bash at my favorite bar. Life as a small business owner.

"You sure? That's like three Saturdays in a row that you've worked. Won't the lezzies in town throw a fit if you don't make an appearance?"

I hated when she tried to sound hip to what she annoyingly referred to as my "lifestyle". She'd watched a few episodes of *The L Word* and, all of a sudden, she thought she was an expert on lesbians. Most of the time I let it roll right off my back, but it was starting to get to me. Not that big a surprise since I haven't gotten laid in six months. Little things irritate now.

"Leave the worrying about my social life to me, 'kay?"

"Sure thing, boss." Sophie backed off.

"Enjoy your evening, Soph." I watched her retreat with an airy goodnight, leaving me to pick up some forgotten towels and mats. A health club owner's job was never done.

Even after a year, my heart swelled every time I thought about owning this club. Thanks to an investment of start-up capital by my incredibly successful friend, Willa, I'd been able to trade up from being a personal trainer to opening the gym of my dreams. On this feat alone, I'd admit to being proud of myself.

I called it a day after taking a shower and glancing at a few supply orders. Heading home was my favorite part of the day ever since I'd bought my house. Both the house and the health club made me feel like I was making great strides to gaining the life I'd always wanted.

"Is that you, Jessamine?" My mom called out from her bedroom when I swung the front door shut. She almost always used my full name, the only one who would. Rightfully so, since she'd chosen it.

"Yeah, Mom." I dropped my duffle under the side table before heading off to find the real reason I'd bought the house.

My mom's prone form huddled under the covers of her adjustable bed. A form that had gotten skinnier and skinnier over the past few months. One scrawny arm lay outside the covers and the bone-thin wrist compelled a sudden intake of breath to keep me from bursting into tears.

I looked at her head last because it always took a while to steel myself for the sight. Wisps of hair clung defiantly to her now sporadically fuzzy head. Not enough growth since her last round of chemo to make her happy, but I thought she looked just as beautiful as she had with a full head of hair. I saved her eyes for last. They lit up whenever I walked into the room. It didn't matter if it was after a long day or a long night; she had a special look for me. Those sparkling eyes never failed to brighten my day.

"How's the day, Ma?"

"Good day today," she reported with a smile.

Thank you, God, for letting her have a good day, I silently prayed. They were few and far between of late, so we relished them when they came. No wonder she'd called four times today asking when I'd be home.

"I'm glad, but I bet you let the nurse go home early though, right?" She nodded in reply. "I wish you wouldn't. They're supposed to be here in case you need something."

"Jessamine, you always worry so. Did I make you a worrier, sweetie?" She beckoned me to sit beside her on the bed.

I carefully took a seat so as not to cause discomfort. "I got all the good stuff from you, Ma, but the nurses are here for a reason. Please let them do their jobs. Did you eat lunch today?"

Her beautiful smile now had a tremor from one of her chemo drugs, but it warmed my heart nonetheless. "Willa stopped by with some delicious soup and her wonderful stories. I find them hard to believe." She looked to me for confirmation that my friend exaggerated. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. It was so much funnier when you believed everything Willa said. "I like that girl so much. I don't know which of you is luckier to have the other, that's how much I like her."

And I loved that girl, even before I knew how generous and dedicated she was to her friends. Quinn was in the middle of a championship quest with her college basketball team which meant that Willa was doing overtime on the friendship duties. I loved that she realized how much a visit can make a person's day when she's ill. I never had to ask; they'd just check in whenever they could. Much more so than my brothers, but that was a whole different elephant to deal with.

"I know what you mean. Did she stay long?"

"She called it a long lunch to walk her dogs and get out of her office. She said I'm an excuse to get away. I know she's fibbing, but I don't care. I like when she comes by. She let me beat her at gin rummy, too."

Now I really loved that girl. I didn't know what I'd done to get so lucky with these friends of mine. "You're the card shark, Ma. I doubt she let you beat her."

"Whichever way, I'm just glad she's a friend of yours. You need to find someone like that. She and Quinn are perfect together. Start searching for a Willa of your own, sweetie. I want to know you'll have someone when I'm gone."

A stinging lump formed in my throat as I shook my head trying to gain control of a calm voice. "Stop talking like that. You're getting better, and positive thoughts make your recovery even easier. No more talk about you not being here for me."

Her eyes filled with the tears that mine fought back. "I'm only thinking of your happiness. Someone special could make you very happy."

I looked back toward the doorway to keep her from seeing my tears. She'd had such a good day, and I didn't want to bring her down. "I'll find someone when I'm ready. Right now, I'm loving my business and my friends. And you. That's a whole lotta plenty good."

"You're right, sweetie. You can't beat plenty good." She gripped my hand. Hers felt a little rough from all the chemo.

"How 'bout a little lotion?" I found some lavender scented hand cream in her nightstand then went about tenderly massaging it onto her hand and up her arm to her elbow.

Her eyes followed my progress as her breathing changed. This always relaxed her. Her skin was cool and slid over the bones underneath. She was losing too much weight, but I tried not to think about that. I tried not to think about a lot these days. Breast cancer, Stage IV, no time for thoughts.

"My beautiful daughter," she whispered when I finished moisturizing her hands and arms. "Play something for me?"

"What do you feel like?"

"A little Chopin or Bach, you choose, sweetie. I'm so tired. You can play me to sleep."

"Wouldn't you like something to eat first?" I tried to keep the desperation from my voice.

"We had a big lunch. I don't think I could eat anything else."

I watched her brown eyes, the ones she passed on to me in the gene transfer, to see if I could push the issue. Nope, wasn't

going to happen. I prayed that Willa made her finish her soup, no matter how long it took. I felt like a hypocrite for praying because I wasn't religious, but when you're dealing with an illness that science hasn't figured out how to fix, there's only one other option. Whether it's labeled religion or spirituality or energy or philosophy, something has to step in because medicine can only do so much.

"Okay. We'll have a big breakfast tomorrow. I'll make your favorite." I smiled and bent to kiss her forehead. "Sleep tight."

"You, too, sweetie. I love you."

"Love you, too, Mom."

I switched off her light and moved into the living room where my baby grand piano stood near the front windows. I'd wanted this piano since I learned to play as a kid, but until I bought the house, I never had a place to put it. The mahogany wood gleamed in the light of the corner lamp, and I ran my fingers along the gilded antique lettering before folding up the key cover to expose the lustrous white and black teeth.

From the piano bench, I pulled out the Chopin music book and propped it open on the note stand. I took a seat, posture perfectly erect. With loose hands, I stroked the keys and music filled the house. Sometimes nothing is more soothing than playing the piano. Not even my imagination. I played until I knew she'd fallen asleep and played some more to quiet my worry.

Chapter 2

When the front door shut with a quiet swoosh, I grabbed my running shoes from the closet and headed into the hallway. Quinn stood just inside the foyer, having let herself in so as not to wake my mom with the doorbell. On game day mornings, Quinn and I took our runs together. The buddy routine wasn't really necessary for upkeep of our workouts, but with our schedules of late, these runs were often the only time we got to spend together.

"Morning, Quinn," I greeted in a normal speaking voice.

My friend's nearly symmetrical face broke into a bright smile. Her golden brown hair doubled up in a ponytail, leaving her long neck exposed. Sunglasses perched on top of her head set to shield her ocean blue eyes from the sunshine on our run. Like me, her tall, athletic body was swathed in winter running gear, the reflective stripes glowing bright in the dark hallway. She had that wholesome beauty that is the stuff of fantasies. Very attractive more so than gorgeous.

"Hey, Jess. Mama Lil up?" she asked of my mom.

"For a while now."

"I'll duck in and say hello." I took a seat to lace up my shoes and gave Quinn a little time with Mom. Soft murmurs and light laughter floated out from the bedroom.

"Oh, sweetie, did you hear?" Mom asked when I joined them. Quinn sat forward in the chair next to the bed, holding

her hand. "Quinn's playing Texas tonight? You're going, aren't you?"

"No way I'd miss it."

"It's a sold out crowd, Mama Lil, but I could have you sit on the bench with the team. Honorary coach, what do you say?" Quinn's eyes twinkled.

"I'd love to, but I think I'll watch it on the TV right here."

Quinn nodded encouragingly. "I want to hear your cheers all the way down at the arena."

"I'm warming up my vocal chords as soon as you two get out of here."

"Okay, Mom. We're taking off. Be back in about an hour."

"Will's at home if you need anything," Quinn offered. "She can dash down here in two minutes."

"More like four, she's got those short legs to work with," I joked and received a punch to the shoulder from Quinn. We all made fun of Willa's diminutive stature, especially now that Austy, the other vertically challenged friend, moved to Seattle leaving us with only one shrimp to pick on.

"All right now, girls," Mom chided us like we were making too much noise on a sleepover. "You two have a good run. Don't wake up the neighborhood with all your chatter."

We waved goodbye and retreated to the hallway. Quinn lifted a hand to brush her cheeks. She didn't often cry, but like most everyone who cared for my mom, a visit these days brought on tears. I'd stopped inviting people to the house a while ago, but Quinn's tears always got to me. This run would do us both good this morning.

* * *

Our favorite club was lively tonight. I found myself wedged between my friends Kayin and Des at the largest table in the place. The group decided that Austy should come out after the game for old time's sake. Austy looked like she'd rather be stuck in an elevator with a wolverine. Her girlfriend, Elise, despite getting some enjoyment at seeing everyone react to Austy's new-to-Virginia look, wanted to bolt as well.

"Shit yeah! Who's that?" someone yelled above the music.

I looked over and groaned. Jordan Palow stood among the tree stumps of her friends staring at our table. More specifically at Elise whose striking looks would catch anyone's attention. Jordan mistakenly believed that she was in a contest with me about who could bed more women. I'd told her that I wouldn't play along, but apparently she kept the game going all by herself. From what I'd heard, she was pretty ruthless about it.

Her posse moved as one toward the table. Everyone but Jordan was hefty to overweight, soft butch to stone, annoying to overbearing. Jordan had a great body, butch tendencies, and was well past overbearing, more toward bitch. The shortest of her pack by at least three inches, she had blond hair that fell in short layers around her pretty face. Her faded blue eyes peeked out at us from behind the champagne veil. Most considered her handsome, but her smug attitude made me retch every time I saw her.

"Hello, ladies," she smirked in a husky voice. "Who do we have here?" She leered pointedly at Elise, ignoring everyone else at the table. "Are you new in town?"

For her part, Elise twitched the corner of her mouth in an amused look. She steeled a simmering gaze on Jordan. Her emerald green eyes gave no hint of interest in even meeting Jordan much less chatting with her. Not that I didn't already, but now, I was really liking her.

"Lay off, Jor, she's with Austy," Des, the most outspoken of our group, ordered.

Jordan turned an icy stare her way. "I'm not asking to marry her. I just wanted to know if she's new in town. If she's new, Jessie must be seeing green. Ain't that right, Jessie Girl? Finally got some competition besides me and you're screwing yourself over by sitting her at your table."

My eyes rolled by themselves. These games were so pointless and stupid. I glanced at Elise with apology. It only hurt mildly that no one at my table came to my defense.

"Ooh, yeah, she looks a little worried," Jordan boasted, turning to smile at her group. She refocused on Elise. "You'd make my whole year if you danced with me, hottie."

"Show some respect, Jor," Kayin put in. "Des just told you she's with Austy."

"Who the hell is Austy?" Jordan asked indignantly. She watched Elise slip an arm around Austy's shoulders and stared blankly for a long moment. "Is that you, A.J.? Damn, baby, you got all hot and stuff. What're they feeding you out there on the West Coast?"

True to form, Austy, who'd gone by A.J. for all the years she lived in Virginia, blushed at the compliment. She wasn't comfortable with people in general. Add to that people who complimented her, and she'd do an ostrich impression every chance she got.

"No matter, baby, you look good. But I'm gonna dance with your girl. You don't mind, do you? I seem to remember that you don't like dancing much." Jordan looked smug enough to want to punch. It clearly didn't matter to her that Elise was clinging to Austy like she was a life preserver. Nor did Austy's visible embarrassment faze her one bit.

"I mind." Elise forced a steady voice. As remarkably gorgeous as she was, I would think she'd be more comfortable with this kind of persistent and unwanted attention.

"Aww, come on, hottie. You won't get a better offer tonight." Jordan reached her hand out, her upturned elbow coming to rest right in front of my face.

Elise simply stared at the hand, both of hers on some part of Austy's body. Austy looked like she wanted to bite Jordan's fingers off, not in jealousy, but to keep her from annoying Elise.

"How 'bout me?" my mouth spoke before my brain did.

All eleven pairs of my friend's eyes turned to look at me as surprised as I was. Jordan seethed with a game-on look. She'd misinterpreted my question, thinking I was muscling in on Elise.

"Will I do, doll? Let me try to make your year." Seduction permeated my skin, rising in waves that I'm certain everyone could see. Why was I doing this? Just because my friend and her girlfriend were overwhelmed, didn't mean I needed to step in to make things easier.

Jordan looked astonished. Other than the first time she came into the bar, we'd never danced. I traced my fingers over her arm, feeling it flinch before eagerly pushing into my fingertips. I didn't bother to look for the shock from my friends. I could only imagine what they were thinking.

"What do you say, Jordan? Care to cut a rug?" I stood up, knowing I wouldn't find any resistance. Knowing by the way her arm twitched that she'd follow me anywhere.

My fingers ran down to her hand to lead us to the dance floor. Jordan obediently followed, her posse staring in amazement as their leader gave up control. When we faced each other, she snapped her eyes to mine with a suspicious look. I gave her my most seductive smile, latched my fingers onto her hips, and pulled her into me. With the sound of the thumping beat, I pushed who she was from my mind and began a slow grind with her.

After four songs in a row, I no longer felt her body glued to mine. I didn't find any enjoyment that I was manipulating her. I didn't delight in the fact that her mouth brushed against my throat, nipping at my skin, her hands pawing my hips and ass as she gyrated against me.

When the fifth song ended, I leaned back and looked into her startled grey-blue eyes. "That was spectacular, doll. We should do this more often." My husky voice made my own skin crawl. Brushing my lips softly against her cheek, I whispered in her ear, "Did I make your year?"

Her eyes fluttered for a moment, opening to look at mine before she smiled, satisfied. Nothing in her expression told me she knew what I'd done to her. As a master manipulator, she should be able to spot my insincerity. Instead, I watched her seemingly float away, riding a false high.

A hand grabbed me before I made it all the way off the dance floor. With a gentle tug, it twirled me back. I expected to see an angry Jordan, having finally realized what I'd been doing. Instead, I saw the angelic face of my friend Lauren, turquoise blue eyes sparkling at me.

"You're dancing with me now." She grabbed my waist to keep me from leaving. I laughed at her forcefulness. She was so cute sometimes.

"What's up, L?" I started moving to the beat, watching Lauren find her own rhythm.

She gave me a wink and turned around to wiggle her tush in time with the music. A free spirit, that's my friend Lauren. My lousy mood at working over Jordan vanished as I got into the enjoyment of dancing with my friend.

When the next song turned slow, I took her hand to head back to our table. She tugged hard and pulled me into her. *Hmm, this is interesting.* She slid my hands around her waist and looped her arms around my neck. When she pressed against me, she led us in a slow dance.

"That was nice what you did," she spoke into my ear.

I leaned back and gave her a questioning look. "What did I do?"

"You know what you did. You don't fool me, Jess."

"How much have you had to drink, L?"

"Ha-ha. Play all toughie with everyone else, but I know what you did."

I quirked my eyebrows at her. *No? She couldn't actually know, could she?* "Don't know what you're talking about, shug."

"Yes, you do. You made Jordan disappear so that Austy and Elise wouldn't be uncomfortable anymore. You took a woman that you don't like out to the dance floor and made her think she was the only person in the world. You're a good woman, Jessamine Ximena, even if you won't let yourself believe it." Lauren pressed closer, moving our bodies with ease. "One of these days, I'll make even you see it." She tilted up and kissed my cheek before detaching herself to walk away.

Five seconds passed before I realized the song had ended.

Chapter 3

Arriving at my friend Caroline's café, I spotted one of the couples in the group among the small late lunch crowd. They were sitting at our reserved table, making no movement to bring in other tables to accommodate the larger group.

"Who was the woman of the eve last night, Jess? We left before I found out your chosen one," Des called out loud enough for the nearest tables to turn and stare as I walked toward her.

If I was the type to take friends for granted, I would have broken off from this group long ago. If only to spare myself the often humiliating to almost always crass remarks that Des made. Unfortunately, I loved some of these women too much to let one of them ruin it for me. Most of the time it wasn't that bad, but again, the whole not-getting-any made me more edgy with everything these days.

The salt was gradually taking over the pepper in Des's short hair as she neared fifty. Cantankerous also seemed to override her usual ornery manner. Her weight tiptoed gradually higher despite my training plan for her. Not that I cared if someone is overweight, but when she came to me for a training plan to manage her weight, I start to care if it doesn't work. At five-eight, she carried the weight well, and her usual flannel to fleece attire concealed what she told me were her concerns. As a contractor, Des spent many hours each day on

manual labor so heart problems due to lack of exercise weren't going to be a concern.

Her partner, Skye, also shared the same concerns about Des, but her cooking probably contributed to their collective heft. Skye worked for a caterer in town and took many of the delectable leftovers home. Her own blond hair showed signs of going grey as well. Despite her laid back Aussie attitude, she didn't like getting older or heavier or crankier.

"For a minute there, it looked like you might be taking Jordan home, but I saw her leave the dance floor without you. Who was it, then?"

"Hi, Skye, hello, Desiree. How are you both today? See, that's how humans greet each other, Des. Not by questioning my sex life for all to hear," I scolded as I moved to the next table and began to drag it over to extend the space for us.

"For a femme, you sure are bossy and physical," Des pronounced, knowing how much I couldn't stand when she started on her butch-femme stereotyping.

"Let me help you with that." Elise rushed forward from the middle of the café to grab the other end of the table I was dragging. Austy smiled at her girlfriend's immediate jump to action and continued toward the table. She hugged both Des and Skye despite having seen them just last night because she loved hugging people.

"Thanks, Elise." We easily completed the task of joining the two tables. I looked at the space, then over at another table and without having to ask, we both moved toward it together. "How was the hotel last night, Aust?" Lauren joined us and eagerly accepted her hug, holding onto her longer than usual. The sight saddened me because I knew how much she missed her best friend.

"You taking your women to hotels now, Jess? Don't want them knowing where you live, eh?" Kayin asked as she and her partner, Isabel, walked toward the tables.

Now how'd I get dragged into this? I released a sigh complete with eye roll that no one caught because I was facing the window. Except Elise. Her mouth twitched, hiding a smile

while studying my reaction. If someone told me she could read minds, I wouldn't question it one bit.

"Which brings me back to my first question, who was the lucky girl last night, Jessie?"

"My money's on Jordan." Isabel flashed a crooked smile which animated her smooth mocha complexion. "She's been begging for a bit of Jessie for years."

"Who's begging Jessie for what?" Sam asked, coming in from her bookstore which was connected to the café.

"What'd I miss?" Sam's partner, Caroline, plopped a tray of her delicious sandwiches onto one of the tables. Now that the lunch rush was over, they could relax with the gang for a while.

"Jessie was just going to tell us about her night with Jordan, or Tara, or Kylie, or was it Wendy last night?" Des cocked her head and jutted her haughty chin in expectation.

A low rumbling swept across the café as the door opened and in walked Quinn. The team's win last night ensured a top ten seeding for UVA and the town folk were still talking about it. They had championship expectations on them every year, but this was the first year in quite a few that might meet those expectations.

"Well done, Coach."

"Good game, Lysander."

"Keep it going, Coach."

She acknowledged each comment with a smile, a nod, or a handshake before winding her way over to us. Willa appeared at the table almost simultaneously, and I had to replay the scene in my head to figure out if she'd been with Quinn the whole time or if she'd entered from the bookstore. She had the uncanny ability to blend into the background whenever Quinn received attention, but this was chameleon-like.

"Jeez," Elise muttered under her breath. I thought she was amazed at the public reaction to Quinn, which always took some getting used to. But when she saw my questioning look, she asked, "Did she just appear out of thin air?"

I laughed at her question. It did seem that way. We brought the last of the chairs over as Austy finished hugging

everyone in the group. Lauren grabbed a seat next to Austy and Willa left one open for Elise, no doubt in an effort to provide extra protection once the group turned to grilling Elise. I planned to keep my mouth shut and had been ever since I realized that I'd met Elise years ago while training for the Olympics in Colorado. One mention of Austy skiing with Elise triggered a vivid recall of the day I'd moved into the training dorm as the winter athletes were moving out. A sharp, witty, gorgeous skier had been assigned to show me and nine others around. By the end of the tour, half of us were lusting after her. She was even more gorgeous now, but thankfully she hadn't remembered the encounter yet. The group would never stop harassing me if they found out.

"So?" Des insisted when I took an open seat next to Caroline.

Moving the conversation off the topic of my oh-so-fascinating love life, I asked, "How are you finding our little town, Elise?"

Austy smiled and eased her arm around Elise's shoulder. Nearly every time I saw them together, they were holding hands or had arms around each other. If it were anyone else but Austy, the most tactile person in the group, I'd call it sickening.

"Well, I haven't had to use an umbrella yet, so I'm liking it quite a bit," Elise joked.

"I'll be leading the dollar tour after lunch," Lauren indicated to the group. "Feel free to join us."

"How much of the campus are you going through and will it include the 'days of Lauren's life' saga as usual?" Kayin asked sarcastically.

"I will now extend it an extra hour to include all the highlights," Lauren asserted with a devilish grin.

Des imitated Lauren's voice poorly, "Here's my favorite study desk in the library. Here's where I used to eat my lunch. That's the building where Austy used to kick my ass in fake court even though I was a third year student when she was in her first. Oh, and I lost my virginity in that dorm."

"Des!" Lauren flushed pink and, beside her, Austy flushed in sympathy.

"Right-o, mate, she's just joshin'." Skye attempted to diffuse her partner's crassness with an exaggerated Aussie accent. "I mean, you would have been twenty-two or three by the time you started law school. She's just having a run at you, mate."

"New topic, please!" Lauren pleaded.

"Was it Jordan, Jess?" Des stoked my irritation.

"Why are you so convinced I went home with someone, Desiree?" Nearly everyone laughed at my comment. Only Austy, Elise, and Quinn didn't smile. They merely turned an interested look in my direction.

"You're hilarious. So if it wasn't Jordan, who was it? Come on, woman, don't tease us."

At that moment, my cell phone rang and the usual round of groans sounded. Normally I wouldn't be rude enough to answer, but since my mom got sick, I always checked the display. Today, she was my savior.

"Hi," I said into the phone, much to the chagrin of everyone at the table. I waved apologetically, got up, and headed outside.

"Hi, sweetie," Mom greeted with cheer. "Will you be home for dinner?"

"I'm covering a spinning class tonight, why?"

"Just wondered if I should make enough for two."

"Are you cooking, Ma?" My hope soared through the lines. She loved to cook, but her energy rarely let her these days.

"Your favorite, sweetie."

"Then I'll definitely be home. Can we make it early? I do need to cover that class."

"All right. See you later, Jessamine."

With a bright smile, I reentered the café. Mom felt good enough to cook, which meant she felt strong, which meant she was getting better. This was my thought process these days. Don't fault my logic.

"Wow, must have a hot date tonight. Is it with the last night's conquest or someone new?" Des leaned forward on her elbows.

"Don't you ever get tired?" Isabel shook her head in wonder.

"Or sore?" Des snickered before receiving a jab from Skye.

My mood faltered slightly at Des's tactless remark. "You know, Desiree," I snapped, ready to rip into her for being such a nosy bitch. Everyone fixed their attention on me, some hoping that I would, others anxious that my words would start the fissure in the group that we all knew might happen if someone called Des on her comments. "Never mind." This was Austy's weekend, and I wouldn't let my anger ruin that. "Lauren, I hope you'll show Elise where you and I met or crashed into each other, I should say."

Lauren smiled proudly at me. For a minute, it seemed like the pride had nothing to do with remembering how we met, rather with the fact that I hadn't lit into Des. Lauren didn't like to let emotional peaks and valleys dictate how we spoke to each other, and she didn't like swearing. Most assuredly, she knew if I'd said what I wanted, there would have been swearing.

"Of course," she agreed readily. "It's not every day that you run smack into a marble statue who adeptly catches you before you fall to the ground and graciously points out that everyone else on the track is running in the opposite direction that you are. The entire track team looked like they were going to hire a sniper to take me out if I'd caused any harm to their star."

Most of the group had already heard some version of our meeting, but they chuckled nonetheless. Lauren winked at me, knowing it was actually me who'd caused the accident, even if she was running in the wrong direction. I hadn't been paying attention, thinking instead about the only woman who'd ever taken my mind off of training. No, I wouldn't start thinking about Chloe again. I was done thinking about her, and our apartment, and the other woman and man I found with her in our bed. *Enough!*

To keep the thoughts from forming, I plowed ahead, "Then you'll have to take Elise by the student center where you introduced me to Austy who still holds the record for the most original comment about my height. She stands, looks up at me, and dryly offers, 'nice to meet you, Jessie. Why the long frame?' She and L broke into hysterics that turned to tears, and I thought that either these two are studying too hard or they're gonna become two of my best friends."

"We were studying too hard," they said in unison before breaking into the same type of giggle fit. Friends that relentlessly ride you and offer little comfort: priceless.

The lunch wound down and while people figured out a game plan for visiting with Austy and Elise, I went to work reorganizing the tables and chairs. When the first tour guide, Lauren, dashed into the bookstore with Sam for a moment, Elise and Austy helped with my chore.

"Is L dragging you out dancing again, tonight?" I asked my friend.

"She mentioned something about it, but I told her that last night was a one shot deal. Elise doesn't really like bars, thank God, and I only ever went to hang out with you guys."

"Why don't you come by my gym tonight? I'm teaching a class. I'll wear your ass out."

"What?" she looked up with surprise. "You're working on Saturday night, Jessa?" Austy always shortened my name to Jessa, feeling that it did better justice to my full name than Jessie did. This from a woman who went by initials for thirty-two years.

"Hard to imagine that I might actually take my business seriously, but yeah, I am."

"Hold up, now, Lofty. This has nothing to do with owning your own club, does it?" Austy's mischievous smile squinched up her whole beautiful face. She was such a cutie.

"Yeah, it does."

"No, you're sick of the whole casual fling thing, aren't you?" Her head started nodding before she got any sort of response from me. Dammit, how'd she figure this out?

"Please, you've been without sunshine too long, shug. It's affecting your thinking."

"I'm right about this, aren't I, *cara*?" She looked at Elise who glanced at me with a shrug and back to her girlfriend with a smile. "See, Elise thinks so, too."

"What? She didn't say anything, and no offense, Elise, but you hardly know me well enough to decide if I've lost my mind and stopped dating."

"Elise just knows things about people. And if she agrees with me, you're so not dating casually anymore." She added an all-knowing smile and went from cute to obnoxious right quick.

"I don't even know how to respond to this. I haven't seen you in a few months. I've barely even met Elise, and all y'all are deciding that I'm a completely different person?" I aired out my most disbelieving voice.

"Deny it all you want, Jessa, but stepping in the way you did last night, avoiding mentioning whom you're seeing right now, and forgoing a Saturday night out, something's up with you. Plus, you stayed pretty close yesterday, no visible flirting."

"Really, how much has the rain affected you, Sawed-off? If I shake your head will I hear a sloshing sound?" I kidded, using the nickname I gave her after her relentless comparison of our statures.

"Joke all you want, but I know it's a cover. I'm proud of you and thrilled for you. Let's leave it at that. No way you'll get as lucky as I am with Elise, but I hope you find somebody great."

I looked down and shook my head with a soft laugh. For once, I felt like admitting how right she was. "You've been an inspiration, you know."

Austy blushed at my compliment. Cute as a flippin' button, this one. "Well, if you hadn't knocked some sense into me, I don't know where I'd be right now. If I can return the favor, you'll let me know?" She referred to the little talk I had with her last summer to let her know that her crush on Willa wasn't

based in reality and she really needed to find someone just for her.

"Thanks, shug. Appreciate it. Come by the club tonight, really. I promise to take it easy on you."

"Bring it on, sister. Elise can do your, my, and her workouts all by herself and not even break a sweat. You think you and Quinn are fit, wait till you see Elise."

"Gauntlet is thrown." I accepted the challenge with a smile.

Chapter 4

“Another trial today, Aleric?”

Lauren looked over at her favorite security guard, watching the x-rayed contents of the scanner. Last week his once completely shaved head started sprouting a barely visible growth of hair. He called it his winter look and only Lauren had the nerve to tell the two-ninety, six-seven security guard that winter officially started two months ago. The rest of the guards, judges, commonwealth attorneys, and other lawyers simply agreed with anything he said. His stature and usual glare intimidated everyone except Lauren. She’d known him at UVA, tutored him actually, which meant he couldn’t get away with anything around her.

“Nope, here for the knitting class, Savion.”

Stark white teeth separated his dark complexion before a rumbling laugh escaped. He leaned over the scanner, his uniform threatening to split at the seams as he shook with hearty laughter. Nothing got in the way of a good laugh for Remus Savion.

“If I find knitting needles in that bag, I’m gonna have to cuff you for carrying concealed weapons into the courthouse.”

“You just want to join my knitting group. I know you.” Lauren plopped her briefcase and file box onto the conveyor belt and stepped through the metal detector.

“I’d rather cuff ya, Fire.” A bit of his pink tongue peeked through his teeth, grazing his brown lips. He enjoyed another

chuckle party at his suggestion. He stood and picked up her box to hand it to her, something he never did for anyone else.

"You know innuendo is lost on me." Lauren had a hard time keeping the mirth from slipping into her tone.

"Tragically, yes. Speaking of lost causes, our friend A.J. stopped by last week."

"Don't make me pull this whole courthouse over, mister. That's my best friend you're talking about."

"Keep your hair red, Fire." He grinned, using his favorite expression from their study sessions in college. "You know I dig me some A.J. Got to meet her new GF. Damn, damn, and more damn! She's the kind of woman who could make me think about dating a white chick. Most the time, you all are too much trouble. When you gonna find yourself a hot babe like that?"

"Gimme that case file, Remus, and keep your fantasies to yourself." Lauren swung the box out of his hands. She didn't need an old school chum verifying her hopeless loser existence.

"I love it when you throw that Irish temper my way."

"Oh, I'll show you an Irish temper, young man. Get back to work before you get fired for disturbing the lawyers." Lauren winked and started down the hallway.

"They give me raises for that kind of thing. Kick some ass in there." His chuckle followed her down the marble hallway.

Using her back to push through the courtroom door, she swung around to find the left side nearly filled with the plaintiff's family and friends. She didn't expect anyone to come out to support her client. He was the only holdover from her days at Koehler, Collier & Keys. An involuntary shiver ran through her as it always did when she recalled those days. *Welcome, first guilt trip of the day.* Why did she still feel so damn guilty about having had to represent their clients? Just the thought of the scum that firm took on made her want to scream uncontrollably in a crowded room.

As a corporate client, she rarely found fault with this guy, but his recent actions triggered her sleaze meter. At trial's end, she planned to inform him that he'd need to find new counsel. Imagining that confrontation caused more guilt and another

shiver. Maybe she could coax Caroline out to dinner tonight to unburden her guilt. Oh, how she missed Austy for conversations like this. Resolving to call her best friend at the lunch break, she unpacked her file box and waited for her client.

"Good morning, pretty lady."

Lauren felt the press of her client's hand on her back before he finished his greeting. Suppressing another shudder, she turned to greet him. He stood too close and his eyes fixated on her chest. That hand rubbed her back in large circles, fingers coming dangerously close to brushing the side of her breast. Sleaze! *Fantastic, second guilt trip of the day.* Maybe she'd skip calling Austy and call a shrink instead. Clearly she needed professional help.

"Morning, Adam. Are you ready?" She turned to pull out his chair for him, but the movement only managed to allow him better access to his ultimate goal.

"Hey, Lauren!" A familiar voice called out loudly from the gallery, startling Adam enough to drop his hand.

"Hi, Jess." She tried to sound professional, but Jessie's responding raised eyebrows told her she'd let the relief slip in.

"Holy Amazon, Batman!" Adam laughed heartily at his unoriginal joke.

Jessie threw him a bored glare. Open hostility poured from her usually intimidating vantage point. Adam was too stupid to realize she could drop him like a sack of sawdust if she wanted. In two inch heels, Jessie towered over him. Not that he had any intention of looking her in the face.

"Adam, this is my friend, Jessie."

"Some friend. Is there a height requirement for your little club, beautiful?" Adam posed his question to Lauren by barely flicking his eyes from Jessie's breasts to Lauren's face. She'd seen many lesbians have a hard time tearing their eyes away from her friend, but this guy didn't seem capable of the task.

Jessie fixed her gaze on Lauren, completely ignoring her idiot client. She was in form-fitting wool slacks designed for a double-take from behind, a silk blouse that flattered her well defined arms, and those two inch heels. She rarely elongated

her six-one frame with heels, but Lauren could kiss her for being so daunting right now.

"How do you do, Adam?" Jessie said to the top of his head because he wouldn't look her in the eye. "Excuse us a moment, will you? I need to speak with your attorney."

"You in some trouble, gorgeous?" Adam managed to glance up at her face briefly.

Lauren wanted to heave him aside so he'd get out of her friend's chest and jar some sense into him. Used to people staring at her striking beauty, Jessie endured the leer like he didn't even exist. Lauren would consider giving away her cat to be able to feign disinterest when someone was that annoying. Well, maybe she'd only consider loaning out her cat for a week.

Jessie reached out and slowly slid her palm down Lauren's arm, clasping her hand. The gesture highlighted intimacy, and Adam didn't miss the effect. His sneer grew even wider as he no doubt graphically envisioned their coupling. Lauren shivered at the thought of him thinking about her and Jessie together. Then she shivered at the thought herself.

"Just need to chat with my friend. You don't mind, do ya?" Jessie tilted her head, letting her long, wavy black hair swing over her shoulder. It complimented her envious olive skin tone, giving her a slightly exotic appearance that never failed to draw a glance. Almond shaped, mahogany brown eyes blinked slowly at Adam. Laced with her husky voice, the look had a hypnotic effect.

Her own mind now faintly wrung out, Lauren felt herself being led out into the hallway. Jessie's seductive powers left a sensation not unlike laughing gas. She doubted Adam would be fully himself by the time they made it back to court.

Once they cleared the doorway, Jessie dropped her hand and faced her. "Guess I owe Kayin ten bucks. She tried to convince me that guy was sleazier than a politician, but I didn't think it was possible. Jeez, Laur, why do you put up with him?"

"He's usually not that bad." Lauren couldn't believe she was defending him, but then again, that was in her job description as his attorney.

"Really? Looked to me like he was mauling you when I came in."

"He's never done that before." Adam had been getting bolder with her lately, which was one of the many reasons she wanted to drop him as a client.

"Well, that's good." Jessie released a long breath. With a sheepish glance she added, "Hey, I know I don't have any right to tell you how to manage your clients, but that guy seems like trouble. Kayin said you're thinking of dropping him?"

"After this trial."

"Do you mind if I stick around till the trial's over?"

Lauren felt a mixture of elation and bother. Bother that her friends didn't think she could handle this alone, but elation that they knew her well enough to understand how difficult this would be. She was so glad to see Jessie, though, she let the elation win out. "Thanks, Jess."

"Thank me, too." Kayin walked toward them.

"Blabbermouth," Lauren accused their friend without malice.

Kayin beamed at the allegation. Her nearly black eyes sparkled with the light streaming in from the windows lining the top of the corridor. Sunlight turned her dark brown skin to russet along her fine cheekbones and she lit up the whole area.

"Was a sista right?" Kayin asked Jessie, getting a brief laugh in reply. "Who's buying my good-looking ass lunch?"

"Get over yourself," Jessie ordered. "Even a one-legged chicken can fly."

Lauren and Kayin turned to look at each other and burst into laughter. "What the hell does that mean?" Kayin choked out through her laughter. Jessie sprinkled her speech with the oddest expressions, usually with perfect timing. Like now.

Dipping into her deepest Atlanta drawl, Jessie declared, "Wouldn't you like to know, sugar?" She got them moving back to the courtroom for the morning session.

Two and a half hours later, Lauren hadn't made any headway on the case. She hoped that would turn around during cross of the plaintiff. "Good morning, Mr. Tims, you're claiming that Mr. Vockel fired you prior to stock distribution in his company to avoid giving you part ownership?"

"Correct." He'd probably never used "correct" in place of "yes" before in his life, but testifying in court brings out carefully chosen dialogue.

"What were your last three performance review scores?"

"I don't know. It's not the sort of thing I memorize." He smirked at the jury.

Lauren cut off his smirk by lifting a manila folder. "I have copies of the appraisals right here if you need to refresh your memory?" She watched him blanch. He knew her next questions would establish that his performance scores had decreased significantly. A few minutes later, she was able to ask the clinching question. "You were aware when you accepted the position, that your former employer operates under an 'At Will' condition of employment, which makes it Scisio's right to terminate you for any reason? And that your performance has been drastically decreasing every year for the past three years? Yet you're suing for wrongful termination?"

"He cheated me out of my shares."

"So you've claimed. Thank you, Mr. Tims. Nothing further, Your Honor."

She barely made it back to her table, before Mike Danel hopped up from plaintiff counsel's chair. "Why do you think he cheated you out of your shares, Mr. Tims?"

"He wanted to keep majority ownership to himself so he could stay the CEO."

"Was that the only reason you feel you were fired?" Mike strategically placed himself beside the jurors' box.

"No, he fired me so that I wouldn't find out about his affair with my wife."

What?! As desperately as Lauren wanted to grab the lapels of her client, she set her glance on the plaintiff, willing her expression to stay neutral. She hated when her clients lied to her.

"He was having an affair with your wife?" Mike restated.

"Yes. Apparently their favorite rendezvous spot was his office, which is why he wanted me gone. If I'm out looking for work, I might be preoccupied enough not to notice."

"Thank you. No other questions, Judge. The plaintiff rests."

Surprise, surprise. Lauren hated losing. At least this one wasn't her fault.

"He's lying." Adam leaned in and put his hand on her forearm as the judge dismissed the jury for a lunch break.

Lauren turned to look at him and whispered, "I see. So, if I continue with our defense, will your corporate officers verify your denial? No one saw you bringing Mrs. Tims into your office?" His look turned sullen, and Lauren didn't need psychic abilities to know he hadn't been as careful as he thought.

"Anything's possible," he grumbled in a defeated manner.

"I don't care if you lie, but I do care if what you're holding back is critical to your case. And when you get my bill, you'll care, too. If you'd told me up front, I could have pushed for settlement. Now, we'll be lucky if they settle for the value of the shares he was promised."

"His last demand was way under that," Adam sulked.

"His last demand was issued prior to trial when his attorney's contingency fee was much lower. He also didn't have the claim of your affair aired out in front of the jurors who control the ability to award him an unlimited amount in damages."

"Fine, point taken. Can't you do anything?"

"I'm going to try to make this go away, but get your hand warmed up because I guarantee you've never written a check as large as you'll be writing on this settlement." Lauren stood from the table and walked over to Mike who'd waited around to see how she'd react to his little bombshell. "My client would like to stop wasting time in court and see if we can work out an agreement. Are you open to that?"

His teeth bit into his lip trying to rein in his smile. He knew he had her, but he showed enough decorum not to rub her face in it. She'd come up against him often enough to know that

he'd been in her position one too many times. It was never any fun when the client was a liar.

"Shall we head back to my office over the lunch break?"

"We'll be there in ten minutes. Thanks, Mike." Lauren watched as he darted out of the courtroom to share the good news with his client. She returned to her table to report, "We've got a settlement conference across the street right away. Once we settle on a number, you'll be looking for another attorney."

"Don't be rash, Lauren. Just because I didn't tell you about my affair? Are you jealous?" He grabbed her arm and smirked arrogantly at her.

"Let go of my arm, Adam." Lauren felt her heart rate speed up at the restraining force he was using. She yanked her arm back, but that only tightened his grip. "I asked you to let go."

"You're overreacting. I need you as my attorney. Sorry I screwed up on this one, but you're good for my company and good for me." He moved his grip up her forearm, making Lauren step back to extend her arm.

"Get your hand off my friend, before I take it off your arm," Jessie spoke up from right behind him. She'd crowded into his personal space, standing five inches taller. Her arms flexed at her sides, showing every bit of the muscular tone that people in her club kill themselves to create on their own physique.

His fingers popped open and he swung around to face Jessie. "I was just trying to tell Lauren how much I need her as my attorney."

"And I told you that, after today, you're no longer my client. I don't like wasting my time on a sure loser...of a trial. I can recommend several attorneys in town. I'll meet you in Mike's office in five minutes. My advice is to accept any demand they make, or you can find another attorney to complete these proceedings."

His head swiveled back and forth from Lauren to Jessie to Lauren to Jessie's muscular arms. "You'll regret not having my business," he huffed and skirted carefully around Jessie to flee the courtroom.

"You know when Jess suggested we come to court today," Kayin started casually, "I didn't think it'd be like watching one of my daytime stories. That was some good show, L."

Jess suggested? Not Kayin who shared an office with her and thus knew about her distaste of this client? That's odd. Lauren shook off her confusion. "I aim to please."

Jessie brushed her fingertips against the part of Lauren's arm where Adam had held her so tightly. One spot felt a little tender and Lauren could imagine the bruise that might appear on her fair, freckled skin. "You going to be all right with that guy?"

A teensy part of her wanted to be annoyed at her friend's lack of confidence that she could handle herself. The rest of her wanted to hug Jessie for her protectiveness. It was one of her best qualities. For a second back there, she actually believed that Jessie could dismember her client. Having someone that strong on her side is a good feeling. "I'll be fine. Thanks for coming. I'd better head over to that meeting."

"We'll walk you out," Jessie offered. "How 'bout a victory dinner tonight? Kayin, get a sitter for Zalika and grab Isa for a little supper? My treat."

"Victory?" Lauren's brow furrowed. "I didn't win. My client is about to get slaughtered in a settlement."

"Sounds like a victory to me." Jessie fluttered her eyebrows and placed her hands on their backs to prompt them out of the courtroom.

Lauren couldn't help but smile. Jessie was right. She'd just freed up her week from this trial, she'd get to bill out thousands in fees, and she finally dumped her most sleazy client. Victory all around.

Chapter 5

Indefinable sounds filtered through the morning grogginess until Lauren recognized the song. She'd woken up to the same one yesterday. Either the radio station was using the same program list, or she was living the movie *Groundhog Day*.

She felt a slight movement next to her hip then heard the comforting buzzing sound of her cat's purr. He didn't like getting up in the morning any more than she did. She reached a hand down and rubbed his tummy. Morning and night were the only times he cuddled. He was anti-cuddle cat.

"Morning, Reveler." She received a bothered "meow" in response. He stretched, glanced his chocolate masked face up at her, tucked his white belly back into her hand until he decided that he wanted no part of her anymore and leapt from the bed.

Lauren did some variation of the same stretch, staring over at the empty side of the bed that Reveler had occupied. She never took up the whole bed, hoping one day that she'd have a reason not to. Trudging through her mid-thirties, that notion was starting to look pretty bleak.

Her last girlfriend stuck around all of seven months before she grew tired of Lauren's work schedule, Lauren's friends, Lauren's cat, Lauren's driving, Lauren's cooking. Or whatever else she yelled as she grabbed her belongings and stormed from the townhouse. Even Lauren's heist bothered her. How

could she throw that out at her? None of those things mattered while Lauren let her move in when she couldn't make rent, helped her with her bills, and paid for the massage therapy classes until she-who-will-remain-nameless got certified and started making a steady income. The sex hadn't been all that great either. Why had she put up with it? Because it was so hard to find someone that matched up anymore. If she was into casual sex, or wanted to settle for anyone who showed interest, or stayed in a relationship to keep from being alone, she'd be waking up to someone rather than her cat.

Time for a little getaway, she decided when she stepped out of the shower. Not Seattle since Austy was just here and Lauren had to respect her new relationship. No, has to be someplace else she could find without too many wrong turns. Directions weren't her thing. Mom and Dad, the good ol' homestead of Roanoke. She could do that.

Towel wrapped firmly around her, Lauren rubbed some lotion on her arms and legs and ran a brush through her hair. She glanced at her reflection and wished again that her hair would stay as dark as it was when it was wet. That was a nice color red, not the orangey underscore of her red. And was it really necessary to have the freckles everywhere? Why not just on her face, she actually liked them on her face, but everywhere?

Grabbing a granola bar, filling her travel mug with tea, and loading Reveler's auto feeder, Lauren left for work. Her office took up both floors of an old Georgian style house in historic Charlottesville just off Court Square. When she decided to leave Koehler, she'd looked at a bunch of modern office spaces before falling in love with this old place. It had desperately needed Des's renovations to bring the exterior up to the historic district's beauty standards, but her friend had worked wonders.

A stab of guilt jolted her along with the cool air when she stepped out of her car behind the office. None of this would have happened without Willa's generosity. Yes, she worked hard as Willa's corporate attorney, but that didn't warrant the gift of an office building and business startup costs. To assuage

the guilt, Lauren reminded herself that she would have done the same thing if one afternoon she became an IPO multi-millionaire. What else would she spend her money on but her friends and family?

Opening the front door, Lauren traced a finger over the gold lettering on the glass that read "Aleric & Associates, Attorneys at Law." She'd just hired her second associate attorney along with one paralegal and two legal assistants. Having those resources at her disposal was both daunting and reassuring. Daunting in that she had to manage them and reassuring in that when she skipped town later today, she'd have someone capable of taking care of her clients.

"Morning, Lauren," the receptionist greeted her.

"Hi, Becky. Chilly outside this morning."

"Heard it might snow again this weekend." She handed Lauren a stack of pleadings from two open cases. "Couple of urgent messages on your system."

"Thanks, I'll take a look. Is Kayin coming in today?"

"She's got a client coming by at eleven, so I sure hope so. God knows I couldn't balance those books." She shook her close cropped head, dangly earrings clattering about her face.

"You and me both," Lauren joked and made her way into her office.

The phone message log popped up as soon as Lauren's system booted. Opposing counsel in her medical malpractice suit wanted to "talk" again. Last time they'd spoken, the attorney tried to convince her that professional courtesy dictated she settle under malpractice coverage limits. Lauren was well aware of the professional courtesy rules of lawyerdom. Don't sue doctors, police officers or other lawyers for malpractice or misconduct. She'd had enough of the rules at Koehler. She flew in the face of rules now that she had her own firm. Well, maybe not in the face of, but she'd tweak a rule or two when she felt like it.

She picked up her phone and dialed the number on the message slip. This attorney always got on her nerves. She'd be happy to have the case over with.

"Bad day already, L?" Kayin asked the second she hung up. She stood just inside the doorway with a teasing grin. They'd started sharing office space about eight months ago, and most of the time, Lauren thought it was nice having a friend so close by.

"Just an insensitive jerk of an attorney," Lauren reported.

"Don't they give you extra credit for that in law school?"

"Oh, that's nice," Lauren scoffed. "You talk to your friends that way?"

"Not Austy, she's the good kind of lawyer."

"Don't start with the lawyer jokes, I can't take it today." Lauren waved a warning finger. "Say, will you get Isa and Zalika to go by my place over the weekend and play with my cat a bit?"

"Sure, Zalika will love it. Where you headed, girl? Getting away for the weekend with some vixen? Who is she?"

For a minute, Lauren felt like lying. As good as she was at bluffing in court, she really wasn't that great at lying. She could try to make up something interesting, but eventually she'd slip and have to fess up that she'd fabricated her weekend plans. Why bother? "Dropping in on the padres."

"Exciting." Kayin rolled her eyes. She and her parents didn't get along, and she didn't understand people who did.

"Just make sure my cat doesn't change the locks on my house while I'm gone, will ya?"

"You got it. If you want overnight cat care, I'm sure they'd be happy to spend the night."

Lauren cocked her head and studied her friend, but Kayin's features gave nothing away. "That'd be great if they wanted to stay over, but what's going on?"

Kayin brushed a hand dismissively. "Nothing. Zalika wants a cat. I don't. This way she gets to spend cat time away from me."

Lauren tried to keep her head from tilting the other way in concern. "You can tell me what's going on, you know. You and Isa, is everything all right with you two?"

"It's just the usual stuff. Might be nice to have a night or two apart."

Something like a wrecking ball smashed its way into Lauren's midsection. For a couple of months now, she'd been feeling the tension between Isa and Kayin. Now she had confirmation, and the knowledge sickened her.

"Well, if you want to talk, I'm always here."

"Not a big deal. I'd better get upstairs and prep the small conference room for my client. Have fun with your parents."

Lauren watched Kayin dash out the door, knowing she wasn't the emoter in her relationship. If she wanted to find out what was going on, she'd have to corner Isabel. That makes two relationships in their group having trouble. Sam and Caroline's efforts to get pregnant put a strain on their relationship that she hoped would disappear when they succeeded. Yeah, a weekend away might be just the ticket.

Hours and a hundred miles later, she pulled into her parent's driveway. The same home that she'd grown up in had started to worry her now that her parents were getting older. She'd been a late surprise. Her mother had her at forty-two, putting her in her late seventies now. Her dad's eightieth birthday celebration was slated for next month. A big bash to include all of his coworkers at the bank where he'd worked for fifty years. He'd be officially retiring.

"Hi, pun'kin," her dad called as he carefully made his way down the pathway toward her.

"Hi, Dad." Lauren rushed forward into his arms. Nothing felt better than being hugged by her dad, even if he seemed to get smaller with age.

"To what do we owe the honor of your visit?" He still wore his jacket from work and, like always, had on a hat whenever he went outdoors. It had little to do with the fact that he was partially bald. Men of his generation wore hats when they went outdoors.

"Just missed you guys, that's all." They made their way into the house where the familiar scent of home immediately comforted her. Not much had changed in her lifetime about the house. Part of the reason for her worry. Soon her parents might have a difficult time getting up and down the front path and

stairway in the house. Maybe she'd start to plant that townhouse idea in their heads this weekend.

"Was that her, Cap?" her mom called out. Everyone called her dad Cap, for Captain, the rank he held in the service.

"Hi, Mom," Lauren responded and went toward the small kitchen. Her mother, once as tall as she, stooped a little and shuffled when she walked now. She'd told Lauren that she had a bit of an ache in her hip, but Lauren thought it might be more than just a bit.

"My miracle." Her mother turned from the stove and embraced Lauren. She'd always called Lauren her miracle because they'd tried for years to have kids before giving up all hope. Lauren might have been a surprise but she'd been cherished nonetheless.

"What's for dinner?" She grinned after their hug.

"Like you have to ask." Her mother smiled back. "Corned beef and cabbage for my beautiful Irish miracle."

"Yippee! I love you, Mom, and I love coming home."

"Don't know how much you'll love her tomorrow when she has you out there trimming those trees in the backyard." Her dad set his hat on the table and shucked off his suit jacket.

Lauren smiled in response. She was glad to help out with anything around the house or hire someone to take care of the tasks. Actually, she wished they'd consider moving to a place that had those tasks taken care of for them even more.

"Help your dear ol' pop set the table, pun'kin." He tugged on her arm and they went about setting out the placemats, napkins, and utensils on the dining table. "How's work?"

"Couldn't be better. I just finished a rough case last week. How's the bank, Dad? Are you going to miss it?"

"We can talk about that later. I'd rather get the scoop on you. Tell me something good so I can keep your mother guessing for days. Are you seeing anyone?" Lauren giggled at his playfulness. Her parents had been married for fifty-six years, very little happened without both of them knowing. They loved playing the I-know-something-about-Lauren-that-you-don't-know game.

"Wish I could help, but nobody special." She loved that her parents accepted her sexuality so easily. When she came out to her dad, his only adjustment went from asking about a "young man" to asking about a "young woman." That he considered it no difference if she preferred women to men filled her with lovely pride for him.

"Dating?"

"Not in a while. Oh, but Austy was home last weekend and brought her girlfriend. You'd love her, Dad. She's FBI."

"A G-woman? That's dandy. Good for Austine. She needed someone as strong-willed as she is. There's no telling those Italians what to do, ya know?" He used his best Irish brogue when he spoke that last bit.

Austy spent many weekends coming home with Lauren during and after law school, and her parents loved her like another daughter. Her father tried all of his best Irish versus Italian material on her. Material he'd compiled with his own Italian best friend while they served together in the War.

"And you're saying the Irish are any different, Pop?"

He winked and spoke with that irresistible Irish lilt. "Don't get me started, lassie. You tell that dandy girl hello for me."

"I'll get her on the phone sometime this weekend, and you can tell her yourself."

"You're not telling him any secrets, are you, honey bun?" Her mom carried in the first of the dinner offerings.

Lauren plopped down a heat pad for the red potatoes before her mom set them in place. Her father answered before she could, "All sorts. You'll be guessing for weeks."

"Honey, why do you indulge him? You better have more to tell me when we're out working the yard tomorrow."

"I'll come up with something," Lauren promised her, elated to be home with all the familiar scents, sounds, and feelings. Just the right mix to get rid of the funk she'd woken up to.

Chapter 6

Sans the rest of the lunch crew, Lauren stopped by the health club to pick up Jessie and Kayin. Two phone calls within the past hour canceled out Skye and Willa, so that left Quinn, Kayin, and Jessie. Everyone else was working through lunch. This was starting to happen more often, or so it seemed. Since Austy left, probably even before when Willa was having problems launching her IPO. Maybe it was once Quinn got the head coaching job. Whatever the reason, Lauren found the whole thing troubling. At least they'd be four for lunch today.

Flashing her membership card, she gained entry to her friend's health club. Even after a year, she still smiled with pride when she stepped through this door. Who would have thought that Jessie would be a successful business owner? Her club appealed to the young professionals, the soccer moms, the middle aged men, the techie geeks and of course, the gay and lesbians in town. Flocks of loyalists jumped ship from the health club where Jessie used to work when she opened this club. Lauren had the honor of being the first member to join. There were times when it seemed like Jessie had a special smile just for her because of it.

"Hey, girl." Lauren held onto the doorjamb of the office Kayin used and swung herself in through the open doorway. "You rea—" She stopped when she realized she was talking to an empty room. Big dollop of humiliation. Thankfully no one was around to witness it.

"Talking to yourself again, L?" Jessie's voice sounded behind her.

Lauren spun on her heel, giggling because she'd been caught. No reason to hide it. "Talking my way to the loony bin, you know me."

Jessie's heart-stopping brown eyes glinted her skepticism but her full lips pulled into a charity smile. "Quinn can't make it, and Kayin got called down to Zalika's school because she wasn't feeling well. That makes us down two for lunch."

"Drat!" Lauren blurted before she thought about who'd hear it. Jessie liked to tease her about her no swearing rule.

The paralyzing smile that accompanied the heart-stopping eyes flared like adding lighter fluid to a fire. "Did you just say 'drat'?"

Rolling her eyes, Lauren looked away with a smile. Caught again. She was about to retort when Jessie's cell phone rang. Like that was something new. When wasn't that thing ringing? "Let it go to voicemail," Lauren ordered in vain.

Jessie was already looking at the caller ID then waving apologetically when she answered. "Hi...Yeah? Oh, good...Sure, I'd love to...No, now's fine. I'll be there soon."

Oh no, she's not canceling, too! For a date? That's so not going to happen. I don't care if I feel guilty for a month, she can just ditch her little lunch honey, Lauren thought.

She watched Jessie snap her phone shut and before a word could leave her lips, Lauren cut her off. "No, you're going to have to postpone your nooner to some other day, sister. I don't care how cute, beautiful, darling, or handsome she is. You're the only one who hasn't canceled today, and I drove my freckled self all the way over here to get you."

Jessie gave her an amused look. "What about Will and Skye?"

"Skye picked up a last minute private party, and Will said something about a serving crasher or whatever."

"Server crash," Jessie corrected with a throaty chuckle. "Leaving you and me, huh?"

"Yep, so you're not going to skip out on me. You'll just have to put a clamp on your libido for an hour." Lauren gave

her most serious stare down. The one she used when confronting defendants in court. All it did for Jessie was widen her smile.

"I'm not sure I can contain myself," Jessie smirked dryly, which made her look sexier. Pretty much any look she gave made her look sexier. "That was my mom. She was hoping I could come by for lunch out on the deck. First time in a while she's felt like sitting outside; I can't let her down."

Was it possible to die of guilt? Lauren had assumed the worst about her friend's lunchtime plans. Yes, guilt punishable by death. She deserved it. "Sorry, Jess. I thought..."

"Don't trouble yourself, Laur. It's fine. Will you come along? Mom would love to see you." A hopeful look crossed her face and Lauren couldn't resist, especially if she could wipe away some of the guilt. She reached for her hand to propel them toward the exit. There was a bounce in her step that Lauren hadn't seen in months, and her excitement was catching. They bounced their way down to Lauren's car for the drive over.

"Listen," Jessie started in a serious tone when they were getting out of the car at her house. "Mom's been doing better, but she's a bit, well, she hasn't been...she might look..."

Lauren stopped their progress at her friend's falter. She stared up into those mesmerizing eyes. "She'll look as beautiful as she always has, Jess, no matter what this disease has done."

Relief eased the sharpness of Jessie's stare. "You're the best, L." She led them through the front door and called out in a cheery voice, "Hiya, Ma!"

Lauren took in the improvements of the house, now completely decorated. It was so different from all of Jessie's apartments, and Lauren guessed it wasn't just because her mom was living with her. It was almost as if Jessie's apartments had been arranged for minimum comfort, like she was purposefully withholding something from her life. The house finally allowed her friend all the amenities she deserved.

They went through the living room, and Lauren immediately noticed the piano. Elegant enough to be a piece of art, it made her want to run her hand along the curve as they

passed by it. She hadn't known that Jessie's mom could play piano, and now she yearned to hear her play it.

Gracious me! Lauren thought when she spotted Jessie's mom sitting in a deck chair under the big patio umbrella. Jessie hadn't been exaggerating. Lily's beautiful face, once so like her daughter's, had aged another ten years past the young fifty-nine she'd been during Lauren's last visit a few months ago. Wrinkles deepened and darkened around her brown eyes and thinning lips. The healthy glow abandoned her when she went from cancer free after her first bout to progressive acute on her second. So did all of her beautiful dark brown hair, lighter and shorter than Jessie's wavy black mane. Under the stylish head scarf perhaps there was a good start of growth, but the silk swath and wide brimmed hat hid any sign of it.

"Girls!" Lily's whole face came alive. "Two beauties, come, come."

"Mama Lil." Lauren wrapped her arms gently around the frail woman, remembering to turn her head away so that she wouldn't breathe directly on her. Germs were the enemy of cancer survival. "It's so good to see you. You look wonderful."

"Don't you turn into a fibber too, now, Lauren. I have enough of that with this girl and that Willa friend of yours. She's always telling me how good I look and what fun it is to visit with me. You're the honest one. I want to count on that."

"Always, Mama Lil. I'm not sure the nail polish is your color, hon. Did Jess chose it?"

Both mother and daughter laughed at her kidding slight. "You're having a good day, I see." Jessie's face softened with happiness. It was a look that Lauren rarely got to see. She found herself wishing that wasn't the case.

"It's a beautiful day, and now that I've got the best company in town, all's well." Lily motioned them into chairs.

"Glad to hear it." Jessie reached an arm around the back of her mom's chair and introduced Lauren to the nurse who came out to serve lunch.

At Lily's request, Lauren spent most of the next hour talking about her work, family, poor attempts at dates, whatever Lily wanted to know. She noticed that Jessie was

mostly focused on her mother's consumption of food, softly encouraging and cheering Lily's progress.

In the middle of Lauren's recitation of her last trial, Lily's arm dropped, clanging the fork to the table. Her head nodded forward, and she slumped in her chair. It was almost as if her strength dropped with the fall of her arm. Lauren panicked at the sight, suppressing an audible yelp in surprise. Jessie calmly cupped her mom's shoulder, holding her against the chair so she wouldn't slump any further.

"Oh no," Lily whispered.

"It's okay, Mom," Jessie said in a soothing voice. "Big day. Not to worry. Whenever you're ready, we'll get you inside."

Lily smiled with a tremble first at her daughter then with effort turned to face Lauren. "Sorry, darling. I've really enjoyed our lunch together."

"So have I, Mama Lil."

"Warms my heart to hear you call me that, Lauren. Always has, and I can't tell you how happy it makes me that you're friends with my Jessie. You've always been so good for her. You're such a lovely young woman. Come around any time."

"You better be serious because I'll plan to be here after work if you are," Lauren kidded with a broad smile.

Jessie pushed back from her chair and eased Lily's chair back. She glanced over at the kitchen door with a frown but smiled gratefully when Lauren stood to help her mother inside. Together they gathered Lily up between them and very slowly shuffled across the deck and into the living room. As they moved into the hallway, Lauren felt Lily slip a little. She tightened her grip just as Jessie dipped and easily scooped her mom up into her arms to carry her into the bedroom at the end of the hall.

Soft murmurs came from the room and Lauren thought about joining them to say goodbye but knew she'd added to Lily's overexcitement and chose to leave her be. Several minutes elapsed before Jessie resurfaced from the room with a brave face, only her eyes betrayed her sadness. She swallowed roughly several times and tried not to look at her directly.

"I'm thinking how much I love the word 'remission'." Lauren felt her eyes fighting tears. "It's nice to say; it's nice to hear; and you'll hear it again, Jessamine. I'm just sure of it."

A long expel of breath left Jessie's mouth as her eyes became shiny with a film of moisture. Jessie looked off, obviously trying to hide her tears from Lauren. The sight made Lauren's chest grow heavy with ache for her friend's sadness. She stepped up and slipped her arms around her friend. Cheek nestled against cheek, she pressed her body against Jessie's firm physique. She liked how well they fit with only two inches difference in height. Other than with Quinn, she was always bending to hug people shorter than she was. It was nice to settle against a taller frame.

Arms clung to her back, not moving or patting, just holding, the way hugs were supposed to go. She rarely hugged her friend because Jessie was a tough cookie who never needed a hug. But she was here for her now, even if for that first moment she relished the feel of Jessie's chest mashing against hers. She chalked it up to her current dry spell and settled into the comforting that she was supposed to be offering her friend.

"I know it, too. Thanks, Lauren," Jessie spoke without a tremor in her voice.

Jessie stepped back from the hug and shot her an unfamiliar glance that made her suck in a quick breath. She had only ever seen that look once before when she happened to be in the same line of vision as one of Jessie's favorite conquests. Desire mixed with longing, only this one was slightly altered because it included a look of caring that Jessie reserved for her friends. What was she thinking? No way she'd read that look right. It had to be the rawness of the moment.

"Good thoughts only." Lauren hoped her voice displayed her strength of conviction.

Her words broke Jessie's glance, and it was replaced by a confident smile and nod of the head. Lauren vowed from that point forward to stay abreast of Lily's health status. She felt lucky to be included in Jessie's small contingent of friends that she could rely on.

Chapter 7

Clang! Beat, beat, beat, clang! Beat, beat, beat, CLANG!

The rhythmic banging caused an involuntary flinch as I entered the weight room at my gym. Nothing bugged me more than members who didn't use the equipment properly. Actually, a lot of stuff bugged me more, but we won't dwell on that right now. Why isn't one of the trainers over there helping this poor schmuck out? Okay, that was one of the things that bugged me more.

"Hello, I'm Jessie, a trainer here." I stopped in front of the offending member. "Have you been assigned to anyone yet?"

"Huh? No, I don't really need a trainer." He glanced up at me from a seated position, his arms still hanging from the bar. Focusing on me, his arms flexed and he puffed out his chest. Men.

"You're new, right?"

"How'd you know? You keeping an eye on me? Am I that irresistible?" Ego seeped out of his pores along with all the sweat from his workout. Even if I were into men, I wouldn't consider him good looking. Yet, like many, he thought he had a shot with any woman.

"It's a small club, sir. As the owner, I always know when we get a new member. I'm a little surprised you're not working with a trainer."

"You own this club? Do I know how to pick 'em or what?"

Assuming it was a rhetorical question, I moved on to my point. "If you had a trainer, she would show you that if you brought the bar down to your chest, like this." I reached out and pulled the bar down easily with his help. "Then resisted the return, like this." I guided the bar slowly back into resting position without the resounding clang. His arms eventually helped me resist the force. "You'll get full extension on your triceps with each rep. Twice the workout in half the time."

"Half the time works for me. I'll give it a shot. Thanks. Maybe you could show me how to use the rest of this equipment? What do you say, babe?"

"I wish I could, but I've got a meeting with my laundry guys. Wouldn't want to run out of clean towels. Let me introduce you to Penelope." I motioned to a petite woman conversing with two members on the treadmills. This week, her dark red hair pulled high into a ponytail with bangs that hid light brown eyebrows. She changed her hair color almost as much as the exercise clothes that highlighted her curvy physique. "Penelope, I'd like you to meet, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Chuck." He stood when Penelope offered her hand. I figured Penelope would be a good fit, being hot and adept at fending off members' advances. Male members, anyway.

"Chuck's new and hasn't been assigned a trainer yet. You up to the task?"

"My pleasure," Penelope offered on cue. Sometimes I just love my staff.

I left them to get acquainted and went to remedy this problem with the club host. A wet, discarded towel stopped my progress. Why couldn't members take their towels with them? Like I was here to be their maid, and all those germs just sitting there on the recumbent bike seat. Disgusting. I grabbed up the towel and took the clean one from my shoulder to wipe at the wet spot left on the seat.

"That was very diplomatic," a voice commented from the upright bike to my left.

I looked up at another new face in the club and realized that it had been a while since I'd looked through the new

membership apps. This face smiled kindly at me, keeping her legs spinning on the bike with a slight rocking of her upper torso as she kept a fast tempo.

"What was?" I asked the smiling gold-brown eyes. Blond bangs from her shag cut obstructed the view of her right eye, but not enough to hide a familiar appraisal. Either she was new in town, or I'd been out of the club scene too long.

"The way you handled him. He had no idea that you sold him on a trainer just then. Not to mention that you corrected his bad form."

A smile crept slowly across my face at her compliment. "I like to make sure the members get what they need from their workouts. What about you? Have you been assigned a trainer yet?"

"Nice guy by the name of Griff. He showed me all the equipment, helped me with a training plan, and set me on my way."

"He's available for more one-on-one training if you need him."

"No thanks. I like a simple workout. Treadmill, bike, maybe a few machines in the winter when I can't get outside for activities as much." She looked like she stayed pretty active with a svelte figure under those workout tights and shirt.

"All right, well, if you decide you'd like a training session, Griff's schedule is posted on the front board." I pointed toward the front desk. "Scribble your name in a timeslot that works for you."

"I will, thanks." She smiled politely again, her eyes swept over me before snapping back to the readout on the bike in front of her.

"I'm Jessie, by the way."

"The owner, I heard. I'm Briony." She stretched her right hand over the handlebars to shake mine but kept her workout going. I took hold of the offered hand, liking that it was perspiration-free and really liking the pliable soft skin.

"Nice to meet you, Briony. Please give a shout if I can get you anything." I let go of her hand and smiled in parting. It

wasn't until I'd passed through the door before I realized that I hadn't tried to flirt even a little with her.

"Anne," I addressed the club host because somehow I was standing up at the front desk. I'd zoned out thinking about why I hadn't attempted to flirt with Briony, who was attractive, well spoken, and definitely a lesbian.

"Hey, boss, what's up?"

"Can you make sure that every new member gets a trainer assigned, even if they don't want one, please? They can't be using the equipment without knowing how to first."

"Sure thing."

"Thanks, Anne. You're a life saver."

Dumping the used towel into the laundry chute, I made my way back up to my office for the meeting. I planned to negotiate a better rate for the laundry service by threatening to put in commercial washers and doing it myself.

"Hi, Jess." Sophie was coming down the steps as I started up. "How'd your friend's trial go the other day?" She placed a hand on my forearm stopping my progress.

"Good, thanks. Everything go okay while I was gone?"

"Sure, no problems. Just thought you looked nice all dressed up. We don't get to see you like that very often." Her hazel eyes slinked down my body, taking in my standard workout clothes. The press of her fingertips grew a little more intense, and I had to keep from widening my eyes in response. This wasn't the standard ass-kissing of her boss. She was coming on to me. *What the hell?* She was my employee, and more importantly, straight.

"Don't know how much I could get done in heels around here," I responded casually. If I didn't reciprocate she'd have to take the hint.

She laughed and leaned closer, eyes locking on mine. "Guess you're right. Too bad. You looked hot."

"Uh, thanks." At least I thought she'd get the hint. "How's Eric?" I asked of her fiancé to get her back to reality.

She blinked blankly at me. "Fine. Still haven't set a date. I'm starting to get a little frustrated."

"Sorry to hear that, Soph." She'd been trying to pin him down almost as long as I'd known her. They were on their third year of engagement now. After the first year, I'd stopped commenting. "I've got to get ready for this meeting. If you'll excuse me." I stepped onto the stair she occupied and felt her drop her hand to brush my hip as I passed by.

"See ya, Jessie." Her voice had a despondent tone, kicking off a new worry for me. I so didn't want to have to break in a new activities director if she didn't stop this nonsense.

Desperate, confused, straight women who wanted to use lesbians to make themselves feel better bug me even more than people who don't know how to use the machines.

Chapter 8

Without needing to turn and look, I knew the women at the table behind us were talking about me. The worst thing about being a lesbian in a fairly small town was that you couldn't really get away from women you've dated. Especially if you've dated as many women as I have. I should get a courtesy waiver for the fact that I've stopped being such a shit when it comes to women recently, but I didn't see it happening any time soon.

Thankfully, only Willa sat within hearing distance. Even if she heard something unsavory, she'd never say anything. If she wasn't so great to my mom, the fact that she managed to stay discrete would be what I loved most about her.

I stole a glance at the woman doing all the talking. Short blond hair, almost no curves, but strapping. Femmie-to-andro boi, one of my favorite types. What was her name?

We'd gone back to her place after dancing for most of the night in the club. We'd barely cleared the door before her hands were all over me. Something about her fumbling told me she wasn't very experienced. Not that it mattered. I took over pretty quickly, grabbing her and shoving her against the door. I lifted her vintage t-shirt over her head and found small breasts with nipples beaded from exposure. I'd hardly kissed her mouth before I moved down to her breasts, licking and teething, getting her to moan for me.

"What do you like, doll?" I challenged, willing to bet that she didn't know everything that she liked.

"This...this is good," she moaned, her hands trying to grasp any part of my body pinning her to the door.

I smiled, my bet won. I moved my hand down to her jeans and unbuttoned the fly. Without letting them fall off her hips, I shoved under the band of her boxers and found her dripping heat. She moaned loudly and ground into my hand.

"How about this?" I murmured around a mouthful of her breast.

"Yes, that's...yes."

"Do you want me to fuck you?" I guessed by her hesitant answers that she wouldn't be able to ask.

"Yes," she whimpered, shuddering against my body.

I made sure to look up at her hooded hazel eyes when I asked, "With my hand or my dildo?" I knew from the moment I saw her that she'd never let anyone take her with a strap-on. I rarely used a dildo unless asked, but when it's a first for someone, it adds a lot of thrill.

Those eyes widened at my question. She looked like she was going to balk, but I leaned into her, kissed her open mouth, stroking her tongue in tandem with my finger on her clitoris. Moving to her ear, I whispered, "You'll love it, doll, I promise."

She couldn't agree verbally but managed to nod her head. I dropped to my knees and took my time sliding her pants down her long legs. My hands ran up the length of her inner thighs to slip inside her boxers and grope her mound. I kissed her thighs and brought the underwear down to the ground. Her eyes watched me carefully as I kissed my way back up her legs, stopping to pay closer attention to her moist curls. Without protection, I didn't allow myself to lick her. My one steadfast rule. But I did blow warm air on her already quivering clit before kissing the rounded stretch of tummy below her belly button.

Reaching down, I fumbled for my backpack to pull out my favorite dildo and fastened it in the harness I wore. From the

moment I spotted this girl, I knew I'd have her like this. Swift and hot. Unforgettable.

"Go slowly, please," she begged when I stood to kiss her mouth tenderly.

Bending to get aligned, I gently rubbed the tip through her drenched folds. Her hips bucked at the movement. With each pass of the toy through her sex, she tilted her hips trying to capture the tip inside of her. Oh, yeah, this was going to be fun.

I went back to attacking her clit. Not much time passed before her hip undulations and moans turned to growls of frustration. My hand held the base of the dildo as I pushed slightly, sinking into her, giving her exactly what she wanted, what she'd never asked for before. I wanted to go slow, but her legs locked around my hips and she completed the coupling with gravity. The press of her weight helped rub the base of the dildo against my own arousal. Using the door for leverage, I started a slow pumping inside of her, watching her eyes take in the sight of the dildo moving in and out of her. She grunted with each thrust, her heels digging into my ass, hands clinging to my shoulders.

"I'm gonna come," she growled. "Fuck me hard, Jessie, fuck me."

I went back to nibbling her neck and sped up my thrusts, loving that I'd taken her toy virginity and knowing that I might explode with her. Usually I liked getting women off. My own release was secondary or forgotten.

Her moans turned high pitched as she met every thrust with a jerk of her hips. "Coming, coming so hard." Her words turned to screams as she came, going rigid in my arms. A few moments passed before she began rocking against me, alternating between screaming and moaning. My own orgasm drowned out in her verbalized passion. I continued a slow grind against her, drawing out my climax and making her experience hers over and over until she screamed that she couldn't take it anymore. I smiled and met her mouth, knowing that she'd never been fucked to the point of screaming for someone to stop. Bois were always so much fun, especially when they're screamers.

The replay in my imagination halted as her narration ended with her begging me to stop. Her friends let go of a collective “whoa” before I’m sure they both turned to stare at me. Obviously, it wasn’t unusual sex, but they knew their friend well enough to get that this was something new for her.

“Any more thought about taking over the space next to your club?” Willa asked from beside me. Her face didn’t indicate that she knew the women behind us were talking about me, or even that she’d heard them.

“I don’t think it’s the right time to take on more space. The club’s working well as is. I’d rather get to the point where it’s possible for the club to take on that expense.”

Her eyes flicked away, unable to maintain eye contact. She didn’t like bringing up subjects that might take us back to the generosity that she’d shown all of us. She’d rather put things in place to make our lives easier and not have it mentioned again. Don’t even start with a plan to pay her back. She only agreed to my exit strategy because I insisted and my “gift” was four times more expensive than the others given to the group.

“Quinn said you’re almost at capacity. She thought you could use more space. Add a pool and some racquetball courts? You’d see me in there more often if you had racquetball courts. It’s the only sport I can beat Quinn at.”

That made me chuckle. Quinn excelled at every sport, but I liked thinking about Willa trying to compete with her on something athletic. “So, really, this expansion is for you?”

“That’s exactly right. Everything’s always about me. You must know that by now,” she joked dryly.

“You’re such an attention hog.” I nudged her shoulder and drew the attention of the group.

“What’d I hear about an expansion?” Des asked.

“Cool your hammers, Des, I’m not ready yet.”

“Bet you’ve never said that in your life,” Des joked, receiving a chuckle from Sam, Caroline, and Kayin. Willa and Lauren spared me.

“How goes the construction biz, Des?” Willa asked to get the group off my back.

“Winter’s always slow.”

"The doctor's office in the building across from ours is looking to remodel. I gave them your number. They seemed like they were ready to get started."

"That's who that was? Christ, I thought someone on the crew was pregnant and checking in with her doctor. Thank God! I can't lose someone for months while she's having a kid and deciding if she's going back to work afterwards."

Caroline made a hasty excuse and disappeared behind the café counter to help some customers, except no one stood in line. Her stick straight blond hair swung sharply as she swiveled to busy herself with cleaning the cappuccino machine instead. Sam's brown eyes flicked over at her partner before she hung her head. A sigh filled then slumped her thick shoulders, and she rubbed her large hands over her khaki pants anxiously.

Damn you, Des! Think about what you say before you say it, I shouted inside my head. Sam and Caroline had moved on to In Vitro fertilization a few months back. So far, nothing took, and with every failure, their relationship grew more tense.

"It's a big job, Des. Right up your alley." Willa tried to ease some of the tension.

"I'll give him a call after lunch. Thanks for the referral."

"Excuse me, is one of you Sam?" a voice interrupted.

Sam turned in her seat. "You found her."

I glanced over and recognized the owner of the voice as the woman from my club last week. The one I'd neglected to flirt with. Even more attractive today in a long, fitted skirt with a slit that showed those shapely legs, blouse opened at the neck and wool jacket to match.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch, but the gentleman in the bookstore told me that only you could help me."

"Sure, what can I do for you?"

"I wanted to see if my book order came in? He couldn't locate them."

"I'm sorry that he sent you to look for me. He should have done that himself." Sam tried to hide her frustration in the softness of her voice. "Your order is under what name?"

The woman must have realized that she hadn't introduced herself yet. Her eyes glanced around the table and, as soon as the gold-brown hit mine, her name came into my head. "Briony Gatewood," she said to Sam and then looked back at me. "Hello, Jessie, we met last week —"

"At the gym," I finished, hearing a snort from Des and stifled cackle from Kayin.

"At *your* gym," she emphasized, nodding and smiling.

"Nice to see you again, Briony," I supplied at the sudden silence of the table.

"Let me check on your order, Ms. Gatewood. Why don't you have a seat?" Sam poked a finger into my back as she passed by. "I'll just be a minute."

The group seemed at a loss. This would be the point when Austy's politeness would have taken over to make this woman feel comfortable in a group of strangers. I was just about to say something when Sam returned.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see your book on the hold shelf. It might have been misfiled."

"It's actually twenty-six books on entrepreneurship."

"For the class? Yes, I've got them in the back storeroom."

"Wonderful. I'll take one now and my students will drift in over the next few days to buy up the rest."

"Sure, I'll meet you at the register." Sam darted out through the back of the café before Briony could say anything.

She turned back, presumably to bid us goodbye, but her eyes stopped on Willa. "Pardon me, but aren't you Willa Lacey?"

Willa rocked back against her chair, brow furrowed in suspicion. "Um, yes."

"The software executive, right?"

Her expression softened a bit. "Yes."

"What luck. I was going to call you a little later in the semester to see if you'd be interested in coming in to speak to my class. I'm rounding up some business executives to come share their start-up experiences."

A surprised exhale sounded from her. "I appreciate the invitation, but I don't think so. You're welcome to visit my

office though. I've already got an IT class coming in once a semester."

"I'd hoped to persuade you to come to us. I don't want the students caught up in the end results without understanding the intricate planning first."

Willa took a moment before responding. "I'd rather stay away from campus, but consider it an open invitation."

"I understand." Briony accepted easily. "Can I persuade you, Jessie? We're interested in many types of businesses and yours covers both service and retail industries."

I knew my stare appeared dumbfounded. Willa, I could understand. She'd lobbied for and received venture capital, built a business with no help, and took the company public. But me? I borrowed money from a friend and leased some equipment. Not exactly the same league. "I wouldn't know what to say."

"You wouldn't need to prepare anything. They'll have questions about starting and running a business. You'd just have to provide a few answers and opinions."

"What about me? I run a construction business." Des never wanted to be left out of any conversation.

"That would be wonderful. Everyone needs to understand the process of bidding and subbing out work. I'm Briony." She reached to shake hands with Des. "Anyone else own a business? I feel as if I've hit the mother lode with you three already."

"Kayin is a CPA and Lauren has her own law firm." I pointed to both as she shook their hands. "And Caroline, back behind the counter, owns this café."

"I couldn't hope for a better turn to my errands today. I'd love it if you'd all consider coming to speak with my class. I plan to ask Sam at the register as well. Maybe if you all have a good experience, you'll convince Willa for me." We chuckled at that unlikelyhood. "I'll make the arrangements and, if you'll give me your cards, notify each of you."

"Or you can stop by my office at the club next time you're there and I'll call everyone for you," I offered, not sure why. Maybe it was the cute dimple she flashed when she smiled.

"That would be great. Thank you all. I'll see you soon."

"Bye, Briony." I watched as she headed into the bookstore.

"You are so transparent," Des proclaimed.

"I'm not the one who piped up with, 'I own a construction company.' I was telling her I wouldn't do it, and you sucked me in with you; so don't give me transparent."

"You must like this one." Kayin pointed an accusatory finger. "I've never heard you deny an attraction before."

I scoffed harshly. "I know it's hard to imagine, but I'm not attracted to every woman I meet." In fact, I'd started thinking about that a lot more lately. One of the reasons I wasn't dating right now was because I hadn't felt attracted to anyone in a while.

The group hardly paused before bursting into laughter. "Good one, Jess," Des inserted.

I didn't bother to shake my head. They wouldn't believe me anyway. Not that I could deny it with the woman sitting behind me and the other woman I spotted at one of the tables up by the window. Obviously, I didn't really have a type. It made sense that the group would think I was attracted to everyone.

Chapter 9

You know, if you're going to sign up for an exercise class, take up a space, preventing another member from getting in, then you better damn well be ready to work out. My daily internal struggle between being a trainer and the club's owner began when I spotted Jordan and three of her friends barely moving in place, mostly checking out the asses of the women in front of them. I fantasized about throwing a yoga ball at them to bring them back into the fold.

"Time for a cool down, people. Great workout," I praised them because they needed to feel good about their screaming lungs and aching muscles.

Half the class took my cool down instruction to mean collapsing straight to their mats and groaning. If it wasn't so bad for their muscles, I'd laugh at their flare for drama. I went through several simple motions and stretches to keep my own muscles from cramping later then ended the class. Members tossed out thanks and drifted off to the locker rooms. The grin Tara gave me as she walked out told me she still kept hope alive that we'd hook up again. If I had a partner I wouldn't have to endure this anymore. *Where did that come from?* It was one thing to want to stop screwing every skirt in town and quite another to want to partner up.

"Hey, Jessie." Jordan materialized in front of me.

I looked over to my right, hoping Lauren would provide me the excuse to get out of conversing with Jordan, but she wasn't in class tonight. "Hi."

"Great class tonight. I love watching you move."

Please! Not her, too. For someone so adept at bedding women, you'd think she'd recognize someone playing her. "Didn't look like you got much out of the class. How 'bout next time, you have Penelope take you through the machines? Give you a little one-on-one time."

"Seems like I've got to take your class just to see you."

"Oh, I'm around," I responded offhandedly. A couple of weeks ago this woman couldn't stand me. Now she was wondering when I'd be at the bar again?

"Promise to save another dance for me?"

Not a chance in hell. "Sounds fun." A satisfied smirk appeared before she slinked away.

Refocusing on my job, I bent to pick up the discarded mats and towels, readying the room for the last class of the evening. Someone had left a water bottle and another person forgot her purse. I expected the owner of the purse to arrive before I needed to take it to lost and found.

"Jessie?"

I turned to find Briony standing in the doorway. For a brief moment, I felt mortified by the sweat darkening my top and several strands of my hair falling out of my ponytail. Then I remembered that I wasn't seducing her or even flirting with her, so who cared what I look like? "Hi there, Briony."

"The host told me I might find you in here. Is this a bad time?" She indicated the towels in my arms, water bottle tucked under my chin, and purse at the bend of my elbow.

"I'm always short on towels at home and the water bottle and purse go so well together."

Any reply got cut off by one of the class members rushing back in, panic stricken. I slid the purse down my arm and held it out to her. "Thank goodness! You're a dear, Jessie." She kissed my cheek before turning to leave. Not even a flicker of arousal at her quick kiss. Libido, table for one, libido?

"You certainly have a way with your members." Briony grinned. "Anyway, I stopped by with those dates for you and your friends to come speak with my class. Are you still up for it?"

Public speaking? No thanks. "Sure."

"Great. I really appreciate this and for organizing the rest of your friends. It's amazing that you're all so enterprising."

"And you? You teach entrepreneurship, ever owned a business?"

"Co-owned, yes." The light in her eyes dimmed a bit. Didn't need to hit me over the head with a bat to tell me the business didn't work out for her. "I enjoy teaching more, though. Leave the hassle of customer service to the experts like you."

As she walked toward me with a piece of paper extended from her hand, I noticed where her pulse throbbed in her neck. My eyes fixated on it like I'd suddenly become a vampire, and I fought the impulse to lick the spot and feel her heartbeat on my tongue.

"Jessie? Thought I heard—" Sophie interrupted us. "Sorry, I didn't know you weren't alone." She moved to stand beside me.

"Briony, I'd like you to meet Sophie, my activities director. Briony's a new member."

Sophie plastered on a smile. "Nice to meet you. Hope you're finding our club to your liking." Her tone didn't sound like she actually cared. *Christ!* Now, I'd have to figure out what was truly going on with her. I didn't have time for drama, and with Sophie, I had the feeling it would be a whole silo chock-full o' drama. "I need to steal my boss for a minute. Are you almost done, Jess?"

My head snapped down to look at her with displeasure. She'd hit impolite with the tone, now she was testing out rude. "I'll find you when I'm done, Sophie."

She gave me a tender look and slid a hand across the small of my back. I wanted to elbow her in the gut. Instead I turned and offloaded the towels on her. "Could you dump those for me? Thanks, Soph." I didn't care if she thought I was

dismissing her. Looks like our talk is going to have to include a gentle let-down. She grudgingly left the room. "Sorry about that. Sophie must be having a bad day."

Briony studied me for a moment. "That's okay. I'm interrupting your goings on. Here are the open dates for the auditorium. Let me know which one works for you and your friends. My number's on the top. No chance you could convince Willa to join us?"

I chuckled softly. "I don't think so, but I'll ask."

"Is she afraid to speak in front of people?"

"No, she just likes to keep a low profile around campus in deference to Quinn's position." My reply brought out a confused look from her. "Sorry, she and Quinn Lysander are partnered." Another blank look had my head spinning. Did she live in a cave? "The head coach of the women's basketball team at your college?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry, I'm not much of a sports fan, and I've only been here since December. Guess Quinn's a pretty big deal?"

"I'm sure you'll find out soon enough. Anyway, Willa likes to avoid any attention getting situation and showing up to speak to a class on campus probably wouldn't qualify as flying under the radar."

"I guess that makes sense. Unfortunate for my class, though." She couldn't hide the dejection from her gaze. "Well, I'll let you get back to work. Thanks again. See you soon."

"Looking forward to it." I watched her walk away, checking her out from behind. I realized this was the first time we'd been standing together and took note of her height, somewhere around five-six, not exactly tall, but I'd been with shorter. Not that we were headed in that direction, just taking notes.

* * *

Vibrating bass pounded the decibels to near intolerant levels making Lauren rub her throbbing temples. At least they throbbed in time with the music. She looked around the Nine forlornly, uninterested in anyone or anything tonight. Times

like these made her miss Austy who'd be sitting right beside her, providing a snarky running commentary to the goings on around them. Austy used to come to the club to hang out with her because she knew that Lauren liked to dance and liked to be social and liked to get out. Austy didn't like any of those things, but she would have joined her. Who could ask for more in a best friend?

Alone tonight because she couldn't convince Sam and Caroline to come along, even Jessie was AWOL. Lauren sat at the bar nursing her martini and thought about asking Polly, one of the court clerks, to dance, but she didn't like mixing her professional life with her personal one. Especially since she'd never date Polly who, as Jessie put it, had more issues than *People Magazine*. She did feel like dancing though, even if no one tempted her enough to date right at the moment.

"No way!" a loud proclamation came from beside her.

"What?" another voice rose above the pounding beat.

"She did not! You're making that whole thing up."

"Am not, and I won't tell you any more if you keep doubting me."

"Shut the hell up, Krissy," the third voice ordered faintly in the farthest seat from Lauren.

She stole a glance out of her periphery and didn't recognize the woman next to her but noticed Tara and one of her friends, Monica, sitting beside her. Tara sat with her back against the bar, twisting from side to side on her stool as she told her story to her companions.

"But a chain link? She used a chain link with you?" the woman to Lauren's left asked incredulously.

Huh? Lauren couldn't help but hear. Were they talking about a fight?

"You asked me why she's so hot, why she's irresistible, why she's the best, and I'm telling you."

"She shoved a chain link inside of you? That's what you're sitting here telling me?"

What?! Now Lauren's ears wouldn't stop listening in. She had to be hearing this wrong. She kept her back to them but cocked her head so she could still hear.

"That's what I'm saying," Tara confirmed.

"I know she's smoking hot, but damn, Tar, you went sub for someone?"

"She's worth it. I don't need to tell you that, Mon."

"You, too?" the unknown woman asked.

"Nothing like what Tara's saying, but yeah, we were together for too short a time."

"Still, a chain link? Isn't that dangerous? How big was it?"

"I don't really know. Felt like inch long links, maybe."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Tara cleared her throat and answered in an embarrassed tone, "Well, I was blindfolded."

"Holy shit, Tar! How come you never told me this before?"

"I never had to convince you to go after her, Mon," Tara snorted at her. "Anyway, I'm lying there, tied up and blindfolded and she's describing for me what she's doing, what she's seeing, how I'm taking everything she wants to give me, and a minute later, feeling fuller than I've ever felt, the links start shaking. She's wrapped the rest of the links around a vibrator, causing the most sensational tremor deep inside me. I just lose it. I start coming so fucking hard. That's when she starts slowly pulling out the links, one by one, each link setting off another massive orgasm. I actually passed out. I know women say they pass out, but I really did. When I came to, she'd put her toys away, untied me, and took off my blindfold. I awoke to her kiss. I was so ready to marry her right then."

"Jesus Christ!" the woman exclaimed.

Ditto! Lauren thought. Kinky beyond belief. That Tara was telling her friends was amazing enough. Lauren's friends didn't get into graphic details, not even with her best friend. Ninety-nine percent of the time she was thankful for that, but she did have the odd impulse every once in a while to inject Austy with truth serum and ask about her sex life. Tara's story was better than any published erotica that she'd heard about. She never read the stuff herself, of course. She's a respected attorney, for Pete's sake!

"No doubt, and Tara never thought about commitment before being with Jessie," Monica inserted.

What the...? Jessie? They're talking about Jessie? Lauren's mind started doing somersaults. It suddenly dawned on her that she'd never really thought about Jessie's sex life other than the fact that she dated a lot of women. What she did with them, Lauren didn't bother to imagine, which was crazy because she had thought about her other friends' sex lives. With lots of guilt, but still, she'd thought about them.

"Not that I would have gone through with it," Tara continued, "but if she'd asked me at that moment, I would have said yes. Only woman I'd consider settling down with. Life would never be boring with Jessie."

"What about you, Monica?"

"She's definitely unbelievable, but she asked what I liked and I guess I didn't have the creativity that Tara has. Best sex of my life even though she insists on safe sex, which is a drag. No matter how much you beg, she won't give in on that."

Lauren shouldn't be listening to this. She felt so guilty listening to it. But she couldn't make herself get off the bar stool and move away.

"With you, too?" Krissy asked Tara.

"Yep, and someone else told me the same thing. She even shared clean test results with her, but Jess wouldn't budge."

"When was the last time you went out with her, Tar?" Monica asked wistfully.

"A few years ago, now."

What? Jessie made a date with her a couple of weeks ago. Lauren witnessed the conversation and even asked Jessie about it.

"I finally got the nerve to ask her out again recently, but she told me that she wouldn't go out with her club members. Tough break for me."

That big ol' liar! Lauren couldn't hold back an exclamation. She silently thanked the DJ for picking another thumping song to cover her reaction to the eavesdropping session. Jessie lied to her about going on a date with Tara. But why? Jessie the Puzzle. It'd been that way ever since they met. Just when she thought she'd figured her out, she'd find out something else

that would ping her brain. Tara was right about one thing: life around Jessie was never boring.

Chapter 10

The students sat patiently waiting for their professor to start the forum. Lauren estimated the head count at one-fifty. She glanced over at Des and Kayin to her right. Both looked like they'd rather have someone shoot an apple off their heads then face this large crowd. To her left, Caroline and Sam fidgeted in their seats. Soft-spoken Sam would have had difficulty speaking in front of three people, let alone over a hundred. Jessie sat next to Sam, looking relaxed, legs stretched out, one ankle crossed over the other. Picture of casual, but Lauren knew that if they tried to make her talk seriously about her accomplishments she'd beat Sam to the exit.

A chain link? The thought zapped her mind. *Stop thinking about that!* Lauren knew a lot of Tara's exploits were exaggerated, but she hadn't sounded like she was embellishing the other night. *Fabulous, here comes the guilt again.* She so shouldn't be wondering about her friend. Or judging her friend, but would she let someone do that to her? No, that's the simple answer. Then again, could she really answer that question? It sounded too kinky, but she couldn't deny getting aroused while Tara was telling her story. Now, she really needed to stop.

"I'd like you all to help me welcome our panel of entrepreneurs and small business owners. They're generously giving their time tonight to answer your questions and give you real life experiences." Briony encouraged some applause.

"We'll start with Ms. Ximena, who owns JX Fitness downtown."

Jessie stood from the chair and took the offered microphone from Briony. They shared a look that Lauren felt all the way from her seat. Did her friend have the ability to seduce everyone? Stupid question, of course she did, but did she always affect people so strongly?

"Hello, everyone," Jessie offered so easily that Lauren thought she might be wrong about her wanting to bolt.

Students filed down the aisles to stand in line for the audience microphones. The questions ranged from background to funding all very thorough.

When Jessie finished up, Briony introduced everyone else on the panel. Sam managed to speak up enough to be heard out in the auditorium. Caroline captivated the students to the point that Lauren would bet every single one of them would wander into her café soon. Kayin was quite popular with her accounting and auditing advice. By the time Lauren got up to talk to the class, they'd been there for nearly two hours.

"Ms. Aleric has her own law firm and is the corporate attorney for all of the business owners up here," Briony offered as part of her introduction.

"Were you able to bring clients with you when you formed your own firm?"

"I'd signed a no-compete clause, but if the client wants to jump ship with you, they can't do anything about it. Excuse me, they can sue, but they won't win. With the right attorney, that is." Lauren winked at the class and received a rumbling chuckle.

"Isn't a law firm basically an if-you-can-hang-a-shingle-you-can-make-it kind of business?"

"It can be. Everyone eventually needs a lawyer," Lauren joked. "Although I know a lot of attorneys that have gone that route and find they don't know how to manage the business side of the house. That's always their downfall, and they run back to the larger firms, tails tucked firmly between their legs."

"For those of us thinking of starting our own businesses, what one piece of free legal advice would you give us?"

"Free? Lawyers don't do anything for free. I'm billing Professor Gatewood as soon as I get back to my office." Another round of laughter made her pause. "If you plan to have employees, write a concise personnel manual then communicate and enforce your policies clearly. You can't have selective enforcement or you'll never win a wrongful termination suit."

"We've just reached the two hour mark," Briony announced at the end of Lauren's discussion. "Please help me thank the panel this evening. Some of this will be included on your exams, so I hope you took notes." The students broke into applause before making their way outside.

"Thank you all again." Briony turned to the group after putting away the microphone.

"That was fun," Kayin exclaimed. "Nothing like communing with business nerds."

"You're just thrilled 'cause no one's ever thought of you as the life of the party. Clearly there's something wrong with these kids," Jessie joked.

"Ha! You're just jealous that I enchanted them when you couldn't."

"You really do need to get over yourself, Kayin. Face it, Car and Laur enthralled them, you were just a rusty spur on a wet hay bail." Jessie's Georgia was working overtime tonight.

Like usual, the friends turned to each other as if expecting one of them to translate her unique expression before laughing. "I swear, girl, I never know what the hell you're talking about."

"That's not a Virginia accent, or at least not one that I've heard yet," Briony said, almost forgotten by the group.

"No, our girl Jessie's from Atlanta, where the men are men and the sheep are—"

"Say it, Kayin, and I'll ban you from the gym for a week," Jessie warned.

"I gotta get home to the wife," Des announced loudly. She'd nearly fallen asleep while Kayin was talking, and Lauren thought she'd heard snoring during her own talk.

"We're going to head out, too." Sam wrapped her arm around Caroline.

"Thanks again." Briony shook their hands on their way out.

"You ready?" Kayin asked Lauren, having driven over together from the law firm.

"Sure," Lauren answered. "Briony, this was great. You've got a nice group of students. I'm sure I'll see you at Jessie's club."

"I'll look forward to it." Briony spoke with an easy honesty, taking their hands in parting.

Lauren watched her turn back to Jessie and ask about Georgia. She smiled to herself, yet another lesbian falling under Jessie's spell. If she didn't know better, it seemed the spell was working both ways this time. Interesting. What would she do if she was the only single woman left in their group? How depressing would that be?

* * *

Pushing through my front door, I heard the stereo playing soft jazz from the living room. Laughter erupted, and I settled into the happiness I'd been feeling since leaving the auditorium. I hadn't needed to worry while I was chatting up Briony after her class. Everything was handled here.

I walked into the living room and found my mom propped up on a bunch of pillows on the couch, the coffee table angled to accommodate her reclined form, and my generous, beautiful friend Willa laughing while no doubt losing to my mom in gin rummy. Mom's eyes found mine when I walked in and that glorious shine livened them to the point of becoming searchlights in the room.

"Jessamine!" she exclaimed, her tone the very definition of love.

"Hey, Mom, Willa. Y'all managed not to burn down the house, I see. Did anything go on that I'm going to need Lauren's help to get us out of?" I joked.

"You'll never get it out of me, woman." Willa stood from her squat on the floor. No doubt she'd been sitting there the entire time I was over at the U. I wanted to hug her and never let her go for her kindness. Without needing to be asked, she'd come to keep my mom company while I was busy.

Mom could handle being alone, but Willa had seen what I'd been seeing of late. Energy sapped, strength weakening, appetite gone, desperate, desolate sickness. I hated it, hated that hope became so elusive, hated that when I woke up in the morning all I prayed for was an uneventful day. Asking for something good was shooting for the moon now. I really just wanted the day not to slam Mom against a wall.

"I owe Lily three hundred grand from our game. Thankfully you got home before I went broke."

"Oh, shush now, Willa, you dear. We've had a lovely evening, and no one kept score."

"But if you did," I guessed, "you'd be handing out the ass whoopin', wouldn't ya, Ma?"

She smiled proudly before shooting me a stern look. "Watch your mouth, young lady."

"Yeah, swearing will stunt your growth." Willa slid her gaze from my feet up to my eyes. "At least that's what my mom always said. How come it only came true with me?"

"Darwinism at its best, shug," I teased.

"Yeah, right. I need to find some short friends. Between you, Quinn, and Lauren, the tension in my neck is killing me." She winked at my mom. "I'd better go pay attention to my dogs. They're missing Quinn on this road trip."

"They're not the only ones, I bet," Mom interjected, starting a faint blush on Willa's cheeks.

"Thanks for having me over, Lily. I had a lot of fun."

"You made my day, dear. I'm so glad you stopped by."

I walked Willa to the back door. She faced me briefly to say goodbye, not one sign of tears in her eyes. I really wanted to hug her, but I knew from Quinn that Willa wasn't entirely comfortable hugging people. I leaned down and slipped my arm briefly around her shoulders. "Thanks, Will."

"She's joy, Jess. And joy always prevails."

Oh my God. If I lived for another hundred years, I'd never come up with anything as succinct and hopeful. I squeezed her more tightly, and she patted my back in response before I let her head out to climb the hill of her back driveway.

I returned to the living room and found Mom fading quickly. She'd be asleep soon after such an entertaining evening. I contemplated taking her into her bedroom, but she looked so peaceful. She stopped my worrying with a request.

"I want to watch you play tonight, Jessamine. I can sleep on the couch."

"All right, Mom. Any requests?"

"Beethoven. I love how you play Beethoven."

I moved over to the piano and settled into the proper posture. I glanced at the notes on the page and instantly translated them to my fingers to fill the house with music. Mom's favorite which made it my favorite.

I'd play for a while, then I'd carry her to bed. After the evening at Briony's class, the acknowledged connection between us, and the long chat we'd had afterward, I'd be up for a while anyway. The worry about Mom would take me into the wee hours of the morning before I'd even think about sleep. Insomnia bites, but I'd lived with it so long now that I took advantage of everything I could get done. Like play my mom to sleep and still have plenty of hours to mull over the attraction I was feeling for Briony. Not to mention all the worries that come with a potential relationship that I knew would be deeper than I'd felt in nearly a decade. Was I ready for something like that again? Something that could hook onto my heart, shred it through my chest until it lost its beat, dripping blood down the claws of relationship catastrophe? No, definitely not.

But, maybe. I've been known to be wrong on other matters, why not this one?

Chapter 11

"That's it, Lori! Make 'em sorry they showed up for the game!" Des shouted from a seat behind us. She was always the most embarrassingly vocal of the group at Quinn's games.

I rolled my eyes at her exaggerated claim. Lauren chuckled when she caught me and bumped against me conspiratorially. To my left, Willa's CFO, Kevin, bit down on a grin. I didn't want to look past him to see what kind of smirk Willa wore. Sitting in Quinn's seats a few rows down, Caroline and Sam were spared Des's outburst. As were Kayin, Isabel, and Isa's daughter, Zalika, who sat across the aisle in the next section. Over the past four years, Willa had usurped the two seats beside and behind her, as well as three in the next section over so that we could all sit almost in a group.

"C'mon, I can't take the pressure of this game," Lauren mentioned about the close score going into the half. "I need ice cream, and you're keeping me company in line." She rose from her seat and pulled me up with her. "You guys want anything? Kev? Ice cream? Will?"

"She lets you eat ice cream?" Kevin whined playfully about me. "She makes me do eight million crunches when I go near dairy."

"Only five million, Kev," I kidded with him. He was one of the few male clients I'd kept when I opened the club. Even if he didn't work closely with Willa, I would have kept him because he was a truly decent guy and gay, so he didn't hit on me, ever.

"In that case, yeah, ice cream sounds good. Thanks."

"I'm too stressed to eat." Willa rolled her neck in an attempt to loosen up.

"We'll head up with you." Des and Skye followed us into the aisle with the migration of fans during the half.

I stood in the interminable ice cream line while Des, Skye, and Lauren used the restroom. Crackling energy from the excited fans surrounded me as I inched slowly closer to extinguishing Lauren's ice cream fix.

"I was hoping I'd catch you here tonight, babe," Jordan greeted, placing her hand on my back and stepping up close.

I suppressed a sigh. "Hey, Jordan. Enjoying the game?" She rarely went to games, but her posse, all of whom were season ticket holders, lingered in the background.

"Even more now." Her hand started to rub my back intimately. I stepped as far to the side as I could without losing Lauren's place in line. "What's wrong?" She let her hand slide down and hung her fingers over the start of my rear end. "What do you say we stop playing games and make an official date? Let me take you out dancing then take you home with me. Between the two of us, we'll make enough heat to set fire to the whole town."

Arrogance? Get some hot, roasted arrogance right over here. Five dollars, all the arrogance you can take. "I don't think so, Jordan. But thanks for the offer."

"Come on, Jess, you know we've been moving toward this since we first met. Why resist it? Nobody's hotter than the two of us. It's time we hooked up, babe."

"I'm flattered, really." I tried to keep the disgust from tainting my tone. "But I don't think it's the right time for us."

Her expression went from seductive hope to spiteful resentment in the space of a heartbeat. "Then why take me to the dance floor? You enjoyed that as much as I did. You liked my hands and mouth all over you then. I thought we'd moved beyond your petty jealousy to what you've always desired."

"Jesus, Jordan. I'm not jealous of you or anyone you date, and I'm not in some twisted competition with you, nor do I

want to sleep with you. It was just a dance. A nice dance, but we're not heading toward a relationship of any type."

"Man, you're a cold bitch. I always suspected it, but I didn't realize you're like Antarctica. You don't know what you're missing. I could thaw you out." Jordan swiped her hand over my ass, and I smacked her wrist away. She laughed without mirth and went back to her friends who shot looks of rage in my direction.

I faced front, ignoring them. My pulse rate had quickened during the exchange and a knot formed in my stomach. I don't like being cruel, but she deserved it, didn't she?

Skye and Des floated by to let me know they were headed to the coffee station. I tried to get my head back into the euphoria of the game, but my encounter still simmered inside. When I turned to check the restroom door for Lauren, I caught her talking to Jordan. What the hell was she trying to pull now? I really hoped she wouldn't tell Lauren about our conversation or we'd be talking about it for the rest of the game.

"Hey," Lauren greeted happily, coming to rest beside me a minute later. She glanced back toward Jordan then ahead, counting with a long finger the remaining people in line.

"What'd she want?" I tried not to make it sound like a bark, but Lauren's flinch told me I hadn't succeeded.

"What happened?" She tilted her head in concern.

"Nothing, sorry. What were you guys talking about?"

Lauren studied me with those inconceivable turquoise eyes. One red curl spiraled onto her forehead, and she tucked it behind her ear. She glanced back at Jordan with a grin and announced, "She asked me out."

"What?!" I didn't bother to hide the bark this time. "Why would she do that?" The words came out before I realized how insulting they might sound.

Too bad Lauren didn't let me roll them back before she responded, "I know it's hard for you to believe, but some women do find me attractive." Her calm tone didn't hide the fact that I'd upset her.

"I'm sorry, Laur. I didn't mean it like that. You're gorgeous. Any woman would be lucky to be with you. I just can't stand Jordan. You didn't say yes, did you?"

Lauren huffed her objection. "I don't think I'll tell you."

"You can't go out with her, L. She's a total player. She'll treat you like shit."

"You're not treating me very well right now. She's always been nice to me. Her problem is with you, not me. You don't get to tell me who to date."

"You're going out with her, then? I can't believe you'd fall for her bullshit."

She flinched again, this time for my use of profanity. She allowed me only so many swear words an outing before she'd start to lecture me on her worry that I was slowly losing my ability to self edit when it would really matter. "I'm sorry you don't like her, but this is a small community. She's beautiful, nice to me, and interested."

"Don't you know her reputation?" I tried to reason with her.

"If I went by reputations, you and I probably wouldn't be friends."

I could actually feel the comic book dialogue balloon being drawn above my head with the exclamation *POW!* written inside. Damn, that hurt. I couldn't believe how much that hurt. Because it still stung and I'm a shit, I couldn't keep from hurling something back at her. "She's a superior bitch, and you're foolish to buy her line."

Blazing emotion darkened her blue eyes. She was either going to cry or smack me. Since she wouldn't want to do either in public, she choked through gritted teeth, "You need to leave here, right now."

"Fine." I stormed away, noticing that my slightly elevated pulse rate had shifted gears up to near Indy car pace.

Why did I just do that? It was so unfair to Lauren. But I knew Jordan. She'd use my friend, toy with her feelings, and toss her aside out of spite. I didn't want that for any of my friends, especially not tender, unguarded, hopeful Lauren.

Spotting the familiar backside just ahead of me, I doubled-timed my steps and grabbed her shoulder. Jordan swung around with a surprised look. "What the hell?"

"What do you think you're doing with my friend?"

Jordan smirked malevolently. "Oh, she told you, did she? So excited about the chance to go out with me that she rushed to share with her little friend?"

"You're not going out with her."

"Beg to differ, ice queen. She's so ripe for the picking. I bet I could have backed her into a dark corner right over there and fucked her like no one's ever tried before." Her passel of lackeys snickered at the thought.

My hands curled into fists. Rage rippled along my skin. If anyone ever deserved to be hit, Jordan would be at the top of the list. But I was an adult, and right now it didn't look like I'd have a lawyer to defend me anymore. "Screw you, Jordan. My friends are off limits, as are yours. We've always played by those rules."

"Rules are meant to be broken," she snarled. "Tell you what, though." Her expression morphed into one of seduction as she took her fingers and began walking them up my arm. "If you reconsider my offer, I'll tell her that I can't see her right now. You're the one I want, and I always get what I want."

Fuck! I knew it. It was bad enough thinking she'd play Lauren like she played her other girlfriends, but to know that she'd only asked her out to get me to date her was despicable. The last time I'd felt this much hatred for someone was when I'd walked in on the only woman I'd ever loved and found her screwing two very different people. One having a penis and all. At the time, I'd felt my heart vanish and hatred take its place.

I had two choices: I could be loyal or a champion. If I chose loyalty, my friend would learn for herself how evil Jordan could be and risk a lot of heartache. Or I could save her by going out with Jordan but most likely lose her as a friend. Which would hurt her more? I knew the answer immediately. Lauren's heart had been wounded before. She'd eventually get over it. But I'd never been disloyal to her, nor would I start tonight.

"I swear to God, Jordan, if you hurt her —"

"What, Jessie? What will the big, bad Jessie do to me when her little Raggedy Anne friend gets the gift of being fucked senseless before I throw her to the curb? What can you do to me? I may not be able to take you myself, but they sure can." She jerked her thumb over at the menacing wall of strong, butch women backing her up.

She was right; I couldn't do anything to her. I was definitely pissed enough to inflict a lot of damage on her friends if they tried anything. But without being willing to get into a physical fight, I'd have to stand by and watch her rip my friend into confetti. From the sneer adorning her expression, I knew that's exactly what she meant to do. Being powerless bites worse than insomnia. One more worry to add to the pile. *Please God, make Lauren understand how hateful this woman is before she gets hurt beyond imagination.*

"I will make you sorry if you hurt her, Jordan. I promise you that." I swiveled back toward my seats and stomped away.

When I reached my row, I could see the suspense of the close game was getting to Willa. Her leg jack hammered and would continue until the team won or someone put a hand on her knee to make her stop. Kevin happily spooned ice cream into his mouth and stood to let me pass. Sam now sat in Lauren's seat with a questioning glance.

"What'd you do to L? I've never seen her that ticked off. Kicked my ass up here so she could sit with Car."

I sank into my seat with a sigh and crossed my arms. "Nothing," I sulked.

"Yeah, right."

When I faced Sam to ask her opinion of Jordan, I heard a familiar voice speak up. "Hi, Jessie." Briony, decked out in nice fitting jeans and a UVA sweatshirt, squatted into a crouch in the aisle. "Hi, Willa, Sam, nice to see you both again. I hope you don't mind. Quinn told me to stop by your section to say hello."

My fury dissipated in the instant it took to admire her shy, wide-lipped smile. "Hi, Briony. Glad you made it to a game before the end of the season."

"I was lucky enough to have a friend offer a ticket. I can see how popular they are."

"Take my seat for a bit," Kevin offered, standing to move out to the aisle. "There's a scrumptious usher in need of some flirting." He shook her hand as I introduced them.

"Thanks, I won't keep your seat from you too long." She said hello to Des and Skye behind us before taking the abandoned seat next to me. "I wanted to thank you again for speaking with my students the other night. You were a huge hit and so helpful getting all of your friends organized. Will you let me buy you dinner as thanks?"

I felt Sam shift beside me, turning her face away to hide a know-it-all grin. Not that this was normal. If I liked someone, I asked her out. Dinner dates, maybe, usually just drinks.. This thing with Briony did feel unusual, though, and I was ready for something unusual.

"Sure, that would be nice," I responded with a genuine smile, careful not to let any desire seep in. I didn't want to use my standard moves on her. Briony deserved better. Hadn't I just tried to convince Lauren of the same thing?

Briony's hesitant look softened with a release of breath. "Great. I'm out of town this weekend, so how's Monday night?" She grinned and it was very catching.

"Monday's perfect. I'll make reservations and let you know where to meet."

"All right." Confusion clouded her dark gold eyes for a moment until the buzzer sounded on the court, signaling thirty seconds until the game resumed. "I'll see you then." She relinquished Kevin's seat and waved to everyone before scooting up the aisle.

I turned back toward the court with a pleased smile and found turquoise eyes boring into me. They'd not lost any of the anger I'd seen earlier, and my stomach dropped with the knowledge that I'd done that to my friend.

Maybe I should add a new rule: when you intentionally anger and upset your best friends, you can move right past being a shit and admit that you're a fucking asshole.

Chapter 12

My mom made me see that I needed to apologize to Lauren sooner rather than later. We'd stayed up chatting after the game. I mentioned Briony and our date, but she could tell that something was bugging me, so I fessed up. Told her the whole story, edited for a PG rating, but it felt great to admit my screw up and have help figuring out how to unscrew things up.

Usually the friends let minor tiffs work themselves out over time, maybe say a quick apology and move on. This wasn't a minor tiff, though, and I didn't need my mother to point that out for me. I thought about going over to Lauren's office today, but I got a call asking me to cover Griff's classes because he and the usual back up trainer caught the same flu bug on a recent ski trip. I resolved to call Lauren when I got home.

After taking care of the classes and taking a shower, I started feeling better. Not even the prospect of the first date in seven months could shake the mood I'd brought on by being so horrible to my friend. I pulled on a clean bra and grabbed a fresh workout shirt from the pile when I heard the door to my private bathroom open.

"Oh, hey, boss," Sophie said casually. "I knocked."

"You can't just waltz into my bathroom. What's up with you?" I hurried to put on my shirt, feeling exposed in front of

her, which was crazy considering I used to teach my classes at the old club wearing some version of a sports bra.

"Jeez, soooorry. Bad day or something? I just wanted to thank you for filling in today. I know it's your club, but it's my job to make sure we've got enough trainers to cover all shifts."

I sighed and shook my head. I didn't need to vent my mood on her, but who waltzes into someone's bathroom uninvited? "I appreciate it. Could you give me a sec to finish getting dressed, please?"

"Since when are you so modest?" Her eyes scanned my body like she knew it well.

I'd been avoiding having this conversation with her, thinking her flirtation would work itself out and she'd remember that she was straight and engaged to some dude. But I needed to nip it in the bud before it got really uncomfortable or I had to hire a new activities director. "Sophie, I'm not sure what's going on with you right now, but this has to stop."

"What does?" She crowded into my personal space.

"Whatever you're trying to accomplish here. We work together, and you're—" My cell phone's ring grabbed my attention. Mom was calling and I grew hopeful that Lauren might have broken the stalemate first by calling the house. "Excuse me, I have to take this." I glared at Sophie when she didn't leave the bathroom, but I didn't have time to deal with it. "Hi, Mom."

"Sweetie, can you come home, please?" She sounded really tired. I'd probably worn her out by staying up late to talk last night.

"I've got to enter a few purchase orders first."

"They can't wait?"

"Is everything all right?"

"I just need you to be here. Now, honey, please?" This time she didn't just sound tired. She sounded desperate.

"I'm leaving right now." Panic seized my heart. She'd never asked me to come home immediately. Never.

"What's up?" Sophie asked, half annoyed at the interruption, half concerned at my tone.

"I have to leave." I hustled down the stairs three at a time, flew out the door, and sprinted to my car. Four minutes later, having broken every traffic law, I pulled into my driveway and blasted out of the car and into the house.

"Jessamine?" Mom's voice held the same desperation as I'd heard on the phone.

"I'm here, Mom." I raced into her room but wanted to turn back when I saw that she was wearing her best head scarf. She only ever wore scarves when she expected company, and we weren't expecting anyone tonight.

"Thank you, sweetie." Her hand patted the bed beside her. On unsteady legs I moved to the bedside and sat carefully so as not to disturb her position.

"What's...Are you...Why?" I couldn't finish any question because I already knew the answers. Death pressed into the room, invading, constricting, suffocating.

"I'm so tired, Jessamine. I can't keep fighting."

Pressure built rapidly behind my eyes and my whole head ached when the tears started to flow. "No, Mom. It's just a bad day. Tomorrow will be better."

"I don't think so, sweetie. I'm okay with this. I want you to be, too."

"Don't, Mom, please don't."

"My beautiful girl, I love you with all my heart. You've given me such happiness in my life." Her hand reached up to stroke my face. I grabbed it and brought her palm to my lips. "I wish I could have seen the boys again."

I sucked in a sob. "We can get them here. They can be here tomorrow, or Willa can help. She'll charter planes for them. They could be here in a few hours."

"No, sweetie. I've already taken too much from her, and I don't think I'll—"

"Yes you will, Mom. Please, they'll want to see you."

"Jessamine Lily Ximena, you'll listen to your mother one last time. I can feel this is my time. I'm finally going to be with your dad again after all these years. Please don't be sad. I love you so much. I'm so proud of who you are and what you've accomplished."

I sniffled loudly, trying to keep from sobbing uncontrollably. "I love you, too, Mom. You've been so good to me."

"Promise me something?"

"Anything."

"I know that girl broke your heart, but you were so young. Don't let her keep you from loving someone again. I don't want you to be alone when I'm gone."

"Mom," I whispered, wiping at the tears that had tracked down to my chin.

"You have such wonderful love to give, and you're keeping it from someone special. You might be surprised to find that she's closer than you think."

"Please, I don't want you to go."

"I know, but the battle's too much now. Promise me you'll be open to that special love, like the kind I had with your father. Don't turn away from it anymore. She's out there, and when you're ready, you'll finally see her. I just know it."

"I'll try. Are you in pain? Can I get you anything?"

"Just a hug, sweetie." I put my arms around her and pulled her to my chest, carefully cradling her thin frame and head. "That's perfect. Thank you." Her arms clung to my back. "...know her...open...heart."

"What, Mom?" I could barely make out her faint voice.

"Open your heart, Jessamine. I feel she's in your life already." She pressed against me more tightly, her head tilted into the crook of my neck. "Love you."

I felt the whisper against my neck. Then I felt death steal her away. Her body became heavier in my arms, head slanting further against my shoulder. I started to wail and rock her torso with mine, pleading for her to come back. I didn't want to let go. I knew I was being selfish. The cancer had slowly robbed her of any semblance of comfort and peace. That she wouldn't feel pain anymore should be of some solace, but as I sat in her bedroom, rocking her warmth against me, crying like I'd broken every bone in my body, I couldn't let go.

I don't know how much time had passed before my sobs lessened and I could handle seeing her face again. Carefully, I

tipped her backward to lay her against the pillows. That silk scarf still artfully arranged on her head because she knew someone besides me would see her tonight. Her eyes were closed and I choked back another sob thinking I'd never again get to see the luminous glow she reserved just for me. This wasn't right. She's too young! I can't make it without her.

I didn't know what to do. No one ever tells you what to do when you're staring down at a loved one who's no longer in her body. They tell you other practical things like what you need to do to buy a house, or save for retirement, or plan a wedding, but nobody tells you what you should do when you're left with a body that looks so much like the person you loved and worshiped for so long.

I couldn't stay in the room. I had to get out, but I couldn't leave her. I looked around until I spotted the phone sitting on the bedside table. The same one she'd used to call and summon me home because she knew. I gripped it in my hand, wishing for her voice to greet me when I put it to my ear. Since I knew that wouldn't happen, I hit speed dial three and waited.

"Please be home, please be home, please," I whispered.

"Hello?"

"Will?" I squeaked out.

"Jess? You okay?"

"No, no. Please, I...it's Mom." The tears returned, and I couldn't speak without a hiccup.

"Oh God!" Willa whispered. "We'll be right there."

"NO!" I objected in a panicked voice. "Please, stay with me."

"Okay, honey, I will. Quinnie!" The phone pulled away for a moment. Softly, I heard, "Jess needs you. It's Lily." Seconds later, Willa's voice came back stronger, "Quinn's on her way. She'll be there in a minute. Don't worry, we're going to take care of you."

"She called and...and..." the hiccups were back.

"You made it home," Willa guessed after a moment.

"Yes," I breathed out.

"You were there for her, Jessie. Everything she could hope for." Willa's soothing voice was like a lifeline.

I heard the back door open and suddenly Quinn was in the bedroom. "Jessie," she managed a strangled cry before grabbing me into a consoling hug. The phone slipped from my hand to the floor. "I'm so sorry."

"I can't let her go."

"I know, I know." She gently swayed with me, holding me upright, her body nearly the match of mine in size. Her comfort helped stem the panic.

"Jessie." Willa was somehow in the room with us. She reached out and the hug I'd wanted to give to her last week finally happened.

I looked over at Quinn whose blue eyes had grown red with her tears. She gave me a weak smile, and I didn't feel so alone anymore. I pulled back slightly, staying attached to Willa but wanting to see her face. The tears she'd never shown fell freely now. She glanced at my mom, squeezed her eyes shut tightly, and cried silently. Quinn stepped in and wrapped her arms around both of us. These two would be my strength. I could allow that for a short time.

After a long while, we arranged ourselves around the side of the bed. "Tell me when you're ready, and I'll make the call," Willa offered. I didn't need to ask who she'd call. She'd take care of it.

"Just a little longer." I got up to take the same spot on the bed I'd taken before. I touched my mom's arm, sliding my fingers up to grasp the underside of her forearm and down to her hand. I looked back at my friends. "This is too hard."

Willa nodded and kept my gaze when Quinn's faltered with tears. "We'll help you through this."

"Thank you. I have to call my brothers. God, how can I tell them? She asked for them, but she couldn't hold on." This involuntary eruption of tears was so foreign to me. I'd never had a problem holding back tears before now.

"Take your time, honey. We'll call everyone else for you," Quinn offered.

"I can't handle having them here tonight. Does that make me awful?"

"Not at all, Jess. We'll make them understand."

A troublesome thought scratched its way to the surface. "I needed to talk to Lauren. Mom and I talked last night...I want to tell her myself."

"Okay, when you're ready, you'll call your brothers and then you can call Lauren."

I turned back to focus on my mom. She looked the same, but smaller, more tired. I didn't see the peace that everyone talks about. She just looked like she was sleeping, but I knew better.

"I don't want her to leave." Quinn wrapped her arms around me again as we both looked down at my mom. This didn't feel right anymore. Mom was gone. I shifted slightly and Quinn pulled us into a stand. I looked at Willa and nodded.

We moved into the living room where breathing came a little easier without the heartrending vision of lifelessness. Willa fetched me a glass of water and went to find some tissues. I looked at the phone, dreading what I needed to do. My brothers and I didn't see eye to eye on anything. They resented me for our mother moving to Virginia several years ago instead of staying in Atlanta where in between shifts at the restaurant she'd act as their free day care center.

A tissue floated in front of my face, and I used it to blow my nose. I felt like I'd cried myself into dehydration. I glanced at the clock, shocked to see that it had been two hours since I'd left the gym. Quinn squeezed my shoulder up against her on the couch. She wiped her own tears with another tissue.

Soft murmurs from another part of the house broke our silence. Willa was making the call. I started crying again. What would it be like when they came to get her? I wouldn't be able to handle that. I just knew it.

When she came back into the room, she reported, "About an hour."

I only had an hour left with her. But it wasn't really her anymore. *God, please make this easier. Make it hurt less.*

I picked up the phone and dialed my brother Mark. He'd know something was wrong because we never called each other. "Hi, Mark, I'm afraid I'm calling with bad news. It's Mom, she's gone...Well, it got so bad for her...No, I was with

her...I don't know, probably Sunday...Yes, here. This was her home...When do you think you'll come?...No, nothing like that was taken care of...Well, she didn't, so you'll just have to come up with it on your own...Don't be petty, Mark. Are you telling me that you'll miss the funeral because you think Mom should have set aside money to pay for your flight?"

I felt Quinn grip my thigh trying to help me through this call. A piece of note paper flashed in front of my face. I focused on it and looked up at Willa. I shook my head, denying her offer.

Quinn whispered, "You don't need this headache. Let's just get them here."

Not believing that my friends, who were too good to me, were going to be that good to my brothers, I reluctantly read from the note. "I'll arrange for your flight and have the tickets at the counter...Yes, for Connie and the kids, too, if you want...No, no, the house won't—"

"Hotel and car service, too." Quinn added.

"We'll get you rooms at a hotel...No, my friends are the ones—never mind...No, I'm handling that...Fine, if you're here in time to make those decisions, great. Did you want to call Phil and Robert?...I am not trying to pawn this off on you. I thought since you all are so close, you might want to be the one to tell them, but that's okay, I can do it. I'll call with the arrangements tomorrow. Bye, Mark."

How would I make two more of these calls? Mark was the one brother I could handle without screaming out loud, and his petulant, self absorbed reaction to Mom's death made me want to disown him.

"You did well, hon," Quinn encouraged. "People handle shocking news differently."

"Thank you for helping me with them." I spoke of their offer to pay for flights, hotels, and cars for these ungrateful, freeloading family members of mine.

"I told you, we'll take care of whatever," Willa reiterated. "That includes the seemingly unfair. You need to focus on getting yourself through this. If we can make that easier, let us."

I nodded and picked up the phone to call my middle brother. It went much the same way, but he actually thanked me for the offer of tickets. The eldest, Robert, wasn't as gracious, but he'd always been the leader of the trio of disgust with me. He resented me for so much, including my father, my father's death, my mom's slight favoritism, my homosexuality, my mom's move here, and my mom's cancer. I was sure he blamed me for a lot more, but I stopped listening or caring long ago.

Time for the last call. My hands shook as I hit the speed dial to Lauren's townhouse. "Lauren," I managed with a suddenly dry mouth when she picked up.

"If you aren't going to start this conversation with 'I'm sorry,' then I'm hanging up." Lauren's voice no longer held the anger or hurt of last night, but it hadn't moved to a lighthearted tease yet either.

"Laur," I croaked before the tears came again.

"Jessie?" she asked full of concern.

"It's Mom. She's...she's gone."

"No, Jessie, no." She started to cry, spurring on more of my own tears. "I'm so sorry. I'll be right over."

"Quinn and Will are here. We're...we're taking care of things."

"I want to see you. Let me come over. I won't stay long if you don't want me to."

Her voice felt like silky comfort. I remembered that I needed to apologize to her, and I wanted to see her, too. "That would be nice."

When I hung up, I handed the phone over to Quinn. She gave it to Willa who'd make the rest of the calls. "Anyone else we can call for you?"

"She had a few friends in Atlanta that she still kept in touch with, and the few here, but I can call them later." My head started feeling numb from exhaustion. The drowsiness of deep sadness set in, but I was sure I wouldn't sleep.

"We'll figure it out tomorrow. Did you want to sit with her until they come?"

I nodded but couldn't move. Quinn stood and pulled me up with her. We started back toward the bedroom when the front door crashed open and Lauren rushed toward us.

"I'm sorry," I said when she flew into my arms. "I'm sorry I was so awful to you last night."

"Stop, that's completely forgotten." Her face brushed against my cheek as she settled into me. Like Quinn her frame fit perfectly with mine. "I'm sorry, Jessamine. I know what she is for you. I'm just so sorry."

"Thank you." I felt her tears salt my lips.

We stayed like that for a long time. Then she pulled her head back and looked at me with those eyes a color I'd never seen on anyone before. "I needed to come hug you and make sure you know how much you are loved. I'll stay as long as you want, or I'll leave if Quinn is going to stay with you."

"I am," Quinn supplied.

Lauren nodded. "You're in good hands."

"Do you want to see her?" I couldn't drop my arms from around her.

She looked anxious but nodded because she loved my mom and needed to see her as much as I did. We moved toward the bedroom together. She kept an arm around my shoulder, and I left my hand around her waist. Quinn took my other hand and with the strength of my friends, I went to say goodbye to my mom for the last time.

Chapter 13

Voices rose to an uproar inside the house once we'd returned from the graveside service. Sixty people milled about, talking, grazing the buffet, inspecting the house, spilling out onto the back deck. I'd had enough, but I knew that today served as closure for the people here.

Quinn sat beside me on the couch. Other than for practice with her team, she'd not left my side even at night. When she couldn't get out of preparing her team for her last two regular season games and the ACC tournament, Willa stayed with me. My friends had all been in and out of the house since Thursday night, offering love and support, making me appreciate even more being part of the group. Austy had taken a red-eye, arriving first thing yesterday morning. She got here earlier than two of my brothers. I shouldn't have worried that she might not be able to make it because she lived so far away and had a new life. Kayin stepped in at the club and handled business matters for me. Des put up a tent over the back deck and added heat lamps in case it rained or snowed today. Caroline and Skye handled the food.

All of the awful details that go with the business of death, my friends had helped take me through. Softly encouraging, understanding, and staying back when they knew I could handle certain things alone.

Sitting here, I knew without a doubt that I wouldn't have survived these past few days without them. When my brothers

and their families showed up, tension escalated so much I felt like if someone poked me with a finger, I'd explode. They'd been picking at me and my lifestyle since they arrived. They considered themselves very religious, but their actions didn't mesh with what I thought religion meant. They used it to exclude and feel superior and judge. Religion should be about love and acceptance.

"Aunt Jessie?" Claire, my favorite niece, stood next to the couch with Zalika. They were the same age and much to the chagrin of her father, Phil, Claire called me "Aunt Jessie" and embraced diversity in people.

"How you doing, Claire?"

"Okay." Her smile disturbed the resemblance to her parents and made her look more like Mom and me, even with the blond hair. "Zalika told me she has a t-shirt from your club. Could I have one?"

I smiled, happy that this kid could see past the restrictive life her parents inflicted on her and her siblings. "Of course. I've got as many as you want. Zalika, why don't you take Claire out to the storage area in the garage and get her outfitted? Ask the rest of the kids, too, okay?"

"Sure, Jessie," Zalika agreed shyly. Normally, she wasn't shy, but I could tell she didn't know how to treat my sadness now. Her and me, both.

"You don't need a t-shirt," Phil interjected from his seat on the couch opposite me.

"I'd love to give her one, Phil," I insisted with the patience I'd been using since they arrived. "It's just a t-shirt."

On the couch across from us, my brothers all looked like slightly aged photos of each other. Robert's dirty blond hair thinned and greyed more than Phil and Mark's. He'd also put on the most weight. He looked miserable, and I'd bet it had nothing to do with our mom's death. A self-indulgent wife and six kids on an insurance adjuster's salary could wear anyone down. Add to that his penchant for negativity and he looked twenty years older than his age.

"I don't know why she ever moved here," Robert announced for the fifth time. "You whined and whined until

she gave in. Like always. Anything for her precious Jessie. She wasn't like that before she met your father. He changed her with his Basque traditions. I'd never even heard of that country until he took over our lives. All y'all can't even figure out if you're Spanish or French."

Quinn slipped her hand into mine and squeezed. I felt embarrassed that any of my friends had to hear this. They'd been hurling these same slights at me ever since I could remember. How much they hated my father for falling in love with our mother, making a life and a child with her after their father left. They hated that she was obviously happier with him than she'd ever been with their dad. And they hated that he looked "ethnic" as they always put it, his pure Basque coloring darkened their picture of the American family.

"We're autonomous, neither Spanish nor French. And you weren't saying anything like that when my father provided a home for you all, gave you love, treated you like you were his own, and when he died, provided a social security check that sustained us with Mom's pay when your father never paid one bit of child support."

"Dad gave me, Phil, and Markie all the money we needed," Robert spat back.

"Child support is supposed to help the custodial parent sustain a child, not for a gun collection or whatever else you wanted to spend his money on."

"What do you know about marriage and divorce? If you weren't such a whore, you still couldn't get married. Not that being a slut is the only thing stopping you from finding someone. No one would ever love such a selfish bitch."

The constant annoyance I felt in their presence blossomed into full-fledged anger. Burning heat seared my stomach and my muscles twitched. I wasn't sure I'd be able to contain myself to just a verbal retort.

"Son?" Lauren's father interrupted from beside Mark's chair. One of his arms tucked around Austy's shoulders, the other arm curled around Lauren's waist. His wife had a hand resting in her daughter's elbow. "I know you're hurting, but

there's no cause to say anything more upsetting here. You may not feel it now, but the regret will sneak up on you."

"This concerns me and my half-sister and her degenerate lifestyle. Now that Mom is gone, I can finally say what I need to say. The Bible says—"

"If you're going to start quoting Scripture, son, you'd better be prepared to quote it all, not just the bits that suit you." He turned to smile in fatherly concern at me then glanced back at my brother. "I can use the Bible to make my point as well as you can yours. I'm an old codger with a lot of Sunday Masses behind me. This day is about your wonderful mother, whom I was lucky enough to know and care about because our daughters have been friends a long time. You need to honor her choices and her memory and forget the pettiness."

Robert looked like he wanted to go fifteen more rounds, but his wife leaned in and whispered something to him. I doubted she was telling him he was wrong because she hated me as much as he did; her unwavering stare at Quinn's hand in mine wasn't the only clue. More likely she was telling him that he shouldn't argue with an eighty-year-old man at a funeral.

"Thank you for coming, Cap." I stood to hug him.

"Your mama was a special lady, just like you, kiddo. A real dandy."

"Thank you." I shifted to wrap my arms around Lauren's mom. "Rena, I'm so glad you both made the trip."

"One of a kind, she was. She loved you so much, darling. You made her so proud. I could draw your Olympic medal from memory, that's how many times she showed it to me. And don't get me started on everything she boasted about your club. You gave her a reason to fight."

I squeezed her tighter and glanced up to find Lauren smiling at me through tears. She leaned in to kiss my forehead as her mom comforted me. They'd always opened their home to me from the moment Lauren and I became friends.

"Okay, now." Rena gave me a final pat. "You come home with my miracle girl for Cap's birthday. Lauren, you make sure you bring this lovely with you. You'll stay the weekend," she

commanded without making it sound like an order, but I knew better than to decline.

I'd just settled back on the couch when Connie, Mark's wife, spoke up. "We'll have to figure out what to do with the house and everything here."

Quinn turned a questioning look at me and I shrugged my shoulders in reply. She looped her arm under my elbow to settle her hand in mine again.

"Do you have to do that here?" Phil spat at me. "We shouldn't have to watch you being indecent with your little girlfriend."

I stiffened again. "Quinn is my best friend. She's married to Willa, another friend, and you need to show her some deference for all that she's done for Mom."

"What did she do other than twist Mom's head even more to your lifestyle?"

I opened my mouth to list all that they'd done when Quinn advised, "Let it go, hon."

Everyone on the couch across from us snorted in disgust. I really wanted them out of my house. From the time I left for college, I'd rarely seen them, but resentment apparently remained.

"As I was saying," Connie plowed ahead. "We're going to have to figure out what to do with the house and everything else. I'd love this piano; we could teach the kids to play."

You're not going near that piano! I screamed inside my head. As calmly as possible, I informed her, "The piano's mine."

"Well, of course you feel that way, but I'm sure your mom would want everything divided equally between us."

"What are you talking about?" I felt the confusion swallow me up. I gripped Quinn's hand tighter to have something tangible to hold on to. "This is my house, everything in it is mine, including the piano."

"This is Mom's house, Jessie. You may have mooched off her and felt like it was yours, but you'll soon find out what probate means," Phil informed me in a condescending tone.

Before anyone else could tell me what to do in my own house, someone pressed down on the sofa arm beside me and

settled a hand on my shoulder. "Excuse me," Willa addressed the other couch politely. She leaned in very close and whispered so that they wouldn't hear. "You're strong. You can do this. You have your mother's love and strength to get you through. Remember that. They may share your blood, but we're your family. This will be over soon."

Oh, God! I didn't know how these friends of mine knew when I needed help the most, but Willa's words settled over me like a blanket of warmth. My free hand flew to my heart as I turned to stare up at her caring face.

"You're right, Willa, thanks. I love you." A look of surprise and gratitude filled her expression. We all told each other this from time to time, me not as much as the others, so I could understand her surprise. Willa, however, didn't verbalize her emotions.

She shook her head slightly, almost as if she couldn't believe it. With a quick intake of breath, she darted an arm around my shoulders for a tight squeeze and whispered, "Thank you, Jessie. I love you, too."

My smile widened because she'd never said that to me or anyone but Quinn before. She showed her love through actions, not words. These women, the two beside me, the four in the front room, the two in the kitchen, and the two on the back deck validated everything about my life and gave me all the love and support I'd ever need. More than the three miserable looking men with a similar nose or chin or forehead had ever given.

"We have an appointment with Mom's lawyer tomorrow. We can sort everything out then. If you'll excuse me, I need to thank everyone who came here to show Mom their love."

Quinn and Willa got up and left with me. Just a few more hours and all these people would be gone. This would be over, and I'd be able to breathe again.

Chapter 14

Hours later only my group of friends remained. Caroline, Skye, Isabel, and Zalika busied themselves in the kitchen putting away the rest of the food. Des, Sam, and Kayin were taking down the tent over the deck. Austy and Lauren went through each room to straighten up, while Willa spoke on the phone.

I realized what Willa was talking about and turned to Quinn sitting beside me on the couch. "You need to go, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, hon. I can't take any time off right now."

"That's okay. Really. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." I needed to say it out loud, even if I didn't believe it. The idea of spending tonight alone petrified me. I wasn't sure I could handle it and still have to deal with my brothers and the will tomorrow.

"We don't want to leave you alone."

"What do you mean alone?" Lauren came in from the front room. "Austy and I are crashing here. She's allergic to my cat, so she can't stay there another night. And where she goes, I go. So, we're having a little sleepover, Jessamine. Deal with it."

The group waited for me to laugh before they did. "What is up with you guys? Lauren's all confident, making demands outside a courtroom. Then there's Des, who's being helpful without whining."

"Hey, I heard that!" Des yelled from the back deck.

"Kayin was in the kitchen doing dishes, and I know she never does dishes at home."

"That's what we have a kid for, right, Zalika?" Kayin juttet an elbow against her partner's twelve-year-old daughter.

"Quinn hasn't gone for a morning run in three days."

"I've been running in place at night," she joked.

"Austy's actually breaking her rule of never imposing on someone, even though having you stay is not an imposition, but in your ultra polite mind, you think it is."

"Lanky's making me." She nudged Lauren's arm.

"And Willa's handing out 'I love you's.' "

The entire group gasped and whipped around to stare at Willa who'd just finished her phone call. She looked like a thief caught in a police spotlight. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Flustered, she looked away then back at us and tried to speak again. Finally, she managed in a higher than normal pitch to her voice, "Well, she said it first!"

"Oh, you are so telling me now," Lauren demanded. She was the most effusive of the group when it came to sharing feelings.

"Me, too." Caroline incited a "me, three" and "me, four."

Willa's panic faded away as everyone became pushier. "Fine, I admit it. I feel remote to moderate affection for you all. Now, get off my back!"

"Willa loves us, Willa loves us!" Lauren sang to another round of laughter.

"Go," I told Quinn. "I'll be watching, especially since I helped you work out Duke's defense."

She leaned in for a quick kiss and hug. "Love ya, Jess. I'll miss you, but we'll be back soon."

"Your dogs will have left you for me, but have fun." I felt like I was slowly coming back into myself. A sadder, emptier self, but so much better than I'd been all weekend.

Their departure triggered everyone else's. Lots of clinging hugs, kisses, and consoling words before Austy, Lauren, and I were left alone. When we walked back inside after saying goodbye to everyone, Lauren's hand went out to stroke the

curve of my piano as we passed through the living room. I found myself doing that all the time, too.

"You're sure you're all right with us staying tonight?" Austy asked because she was the most polite person ever to live.

I knew Lauren was thinking the same thing by her soft chuckle. "Yes, shug. There's plenty of room, and I really don't feel like being alone."

"When was the last time you ate something?" Lauren asked.

Actually, I couldn't remember. Quinn had cooked the last couple of nights, but I wasn't sure I ate. "I'm not hungry."

"That wasn't my question," Lauren said firmly and glanced at Austy, who sprang off the couch and went into the kitchen. When she came back, she had samples of nearly everything Skye and Caroline had prepared on three plates for us.

I decided to take advantage of her accommodating state, mostly for Lauren's benefit. "So, I could use some good news, Aust. Tell us, when are you going to marry Elise?"

Her silverware clanged back to the coffee table as she turned to stare at me. The familiar blush tinted her whole face. Lauren bumped a shoulder against me and raised her eyebrows. I knew she'd asked Austy last time they saw each other, but Austy dodged personal questions like someone easily avoiding heavy water balloons being tossed from ten feet away.

"You are going to marry her, aren't you?" Lauren asked.

Austy glanced about, seemingly looking for exits but understood that she was trapped. When she admitted, "Yes," she couldn't stop the silly grin that people in love wear around until cynics like me tell them how sickening it is.

"Yippee! I'm so happy for you." Lauren raced around the table to hug her best friend. "Why haven't you married her yet, and why aren't you officially living together?"

Austy laughed and tried to get out of answering the question by taking a bite of the food. When we kept staring at her, she finished swallowing before she spoke. "Who do you know that's more cautious than I am? I don't think it's absurd

to want to wait a year or so before you commit to someone for the rest of your life. I know that goes against the U-haul standard, but I've never been wired right."

I chuckled but assured her, "It's not absurd, Aust."

Lauren and I stole a glance and smile. "When are you going to ask her?"

"Can we drop this subject, please?"

"No," Lauren and I said together. "You are going to be the one to propose, right? Or are you waiting for Elise to ask you?"

"Ooh, good question, Jess." Lauren did an impression of a Family Feud contestant.

Austy looked like she wanted a witch to come by and cast a spell to take away her power of speech. "You know if I weren't at your mercy right now... Yes, I'm going to ask her, but we're waiting for her cousin to finish high school. He's had some trouble and been ignored, so this is a big thing for him. Since Elise is making a big deal out of it, his family has to as well."

"That's so admirable. Now I'm in love with her," Lauren kidded.

"*Stai zitta, Amica.*" Austy liked to use Italian for exclamations, and I always thought telling someone to shut up sounded better in Italian anyway. "Eat up." She pointed at my full plate.

I picked up the fork and slowly went about my assignment. The food brought no taste with it because everything seemed dull since Mom died. They joined me, eating in silence, sharing concerned glances but not sure what to say.

"That's a beautiful piano, Jessie. I bet your mom sounded great when she played," Lauren mused.

I smiled fondly. "Mom played the cello. The piano's mine."

"Wait, what? You play the piano?" She and Austy stared wide-eyed at me. "Why don't we know this?"

"You never asked," I responded quietly, battling some guilt at the touch of hurt in her voice.

She looked like she wanted to debate my response, but she didn't have any ammunition to do so. "That's right. We haven't yet covered lies by omission in our friendship. That'll come in year twelve. See, it says so right here on the syllabus." She

fingered an imaginary document on the coffee table. "Oh, wait, it does say 'piano recital' in year eleven. Get to it," she ordered.

I looked longingly at the piano and back at Lauren. I wanted to play, but I knew it would make me think about the last time I played and the fact that I only played for my mom. "No," I declined in a tense whisper.

"Please? You owe us because you've withheld this information for so long."

"I can't," I repeated my denial in a short, pained burst.

"*Amica*." Austy stopped Lauren's sure rebuttal when she heard the plea in my decline. "Some other time, Jessa. We'll be your fawning audience whenever you like."

"Thanks." I felt grateful to be let off the hook. "Let's get you settled in your rooms. Austy, you can take the guest room, and Lauren, you can use my room. I won't sleep much."

"We're here to keep you company, Lofty. So, if you're not sleeping, we're not sleeping," Austy proclaimed.

"Really?" A wicked thought entered my head. "The couches are gonna get really crowded when you both conk out after midnight. What's Elise going to say when she finds out that you slept with two other women at the same time?"

"She's going to wonder how I managed not to do something to my back and neck while sleeping with two circus giants such as yourselves."

Lauren and I laughed at the running joke between the three of us. "We'd be gentle, Sawed-off," I joked.

"Until we bring out the stretching rack, that is," Lauren inserted to my surprise. Randy jokes weren't her thing. Sad that it made me proud of her. Shows how warped I am.

The camaraderie I felt with these two reminded me of my last year in college when I met them both. We'd spent many evenings hanging out in Lauren's apartment. It would be a nice diversion to think about when they both fell asleep tonight and I was wandering around trying to convince myself that it was all right to sleep.

Chapter 15

More tired than she'd felt in a long time, Lauren pushed through her office front door an hour later than usual. She'd gotten about four hours of sleep because Jessie wouldn't go to bed, so she and Austy didn't go to bed. As Jessie predicted, though, they eventually crashed on the couches in the living room. Because it wasn't her own bed, she kept waking up and finding Jessie roaming the house. She'd try to stay awake to keep an eye on her but kept drifting off.

After rushing home to shower and change, feed the cat, and drop off Austy at the bookstore, she made it to the Georgian fifteen minutes before her meeting.

Big relief. No sign of her appointment in the lobby. Lauren walked briskly through. "Morning, Beck. Running a little late today. Is the conference room ready?"

"Yep, and your favorite opposing counsel just called. He wants a settlement conference with you today."

"You told him that we're not a drive through legal window, right?"

Becky laughed and thrust a mug toward her. "I think I used those exact words. Thought you might need some tea, seeing as you're bumping up against the start time."

"Thanks, Beck. You're a wonder."

"I'm glad you're here," Shelby, her newest associate, greeted. "Can I get your approval on this demand letter?" Her French tipped fingernails gripped a document she juttled

forward. Shelby still insisted on manicures, tightly woven hair styles, and trendy suits despite the casual dress code at Aleric & Associates when not meeting with a client.

"Can it wait, Shelby? I'm stepping into an appointment in a few minutes."

"I promised to messenger it over by ten-thirty."

Lauren liked that her associate had moved up the timeline on this case. But she needed her to stop acting like she still worked at a huge law firm with sixty partners who wore down the confidence of their associates by micromanaging. "Okay, what's the amount of the demand?"

"Three times med damages."

"Sounds exactly right, Shelby. Good job. Send it out."

"Really?" Shelby's cinnamon toned face broke into a proud smile.

"I didn't hire you for your sewing skills. You know what you're doing." Her grin widened as she rushed a "thanks" and almost strutted back to the staircase to return to her office.

"Charming people again, L?" Jessie closed the front door behind her.

Her nine a.m. appointment. Jessie looked even more tired than Lauren felt. Not surprising since she would bet that her friend hadn't slept more than an hour last night or any night since her mom died. Like yesterday, her hair was swept into a loose up-do, several long curls hanging free along her cheek and down her neck. Even tired, her beauty overpowered the room.

"Yes, that's *moi*." Lauren waved a hand at the ridiculous notion.

Jessie cocked her head and gave a tight lipped smile. She blinked several times before stating simply, "You're a charmer, Laur, and not in the overused sense of the word, either. You make people feel good about themselves when they talk to you. A genuine charmer."

Lauren figured it was the sleep deprivation talking but liked how Jessie dipped into her exaggerated southern drawl when she said "charmer." She didn't bother to respond because Jessie paid compliments casually all the time.

"Want some tea?"

"No thanks. I just want this over."

"It's pretty straightforward, hon. Don't worry."

Jessie sighed and dropped her head. "I'm always worried," she spoke under her breath.

Lauren leaned forward. Had she heard that right? Casual Jessie worries all the time? She knew Jessie worried about her friends and her mom and her business and, okay, maybe she did worry all the time. Lauren hadn't ever examined that before, but now that she thought about it, Jessie did worry about quite a bit, even if she didn't always voice her worries.

She raised her hand to cradle Jessie's cheek. "You've done so well, Jessamine. Your mom would be proud."

"Not her, too?" a male voice sounded from the doorway.

Lauren turned to see Jessie's oldest brother, Robert, acting as a dam to the flow of people into the law office. Her middle brother, Phil, muscled his way to the front.

"Christ, Jessie, can't you keep it in your pants for a minute? You're little girlfriend isn't welcome in this meeting." Phil moved right up to them, trying to use his size to intimidate. He looked a little confused when he remembered that his younger sister was taller than he was.

Jessie issued a look of pure disgust. "You know what, Phil? If Lauren were my partner, she'd have just as much right to be here as your wife. But she's Mom's lawyer, so she's definitely welcome."

"No way," Robert objected. "You're the lawyer who drafted my mother's will?"

"Yes," Lauren spoke confidently. Something about being in front of clients erased all of her doubts. "Would you mind coming inside and shutting the door? It's rather chilly out there."

"How do we know that you didn't finagle our mother into something she wouldn't normally agree to?" When Robert said "our mother" he indicated only his brothers.

"That's enough, Robert. Let's get this over with," Jessie demanded, but Lauren noticed her hand shook as she grabbed the back of her sweater to unnecessarily straighten it.

"Don't order me around. I don't like this one bit. A friend," Robert used quotes around that last word, "of yours drafted Mother's will and you expect us to believe it's valid?"

"I assure you, Mr. Rove, the will is valid. If you'll follow me, we can commence with the reading." Lauren led the group into the conference room.

Jessie took the seat to her right and kept her eyes on Lauren, ignoring her brothers. She couldn't blame her. After knowing them two days, she wanted nothing more to do with them. Once Becky served the coffee, Lauren went about the simple task of reading Lily Ximena's will.

"But I'm the oldest," Robert whined petulantly. "How come I'm not executor?"

"Your mother wanted Jessie to be the executor," Lauren patiently explained. "It has nothing to do with birth order."

"But she's already gotten so much more than we have. She's been living with Mom and convinced her to spend her money on needless things like a new car." Phil was fast becoming Lauren's least favorite of the brothers.

"Everything will be divided evenly, including her car."

"What about her house? Jessie's already claiming that and the stuff in it. That's not a fair division." Robert was acting like he was five and his teacher told him to share the crayons.

Lauren glanced over at the quiet and still form of her friend. Tense didn't begin to describe her expression.

"I told you yesterday," Jessie started evenly. "The house is mine. I bought it and furnished it myself. Mom brought some pieces with her when she moved in, but they were the things she specifically wanted me to have. Everything else we placed in a storage unit, including things she labeled for each of you. You can all fight over what isn't labeled."

"You expect us to believe that you bought that house without any help from Mom? And what about her old house? Will we see any money from that?"

"What kind of money do you think Mom made as a waitress? She had just enough to put a down payment on a condo when she moved here but had to sell it when she got

sick the first time. Medical payments ate up everything she had."

"So, you let her spend all her money on private nurses because you were too selfish to stay home and take care of her?"

"You called her once every three months. Who's the selfish one? And she didn't pay for the nurses or any of her medical bills when she got sick again. Neither she nor I could afford that. My friends Quinn and Willa paid off her remaining bills from her first bout and all of her bills and the private nurses during the second. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude."

"Give me a break. Why would they do that?"

"Because they loved Mom, and they...they love me." Jessie looked shaken by this argument.

"That's a hoot. They want something, or are you screwing both of them as payment?" Robert sneered.

Jessie flinched in her seat, wringing her hands together. She trained her eyes on Robert. "Do you know how costly cancer is for someone with even a standard medical plan? Mom ran through her lifetime max partway through battling the second occurrence. We would all be responsible for those bills if my friends hadn't offered to pay. I won't let you say anything disrespectful about them. I will be thankful for the rest of my life for their generosity. You should be, too."

"I'm protesting this will. I think you're hiding some of her assets, and I don't agree with her naming you as executor."

"Mr. Rove, I can understand your surprise," Lauren began diplomatically.

"Shut up! You're as worthless as she is."

"Robert!" Jessie slammed her hand down on the table. "You will respect my friends. If you have a problem with the will, go ahead and protest it. It'll drag out in court for years before you'll ultimately lose because no one is better than my lawyer."

It took Lauren a minute to realize that Jessie was referring to her as the lawyer. With all that Jessie was dealing with right

now, she cared more about defending her friends than what hateful words these men threw at her.

"I'll give you directions and the key to the storage unit. You can squabble all you want over what isn't labeled in there. I'll sell whatever you leave behind along with her car and divide the money three ways. That's my offer if you drop this whole thing. I want to move on, and I'm sure you do as well. If you decide to protest the will, when Lauren beats your attorney, I will follow the will's instructions and divide everything by four instead."

Robert, Phil, and Mark stared at each other in quiet confusion. "Fine. The idea of having to deal with you in court or anywhere else after this makes my skin crawl."

Jessie slid a key and the directions across the table to her brother. "I'm your sister, and I'll always be your sister. If you decide that you want to treat my friends with respect and me with civility, I'll welcome you into my home."

"That's not going to happen," Phil mumbled under his breath. He pushed back from the table and brought his wife up with him. The rest followed, leaving without a word to Jessie.

Jessie stared after them, and Lauren's heart felt the pain of the hurt they'd caused her. "I'm sorry they insulted you like that. I'm horrified that you had to hear any of that."

Lauren studied the tired brown eyes before her. She reached out and cupped Jessie's face. "They're the ones who should be sorry. I'm so proud of you, Jessamine. You handled that with dignity. I should hire you to join my firm. You're a damn good negotiator." When her comments didn't elicit the smile she'd yearned to see, she asked softly, "How much sleep did you get last night, hon?"

"The usual."

"You normally stay up all hours of the night, pacing, reading, or sitting at your piano?"

Her brown eyes grew wide in surprise. "You were awake?"

"I woke up a couple of times."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because you were sitting at your piano, and I didn't think you'd start to play if you knew I was awake. Not that you did, but a girl can always hope."

"I'm sorry you didn't sleep well."

"It'll be easier tonight, especially if you stay at my house." Lauren tried for another grin.

"I'm thinking of becoming a UVA women's basketball groupie over the next week or two."

Lauren felt strangely disappointed. "Oh, okay, that sounds like a good idea."

"I had fun last night, though. It was like old times with Austy around."

Lauren's sadness deepened at the thought that they'd never get that back with Austy living so far away. "Sure was."

"Do you mind taking over my dog sitting duties?"

"Eww, dogs," Lauren whined playfully. She didn't mind dogs really, but she advocated her cat whenever possible. "Sure, between me and Zalika, we'll take care of the dogs. Willa and Quinn will be thrilled to have you there with them."

"I hope so." Lauren was surprised by the uncertainty in that statement. She saw then how much the loss of her mother was only beginning to affect her good friend.

Chapter 16

The look her cat gave her made Lauren turn back to the mirror to check her outfit one more time. Her slinkiest dress clung to her frame. She wished she had more curves, but willowy worked, too. Jordan didn't seem to have a problem with willowy. The looks Jordan gave her during their dates didn't need subtitles.

Lauren grinned at her reflection. These past few weeks, she and Jordan had gone out three times. She hadn't pressured her to move too quickly, she'd understood when Lauren had to postpone their first date for Lily's funeral, and she'd been interested and engaging every time they got together or spoke on the phone.

Tonight counted as their fourth date. With it came a nervousness she hadn't felt before because she knew that many considered the fourth date as the "money" date. Lauren had different standards, always had. She could succumb to fiery desire as much as the next woman, but she learned after her second girlfriend that it was a mistake to jump to the physical part of the relationship before she was certain of her feelings. When she'd started feeling more secure about herself, she stopped trying to please women by becoming intimate too soon in a relationship.

The phone rang, making the cat jump slightly. "Who could that be, Reveler?" She reached out and scratched his head. As

she walked into the bedroom to answer the phone, she hoped it wasn't Jordan canceling their date. "Hello?"

"Hi," a voice she hadn't heard for nearly three weeks spoke into the phone.

"Jessie! Where are you?"

"Just got home. Did you know that if you badger Willa relentlessly ten hours a day for weeks she will actually tell you something personal about herself from time to time?"

"Get out!" Lauren giggled into the phone, so happy to hear her friend without the deep sadness she'd left town with. "You're going to share, right?"

"Maybe. What are you doing tonight? You free? The info's worth it, believe me."

Guilt slammed into her as she caught a glimpse of her dress in the bathroom mirror while taking a seat on her bed. Moments ago, she'd been so excited to see Jordan again. Now she was torn between giving that up to see her friend.

"You there, L?"

"Yeah."

"Is that yeah, you're there, or yeah, you're free?" Jessie teased.

"I have a date, but I can cancel it."

Seconds passed before Jessie spoke again. "No, don't be crazy. That's great, L. First date?"

"Fourth." Lauren couldn't stop the argument they'd had at the basketball game from running through her mind again.

Jessie's hesitation wasn't as long this time. "Great, that's great. Jordan, right? If you're at the fourth date, it means I was wrong about her. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have imposed my judgment about her on you."

Lauren's heart rate sped up listening to the regret in her friend's voice. "Forget it. She's been a lot of fun. I think if you give her a chance, you'd like her."

"I'm sure you're right. Well, I don't want to keep you."

"I could come over afterward?"

Jessie laughed in her ear. "You're something, L. Thanks, but no."

"But you're home for the first night since...I don't want you to be alone."

"I'm fine, really. I've been neglecting club business. I'll probably spend most of the night over there anyway. I just thought I'd see if I could tempt you with the pure gold I have on Willa. Some other time."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, and since this is the only advice I'm qualified to give you, don't promise to do something with someone else, especially another woman, after a planned date." Her tone sounded more like her customary sure self. Some might label it cocky if they didn't know her. Unfortunately, the tone didn't bring with it the usual joy Lauren felt because it sounded false.

"I'm going to cancel."

"No, you're not," Jessie told her with authority. "I'm rescinding my offer. I was using you as an excuse not to deal with work anyway. I can't get away with that much longer. You're actually helping me get focused. Have a good time, and I'll call you next week. Bye." She hung up before Lauren could say anything. Not that she knew what she would have said anyway.

The front doorbell rang and she checked the clock, heart hammering that her date was already here. She threw the receiver onto the bed, stepped into the bathroom to check her appearance one last time, and went to answer the door.

"Hi." Jordan's pretty face broke into a wide smile. She carried flowers, which she immediately thrust into Lauren's hands.

"Oh, how beautiful, thank you." The daisies were very thoughtful, not exactly her favorite, but Jordan was sweet for thinking of her.

When she looked up, Jordan moved in and kissed her hello. She expected a soft brush of lips and ended up surprised by the pressure of Jordan's mouth on hers. The sensation sparked a lick of heat in her stomach. "Mmm, I couldn't resist. You're looking pretty tonight." Jordan stepped inside without being invited.

Lauren shook her head at the thought. It was true that she hadn't yet invited her inside before or after a date, but with the flowers, Jordan would have to wait while she found a vase.

As they walked down the hallway to her kitchen, Jordan made comments about her décor and the warm feel to the townhouse. Reveler poked his head out from her bedroom and went toward them. Automatically Lauren reached down and rubbed his chin.

"You have a cat. I'm more of a dog person, but cats are all right." She squatted down to pet Reveler, but he gave her the cold chocolate mask and darted back into the bedroom, probably hiding under the bed.

"Don't mind him. He's a little skittish."

"Seems like. So, baby, how was your day?" Jordan came up and wrapped her arms around her while she was reaching for the vase.

"Good, how was yours?" She felt a little mystified by this sudden familiarity between them. It was as if they'd had a dozen other dates between the last time they'd seen each other and now. She brought the vase down and twisted out of Jordan's reach by moving to the faucet.

"Great. The thought of seeing you tonight was enough to make even a horrible day awesome." Jordan smirked in that sexy way of hers.

"You're in a good mood." Lauren slid her gaze down Jordan's perfectly curvy physique. The desire had been getting harder and harder to contain as she got to know Jordan better.

"I think I already explained why." Jordan tipped up and slanted her mouth against hers. She settled back on her heels and her lips dropped to Lauren's jaw line. That spark of heat slowly crackled to flames inside of her. She bet that Jordan's mouth could act as flint for a much stronger fire and guessed she'd find out the answer to her bet sometime soon.

She cleared her throat, nervous at the thought. "Where are we going to dinner?"

Still nibbling on her neck, Jordan responded, "I've got reservations downtown, but we could stay in. Suddenly my appetite seems to have changed."

Lauren's heart raced at the proposition. She should agree. She should. This crazy rule of hers was the reason she'd only slept with four women in her whole life. *Her whole life!* But by not waiting with her first and barely waiting with the second, she found out too late that they only wanted a sexual relationship when she'd already started to fall for them. After that, she instituted a two-month minimum rule before starting a physical relationship.

As much as she wanted to break that rule with Jordan because her mouth felt so good and those hands warm and strong on her back, something held her back. She pushed slightly against Jordan's shoulder, noting the disappointed look on her face.

"You're very tempting, but I like to take things slowly. I thought we agreed to that on the first date."

Jordan's hands came up and waved in a defensive gesture. "All right, baby, if that's what you want, but I'm having such a hard time resisting you. Maybe you should start wearing a burlap sack or something that doesn't look as scrumptious as this little ditty."

Lauren smiled at the compliment. "I'm sure I could dig up some ugly throw back disco number, if it's really a problem."

Jordan laughed silently. It was one of the things that bugged Lauren about her. She never laughed out loud. All of her friends laughed out loud, but Jordan would only go so far as to say, "That's funny." As if she was too cool to laugh.

"Not like that's going to help much. But I'll force myself to be good. Shall we?" She reached behind Lauren and guided her out of her townhouse.

No more need to be nervous. Jordan understood. What a relief.

Chapter 17

The folks from the bank hunkered around the buffet table like they were afraid a hawk might swoop in and steal all the food out from under them. Lauren couldn't blame them; her mother was a wizard in the kitchen. The combination birthday-retirement party for her dad brought out even the rarest of her mom's dishes.

Her dad spent the party time wandering from group to group. Everywhere he went laughter trailed closely behind. She worried that he wouldn't handle retirement well, but he seemed to be taking it in stride. Lots of promises to keep him busy with AARP duties, lodge duties, friend duties, and house duties. Still she worried that when he woke up on Monday morning and didn't have to put on a suit and his hat he'd start to lose his vigor.

"Look who I found outside." Her dad had his arm wrapped firmly around Jessie's waist. His other hand grasped a bundle of tulips, red with streaks of orange in them. The exact color of his hair before it turned white.

"Hey, stranger." Lauren kissed her friend's cheek.

Despite the promise to call after they last spoke, Jessie hadn't been in touch with her. Lauren figured Jessie got swamped catching up at work. Plus she'd been a little preoccupied with her crush on Jordan. She felt guilty for not insisting that she and Jessie get together.

"How are ya?" Jessie flashed a shy smile, one Lauren hadn't seen since they'd first met. She glanced around the room, taking note of all the people. "I didn't realize you'd been elected mayor, Cap. Looks like the whole town is here."

"Only half," Cap joked. "The other half's out back."

"Jessamine Ximena!" Lauren's mom declared sternly. "I believe I told you that you were to come stay with my miracle girl, and she shows up alone yesterday. What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?"

"She brought me flowers." Cap swiped the bouquet under his wife's nose. "A younger woman is giving me flowers. What are you going to do about that, Lucky?"

Before Rena could respond, Jessie pulled another bouquet of white orchids from behind her back and offered them to Rena. "Oh, they're so beautiful, Jessie. How thoughtful. What do you think, Cap?"

"She's a dandy," Cap confirmed, pulling Jessie into him for a hug. "Howard," Cap stopped one of his friends walking by. "Looky here, beautiful young women are giving me flowers. Don't try to hide your jealousy, boyo."

"Is she visually impaired?" Howard joked, leaning down to steal a kiss on the cheek of his favorite goddaughter.

"This is my friend, Jessie. Jess, meet Howard." Lauren introduced them, still mentally editing out the usual "Uncle Howard" that she'd called him since she learned to talk.

"Guess what else this beauty got me?" Cap's eyes twinkled roguishly.

"A toupee?" Howard turned to wink at Lauren and Jessie.

"I was going to share it with you, Howie, now I'll be taking my beautiful wife instead. Too bad for you."

"Don't drag me into this, Cap," Rena warned. "Make up and don't keep us in suspense."

"You're no fun," Cap whined. "She got me a fly fishing rod and fly tying kit."

"How delightful!" Rena reached out to squeeze Jessie's hand. "You've finally got time to give this hobby a try. Howard, I'm warning you right now, you get yourself a rod

and save me from having to wade into the water with this man."

"Yes, ma'am. Good gift, young lady. Let's have a look-see, Cap." He turned them around and they headed back outside. Cap clutched the flowers firmly, brandishing them for everyone they passed on the way outside.

"Thank you, Jessie. Wonderful of you to think of him."

"My pleasure, Rena. I remember him saying he'd always wanted to try it, and you've got that creek right out back here."

"Perfect situation. Out of my hair, but not by much. Sweet, sweet girl." She tipped up to kiss Jessie on the cheek. "Think about staying the night. We'll have a girl's night and stay up late chatting so I can hold it over Cap for months." She pinched both of their cheeks and went to tend to the diminishing buffet.

Lauren swiped her glance over Jessie. Decked out in light grey pants and a lavender blouse, she looked beautiful but tired. Still. Lauren hoped that the time off, enjoying basketball games with their friends would have eased the weariness. But the envious lavender brushed up against a neck that had an unfamiliar pallor to it.

"You look lovely," Jessie praised easily, her eyes taking in Lauren's favorite blue dress.

"Thank you, and thank you for the fly fishing idea. My dad will dedicate his retirement to mastering that craft. And the flowers were a huge hit with both of them. You're so thoughtful."

"Well," she began then brought out the hand she'd been holding behind her back, flourishing another bouquet of flowers. "These are for you."

"Oh! Irises, my favorite."

"I know," she said without even a hint of smugness.

"What's the occasion?" Lauren breathed in the sweet fragrance. Jessie didn't do flowers. At least that's what she claimed.

"Our vertically challenged friend taught me that you never show up at someone's home empty handed." She flashed a smile, obviously thinking of Austy's dogged politeness. Her

gaze flicked about before she asked, "You didn't bring Jordan?"

Lauren broke eye contact, feeling the guilt of this topic with Jessie, and the guilt of deciding not to bring her almost girlfriend to her dad's party. She really liked Jordan, but there were moments when she felt surprised by something Jordan said. Surprised to shocked, actually.

"She wasn't able to make it." It wasn't really a lie. Jordan couldn't make it because Lauren hadn't invited her.

A flash of irritation sifted through Jessie's expression before she smiled supportively. "How are things going with her?"

Lauren broke off eye contact again. "Why is this so weird for us? Can we just forget what we said before and start over with our standard? 'So, L, how's the new GF? Good, and who's lucky enough to have your attention right now, Jess?'"

"Sure." Jessie smiled but kept the cautious eyes.

"So, how is the woman who has your attention now, Jess?"

Her friend's smile widened briefly. "I like her."

Lauren grinned happily. Jessie didn't admit that she liked many of the women she dated. She'd only go so far as to say she liked seeing them. "Tell me about her."

"Are you going to tell me about Jordan?"

"What do you want to know?" Lauren enjoyed the banter, but her question brought another flash of emotion that looked like worry but more severe, closer to alarm.

"I think I just got hugged by every Irish American in the whole state." Willa's rant broke in as she came to a stop before them. Quinn, Kayin, Isabel, and Zalika all had three steps to catch up. "Is it really necessary for your mom to introduce me as 'the cherub who made my miracle girl's dream come true?' Can't you make that stop, please?"

Everyone laughed at her discomfort. Two of Willa's all time favorite things: stifling hugs and gushing attention. "Wait till they open your gift. You'll have an even longer introduction from now on. 'The generous delight who gave us a touch of the homeland for the first time since our honeymoon' in addition to the whole cherub thing." Lauren referred to Willa and

Quinn's birthday/retirement gift of a trip to Ireland for three weeks.

"I already thought of that. Your name's on the card, hon. Quinn and I are giving them a couple of books and iPods for the plane," Willa announced in a deadpan voice.

"Funny," Lauren chuckled at her joke. "Thanks for coming, you guys. My parents won't stop with the 'blessed friends' spiel for the rest of the weekend. You all make me look good."

"That's not hard, cutie." Isabel hugged her hello. "You always look good."

"Did you bring your cat, Laur?" Zalika asked hopefully. She had her mom's button nose, but kept her hair short like Kayin's. On the brink of being a teenager, she'd become a bit less like the cute girl Lauren had known for four years since Kayin and Isabel got married and more like the disinterested petulant teen glorified by MTV.

"Nope, but my mom has two of her own. Up the stairs, first door on your right. They'd love a playmate."

"Can I, Mom?"

"Sure, but don't break anything up there," Isabel ordered and watched Zalika sprint to the staircase. "Thanks, she's been on us about a cat. If we give her enough cat visits, maybe she'll grow out of it." She glanced at her partner, and immediately Lauren suspected that hope was Kayin's not her own.

"Fingers crossed," Kayin confirmed.

"Crap! More people with arms," Willa mumbled, eyes wary of the group heading her way. She turned to her partner and implored, "Please, Quinn."

"My defenses are down around octogenarians, I'm afraid." Quinn stroked her cheek. "You'll just have to suffer through."

"I gotta hide," Willa squeaked and darted through the parlor into the kitchen. Lauren giggled when she spied her mother with Willa in her sights and four of her knitting group friends trailing behind. This would be a long night for her friend.

"As long as there's food in there, we'll help her." Kayin placed a hand on Isabel's back and moved them off after Willa's retreating form.

"We'll circle back around when the coast is clear," Quinn told her. "By the way, Will wasn't kidding. The whole group signed a birthday card and we added your name. We thought it might go over better if the trip came from all of us. You don't mind, do you?" She tipped her chin with a dazzling smile and went to help block hugs for her partner.

"My God," Lauren whispered, and felt a sheepish smile spread across her face when she saw that Jessie still stood beside her. "I can't believe them."

"They can never be equaled, and that's an understatement."

Lauren's stare turned curious. Sometimes Jessie surprised her with poignant observations. Of the friends, Jessie wasn't often thought of as profound. She seemed to broadcast that image with self-deprecating comments about being only surface deep. Of course, Lauren knew that Jessie was full of bleep about being superficial all the time.

"Very apt, Jess." Lauren shifted to watch her mother zero in on Willa. Quinn stepped in front of her to receive the brunt of the hugs from the elderly group. "I wonder if her other girlfriends would have stood in front of that firing line for her like Quinn?"

Jessie leaned in with an omniscient look on her face. "That's one of the things I got out of her while we sat through all those games."

"Tell me, tell me, tell me!" Lauren breathed in wonder, bouncing excitedly.

"This goes no further than us because the second she said it, she looked like she wanted to hit me over the head with a blunt object so I'd forget it."

Lauren's guilt returned. "Don't tell me then."

Jessie laughed her throaty laugh, one Lauren hadn't heard in a while. "You're too much." She stepped closer and shared, "Quinn is Willa's first and only."

"What?!" Lauren couldn't hide her shock. No one knew many details of that relationship because they'd met years before they joined the group. "But they met nine years ago."

"She did date men, but she's only been with one woman."

"She was like thirty when they met. Wow, she's even got me beat." As soon as Lauren said it, she knew how Willa must have felt with wanting to inflict an amnesia inducing blow.

"Hmm? What was that?" Jessie moved in closer, eyes dancing with delight.

"Nothing."

"No, no. Freud, paging Dr. Freud? How does she have you beat? Or should I ask, by how many years?"

Lauren could feel the embarrassment flush her whole body red. She'd managed to keep everyone but Austy from finding out this mortifying information about her. Des's joke almost broke it wide open with her law school guess. At the time, Lauren had felt like the only twenty-four-year-old virgin alive and purposefully never picked up a Guinness Book of World Records, too afraid to find a picture of herself as the record holder in that category.

"Stop it. We were talking about Willa," Lauren said firmly but recognized a flash of the gaze she'd misinterpreted once before from Jessie. At least now she knew the desire she saw only had to do with Jessie wanting information that Lauren wouldn't give up.

"You'll slip up again, sugar," Jessie drawled in her best Georgia.

"Do you think if they ever broke up that Willa would go back to dating men?"

All the playfulness in Jessie's expression vanished instantly. "Don't say that. That's not a possibility with them."

Lauren didn't know what surprised her more: the fierceness of her friend's statement or the absolute certainty of her belief. Jessie, who, as far as she knew, didn't even believe in marriage, advocated the notion that two people could stay together for the rest of their lives? Miss Jessie was full of surprises today.

"You're right, and now I've got major guilt for even voicing the crazy notion. But sometimes I wonder about women who'd only been with men for so long." She glanced sideways quickly because she couldn't face Jessie with all this guilt. Her friend was staring at Quinn and Willa as they helped her mom with

food prep but took every opportunity to touch each other as they crossed paths.

"I think if somehow the improbable happened," Jessie turned back with a serious expression, "Willa wouldn't be with anyone else ever again. Actually, I know it."

Lauren couldn't stop the surprised delight from shaping her smile this time. "Why, Jessamine! You're. A. Romantic."

"Yeah, right." Jessie flicked her hand dismissively, but a smile returned to her face.

"Capital R, Romantic! Wait till I tell Austy," Lauren bubbled with excitement.

"Tell her, and I will find out the answer to the question I let you drop earlier. Believe me, I have my ways." Jessie steepled her fingers with a sinister grin.

Lauren held up her hands in surrender. One of these days, she'd succeed in getting the better of her long time friend. A romantic? Who would have guessed?

Chapter 18

Tonight was the night. As long as Jordan didn't say anything shocking, it would happen tonight. They'd waited long enough. She didn't really get Jordan's friends or some of the remarks she made, but then she didn't always get dirty jokes or lesbian in-jokes or mean jokes either. Jordan had been attentive, tender, and gosh darn it, Lauren was so sick of the whole four women only thing. She didn't like that she wasn't in love with her yet. She usually felt so strongly about someone at this stage in her relationships. Often she'd scare off someone by blurting her feelings too soon. She cared about Jordan, but she wasn't in love. Everyone else slept with people under far less bonded emotions, why shouldn't she?

Bath time lasted a half hour longer than usual to finish primping fully. Reveler dangled precariously on the edge of the tub, dipping his paw into the water, gazing at her with quiet judgment. So far, he hadn't warmed to Jordan.

Stepping out of the tub, Lauren towed off, inspecting the results. Legs, bikini line, underarms, even the annoying single hair that sprouted from the middle of her neck, all in order. When she reached for some lotion, nervousness seized her. She stared at her naked form in the mirror and hoped that Jordan would find her sexy. Jordan had a lot more experience, and that could be intimidating. God, how stupid was she being? She shouldn't be thinking about that. Since when was she so insecure about the way she looked?

She rejected her favorite dress because it was still cold enough that she'd have to wear nylons with it. Nylons were not sex friendly. Instead, she went for slacks and a v-neck sweater in turquoise that highlighted the color of her eyes. She felt they were her best feature, everyone else commented on the hair or freckles, but she liked her eyes.

By the time Jordan rang the doorbell, she'd rechecked her appearance five times. Reveler gave her a paw up in his own disinterested way. She blew out a nervous breath before opening the door. Jordan leaned against the doorframe with a cocky smile. Before she could say hello, Jordan grabbed her for a kiss. Warmth spread quickly through her limbs. Yes, this would happen tonight.

"Mmm, that works." Jordan settled back on her heels.

"Hello to you, too, Jor." Lauren stepped back to let her inside.

"Did you want to grab a quick bite and head over to the bar later?"

Lauren stamped out the disappointment at Jordan's casual plan. Over the past few weeks, Jordan had stopped making reservations at places. "I was thinking I'd make us dinner." She hadn't, but she didn't want to smell like smoke when she got back home later.

Jordan whipped around and seized her waist. A predatory smile spread across her face before she said, "Really? Well, isn't that just the best surprise of my week?"

"You like home cooked meals, do you?" Lauren teased.

Jordan dropped her gaze to take in Lauren's breasts. "My favorite kind."

Lauren didn't have to understand all the innuendo, but she could guess her meaning. "Any allergies that I need to know about?"

"Latex, but we can work around that."

There she went with the shocking again, but Lauren laughed it off. She wouldn't use that as an excuse to avoid what made her nervous. "Braised lamb chops sound good?"

"Delicious. For later." Jordan captured her mouth in a kiss.

The warmth Lauren felt earlier turned to searing heat as that talented tongue swirled around her mouth. Jordan's often wandering hands got bolder, slipping under the band of her sweater and pushing upward. Lauren pulled back breathless, stopping Jordan's hand.

"You're not hungry?"

"For you, baby, only for you. Let's do this. We've been waiting too long."

Let's do this? Not exactly the stuff of romantic fantasies. But not everyone was as romantic as Lauren, and she couldn't inflict those standards on others.

"No one's ever made me wait this long, baby." Jordan moved her face down, lips smacking Lauren's neck and leaving wet prints while her hands resumed their quest up her rib cage. "...better...worth it." Lauren's cleavage muffled the words.

"What?" Lauren breathed. Her head swam with the long forgotten feelings. She didn't want to think about how long it had been since someone kissed her there.

"I said I'm dying for you, baby. I'm taking you right here unless we get near a bed soon."

Jordan's gel spiked hair brushed her neck as she dipped her mouth lower. Hands pulled roughly at her sweater's neckline to expose her bra. Lauren gave only a fleeting thought to how much this assault on her favorite sweater might reshape it. She pressed Jordan back and received an irritated look until she grabbed her hand to lead her to the bedroom.

Jordan took over once they got inside, pushing her against the bed. The bed frame dug into her calves, but when Jordan's mouth crushed onto hers again, she forgot all other feelings. She felt her sweater being pulled over her head then Jordan's hands were kneading her breasts through her bra. She gasped when thumbs flicked over her nipples.

"Yeah, you want me just as bad as I want you, don't you?" Jordan's tone demanded, then she seized her hand and shoved it against the front of her jeans. "Feel what you're doing to me."

Lauren's mind didn't expect what her fingertips found. A hard bulge pressed against the fly of Jordan's jeans, and Lauren squinted in confusion. "Is that...are you wearing...?"

"That's my cock, baby, and we're going to have so much fun with you." Jordan reached up to kiss her again, cutting off any reply. She zipped Lauren's pants off and they pooled around her feet on the floor. "Take my clothes off," Jordan ordered.

Lauren felt an oppressive flush of heat at the thought of another woman's body pressed to hers. She pulled off Jordan's t-shirt and went to unbutton her jeans. "Honey, can we save the toy for later?" She didn't mind using toys when she'd been with someone for a while, but she liked her first time to be all flesh. She liked the connection she felt when a woman made love to her with her own parts.

Jordan growled in anguish. "But I want to be inside you. Let me make you see stars, baby. C'mon, you're so wet for me. You know you want me inside you."

Jordan kissed her again as those fingers brushed over the moistening satin of her panties. Lauren moaned unable to stop her hips from bumping up against Jordan. She pushed Jordan's jeans over her rear, surprised to find that she wasn't wearing any underwear. The harness buckles reminded her of what Jordan intended. Why was she objecting? As Jordan's mouth moved lower along the swell of her breast, she couldn't remember.

She heard another growl and felt herself fall back against the bed. Jordan stood over her with the black harness a stark reminder against her pale skin. A purple dildo jutted out from her pelvis and didn't look as sexy as she remembered on other lovers before.

"Is this what you like, Jordan?" she asked, her eyes not leaving the purple appendage.

"This is what you'll like, baby." Jordan certainly didn't lack for confidence.

She was torn between wanting to feel closeness with Jordan and wanting to give her what she liked. She knew her view of toys was different from other lesbians, but she couldn't help

how she felt. When they grew to know each other better sexually, she never had a problem with toys. For a first time, though, she'd never allowed it. But this was what Jordan wanted, and she liked her, not to mention her hands and mouth.

Jordan moved up over her. She kissed her softly at first, turning rougher as her hands roamed all over. "Yeah, that's it," she moaned when she felt Lauren's hands slide her jeans off. "You want me to fuck you, don't you?" she growled, her mouth back on Lauren's throat. "Tell me, baby, tell me how bad you want it."

Lauren pulled her face up to look in her eyes. "I want you to make love to me, Jordan."

Disappointment touched Jordan's expression. She bent to kiss Lauren, tongue dropping sloppily inside. She braced herself on one elbow and ran her other hand down Lauren's body to squeeze a breast roughly. Lauren sucked in a sharp breath at the twinge of pain.

"That's it," Jordan groaned when she dropped kisses along her neck. "You're my horny little slut, aren't you?"

Lauren stiffened immediately. She knew people said things in the heat of sex that they'd never say otherwise, but she didn't like being called a slut. "No," Lauren said, finding it difficult to stay annoyed when those fingers danced over her.

"You're not?" Jordan's tone was playful. She kept her mouth suctioning over her skin and centering on her breast. "I think you are. I think you've been dying for me to fuck you."

"Don't call me a slut," she breathed, lacing her fingers through Jordan's short hair.

A throaty chuckle sounded. "Loosen up, baby, I'm gonna make you come so hard you'll never be the same again."

Spoken in a husky moan, the words didn't bring the usual all encompassing fire of need. Lauren's mind started racing when she just needed to shut it down. Some women were like this. She couldn't let a few utterances ruin the good thing they had together. She dropped her hands down and grasped Jordan's butt to pull her hips into a slow grind.

"That's it. You want me inside you, don't you? You're gonna beg me for this all night. I know what my pretty whore wants."

Lauren's eyes flew open, and she went completely rigid. "Stop!" She pushed her arms against Jordan's shoulders, trying to get out from under her. A frantic need to be free consumed her, and she used a leg as leverage to shove Jordan off.

"What?" Jordan whined, looking annoyed to be cast aside. She reached out to grab Lauren's shoulder, but the touch no longer felt caressing. "What's the matter, baby?"

"I don't like when people use that kind of language around me, especially when someone is about to make love with me."

"Aw, come on, Lauren. You can't handle a little nasty talk when we're doing the nasty?" She chuckled at her own joke. "Fine, I can tone it down, baby. I want you to be happy."

"I feel like you're not respecting me at all, Jordan. I asked you if we could wait to use your dildo and you insisted. I asked you not to call me a slut, so you call me a whore instead? You didn't ask me if I liked toys or if I was into that kind of talk."

"Fuck, Lauren." Jordan's tone went from teasing to anger in two words. "I knew you were repressed, but shit, loosen up. This'll only help."

"No." Lauren moved to get off the bed.

Jordan grabbed her arm to stop her. "Okay, I'm sorry. I'll be more aware of what I say."

"No," Lauren repeated. "I think we're done for tonight."

"You fucking tease!" Jordan roared at her. "I spend all this time seducing you, letting you take your goddamn sweet time until you finally let me in your pants. I'm horny as hell waiting on your precious ass, and you're kicking me out?"

Lauren wished she didn't feel the swell of tears or panic or foolishness. She reached for the edge of her bedspread and pulled it over her. "We're not doing this tonight. We should have talked about what we liked before we jumped into bed together. Maybe we can have that conversation another time."

"You're the one who doesn't know what she likes or what you're missing," she spat at Lauren. She scooted off the bed,

quickly stepping into her jeans and pulling her shirt on. "Fuck this. You're not worth the effort. As much as I want to get back at Jessie for passing me up, I can't put up with your prissy shit anymore. I was hanging on just so I could see the look on her face when I told her every detail about fucking her friend."

Lauren couldn't believe her ears. This whole time, she'd been a tool for revenge? No. She couldn't believe anyone would be that cruel. "Jordan?" she questioned.

"I guess I'll just have to live with the look she gave me after I told her how I was going to give you the best fuck of your life and dump your ass. Your bony ass which is covered with freckles. Who would find that hot?" She strode fiercely to the bedroom door, glancing back with a sneer. "Watch what would have been the best sex of your life walk out the door, slut!"

Two seconds later, Lauren heard the front door open and slam shut. She lay stunned on her bed. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest and her breathing became labored. She wished she could feel anger. It would wipe away the heaviness in her chest and the throbbing of her head as she tried to chase Jordan's hateful words from her mind.

Even with the sheet draped over her she felt exposed and vulnerable. She rushed to get up and grab her clothes. Dressing became a difficult task with her trembling fingers, but she had to cover herself, cover the vulnerability, cover the spots marking her body. *How could she have been so stupid? How could she have let that cruel woman mean anything to her?*

She felt unclean, but she didn't want to get undressed to take a shower. She wanted to keep her clothes on for now. Maybe forever. She looked at her messy bed and she could feel Jordan's fingers on her, that dildo pressing against her. She shuddered, shaking her arms out. She had to get out of her bedroom, out of her house.

Rushing to the front door, she glanced out the peephole before she dashed to her car. Once inside, she breathed a little easier. The humiliation rolled in waves, bringing with it more tears. She pulled her cell phone out of her purse to contact a friendly voice.

When the first call rang through to Austy's machine, she tried her cell phone, then Elise's house. She'd never wanted her friend back home more than right this instant. She tried to leave a message, but her voice failed her.

She started the car and drove away. She didn't care where she went, just away from that room and the voice repeating in her head. She tried Caroline's cell phone, but she didn't pick up either. When Isabel's also went to voice mail, she remembered that the foursome was taking in a movie tonight. That left Skye, but she was working a party tonight, and Willa, who was having a dinner party for Quinn's coaching staff.

When her attention came back, she realized that she'd just pulled into Jessie's driveway. How she'd gotten there, she didn't know. Why she was there, she also didn't know. She couldn't talk to Jessie about this. Jessie was the only one who'd warned her about Jordan. Besides it was Saturday night, Jessie definitely wouldn't be home.

She leaned on the steering wheel, letting the waves of humiliation tighten her muscles and wrench out more tears. She'd been nearly naked with a woman, about to make love, letting her touch and kiss her, and she'd wanted it so badly. She'd waited longer than usual to make sure it wasn't a mistake; she'd held herself back from falling for Jordan; she'd loosened up enough to accept that not everyone had her standards of behavior; and she'd been slapped in the face for it.

A sharp rap on the driver's window jolted her body back against the seat. Jessie peered in at her from her driveway. "Lauren?" Her muffled voice sounded through the window.

She panicked at the concerned look of her friend. What would she say? Why was she here? She couldn't face Jessie.

"Are you okay?" Jessie opened her car door. "What's up?" When Lauren didn't get out, she squatted and looked at her closely. "Have you been crying?"

Lauren tried to muster a casual glance, even a smile, but the worry in her friend's voice made the humiliation real. She knew she was two seconds from the ugly crying face, but she couldn't stop. Jessie dove forward and wrapped her arms around Lauren.

"What's wrong, shug? What happened?" She rocked them slightly in the seat. Her strong arms squeezed her tightly, making Lauren feel so much better. She didn't care that Jessie was crouched over uncomfortably, trying to keep balance with half her body inside the car, the other half outside. All she cared about was the comfort her arms provided.

She shook her head against Jessie's neck. "I'm fine."

Jessie leaned back, dropped a knee to her doorframe, and kept her hands on Lauren's upper arms. "What happened?"

Lauren shook her head again, fighting another lump in her throat. "Jordan and I broke up." Just saying her name caused a stinging rush of moisture to her eyes.

Jessie trained her eyes out the passenger side window, composing herself. "Inside." She pulled on Lauren's hand to get her moving and ushered them into the house.

As they entered, Lauren could still feel the sadness living there. She glanced down the hall toward Lily's room. The door was shut, just as it had been from the moment they took her body away, as it never was while she lived there. Walking through to the living room, she felt selfish for feeling bad over what happened to her. This was true sadness. The loss of Lily's love, the emptiness she once filled, that was something to cry over.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be here." Lauren turned back, but Jessie's grip kept her from getting very far.

"Stay. Keep me company." Jessie guided them to the couch. "Tell me what happened."

Lauren looked into the concerned brown eyes and instantly felt better. "She was everything you said. I should have listened to you."

"You couldn't have known."

"But you did. She said you—she wanted to..." Lauren couldn't finish her sentence because Jordan was just trying to be cruel. No need to drag Jessie into this, but her friend's worried expression turned away. She took a long time before she looked at Lauren again. *Oh God! Jessie knew.* Jordan had been telling the truth. "Why didn't you tell me what she said to you?"

"You weren't speaking to me, and then Mom...By the time I got back from the road trip, you wouldn't have listened to me. Plus, things seemed to be going so well, I thought maybe I was wrong. That she was only being a jerk to me. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I'm the stupid one."

"You're not stupid, Lauren. Don't ever say that." Jessie's gaze held, projecting her confidence. She smiled supportively then dropped her glance. It stayed on Lauren's chest for a second, before she looked up with terror. "Did she hurt you? Physically?"

Lauren could still feel Jordan's weight pressing down on her, making her feel a little nauseous. Did she physically harm her, no. Did she hurt her, yes. "No."

"You show up crying and your favorite sweater is torn. She didn't hurt you?"

Lauren looked down at the neckline of her sweater and noticed a tear at the mouth of the sweater. Her favorite sweater ruined, her first attempt at sex in more than two years cut short, her reintroduction to humiliation going strong. "No, this was from..."

Jessie's mouth parted and her stare turned knowing. "I see," she said quietly.

"Nothing happened. Well, not much, anyway. I kicked her out pretty quickly."

Jessie's eyes flared, and she forced a smile. "You kicked her out, huh? Good for you. About time you got to do the tossing with someone."

"I don't even feel guilty." Lauren tried for cheerful.

Jessie smiled genuinely and hugged her again. "Aside from telling me that she's history, that's the best news I've heard all month." She squeezed her tightly and Lauren felt her tension drain away. She'd work on blocking the whole incident from her mind later.

Chapter 19

I'll kill her. I'll fucking kill her! I couldn't think of anything else. From the second I spotted Lauren's torn sweater, I could feel the fury mounting. I wanted to break something. Something big. Something alive.

Because I recognized that feeling, I holed up in my office for most of the day to avoid biting anyone's head off. It's amazing the amount of paperwork you can plow through when you're trying to avoid killing someone.

The phone on my desk rang. "Hey, you said to call if —"

I hung up before Anne finished talking. Bolting from my chair, I took the stairs three and four at a time on the way down to the front desk. The exercise might save a life. I forced myself to slow down as I approached the desk.

Seven women milled around with confused looks on their faces. Their gym bags slung over their shoulders, pacing to the point of bumping into each other while they waited to hear why they couldn't gain entrance to the club.

"What the hell, Jessie?" Jordan shouted. "Anne's making us wait out here for ten minutes. I've got a date later. I only have so much time to work out tonight."

Hands clenched, I walked right up and punched her with all my might. She dropped to the ground with a shout, and I bent over her to keep wailing on her until her screams petered out to agonizing moans.

Okay, it was what I imagined doing to her. A vivid, tangible image of beating her to a pulp. I didn't need Lauren to tell me anything more than kicking Jordan out after she'd had her sweater off. I hoped nothing more happened, but I knew that was a naïve hope. I didn't need anything specific to help me hate Jordan more.

The minions glared at me from behind Jordan. Other women might be intimidated by them, but I figured I'm six-one for a reason. Nothing much intimidates me, especially not bullies.

Rage spilled out of my pours, and no one could mistake my deadly stare. They knew I was pissed, but I guessed the posse didn't know why. "Do you have their member cards?" I asked Anne without breaking my stare of death.

"Yep."

"What's that about?" Jordan demanded.

I pulled some checks from my pocket and fanned them out toward Jordan. "This is a refund of your annual membership fees. You and your friends here are no longer members of this club. You're not welcome through those doors ever again."

"What the hell?" Jordan demanded.

"You. And your friends. Aren't members. Anymore. Get out."

"Okay, good joke. Now give us our cards back."

"I told you that if you mess with my friends, I'll make you sorry. You messed with my friend, so I'm messing with you and your friends. Ladies," I addressed the posse, "maybe this will help you choose your friends better."

"What did that bitch tell you? Did you know she's nothing but a tease? And when you get her right where you want her, she's a dead fish. No wonder none of your friends ever fucked her." She turned back and received high-fives from her friends. It took every ounce of strength I had not to grab up a bat and pummel them all.

As calmly as I could, I delivered what I hoped would be a fitting punishment for her mistreatment of my friend. "You asked me what I could do to you if you hurt my friend. This is step number one. I've taken away half of your trolling

opportunities, bitch. Every lesbian in this town who works out uses my club. If you say another word about Lauren to anyone, if what you just said comes back to me from anyone, I'll start taking away all the rest of your fun."

Her open mouth told me she was too shocked to believe that I could do anything else. The friends weren't giving her high-fives anymore.

"See, I know a lot of women in this town. All day long I'm sitting up in my office seething mad for what you did, so I start calling around. Oh my, are there a lot of women pissed off at you out there. There's Jenna down at the golf course, Olympia, Nicole, and Rylie at your favorite restaurants in town, Ariel at the police department, and my personal favorite, Erin, at the Nine. Jenna's ready to pull your membership right now and I didn't even have to call in a favor. All I'd have to do is smile at Erin and she'll never serve you another drink at the bar ever again. The restaurant babes need nothing more than a little encouragement from me and getting a reservation becomes elusive. And you have to know what a police officer can do to make your life hell."

Her friends turned to stare at Jordan, wondering how she'd play it. By the looks of things, they wanted her to back off, and back off quick. They couldn't have all those places closed off to them. Charlottesville could be a really small community at times.

"You understand me, Jordan? One goddamn word of what you did to my friend or what you think of my friend, and your town gets a whole lot more tiny. Now, get out." I shoved the checks into her hand.

They stared dumbfounded for a minute but eventually turned to leave in defeat. I'd probably just shaken a snake in a bag, but I didn't care if she struck back at me. I didn't want Lauren's hurt to continue, and having what Jordan was all too eager to share about her spread around town would embarrass her tremendously.

"Jeez, Jessie. What did she do?" Anne asked from her perch behind the front desk.

"I don't like when people aren't good to my friends. I'd appreciate if you didn't share that little scene with anyone else."

"What about your friends; wouldn't they be proud of you?"

"They'd want to know why I did it, and I don't want that to get out. So, lips sealed?"

"No problem. For what it's worth, that was awesome. I'm glad you dropped them. Two of them were kinda creepy."

"Who's creepy?" Briony asked as she approached us.

A lot of my anger dissipated at the sight of my date walking toward me. She looked beautiful, her medium length blond hair moussed into a stylish shag, matching blouse and skirt flattering her curvy figure and heels that would make it so much easier to kiss her goodnight later. We had our fourth date tonight, and it was getting more and more difficult to leave her at her car afterwards.

"Hey, darlin'." I leaned in for a quick kiss. "How was your day?"

"Good." She eyed me curiously and turned to say hello to Anne before we went up to my office. "What was going on when I walked in? I passed some angry women out in the parking lot."

I glanced at her expression trying to read if she was asking out of idle curiosity or if she knew something more was going on. It was hard to tell. "Revoked a couple of memberships. They didn't take it too well."

"Do you do that a lot?" Briony took a seat on the couch in my office as I ducked into the bathroom to find my discarded sweater.

"Not often." I pulled the band out of my hair and finger brushed it to manageable submission.

"What did they do? Bang the weights? Leave towels lying around?"

Striding back into the office, I felt a surge of happiness at her lighthearted tone and smile. "I'd have to kick eighty percent of my members out for things like that." I pulled her to a stand, sliding my arms around her waist. I bent to kiss her

soft lips, a light hello kiss that she turned more urgent. She pressed closer to me and slid her hands across my shoulder blades. When I moved my hips into hers, her mouth pulled off mine with a gasp of breath. This was the third time we'd gotten more intense while kissing, and it was the third time she'd pulled back.

"You ready?" she asked, still regaining her breath.

I cupped her cheek, running my fingertips through the soft hair at her temple. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just needed to catch my breath. You're pretty good at that, you know?"

The compliment brought a smile to my lips. "Okay, we'd better get a move on if we're going to make the ballet."

"I'm really looking forward to this. Last time I went to the ballet, Megan fell asleep and snored through the last half." She laughed at the memory. *Megan*. Her former partner. Not an ex, because her partner had died. They'd shared a life, shared a child, shared a dream for a future. Even though she'd been gone two years, Briony still talked about her. In fact we hadn't had a date where Briony didn't bring her up.

"Would you rather not go?" I asked because she looked suddenly sad.

"No, I want to go. This'll be fun." She seemed to be convincing herself more than me. She glanced down at her left hand. I'd started noticing that on the first date. If I weren't such a chicken, I'd ask her when she stopped wearing her wedding band. "Jessie?" She took that left hand and clasped my right. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't keep mentioning Megan. It's not fair to you."

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. "It's okay, Briony. I understand." And I did. Megan had been taken from her too soon. The rawness of my mom's death flared inside me again. "How's Caleb?" I asked about her son, realizing too late that mentioning Caleb would probably bring another glance down at her left hand. Megan was Caleb's birth mother.

Thankfully, her face broke into a proud smile instead. "He's so wonderful. I can't wait for you to meet him." We'd

agreed that I shouldn't meet him until we were farther along in our relationship.

"Me, neither." Although, I did have some reservations. I'd never had a relationship with a woman who had a kid before. That I found intimidating. Seven angry butches, not so much.

Briony moved closer again and tilted her head to look into my eyes. "I've been out of the game for a while, but I know that tonight's our fourth date and, well, I'm not sure what your expectations are? I don't know if I'm ready."

I slid my hands over her hips and smiled understandingly. For once, I wasn't ready either. "We're in this together. We get to set the pace."

She placed her hand on my sternum and smiled gratefully. "You're just about perfect."

"What do you mean 'just about'?" I kidded, leaning down to kiss her lightly again. I liked the way she made me feel and only felt moderate distress that I might be using her to feel this way. *No, Briony wasn't like the other women. I cared about her.*

"Let's go." She tugged on my hand to get us moving.

Just a few minutes ago I'd been telling Jordan off, now I was headed to the ballet with the woman I was seeing. Not sleeping with, seeing. I didn't know if it qualified as personal growth, but I felt good about it.

* * *

"How did you two meet?" Briony asked our table companions.

Quinn flicked a quick glance at Willa before answering. "I was walking my dogs and one of them attacked her. Well, as much as a harmless Corgi can attack, anyway."

"Great first meet story," Briony affirmed. "Short, funny, and appropriate to tell anywhere. My friends aren't as lucky. I'm always torn between keeping my mouth shut or telling them that they might want to G-rate their stories for others."

They laughed with me as I slipped an arm around Briony's shoulders. Dating her made me feel like I'd grown significantly. Not only did she have substance, but we'd yet to

progress to a physical relationship which is about all I'd had since denouncing intimacy ten years ago. The dinner with Willa and Quinn tonight was also something new in my dating life. So far, Briony had fit right in, chatting easily with them, keeping the topics light but substantial, nothing too personal until the last question.

"And you two?" Despite knowing the answer, Willa grasped for anything to shift the topic away from her personal life.

Briony leaned against me and it felt so familiar. "I watched Jess basically hypnotize a club member. He'd been misusing the machines for the better part of an hour before Jess walked in and within thirty seconds had him ready to follow her off a bridge. I knew I had to meet her."

"Were tasers involved?" Willa joked.

"Mild hallucinogens," I kidded back.

"On Briony, too, obviously," Quinn chimed in.

"I see how you all are." Briony faced me with a smile. "I hope I can keep up. How long have you known Jess?"

"We met in college my last year, but we didn't really know each other until I moved back," Quinn answered. "Will wandered into the bookstore and met Sam and Caroline who introduced her to our other friends including Jessie."

"How fortunate."

"What about you? Jessie tells us you're from Vermont? And you have a son?"

"Yes, Caleb. He's eight, the light of my life. He's got his teacher wrapped around his finger, something he learned from his other mom." She went from sunshine to maudlin in the space of a sentence. This had been happening a little too often on our last few dates. "She could sell Bill Gates an Apple computer."

"Caleb must be a blessing to have." Willa exchanged an uncomfortable look with her partner.

"He is, thanks. He misses his friends and his grandparents who lived down the street from us in Vermont. Other than that, he seems to like it here. I think it was a good move."

"I'm sure it was," I confirmed. "For me especially."

She turned an awed look my way. "And me as well."

Quinn raised her eyebrows at me just as the waiter arrived with the check. "I'm so glad we could do this," Quinn said. "It's been a pleasure getting to know you better, Briony."

"It's been great," she agreed as we gathered our coats.

After exchanging goodbyes with a promise to get together again soon, Briony and I got into my car to head back to her place. When we pulled up at her curb, she turned to invite me inside. I knew my face must have shown surprise.

"Caleb's at an overnight birthday party."

Hmm. So, tonight's the night, I guess. Strange that I didn't feel more excited. More like incredibly nervous. It's not like I didn't have enough experience at this, but still I'd been playing things so differently with Briony. Right now, I was so backwards with the way we'd been dating that I wasn't sure I was ready for this to move to the next step. A step I'd taken too many times with other women too easily.

Turning off the engine, I exited without a word. I needed to get control of my nerves before I spoke. She emerged from the car just as I made it to her door. Lacing our fingers together we walked up to her house.

Only the second time I'd been inside, her house had a homey feel if not a little disorganized. Caleb's stuff lay scattered everywhere. I'd gotten the impression that she didn't discipline him much, feeling guilty about being hard on a kid who'd lost his other mom. Since I didn't have a kid, I couldn't judge.

"Would you like some coffee?" She asked to my chagrin. No matter how many times I'd declined or mentioned that I don't like coffee, it didn't seem to set in with her.

"No thank you. I'm not big on coffee."

"That's right, sorry. Would you like something else?"

"Tea, if it's no trouble."

"Have a seat. I'll get the kettle on." Briony disappeared into the kitchen, and I sat on the couch, trying not to get more nervous. It'd been so long since I was nervous about sex.

She came back with a shy smile, taking a seat next to me. I shifted and brought an arm around her to get her to relax. She

tilted her head up and pressed her mouth to mine. "You're so gorgeous," she whispered after our kiss broke.

"Briony." I felt suddenly self-conscious. People had said this to me before, and I found it hard to believe. Since dating her, I'd started to feel more worthy of these compliments.

"Make love to me, Jessie." Her eyes flicked back and forth between mine. A film of moisture welled and formed tears.

I cradled her face, wiping away the spilled tears with my thumbs. "Honey, I want you. You're beautiful and sexy." Heaviness grew in my chest as I realized what I needed to say. "I want to make love to you, but you're not ready. We both know that."

"Jess," she whispered, tears falling freely now. "I feel like I should be ready, like I should be at that point. It's been over two years since she died."

"It's all right. She was your life." Her eyes widened at my understanding. It wasn't hard to imagine how she felt. Losing my mom still hit me like a crack across the ribcage whenever I thought of her. Or worse, when I was concentrating on something else and the sadness snuck up on me, taking my wind and leaving me aching from the hurt of loss. "I know what it's like to have your friends tell you everything's going to be all right and feel like they couldn't possibly understand. That something as ordinary as a Saturday can sap all the energy you have because everything you used to do together that day, you now have to do alone. You don't know how your friends keep insisting that everything will be fine, because you feel like nothing will ever be all right again."

"Yes," she squeaked through tears.

"You can't measure readiness with the passage of time." I kissed her wet cheeks.

"Thank you, Jessie." She smiled weakly, a flush of pink taking over her cheeks.

"Friends?"

"You're wonderful," she sighed. "Of course, I'd be honored to be your friend."

I stood from the couch and pulled her up with me to kiss her gently. "Goodnight, Briony." I got a brief smile and turned

to walk out of the most grown up relationship I'd had in years.
So much for personal growth.

Chapter 20

Frizzy hair, mud splashed cuffs, damp shoulders, must be Seattle in April, Lauren thought. She stepped out of the rental right into a puddle. Great, now she'd have to change her shoes when she got up to Austy's. At least she'd get to see her best friend in a couple of minutes.

"You all right there, L?" Jessie glanced down at the drenched shoe before she grabbed their bags out of the trunk.

"Peachy." Lauren shook out her foot before squishing into a step. She grabbed her carryon and let Jessie wheel her suitcase up to the building. She pressed the intercom and looked up at the monitor. Seconds later a buzz sounded, and they pushed through the door.

"Amica!" Austy declared when they stepped off the elevator. She dashed from her open door into Lauren's arms.

"Hi, Young'un." Lauren tightened her grip, amazed at how her mood lightened instantly with Austy's excited greeting and comforting touch. Why did her best friend have to move all the way out here? The question smacked her upside the head every time they saw each other. She didn't buy the "great career opportunity" answer, and she'd keep asking until she got the real answer or convinced Austy to move back.

"Hey, Jessa." Austy went to Jessie for a welcome hug. "I'm so glad you're both here."

"Better us than Des and Skye, right?" Jessie joked.

"Like I'd consider letting them stay at my place unsupervised," Austy scoffed.

Lauren and Jessie laughed at their friend's idiosyncrasy. She was very particular about whom she allowed into her home, which is why only Lauren and Jessie would be staying at her loft while they were in town to watch Quinn's team compete in the NCAA Final Four. Everyone else was checking into a hotel downtown.

"We're kicking you out of your place?" Jessie's brow crinkled in confusion.

"Any excuse to stay with Elise is fine by me." Austy beamed.

"You're so in love," Lauren teased and got a full blush in return. "Isn't she cute?"

"The cutest," Jessie deadpanned.

"You will stop now," Austy said with her familiar quiet authority. "Let's get you settled. You'll have to fight over which rooms you want."

"I call Austy's room!" Lauren blurted.

"You'll have to beat me to it." Jessie started into a sprint, inciting a yelp from Lauren who broke into a full tilt run toward the staircase. Jessie pulled up immediately and turned to Austy with a sinister grin. "Gets her every time."

"You're horrible," Lauren accused, her heart pumping from the surprise and attempted race. Had she really thought she could beat Jessie to Austy's bedroom? The woman was a former Olympic decathlete, for Pete's sake.

"Damn proud of it."

"I'm suddenly very afraid to leave you two here alone." Austy stared at them in apprehension.

"You should be. The second you leave, I'm tearing this place apart trying to find love letters, embarrassing photos of you and Elise, or anything else, like..." Lauren glanced around trying to come up with something clever.

"Leather, whips, secret dungeons," Jessie listed with that same deadpan delivery.

"Stop it!" Austy hid her blush with her hands.

Lauren giggled at her friend's horror and winked at Jessie, appreciating her sense of humor even more as the years rolled by. "You miss us, Young'un, admit it."

"You're lucky I do, Lanky, or I'd toss you out." Austy smiled up at her. "Get unpacked, unwind a little. We're not getting together with everyone until later. Tomorrow's the game. Can you believe Quinn's team made it this far? I'm so proud of her."

"I am, too," Jessie agreed sincerely.

Lauren hoped she misinterpreted Jessie's expression just then. For a second it looked like Jessie thought Quinn's success now put her in a different category than her best friend. Jessie hadn't been herself on the flight out, avoided joking with Des, Kayin, and Sam like usual. Well, they'd be locked away together for four days in Austy's loft, in a different town, sharing a rental car, meeting up with friends, and attending hopefully two basketball games if Quinn's team made it to the final. She'd have plenty of time to figure out what had Jessie in this mood.

* * *

The crowd cheered with reserved abandon after Quinn's team won the semifinal. Tournament crowds lacked the same fervor as the UVA home crowd, but still it was exciting to be in the midst of this championship atmosphere.

Lauren looked down at Austy beside her. Elise, her teenage cousin Scott, and his friend mimicked Austy's enthusiastic applause. Lauren had the feeling these two boys had never heard of the Lady Cavs before today, but they happily donned Cavalier colors and rooted loudly for the team throughout the game.

When she glanced to her right, she caught Jessie smiling at her. The melancholy of earlier pushed to the side as she cheered her best friend's accomplishment. Lauren hadn't yet gotten to the brunt of her distraction, but she was happy to see the smile tonight.

"Quinn did so well," Lauren yelled above the din.

"She's the best." Jessie helped her slip on her coat as they started making their way out of the arena.

"How great was that?" Sam exclaimed once they'd cleared the building.

"Two years! Two years as head coach, and she's got them in the finals!" Caroline skipped to join Sam.

"Damn right!" Des put in. "Our girl knows her basketball."

"All right." Never one for showing emotion, Willa played down her enthusiasm as they approached their cars. "We're meeting up at my sister's restaurant for brunch tomorrow. I'm sure Quinn will appreciate your congrats then."

"Does everyone know how to get to Helen's tomorrow?" Austy called out to the group.

"You drew us a map, put up signs, and painted arrows in the street, Aust, I think we can find the way," Kayin joked.

"Overkill, I get it. See you tomorrow morning, then."

"See you," several of the friends answered together, watching Austy and Elise join the boys at their car. Goodbyes went round as everyone broke off into the rentals.

"Do you mind dropping me back at Austy's?" Lauren climbed into the car with her traveling companion. "I'm too tuckered out from all the excitement to go clubbing tonight."

Jessie studied her for a moment after starting the engine. "Me, too. A quiet night watching the sailboats sounds good. Or did you want the place to yourself for a few hours? Scour the place for Austy's stash of embarrassing possessions."

"You honestly think I'd find anything like that? Our Austy?"

"Head back to the loft, then?" Jessie asked with a bit of uncertainty. She guided the car out of the parking garage and onto the surface streets. She'd get them to Austy's without Lauren needing to consult a map even once. The directions gods were never as kind to her.

"Wow, you must be serious about Briony." Lauren shifted to examine her friend's reaction.

Jessie made a turn in silence before responding. "Briony and I aren't together anymore."

"What? When? What happened? I thought you liked her?" Briony had been so different from Jessie's other dates. Lauren thought her friend might make a go at a relationship this time.

They crossed over a drawbridge and took a sharp circular turn that spit them out onto a familiar looking street. "I did like her," Jessie confirmed. "But she wasn't over her late partner."

"I'm sorry, Jessie. When did this happen?"

"Last week."

"Why didn't you call me?" Lauren thought about the night that she'd run screaming to Jessie's after that fiasco with Jordan.

Jessie pulled into Austy's parking space and looked over at Lauren with a pained smile. "I didn't feel like talking about it."

As they made their way up to the loft in silence, Lauren wondered how much of this had caused Jessie's off mood. Pushing through the loft's door, she headed into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of wine from Austy's collection. "How about some Pinot? We'll put on some music, watch the sailboats go by, and we can talk about it now."

Jessie's expression widened in astonishment at her forceful tone. Lauren surprised herself as well, but she wanted to be a better friend to Jessie. Like the kind of friend Jessie had been when she'd had the meltdown about Jordan.

She poured two glasses for them and walked over to the stereo to flip through Austy's music collection. When she found something she liked, she loaded the player and set the volume to allow for conversation. She went back to the kitchen and opened another bottle of wine to let it breathe.

Jessie gave her a curious stare, and Lauren smiled conspiratorially. "Austy said to help ourselves."

Lauren cradled the wine goblets and took them over to a now chuckling Jessie. Maybe getting Jessie to open up wouldn't be that difficult. Not with the amount of wine they had available to them, anyway.

Chapter 21

With tremendous guilt, Lauren rang the doorbell of Elise's house. She prayed that Elise's cousin could sleep through anything and that Austy wouldn't kill her for barging in so early. But she had to talk to someone.

Muffled voices grew just loud enough for Lauren to recognize her friend's perturbation. Austy wasn't crazy about people dropping by. Why? Lauren never knew, despite asking many times. She really should have called first. What was she thinking? That's right, she wasn't thinking, which was why she was here. She wasn't thinking last night, and she wasn't thinking right now, but that's why she needed to talk to her best friend.

Thankfully, Elise didn't have the hang up about drop bys that Austy did. She answered the door with a welcoming smile. Lauren felt guilty for being here so early, for coming over without calling, and for thinking again just how remarkably beautiful Elise was. *She's your friend's girlfriend!* Lauren scolded herself.

"I'm sorry, Elise," she began. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

"Good morning, Lauren, what a pleasant surprise." Elise's welcome almost erased her guilt.

"I'm sorry to come by so early without calling."

"Don't be silly. You're always welcome here." She waved her inside. "We've been working on easing that rule a little." She winked just as Austy emerged from their bedroom,

tucking in her blouse. Great, she'd barged in before Austy was even dressed. It was a nice blouse, though. Too bad her friend was as she put it "carnival short" or Lauren would borrow all her clothes. Austy was the best dresser of the group by far.

"Did you lose your phone, L?" Austy was only half joking, her brown eyes showed both amusement and bother. She was so cute when she was annoyed, but only because she was so tiny. If she weren't only five-two and maybe a smidge over a buck, she might be more intimidating when she got annoyed.

"I'm so sorry, Aust. I didn't have anywhere else to go, and I really needed to talk to you."

Austy juttet her face forward in concern, her hand came out to grasp Lauren's arm. The touch was such a comfort.

"Let's tackle what you need to talk about before we discuss that you're staying at my loft unless something happened to it."

"I can't go to the loft!" Lauren's face crumbled, fighting the accompanying tears.

"Amica!" Austy grabbed her into a comforting hug. Her short stature put her face right into Lauren's sternum, but her strength flowed freely. "What's going on?"

"I'll let you guys talk." Elise made a move toward their bedroom.

Lauren twisted to look at the woman who made her good friend so happy. Finally. Austy had been alone for so long in Virginia. Why? Lauren didn't know that either. "No, please stay, Elise. I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"All right, I'll make some tea." Elise nodded at her then gave a glance filled with unspoken words to Austy. They did this a lot, and Lauren envied them every one of these glances. She also envied Elise's memory. Would she remember how Elise liked her coffee if they ever stayed at her townhouse? Doubtful. Yet, Elise remembered that Lauren didn't like coffee. Neither did Jessie. *Oh no! Jessie!*

"Is Scott still asleep?" Lauren asked guiltily.

"He stayed at his friend's house last night," Elise replied.

More guilt. They had a night alone without Elise's teenage cousin, and she crashes their morning after. So not cool. A

thought entered her head uninvited, accompanied by a sure blush. How could she think about something like that? It was one thing to think she might be interrupting a morning of intimacy, and quite another to wonder if, when they found themselves alone in the house, her friend was loud during sex. That's so not right to be thinking about. Quiet, generally reserved, tiny Austy? Now she couldn't stop thinking about it. Knock. It. Off! God, she was screwed up and so very guilty.

"Sorry, I should go." Lauren looked away to avoid catching Austy's eye.

"*Amica*." Austy pushed down on her shoulder to keep her seated. "What's going on?"

Lauren teared up at the term of endearment. She'd missed Austy calling her "*Amica*," and she missed all the times that she'd convince Austy to speak Italian for her. *Stop remembering and start dealing with the guilt and stupidity*. "I did something really, really, really stupid."

"A troubling something?" Austy persisted.

"Very troubling."

"Like real trouble, Lauren? Is that why you're here?" Austy referred to her job as an Assistant U.S. Attorney and Elise's job as an FBI agent. They were like their very own NBC Wednesday night crime drama series.

Lauren managed a smile between rolling waves of guilt. "No, not that kind of trouble."

"All right. What can we do to help?"

"There's nothing you can do. God, I've really screwed things up. I don't know how I could have been so stupid!" She plopped her head into her hands.

Austy cupped the back of her neck. "You're one of the smartest people I know. It can't be that bad. Out with it."

With her head still dropped, she whispered, "I slept with Jessie."

"What?!" Austy's voice rose in disbelief.

Exactly the reaction her own head screamed at her when she woke up tangled among Jessie's arms and legs and neck and hair this morning. *God, those arms and legs and that neck, okay, and her hair. Don't think about her other parts, either!* At least

she wasn't crazy. Austy felt the same incredulity about the situation as she did. Not that it felt good to have it verified.

"Sweetheart," Elise cautioned when she brought over the tea.

"Jessie?" Austy's voice softened a bit, taking Elise's hint. "Our Jessie?"

Lauren didn't want to look at her, but she had to. She deserved the humiliation after her own stupidity. The face that met her glance was a mixture of amazement and concern.

Austy was obviously struggling to keep her voice even. "The Jessie that doesn't sleep with her friends? That Jessie? She doesn't break that rule, L, ever."

"We were drinking," Lauren offered weakly.

"Come on. How many times have I driven you both back to your place because you'd had too much to drink? I don't remember you ever sleeping together then. What's really going on?"

"I'm so stupid! She's Jessie! She beds every lesbian in the whole state as far as I know and some straight women, too. What was I thinking?"

"Okay." Austy's wonderful concern won out over the shock. "First, you know she didn't really sleep with everyone in town, right? Second, she stopped casually dating a while back. And third, she's one of the most insightful women I've ever known."

What? "What?" Lauren echoed her inner voice.

"Which what?"

"All three whats."

"You two should think about going to a communications class." Elise tried to lighten the mood.

Austy smiled but kept her concerned look. "I thought you knew. You didn't notice?"

"Notice what?" Lauren's interest was peaked. "Austine, I'm desperate here! I made the biggest idiotic move of my life, and you're holding out on me."

"Okay, okay. You know how we always thought those phone calls she got were to set up dates? Most of them were from her mom. Even before they lived together, she'd been

helping her out. Her mom called sometimes three, four times a day."

Lauren couldn't believe what she was hearing. Every time Jessie's phone rang, she'd want to hurl it under a moving vehicle. It had always been so annoying, but recently it had triggered a twinge of jealousy. Now that she thought about it, that phone barely rang anymore. Not since her mom died.

"Are you just saying this?" Lauren let her caution flare up.

"No way, *Amica*. You know Jess. She'd bend over backward to help any of us. She was it for her mom. I imagine she didn't want anyone to know because she always puts on a tough act, but underneath she's got such a tender heart."

"I don't think it's an act," Lauren denied Austy's statement.

"I don't either," Elise offered. "It seems to me that if someone has a tender heart, they'd have to be tough to keep it from getting hurt. Add to that how incredibly beautiful Jessie is, and you've got someone who can't afford to let too many people in."

"But," Lauren began in a confused voice. Elise didn't know Jessie as well as she and Austy did. "She dated so many women."

"Some people don't date at all to keep people out." Elise glanced meaningfully at Austy again. "Others date a lot of people to keep anyone from getting too close."

"So, you're saying she's not a hussy?" Lauren asked hopefully. Elise made sense, plus she was goddess gorgeous, just like Jessie. Maybe she knew what she was talking about.

"She hasn't been dating casually for a while now, L." Austy's face turned serious. "Not that I want to bring this up, but I thought she was seeing someone pretty exclusively."

Lauren's eyes filled with tears again. She had to stop this crying jag. *You're such an idiot. Face it like a woman. Suck it up.* "I know. That's the worst part. Not only did I sleep with someone who's been with a lot of women, but I think I'm rebound sex. God! I want to die!"

"Let's hold off on that for now. You said you were drinking. Maybe it's not that big a thing. How'd she react this morning?"

A whole vat full of guilt. "I left before she woke up."

"Lauren!" Austy tried to mask her surprise but wasn't doing a good job of it.

"I know, I know. I'm an awful person. I left a note, but I couldn't face her. What if she thought it was a mistake? I didn't want to make her feel awkward."

"Oh my!" Austy's expression grew earnest. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

"What? No, I'm no such thing." Lauren's protest sounded inauthentic, even to her.

"*Cara mia?*" Austy looked her question at her girlfriend, who merely nodded.

"No, you guys are way off here. We'd been drinking; she was talking about her breakup, and I don't know. It just happened."

"I've known you for a long time. Sex doesn't just happen with you, and Jessa doesn't break the friend rule because something just happens. Something's going on with you two."

"You know I came here for moral support. Every time I think I'm going nuts, you always talk me out of it. Now you're talking me straight to an insane asylum."

Austy laughed easily. She always laughed easily. Someone who didn't know her well would think she was laughing at Lauren's predicament. Not so, but right now Lauren had to remind herself of that. "What's wrong, Lanky? You've been, you know, pretty quick to fall in love in the past. Why are you denying it now?"

"I don't fall in love all the time," Lauren protested.

"I didn't say that. I said that when you get involved you tend to fall pretty quickly. You can't be denying that. You're the romantic mush of the group."

"And you're the toucher who keeps her heart to herself," Lauren said surely then blanched, twisting to look at Elise. "Until she met you, that is. And I'm so glad she did. For years, we'd wonder why this terrific woman couldn't find—"

"We're not talking about this." Austy's familiar embarrassment flared up, shooting a streak of pink through

her neck and into her cheeks. At least some things hadn't changed.

"No, no, please go on, Lauren. This is good stuff," Elise joked with a wicked smile. A wicked, sexy smile. *She's your friend's soon-to-be partner!*

"We're getting farther away from your reason for visiting this morning. Unannounced I might add." Austy had a particular knack for bringing back the guilt. Evil, evil woman.

"What am I going to do?"

"First, you're going to admit that you've fallen for her. Second, you're going to figure out if you want to be with her. Third, you're going to show her why you two need to get together."

"Austine! None of those things are going to happen because you're out of your mind," Lauren rushed to say. Then because she couldn't help it, she added, "But let's just say you're right. How stupid would that make me to fall for a woman who doesn't fall in love with anyone? She dates and dumps. We all know that. She doesn't allow herself to fall in love."

While Austy was forming a response, Elise spoke up, "I don't think that's true."

They both looked at Elise like she should be the last person to make that kind of statement, and she should be. "What?"

"I'm pretty sure she was in love at least once." Elise looked to Austy for confirmation. "That woman at the restaurant?"

"Oh my. Of course." Austy looked amazed and turned to Lauren to explain. "The last time Jess was out here, this woman comes up to the table and with a simple hello just flat out incapacitated her. Wow! I never put it together."

"When would this have been?" Lauren wracked her brain trying to remember. "We've known her since her last year in college and she certainly hasn't been serious with anyone that we've seen."

"There was that year she moved back to Atlanta after graduating. You'd just gotten out of law school and were busy with the partnership track at Koehler, and I was trying to make it through my second year of law school without you around

every day. I don't think I heard anything from Jessie but for a Christmas card, and I didn't have time to reach out. Then suddenly she's back in the Ville not saying a word about why she'd left Atlanta. I was so happy to have her around I didn't think to ask why."

"Rats!" Lauren interjected. "I'm never going to find out now. Not that I want to know."

"No, of course not. Why would you want to know if the woman you're falling for is capable of falling in love?" Austy's teasing tone wasn't so cute this time.

"Stop now! My life is over. Put me out of my misery."

"It's not that bad, *Amica*. She's amazing, she's loyal, she's, well, she's Jessa. There's no one like her. And you're gracious, spirited, joyous Lauren. Plus, you're circus freak tall like she is, so that's a bonus. I think you'd be great together, but you need to make that decision."

"Come on, this is Jessie we're talking about. Women throw themselves at her, make fools of themselves for her, beg mercilessly for her. What am I thinking?"

"You're thinking she's been one of your best friends for years, and there's a reason she's included in that exclusive group. Everything that makes her your friend makes her perfect for you. Right now, though, we're supposed to be meeting everyone for brunch, so you're going to have to make up your mind pretty quick. You can't avoid her much longer."

"Really, just kill me." Lauren clutched Austy's shoulders.

"Elise does have a weapon, so that may come in handy," Austy joked. "Come on, Lanky, let's face the music or firing squad, whatever the morning turns out to be."

"I miss you, sister. I know you're never moving back, but if I make a fool of myself, can I move out here?"

"Everything's going to be fine. We'll be right there with you," Austy assured her in that encouraging tone that she missed so much.

Maybe moving to Seattle wouldn't be such a bad idea. Then again, all this rain, so maybe not.

Chapter 22

The yellow sticky note had been taunting me all morning. Confirming what I should have known before allowing myself this chance. Telling me that I had rules for a reason. Screaming at me for being such an idiot.

At first, I thought she was in the bathroom, then I guessed in the kitchen, then I hoped she'd run out for some tea. I knew how particular she was about her tea.

Waking up from an unperturbed, deep sleep had been such a treat. I hadn't slept that well in four years. For a moment, I couldn't remember why I'd been treated to such a wonderful slumber. But the explicit awareness of my groin muscles brought back the memories.

Her subtle perfume still lingered in the room and her scent clung to me. My body ached for the heat of her, for the way she'd covered my side and nestled into me before she fell asleep. Never had I been able to fall asleep like that.

When she'd wrapped herself around me, limbs jumbled with mine, I panicked. I knew that I'd wait until she was sound asleep and slide out from under her to distance myself. Or worse yet, get up, get dressed, and leave. That I'd become the shit with her that I'd been with everyone else. At least I'd planned to stay—in the room, even; so if she did wake up, I'd still be there. That's what I'd been thinking about with her body weight slightly pressing me to the bed, her fine hair caressing my jaw, her arm possessively gripping me to her, her

leg claiming my own. But with a soft kiss on my neck, quiet whisper of “goodnight,” and a tightening of her arm as she drifted off, I felt the bliss of sleep enfold me and succumbed. Eight hours later, I woke up amazed, elated, refreshed, like no other morning in four years.

Until I saw the sticky note.

Woke up early and took a drive. -L

No mention of not wanting to wake me. No mention of where she’d gone. No mention of when she’d be back. But most importantly, no mention of last night. Taunting, jabbing, stinging. I don’t care how convenient they are; I now hate sticky notes.

All the worry that I wouldn’t handle the situation right or that I’d become my usual asshole self if I ever tried anything with one of my friends. Never once did I think the reverse would come true. That instead of me running far away, denying the hurt I’d caused, burying myself in work or meaningless sex to avoid dealing with the mistakes I’d made, that it would be the friend who needed to get away from me. Lauren, especially.

Well, you’ve done it now, asshole. Ruined a great friendship, just like you knew would happen, which is why you have those rules. What the hell is wrong with you?

A soft click sounded from the doorway sending the deadbolt back into the door. Seconds later another sound as the second deadbolt slid back. Just the door lock, now, and my heart thundered in anticipation. I didn’t think or care, as I usually did, why Austy had so many locks on her door in a highly secure building. All that mattered was that Lauren had come back, and I’d get to see how she was doing after last night.

“Morning, Jessa.” The voice wasn’t the one that had been running through my mind since I woke up this morning.

From the couch, I looked over at the open door. Lauren must have gone for reinforcements. Austy stood in the doorway of her loft, the one that was impeccably neat, ordered, uncluttered, everything in its place, everything except that goddamn sticky note.

Her gorgeous face smiled shyly. The shyness I'd expected, that's Austy, but the tentativeness in the smile confirmed where Lauren went this morning. *Fuck!*

"Hey, Aust," I managed in a casual tone. My heart pounded so hard that it actually hurt my chest.

She walked into the kitchen to check her messages, trying for nonchalant. After knowing her so long, I saw right through her act. God, I missed her. I wish she didn't live three thousand miles away. She never judged me, never joined in the group's teasing about my sex life, never believed the worst of me. Her acceptance often kept me from believing them myself.

After listening to her calls, she turned toward me. "Did you find the stash of tea? I got your favorite kind."

I hadn't but I lied. "Yeah, thanks. You didn't have to do that."

"You're my guest. I want you to be comfortable here. Did you sleep well?" She flushed pink because she embarrassed easily. *Oh yeah, she definitely knows.*

"Thanks," I inserted to keep her from feeling embarrassed at what should have been a pedestrian question. Unless you're asking the question of a louse who slept with a good friend when she had no right sleeping with that good friend. "Where's Elise?"

"She's downstairs with everyone at the restaurant. I thought I'd come up and grab you. You ready?" Her earnest brown eyes looked so hopeful.

Dreading the answer, I still made myself ask, "Everyone?" I got up to approach her. She broke off eye contact. Not needing to ask, I did anyway, "She told you, didn't she?"

"Jessa." Austy couldn't reestablish eye contact. Yep, she knew.

How could I have been so stupid? Why would I chance something like this? I'd be lucky to keep Quinn as a friend, maybe Willa out of respect for Quinn. Everyone else would be Lauren's. She's too amazing for it not to be so.

I looked away and muttered to myself, "I'm such a shit." A little louder, I guessed, "You must hate me."

"No way, Jessa." Austy rushed forward to wrap her arms around me. Her head pressed in just above my chest and her body melded to mine. She comforted so well, I'd forgotten how good she felt to hug. Even at half my size. "Why would you ever think that?"

Cradling her against me, I couldn't make an argument for why she should hate me. I'm too selfish for that.

She pulled back to stare up at me. "Listen here, Jessa. You're my friend. You could never do anything to make me hate you."

Yes, I could. I could do a lot. Starting with telling her that I'd wanted to sleep with her girlfriend when I met her so long ago. Fantasized about it, many, many times. I wonder how much she'd like me then. But I wouldn't, because I needed all the friends I could get. "Thanks, Aust. You're the best."

"Please," Austy scoffed like she always did because she had a hard time taking compliments. "C'mon, everyone's waiting." She stepped back and reached for my hand.

"You know, I'm a little tired. I think I'll skip brunch. Meet up with you guys later. You're still planning to head over to some island, right?"

Her fingers slid across my palm and closed around my hand. "No, you're coming to brunch. You need to do this."

Downstairs, we approached the door of the restaurant and my heart reached a pulse rate equal to an intense cardio workout. I didn't think I could do this. When I hesitated, Austy took my hand again and gave me her strength as we went through the door.

"Finally, sleepyhead! Laze away the day, why don'tcha?" Kayin called out.

I waited for Austy to drop my hand because her girlfriend looked up at Kayin's declaration, but she held tight. Nothing insecure about their relationship, I see. God, she's lucky. I could hold hands with Quinn and not have Willa freak, and now it looked like I could do the same with Austy. I wouldn't try it with anyone else, because as much as they liked me, there wasn't a whole lot of trust when it came to my reputation.

"L was here ages ago. What's up with you?" Des demanded.

I chuckled softly, not feeling the joy of the banter but putting up a great show. "You know Aust, I had to make sure her place was spotless before I wandered down here."

The table started to laugh as Austy mumbled sternly, "Better be spotless, dammit."

The seat next to Elise was open, and I expected her to venture over to it. Instead, she swung our joined hands toward the two seats closest to us, boxed between Caroline and Isabel.

From the kitchen, Willa's sister, Helen, surfaced with three baskets of scones. Willa, Quinn, and Lauren were right behind her with orange juice, coffee, and water. Lauren hadn't looked up yet, but I couldn't complete taking my seat. She'd tied her curly mass of red hair hastily into a ponytail and her clothes were a little wrinkled. Even disheveled, she looked breathtaking.

When she looked up, her eyes widened then grew apprehensive before she looked away. *Great! You did that to her.* She looked like she wanted to bolt back to the kitchen with Helen, but Elise stood to help her set the pitcher on the table and wrapped an arm around her waist to guide her to the empty seat.

The table conversation turned to focus on Elise. Poor woman. The group did a great impression of starved piranhas when it came to getting information out of someone joining the group, especially by marriage. Despite the fact that she and Austy had been together almost a year, the group hadn't seen them together but for a few visits.

Grateful for the distraction, I glanced surreptitiously at Lauren. Lovely Lauren, that orangey-red hair so startling, but it was her blue eyes that got to me. Iridescent almost, the color best represented by blown glass. A vase in Lauren's house that Austy had given her after a trip to Venice reproduced the uncanny color of her eyes whenever light reflected through the glass.

A flash of heat, slickness, panting, arched neck, tilted chin, stifled cry, and intense, time-stopping turquoise assaulted my

mind. I'd called her "Blue" in that moment right before release. We'd locked eyes and I couldn't help myself. I'd never done anything like that before. I avoided all things tender when making a woman climax. But marveling at her in that moment, knowing it was something I'd thought about calling her since first being affected by the stunning color of her eyes, I couldn't stop my whisper.

I closed my eyes to keep from getting dizzy with the image. I tried to concentrate on the conversation. Helen and Willa were doing a great job of deflecting Elise's interrogation, having become good friends with her. I smiled at the sound of the siblings so similar in virtual stereo from opposite sides of the table. It was the only similarity between them. When I opened my eyes, I caught Lauren staring. Breath surged into my lungs unexpectedly as I struggled to keep her stare. When she looked away, I whispered without realizing it, "Fuck!"

"You okay?" Austy leaned in close.

My head snapped down to look at her. "Yeah." I smiled, displacing her concern.

After brunch, while everyone was fighting over how we'd get down to the ferry dock so we could go over to an island for sightseeing and more food, I left to take advantage of the restroom. I wanted to avoid having to run back up to the loft and chance the group leaving me behind. They probably wouldn't, but my day wasn't complete without some pointless worry.

When I surfaced from the stall, Lauren stood by one of the sinks. I nearly tripped in surprise on my way to the sink. "Hi," she spoke softly. Her hands dug into the pockets of her linen trousers, arms squeezing tightly against her torso as if bracing herself.

"Morning," I managed, trying to hide my hope.

She needed to be the one to decide. If we left it up to me, I'd reach behind her, lock the door, and take her right here in the bathroom. I'd turn her around to face the mirror while my hands roamed her lean frame. I'd want to stare into those turquoise blue eyes as I unbuttoned her shirt and pants, leaving them hanging open because I couldn't wait to feel the

flesh beneath. I'd only break eye contact to kiss the back of that elegant, tempting neck, then slide my hand down her flat stretch of stomach to test her arousal. Would she be as wet as I was? How easy would it be to shove inside her panties and slip over her slickness? Find her hardening clit, swelling and throbbing. Satiny smooth, like an addiction too difficult to beat. I'd lift my head from tasting her neck to watch her eyes in the mirror as my fingers found her, stroked her, loved her. I would feel the press of her backside against my aching need, hear the attempt to stay quiet as my fingers took her over the edge, and see the look in her eyes when she tumbled from her climax. Want coursed through me, but I'd let lust drive my actions for the better part of a decade, I couldn't let it dictate my response here.

"Did you have a nice drive?" I asked in what I hoped wasn't a strained voice. Not really a safe topic but better than, "So, are you sorry you let me make love to you last night?" *Make love, please! It's been ten years since you've made love to someone.* But I wanted to shout at my inner voice. Last night had been different!

She cleared her throat. "Yeah, it was nice." She looked at the stalls, the ornate tile work, the faucets, and back to me. Waiting.

"You find Elise's place all right?"

Her eyes widened in embarrassment. I'd let her know that I knew she ran to Austy. I didn't want to play any games with her. "It's the only place I remember how to get to other than Willa's house. And no way was I going across that scary bridge. Floating? What if it sinks?"

I nodded, expelling a breath with my grin. "Had a good talk, did you?"

Worry creased her forehead, tightening her lips, and squinting her eyelids. "What did she tell you?" she asked cautiously. Hands surfaced from her pockets and squeezed tightly together, sliding the palms back and forth.

"Nothing. I just figured you went there for a reason."

Relief loosened her features a bit. "I did. She's my..."

"She's your calm," I finished for her because I knew it was true. They complimented each other so well. Shy, reserved, but entirely secure Austy put everything into perspective.

"Yes," she confirmed, her eyes flickering to mine, down to my mouth, my neck and lower, before snapping back up. "Look, last night...I, we...last night."

"Yeah," I breathed out, breaking eye contact for a moment. I needed her to tell me what she wanted.

"I think we...I really...It was a..."

Mistake? Of course she'd think that. How could you imagine she wouldn't? Why would you hope for something else? You're Jessie the Destroyer, Jessie the Conqueror, Jessie the Wanderer. No one, not even your best friends would give you the benefit of the doubt when it comes to relationships.

I couldn't let her label this as a mistake. Lauren didn't make mistakes like this. I had to stop her from blaming herself for my uncontrollable lust. I knew how she thought and how hard she'd take the guilt if I let her think she'd done this. Even if she thought I was a shit, I couldn't let her regret what she'd done.

Because it always worked, I lied, "We drank a lot. Made the details a little hazy, you know? Things got carried away, and I hope I didn't ruin what we have between us. I understand if you don't want to see my face for a while, but I hope you'll forgive me for taking it too far."

"You mean you think—?"

"Exactly what you're thinking, yeah. We're adults, right? We can handle this. Our inhibitions were lowered, those candles you insisted on for fragrance, Austy's R&B collection, a night in a different city, the very background for every romantic scene in a movie. With that kind of setting even a celibate would have trouble keeping up her defenses. Right?"

Her gaze lowered to the floor for a moment before a huge breath pumped through. "Yes." She breathed out the inhale and smiled steadily, features loose again, no longer tangled in guilt or worry. "We're adults. And you're right, I can't even remember how it started."

I did. I remembered her longing look, her hand curled around my inside thigh, her chest brushed against my arm, her head tilted with mouth parted. I remembered every signal she sent and my not being able to stop my need to taste her. I remembered her immediate response, the shift of her body to straddle mine as her mouth opened for me. I remembered her hands gripping my face, sliding down to press against my thundering heart, seemingly cherishing her effect on me before she lowered them to caress my breasts. All the while her tongue was searching, wanting, needing. I remembered. I couldn't believe she didn't.

Because she looked at me to finish this, I said, "Me, neither. One of those crazy things that got away from us, huh? So, we're good, right?"

"Oh, yes. I'm...yes," she agreed readily, stepping toward me like she was going to hug me but stopping when she realized what that now meant.

"Good, so, everything's fine." I gestured to the door for us to join the rest of the group as if nothing had changed. As if my entire outlook hadn't just shattered because I again knew the massive difference between making love and having sex. As if I'd ever see her the same way again.

Everything was fine. I could do this. Everything was fine. Groovy, peachy, swell, fucking hunky dory. Yes, lying was about the only thing I'm good at these days.

Chapter 23

I kept the sticky note which was stupid. Not as stupid as what I'd tried with Lauren, but stupid enough. Every time I opened the side drawer of my desk, I caught sight of a bit of yellow that I'd tried to cover up with office supplies. Yet, with each slide of the drawer, the contents shifted and invariably I'd see the edge of the note. Reminding, cutting, ridiculing.

I needed the reminder, though, which was why I'd kept the note. Last thing I'd want to do is lose control. Run into Lauren and break every restraint. Three weeks had passed since that night. Somehow, I'd managed not to see her. The self condemnation flared with each passing day, but at least I could be assured that if I did see her, I wouldn't tackle her and drag her home. I really shouldn't have taken such a long break from sex. This might be easier if it hadn't awakened my lust.

Forcing myself to focus, I checked over the last purchase order on my desk. Tumble blocks, kid's gym, ball pit. What the hell? I glanced at the order forms and saw Sophie's name on the contact line. Sophie had been filling in for me since my mom died, but purchase orders weren't under her purview. Now it looked like Sophie had ordered the start of a kid's playroom. Something that I'd never wanted for my gym.

Only one way to find out. I went down to the weight room in search of Sophie. The first thing I noticed upon entering was a camera crew. I knew I'd been absent a few weeks on and off over the last couple of months, but I'd been here otherwise.

Not really mentally here, which might explain why a film crew was in my weight room, following some strapping guy through his routine.

I had to circumnavigate the cameraperson to get to Sophie. She was paying more attention to the filming than the club members on the floor. When she saw me approaching, she broke into a proud smile.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on here?" I tried to contain my annoyance.

"They're filming Craig over there. He's the star wide receiver for UVA."

Like that explained everything. "And why are they here?"

"He wanted to use a private health club for his show, and I thought it'd be great advertising." Her proud smile was aching to be knocked off.

"How? Will they be showing the club name in any shots? And what if he's doing something unsavory or it turns out to be ridiculous? I don't want my gym associated with something like that. Did you get a content outline at least?"

"Uhh, no. But it's the Discovery Channel or something."

"You don't even know which channel this is for? Did you sign an agreement?"

"Yeah, it's up at the front desk."

"We're going to need to take a look at that. For now, make sure that the film crew doesn't block any apparatuses as they do their work. The other members shouldn't have to suffer because you signed this deal." I gritted my teeth and started counting back from ten. Her eyes darted over my shoulder to the kid on camera and the glance spoke volumes. "Let me guess. You're his personal trainer on camera, aren't you?"

"Aww, don't get uptight, Jessie. If you'd been here, I'm sure he would have chosen you."

"When you're on camera, don't wear the club logo or mention us by name. We don't need any advertisement, Soph. Within three months we'll be turning away members."

"It can't hurt."

"I just gave you two examples of how it can."

"Take it easy. Jeez, when was the last time you got laid?" Her gaze shifted between my eyes and my mouth. "I'd be happy to volunteer." Her hand touched my forearm.

I stepped back immediately, forcing her hand to slip from my arm. She'd just crossed the line from innuendo to outright hitting on me. I couldn't take anymore of this. "Sophie, I don't know what's going on with you, but I know that we won't work. You're my employee, you're straight, and I'm not interested."

"I know all about how you've converted some of the straight women in town, Jessie. I'm ready to be with a woman, and I heard you're the one that can make any woman scream. I need that, and I know you want me, too." She slipped her arms around me, her hands taking liberties they shouldn't be taking.

I reached around and pulled her hands off my butt and placed them forcibly by her sides. "I told you I'm not interested. I won't change my mind."

"Yes, you will. I'm hot, and you never pass up a hot piece of ass."

"This will be the last time we discuss this. If you bring it up again, we'll need to consider other employment options for you."

"What do you mean? You're going to fire me?" she asked shrilly. "I covered for you. I've taken this club to places you didn't even dream about."

"Like the romper room you seem to be setting up? We've have this discussion before. I don't want a lot of kids running around my gym. It's a place for adults to exercise. I'm canceling those orders, and I'm also revising your trainer schedules because you're starting to show preference in your assignments."

"You really do need to get laid, girl. We can use the couch in your office if you want. You're so tense right now." She reached up and placed her hands on my shoulders to rub them.

"Enough, Soph." I stepped back again and pushed her hands off me. "I don't think this is working out anymore. You're making me very uncomfortable, and you're taking

liberties with me and my club that you have no authority to take. I've appreciated the work you've done when you were focused, but I don't think this is the right fit for you anymore. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go. I'll have Kayin arrange for a month's severance and provide you with a letter of reference."

"Come on, Jess!" she screeched. "You're not firing me."

"Yes, I am. Thank you for the work that you've done, but I want your employee badge right now." I held out my hand and waited for her to unclip the badge from her exercise pants.

One of the other trainers, Griff, caught the tail end of our conversation and joined us, probably trying to prevent Sophie from making a scene. He and I escorted an increasingly antagonistic Sophie to the employee's locker room to clean out her locker and to the front door.

When I watched the door close behind her, I thanked Griff and headed up to my office. It bothered me that I wasn't upset by the loss of my activities director, who'd been a pal of mine back at the old club. Her behavior over the past few months had been getting increasingly offensive. I didn't relish having to interview again, not to mention I'd just doubled my workload for the time being, but I didn't care. I had nothing but time now. Avoiding everything else in my life gave me a whole lot of free time.

* * *

"At first I thought it was me," Quinn posited, leaning against my office doorframe. "My team loses in the Finals, even I don't want to talk to me. Then I find out you're not talking to anyone. I didn't think we could all piss you off at the same time, but maybe we did."

I laughed, but my heart hammered at her accurate observation. At least she was still speaking to me so Lauren hadn't told everyone yet. "It's been a little crazy around here is all."

"Mm-hmm. Well, I've been sent to get you. No excuses. We're reestablishing Sunday night dinners until I have to start

recruiting again. My mission is to get you and cook dinner. If I don't get you, then I don't cook dinner, which means Willa cooks dinner. When Willa cooks, we get a whole lotta chips and salsa and maybe toast if she's feeling magnanimous."

Despite the terror of potentially seeing everyone again, I had to laugh. The group would kill me if I was the cause of them eating TV dinners at the Sunday night meal. "I've got a class to teach, but thanks for the offer. Maybe next week."

Quinn moved inside, a look of concern tainting her beautiful face. Since being with Lauren, I'd started noticing the beauty in my friends. Conventional beauty didn't befall them all, but Des and Sam preferred handsome anyway. Kayin and Skye fit the good-looking label. Isabel and Willa edged past attractive. Quinn and Caroline were very beautiful, while Austy and Lauren, well, needless to say, gorgeous. Stunning enough to make anyone with eyes salivate.

"Something happened. Something you don't think you can tell me. Something in Seattle. That's all I've figured out so far." She folded her long frame into the seat facing me. "You're my best friend, Jess. I'll respect your privacy, but I feel I've been lax in my friendship duties. If you're hurting, I want to help."

"Quinn, you're never lax on anything. Your players would back me up on that. This is nothing; it'll pass."

"Is it your breakup? I know Briony meant a lot to you."

I had to stop myself from issuing an immediate denial. Neither of us had been ready. "No, really. I let work take over and didn't notice I'd missed out on anything with the group."

"I wish you'd tell me so I could help, but I understand."

"Thanks, Quinn. And thanks for the invite, but I've got that class."

Quinn stood and reached her hand out to me. "I talked to Griff. He's taking it for you. Don't make me face the wrath of the group if I go home empty handed."

"Is everyone coming?" I asked with trepidation.

She studied me with interest. Had I just given it away? "Yes." She carefully watched my reaction, which I was proud to say could have fooled an entire championship poker table.

Since I had no choice, I told her to give me ten minutes and ducked into the bathroom for a quick shower. When I stepped out of the shower, I ran a brush through my hair, put some curl definer in it, and threw on some eyeliner and concealer for under my eyes. Four years of insomnia, loss of a parent, and idiotic move with a good friend darkened the crescent moons under my eyes even more every time I looked in the mirror. No more delays, time to become a high functioning adult.

Thankfully, no one had arrived by the time we pulled into her driveway. I figured I was in for a half hour of cooking until the group showed up. I gladly accepted the assignment, anything to avoid thinking about facing Lauren again. I wasn't sure I'd be able to look at her lovely face when I knew she'd decided against us.

Soon enough the doorbell started ringing and I busied myself in the kitchen. Quinn loved cooking. She said it relaxed her. Sharp knives, gas burners, boiling sauces, sure, really relaxing.

"Where you been hiding?" Des demanded when she walked in with Skye, Sam, and Caroline.

"Working. What about you? Any fun projects?" Get Des talking about work and the need for making conversation goes away. A trick learned long ago. Only one topic takes her mind off of talking about her work. If she can get details about anyone's sex life, mine especially, she'll gladly give up the floor.

Kayin and Isabel joined us moments later, and true to form Des started her narration over so they wouldn't miss anything. I tried not to think about the last time I saw all these women together. Another ten minutes passed before the final doorbell rang. I positioned myself in between Caroline and Des, concentrating on Des's elaborately detailed story.

"Hey, L," Isabel greeted her as she walked into the room.

I avoided looking directly at her like she was a solar eclipse or something. I snickered at my juvenile stupidity then realized I'd done it out loud. *Smooth start, idiot.*

If Lauren noticed, she didn't let on. Glancing at her, my eyes felt the effect. Worse than a solar eclipse. Silk skirt that

sashayed as she walked but came to a rest showing off her hips, flat stomach, and perfect rear end. Who was I kidding? Everything about her was perfect.

"Hi, everyone," Lauren greeted us as a clump. My goal for the night: stay in a clump to avoid conversations with anyone that would end up making my head woozy with desire.

"Skye, Car, help!" Quinn called out from the kitchen. Her menu for the evening seemed adventurous even for her.

Skye and Caroline jumped to action, both being professional cooks. Willa got kicked out of the kitchen as they came in. I believe threats were issued, but I wasn't paying close attention.

She put on some music then opened the wine. I helped her fill the glasses and started handing them out. When I turned to the group, Willa'd already hit Isabel, Kayin, and Des, leaving Sam and Lauren for me. I handed Sam her glass of Chardonnay and Lauren her glass of Pinot. We locked eyes for a moment, and I got transported to the start of our evening together in Seattle. I wish I could blame it all on Austy's amazing wine collection.

Please don't remember, please don't remember, stop remembering! The softest skin ever to caress my fingertips. Later I realized it was because she avoided sitting in the sun to keep her fair skin undamaged. The freckles had surprised me, but I don't know why. In a short sleeve shirt or skirt, I'd seen her skin before, but clearly I hadn't paid attention. Just like with Austy's eyes, Quinn's cheekbones, Isabel's ears, Caroline's chin, I'd never noticed these things. The fact that Lauren's freckles reached everywhere forced me to admit that I didn't give much consideration to my friends. I disliked that about myself. How self-centered could I be not to notice that my redheaded friend had freckles on her bare arms or legs before now?

"Jess?" Willa interrupted my recall. "Come take a look at the pool table." She led me outside and over to the cabana by the swimming pool. "Everything okay?"

I looked down at her. She was staring at the new pool table, not at me, and I loved her for it. "Yep."

"All right then." Deep as the ocean, that's Willa and me.

I tried out a shot on the table before we went back into the house for dinner. Thankfully, Des continued to monopolize the conversation during the meal and, before I knew it, we were already moving into the living room where a friendly game of trivial pursuit ensued.

When I caught Lauren staring at me, I felt an oppressive heat flush through my body. Almost as if I'd been working outside all day and just reached the boiling point. I had to get out of here. I excused myself to the bathroom and slipped out through the back door instead. I started walking and didn't stop until I was at my own house. They'd never miss me.

This was why I had my rules. Break one, and I find myself thinking about moving. Seattle was nice this time of year. Plus, I already knew two locals, three if I counted Willa's sister, four if I included Willa's business partner. Definitely something to think about.

Chapter 24

Leaving the party early, Lauren pointed her car in the opposite direction of her house. Even before she left the party she knew where she was headed because she felt angry with herself for not noticing right away that Jessie had run off.

Doubt drove along with her, but she couldn't let this awkwardness continue. They hadn't spoken once during dinner and she missed her friend. Even if she was mad at herself for falling for her.

At Jessie's, she lurched out of the car to keep the nervousness from gluing her to the seat. With a deep breath, she rang the doorbell. This so wasn't a good idea, but she couldn't think of what else to do. A few moments passed before Jessie opened the door with a startled expression. Lauren tried not to fixate on how gorgeous she looked in her sportswear, almost as dazzling as when she dressed up. That wasn't as difficult as trying not to blush under Jessie's stare.

"You ducked out. I came to see if you were feeling okay?" Lauren made up on the spot.

Jessie frowned for a split second then smiled casually. "I feel fine, thanks."

"You didn't just leave early. You left without saying goodbye to anyone. I thought something—" She stopped and looked around at the darkened porch. "Can I come in?"

The hesitation had plenty of time to turn into awkwardness before Jessie finally reacted. "Sure." She opened the door wide and tracked her entry.

Lauren steeled herself to face this beautiful, but suddenly intimidating woman. "I thought we decided that everything was fine? That we were good."

Jessie's eyes widened at the rushed words. "We are."

"Then why haven't I seen you for weeks, and when I do, why'd you leave so early? Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"Everything's fine, Lauren. Really. I felt like leaving, and I didn't want it to become a big deal about leaving so soon."

"I don't like that this is weird," Lauren admitted.

"It's not. I've been busy at the club. We're a trainer down. I should've been teaching a class tonight, but Quinn made me bag it. I guess it got to me. It has nothing to do with you."

Lauren wanted to believe her. "Okay."

"Would you like some tea? I was about to make some."

"Tea would be nice. Thanks." She watched Jessie retreat to the kitchen, happy that things seemed to be returning to normal, even if her heartbeat wasn't.

Catching sight of a colorful card on the fireplace mantel, Lauren moved forward to inspect it. Painted lilies on handmade card stock. "Beautiful card."

"Oh, yeah. From Will and Quinn. Take a look."

Lauren picked up the card and glanced at the condolence notes they'd written on the blank interior. "I wish I'd thought to write you a card."

Jessie came up behind her with a mug of tea. "You were here. That's more important than you can ever know. I'll never be able to make that up to you."

Lauren felt a lump grow in her throat. "You do every day." Surprise surfaced on Jessie's face, and Lauren thought this might be the perfect time to take advantage of her being off guard. "But you could do something special for me."

"Anything."

"Play the piano. Please?"

Jessie broke eye contact, glancing out her patio door. A hand came up and closed over her eyes.

Lauren tilted back against the mantel so she wouldn't try to hug her sadness away. "Do you like playing?"

"Love it," came her hoarse reply.

"If it feels wrong when you start playing again, you'll stop. But don't turn away from something you love."

The muscles in her arm strained as Jessie pressed the hand harder against her eyes. The lump in Lauren's throat grew to the size of her entire neck. She had no idea how her friend managed to move under all this sadness.

Jessie's hand swiped roughly at her eyes before it came down to her side. She practically catapulted herself into movement, the effort so pronounced. The familiarity of the path she followed the only thing responsible for getting her to the piano.

A songbook lay open on the shelf already. Jessie stared at it as she took her seat on the bench. Her posture popped erect, arms swung up to place fingers gently folded over the keys. A full minute passed before she pressed any tooth, the sound jarring the silence of the room.

Classical music wafted over and around Lauren, drilling her to the perch she'd taken on the back of the couch. The sound was so tangible, like something to cling to. Nothing about this piece said "beginner" or even "intermediate." Jessie didn't learn this in piano lessons when she was younger; she mastered this piece on her own. Lauren knew that by the way she played the music. The way she loved the music.

Chills spread through her body as she watched those fingers stroke the complicated pattern of keys to bring the fullness of the music to every corner of the house. Lauren felt the sadness retreat, as if afraid of the warmth of the sound. She found herself propelled toward the piano, coming to a stop behind Jessie on the bench. The notes on the sheet were foreign to her, but she could almost follow along with the depressed keys.

Music faded into silence, but this time the silence didn't invite sadness. She reached out and put her hands on Jessie's shoulders. "That was wonderful. You play so well."

"Thank you," Jessie spoke to the songbook. A huge cleansing breath moved through her body, releasing the tension from her shoulders. When she turned to face Lauren, none of the earlier tears remained.

Lauren smiled, so happy that she'd forced her friend to take the music back. She brought up a hand to cradle her face, palm resting on her cheek and fingertips buried in her hair. "Really, Jessie, you're magnificent."

She watched her compliment spark the light in Jessie's eyes. The hand still on Jessie's shoulder felt the change in her breathing, and scorching heat burned away the earlier chills. A hunger she'd only felt once before ripped away every modicum of composure.

Before she could act, Jessie shot off the bench and fused her mouth to Lauren's. Hands came up to seize her face, and Lauren knew that, without those hands there, the explosion she felt in her chest would have drained all of her weight and she'd float up to the ceiling. She mashed up against Jessie, needing their bodies to be as united as their mouths.

They kissed frantically, sliding lips over every part of each other's mouths. One hand moved from her cheek to curl around her nape, caressing and pulling her closer. Lauren didn't know how she was breathing, or if she was breathing. All she felt was the pull and press of soft, full lips while fingers brushed her cheek and pressed into her neck.

They barely moved, searching with mouths only, spurring on her hunger. She felt like nothing would quench this hunger, even with the engulfing dance of Jessie's lips and tongue.

"Do you," Jessie's tone matched her hunger in between kisses, "want this?"

"Yes," she spoke into Jessie's mouth.

No sooner had the word left her lips then she felt her body rising quickly. Seconds passed before she figured out that Jessie had smoothly picked her up. *She's carrying me!* Lauren marveled. Not even in her romantic dreams did she allow for this. Who would be able to sweep a five-eleven willowy, but not exactly feather-light, frame into her arms?

"Tell me to stop," Jessie posed softly, looking into her eyes before taking a step.

"No." She tilted up to kiss Jessie's now bruised lips.

With mouths still attached, Jessie swung them into motion. Lauren floated through the front room and experienced a pang of regret when they reached the stairs. Expecting to be let down, her stomach lurched at the sudden upsurge as Jessie ascended the staircase.

They drifted into a room upstairs. Jessie set her gently on the bed, following close behind to cover her with the warmth of her body and the tenderness of her mouth. Clothing got stripped to the side while they tried to keep their mouths connected. To get everything off, Jessie pulled them into a stand and completed most of the task herself.

When she stood before one of her oldest friends completely naked and entirely sober this time, she felt none of the consuming awkwardness of the past few weeks. She took in Jessie's incredibly toned, more like ripped, body. Long legs, the perfect blend of muscular and fit, crested at slightly flared hips and topped by an abdomen that looked like the after picture of every fitness device infomercial. Dark brown nipples beaded on full, high breasts, and Lauren's earlier praise sprang to mind. *She's magnificent.*

"God, you're beautiful," Jessie said in a hoarse voice, her eyes wandering freely. "So beautiful." She crushed her body against Lauren's, kissing her face and lips and neck. Each kiss bringing with it a stimulating pulse that reached everywhere. Jessie gently pressed them back onto the bed and wrapped an arm under her to drag her backwards until Lauren felt her head hit the pillows at the headboard.

She waited in the moonlit darkness for Jessie to settle on top of her. Instead, Jessie placed another pillow under her head and reclined beside her. A hand moved over her abdomen to grasp her side, and Jessie leaned in to kiss her again. She bit back a whimper when that hand began to roam, swirling fingertips up to the side of her breast and down below her hip. Her skin puckered into goose bumps, the caress of warm fingers its only relief.

The hand she had tucked behind Jessie's back began its own exploration, riding over the smooth, firm skin. So warm with absolutely no give. Only her skin made the muscular hardness of Jessie's body so soft. She felt like she could trace every muscle definition, but the hand tantalizing her side moved to her stomach and started its torturous feathery touch. With it, she couldn't concentrate on the sensations under her own fingertips. She deepened their kiss, reaching into her mouth, coaxing more closeness. A truncated groan escaped as Jessie responded to her request, pressing more of her body over her.

Jessie's mouth broke off her lips with a gasp as their bodies melted together, limbs intertwined, hips matching with hips, breasts matching with breasts. No one had ever matched up like this for her. She should have been making love with women her height or taller all her adult life. *No, she should have been making love with Jessie for all that time.*

"God, Lauren," Jessie whispered, her mouth attaching itself to her throat, sinking lower, pressing, pulling, licking, and nipping. Her tone moved toward the utterance she'd used last time when she'd called her "Blue." Lauren remembered that daily, sometimes hourly, and she wanted to hear it again so badly.

She lifted her head so that she could kiss any part of this amazing woman and met her temple, pulling softly on the skin and capturing some of her hair. She'd barely gotten to kiss the tender spot before Jessie's face twisted back and grabbed at her mouth again, fiercely, like her life depended on exploring Lauren's lips.

Jessie's hand slid between them, finally stopping its tease to grasp Lauren's breast, squeezing exquisitely with the whole of her hand. When her fingers took over, they alternated pressure points, massaging and caressing. Lauren arched into her touch before remembering that her hands could touch more. She fanned her fingers out over the dip in Jessie's lower back until she'd crested the rounded flesh of her rear end.

"Lauren," Jessie exhaled against her mouth when Lauren's hand reached her firm ass.

At the second utterance of her name, she realized Jessie was the only one who'd said anything. Between the two of them, she wouldn't have guessed Jessie to be the one to whisper intimacies. Just then, she felt Jessie's fingers pinch her nipple and a moan left her mouth. A thumb and middle finger slid alongside her nipple to pinch then twist on each stroke.

"Yes, yes," she murmured.

Jessie dropped her head, raining kisses along her jaw, her neck, onto her sternum, heading toward her other breast. The movement took her out of Lauren's grasp. She groaned in frustration, but it turned to a whimper as she felt that mouth close over her other nipple. Soft wetness pulled at the already erect bud, vacuuming the sensitive tip until it was drenched in warmth. When Jessie's tongue met the hardened peak, Lauren nearly came. Just like that, barely any contact and she'd almost crested into orgasm. Because she didn't want it to end so soon, she reached for Jessie's head and pulled her up.

"Something wrong?" The tenderness in her voice made Lauren want to open her heart and pour out all her emotions.

"No," she assured her, feeling her heart drumming against the body covering hers. "It's just too much."

At her words, Jessie exhaled and sucked the air back in just as quickly. A furrow ruined the perfect expanse of her forehead. "Do you want to stop?"

Lauren shook her head immediately. She reached up and curled her fingers into Jessie's hair, combing it over to one side. "No, I meant what you're doing. I want it to last."

Jessie smiled, her expression morphing into that breathtaking glance of desire, longing and caring. "It's okay. We've got all night. I promise to make it last." She bent to kiss her before moving over to her ear. "You have such beautiful skin. I need to taste it again."

Not waiting for a reply, Jessie dipped her head to resume the suctioning assault on Lauren's nipple. A hand slipped under and around her lower back, fingers constantly swirling, erupting puckered skin in their wake. She was left to what her own hands could feel. They met the hard lines of Jessie's back, sliding up to her shoulders and shooting fingers through her

thick hair. So different from her own fine hair, she loved the smooth, silky texture under her palms.

Lips moved from her nipple into the valley between her breasts to kiss the other nipple before the fingers came back and the mouth feathered kisses down her torso. Jessie left her midsection abruptly, producing a groan from Lauren. She thought she heard a soothing laugh before she felt that mouth again on the inside of her thighs. Kisses marked the sensitive skin on each thigh, slowly savoring but torturing her with their elusiveness. Finally, Jessie found her, kissing fully like no one else. When her tongue joined in, Lauren's hips left the bed.

She started panting, a little sound coming with each exhale. She wasn't going to last, not with that expert mouth pulling her into it, lapping, kissing, sucking until she found her extended need. She seized up when Jessie's tongue hit her clit, lips providing extra pressure. Her breathy exhales turned to soft moans. When she felt Jessie's tongue somehow cradle her clit on both sides and over the top, slowly lapping to encompass the engorged root, her orgasm screamed through her without warning. She cried out something incomprehensible because her brain arrested with the first contraction. Her climax heaved her body with each convulsion.

Eventually, Jessie took her mouth away and moved up over her, watching as Lauren rode each wrenching pulsation. When the orgasm stopped wracking Lauren's body into spasms, Jessie kissed her way up her neck to her mouth. She could taste herself on Jessie's lips and pressed her hands down on Jessie's lower back to coax her weight onto her fully.

"Too soon," she whispered when their kiss broke.

"I told you," Jessie began and kissed her chin, "I'm going," she kissed the left corner of her mouth, "to make," she kissed the other corner, "this," she kissed dead center, "last."

When their gazes met, she thought for a moment that Jessie was talking about their relationship. Then she desperately wished she was talking about their relationship. She stopped thinking and wishing when Jessie kissed her again and felt her hands move between them to grasp her breasts.

Lauren mimicked the movement with her own hands and heard Jessie's breath hitch. For a moment, she wondered if Jessie didn't let women reciprocate. Then she vaguely remembered that she'd touched her last time, barely, but she'd touched her. "I want to touch you, Jessie. Will you let me?"

"I'm not letting go of you," Jessie insisted with a trace of playfulness. Her hands squeezed Lauren's breasts for emphasis.

"Together," Lauren whispered. "This time we'll be together."

"I don't know," Jessie mouthed against her neck, barely a whisper making it through. "I'm going to need to taste you again."

"Not as much as I need to touch you." Lauren tilted her hips, rolling Jessie to her side.

"Feisty." Jessie let out a brief laugh when she found herself lying beside her. "You can't beat feisty."

"Don't even try." Lauren felt wicked thoughts take over. She ran a hand down Jessie's arm, onto her breast, down her chiseled abs and onto her stomach. Because of the torture she'd endured, she skimmed across to her hip, curled into her inner thigh before finally moving back up until she reached perfection. The feeling not unlike dipping into liquid fire.

Jessie jerked against her at the touch, a whispered groan left the mouth that pressed into her neck. A knee nudged forward between her legs to separate them and a hand darted quickly through to cup against her.

"Jessie," Lauren whispered, flipping her leg over Jessie's thigh to allow better access. She relished the feel of the silky curls against the base of her palm while her fingers slid through the softest, slickest flesh imaginable. She wanted them to climax together but Jessie's whole hand ravaged her engorged lips and clit mercilessly.

"Lauren?" Jessie moaned when her fingers reached lower.

"Yes," Lauren agreed to the unspoken desire. Two fingers plunged inside, filling so completely. She bucked wildly, urging a closer connection, abandoning all restraint. "Yes, God, yes. I love this, Jessie. I love what you're doing to me."

Jessie let out another moan before her own breath came in gasps. She sped up her thrusting fingers, adding her thumb directly on Lauren's clit. Rubbing and thrusting, reaching those long fingers inside her, touching parts of her that no one had reached before.

Lauren concentrated on Jessie's extended clit, circling, swiping, rolling until she felt her own rising heat, knowing she couldn't hold out much longer. She rocked against Jessie's hand and cried out, coming violently around those magical fingers. "I love you, Jessie!" she screamed inside her head, looking into beautiful brown eyes. She felt Jessie stiffen. A startled look pierced the glow of her eyes. *Did I say that out loud?* Lauren thought in the instant after the first wave, seeing the shock on Jessie's face. Then all thoughts drained with the next crescendo.

"Blue," Jessie moaned before she squeezed her eyes shut and went rigid at the pinnacle of her orgasm. A soft groan sounded on each exhale as her body jerked into movement. When she opened her eyes, she seemingly looked into Lauren's head, reading every thought. She tipped forward, kissing her lips, her final groan pouring into Lauren's mouth.

Their hearts pounded against each other, perspiration glistened between them, breaths ragged, and bodies shaking. When the last of the ripples flowed through them, Jessie withdrew her fingers slowly. She dragged the hand up to flick fingers over Lauren's nipple.

Lauren moaned, exhausted beyond imagination. She was too old for three times in one night, especially given the intensity of the first two. She brought her free hand up to stop Jessie's fingers by pressing the hand against her still pounding heart.

Jessie smiled softly, nodding her head and gathered Lauren against her. Lauren settled partly over her side, tucking her head into the crook of Jessie's neck. She felt an arm snake over her back and grip her waist exquisitely.

"Goodnight, Jessie," Lauren whispered as sleep took over.

She thought she heard a responding whisper, "Please don't leave," but she couldn't be sure.

Chapter 25

She'd done it again.

Throughout the night, I'd woken up to make sure Lauren was still there. I couldn't get more than an hour of sleep at a time. Sometime before dawn, I finally dropped into a dream that didn't seem plausible even though I knew I was dreaming. I hated when that happened. I realize I'm dreaming, but I question the validity of the dream. Who does that? Why not just enjoy it until you're fully awake?

When I did wake up, the dream sifted into my consciousness. Lauren and I had been dancing together at Austy's wedding, her body feeling just as good as it had last night. Our friends stole glances at us, marveling at how well we fit together and envious of our closeness.

My arm reached out on its own and fell to the emptiness of the other side of the bed. Hurling myself into a sitting position, my eyes blinked through the morning sunshine until they adjusted to the light. I couldn't see her anywhere in my room or bathroom, and my ears strained to hear if she was downstairs. Not one sound.

Because I didn't trust my ears, I flew out of bed and hurriedly made my way downstairs. Halfway down, I realized I was still naked and might give some neighbor with good eyesight a free show, but I didn't care. Even if by some miracle Lauren was in my kitchen, I wouldn't want a robe because I planned to make love to her right there. She wasn't in the

kitchen, or living room, or front room. She wasn't here. She'd left again.

Shoulders rounded, I slogged back up to my bedroom. The lack of sleep started tormenting my mind with ridicule for why she would have bolted from my bed again. Not that I needed the lack of sleep excuse to torment myself. *You've done it again. She didn't come over last night to sleep with you. She was being kind, and you took advantage of that sympathy.*

"I love you, Jessie!" Her excited declaration popped into my mind, almost as if she stood before me now.

Did I imagine that? Did my hope completely fabricate words that weren't spoken? But even if she did say it, the timing made it suspect. I couldn't count the number of women who'd uttered those words to me right before they came. Women said things like that at the peak of passion. I'd always discounted it before.

Yeah, but this time, you love her back. That's only happened once before. Although, compared to what I'm feeling right now, it hadn't even happened then. Love with training wheels, that's how I'd describe what I had with Chloe now that I knew how substantial it could actually be.

"Dammit!" I yelled at the empty bedroom.

If the pain I felt when I'd caught Chloe cheating on me was bad, losing Lauren would ruin me if I had the chance to let this go any further. I could stop these feelings. I'd done it before. Extinguish them before they developed fully. With her second departure, Lauren made her feelings very clear. I'd satisfied a need. In the bright reality of day, Lauren could never accept me as anything more than a short affair. And what was I thinking? Lauren? I'd known her for forever, and all of a sudden I have feelings for her? That makes no sense.

The doorbell rang and, for a hopeful moment, I thought maybe it was Lauren coming back. Then I realized Quinn was here for our morning run. If ever a morning existed where I didn't feel like running, today was the day. I went for my robe because Quinn would let herself in if I didn't answer the door. A familiar looking sight on my nightstand caught my attention

on the way out. Not yellow this time or a sticky note, but a note, nonetheless.

Had to get an early start for a big trial this morning. -L

"Dammit," I growled again. Would it have killed her to lie and include something, anything about our night together? *So, she's not as good at being a shit as you are. She can't make up phony tender notes on the spot. She doesn't have as much practice as you; cut her some slack.*

"Jess? You up there?" Quinn's voice floated up from the foyer.

"Yeah." I started toward the hallway because I needed to turn away from the distressing reminder of my hopeless failure at romance.

"Hey, were you still sleeping?" Quinn held one ankle in a hand, pulling her leg into a stretch while she waited for me. "I'm sorry. I thought we had a run this morning."

"We did. My fault, I overslept. I'm not feeling that great. Do you mind if I bag the run?"

"Please don't tell me I gave you food poisoning last night?"

"No. I just didn't get much sleep last night."

Her eyes scanned my robe. "I'm sorry you're not sleeping well. Why don't you jump in the shower, and I'll stick around so we can talk about it?"

I've lost my mind and fallen for one of my best friends who can't get away from me fast enough every time I touch her. There. Make sense of that one, Quinn, because I sure as hell can't.

"You know, I think I'm going to try to get some more sleep," I answered instead.

"Sounds like a good idea, but I'm around any time you decide you want to talk. Okay?"

"Gotcha. Thanks."

Quinn turned with a parting wave. When her hand reached the doorknob, she glanced back up at me. "You know, I could have sworn I saw Lauren's car driving by my place as I came outside this morning. Did she crash over here last night? I didn't think she had that much to drink, but maybe I should make the sobriety test a little stricter?" She smiled at the

rigmarole she puts everyone through before handing over the keys to their cars.

I wished I could have smiled with her, but the idea that I'd missed Lauren by only a few minutes this morning drained the animation from my face. What would she have said if I'd woken up and caught her sneaking out of my room?

"Jess?" Quinn stepped forward to touch my arm. "What just happened?" She waited for me to tell her that everything was all right, but I couldn't muster the lie. "Oh...Okay." Her eyes swept over me much more slowly this time. "You and Lauren?"

I considered denying it, but what if she got Lauren to admit it? Then I'd be a louse and a liar.

Quinn didn't need me to say anything. "In Seattle, too? I should have put that together when you stayed on our couch instead of going back to the room you had at Austy's."

"Please don't say anything to her or anyone else."

"I'm guessing she already knows, hon," Quinn kidded because the room felt suddenly very heavy. More seriously, she asked, "Was it a mistake?"

"No," I retorted immediately. "Well...she thinks so, and I should have known better, so yeah, I guess it was."

"You don't think it was a mistake, but she does? That doesn't sound like Lauren. What makes you so sure?"

"I can't talk about this right now. I'm not deep enough to handle stuff like this."

"Stop that." As my best friend, she didn't like when I remarked on my lack of emotional development. "I have complete faith that you'll be able to figure this out, but I won't press you right now. I would like the opportunity to be as good a friend to you as you were to me when I thought I was losing Willa. When you're ready, I'll be here."

I grimaced at her mention of the rough time Willa went through a couple years ago when she began pulling away from everyone in the group, including her partner. I really hadn't done anything other than listened to Quinn's worries and worried on my own. The chat I'd had with Willa turned out to be more life-altering for me than for her, but I knew she'd find

her way back because that's what I would have done in the same situation. She and I were too alike in those matters.

"Thanks, Quinn. I'll figure this out, and I'll try not to hurt anyone in the process."

"I know you will, Jessie. You don't hurt people, especially your friends. Give me a call or stop by anytime. Love ya, hon."

"Me, too." I watched her open the door and disappear before I went back upstairs to face the chasm of my stupidity.

Later, I'd leave a message on Lauren's cell phone while she was in court to wish her luck on her trial. Good enough to be considered contact on the day after, but not enough to make her feel obligated to try to explain what a mistake we'd made again.

Chapter 26

“Hey, Aleric, can’t you get enough of me?” Remus smirked adorably.

Lauren shook her head in amusement and waited her turn in line through the metal detectors. “You’re too much for me, and you know it.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” He ignored the two lawyers in line in front of her. Both turned curious stares her way before starting into the courthouse. “What’s on for today?”

“A little medical malpractice. What about you?”

“Coupla disgruntled legal types, obnoxious law enforcement types, and saving this sorry courthouse from being blown up. The usual. Med mal, huh? Not easy, Fire, you gonna win?”

“This one’s a sure thing, and you know how I love those sure things.”

His grin turned knowing. “Now who’s throwing out innuendo? Hey, you got time for lunch this week? I need to pick through the photos of my football team for the school’s trophy case. I could use another pair of eyes, blue eyes to be precise.”

Lauren laughed, happy that his part-time coaching job made him so giddy. “Sure, tomorrow? Depending on when I wrap, I should have a full lunch break before we’re back.”

"I'll be here whenever. You can't miss me. I'm the beauty on the security staff; everyone else is the muscle." He rumbled into a laugh and handed her the case file.

One of the court clerks, Polly, rushed toward them, breathing excitedly. "Have you heard?" She waved a dismissive hand "Of course, you're her lawyer. But can you believe it?"

"Catch a breath, now, Pol." Remus was all too familiar with Polly's theatrical manner. "What's going on?"

"The lawsuit. What do you think?" Polly looked back and forth between them. "You mean you don't know? No way. I'm talking about the sexual harassment claim against Jessie."

A sexual harassment claim? Against Jessie? This can't be right. "When was this filed?" Lauren tried to calm her racing heart.

"First thing this morning."

"You joking, Pollywag?" Remus lean forward, concern for his pal Jessie etched in every feature of his expression.

"Nope. I stamped the papers and opened the file myself. Sophie Tamblyn is the claimant. She worked for Jessie. The activities director."

Worked? Past tense, worked? Lauren hadn't been to the club since returning from Seattle. In fact, other than her slip up last weekend, she hadn't even seen Jessie. She wasn't likely to, either. Not after her declaration and Jessie's reaction. Then there was the cavalier message Jessie left the next day. How could Lauren have told her that she loved her? She was now sure that she'd spoken the words that screamed inside her head. It was the only way to explain Jessie's response, or lack thereof.

Forcing herself to forget what she'd said, how Jessie had almost stopped making love to her, how amazing it sounded when Jessie called her "Blue" again, how incredible Jessie felt over, under, around and inside her, along with everything else about that night, Lauren focused on Polly. "Hostile environment or overt behavior?"

"Overt. Jessie's screwed if Sophie can prove it, and she won't have a lot of character witnesses at the Nine either. She's

burned a few bridges there since she stopped going regularly about eight months ago. The lesbians are feeling a little scorned."

Too many thoughts and emotions punched through Lauren's mind with that statement. Eight months? Surely that was wrong, although Austy did say that she'd stopped dating casually. But eight whole months? *God, she wanted her. Really, really wanted her. Stop wanting her!*

"No possible way." Remus snapped Lauren's attention back. "J-dec wouldn't harass anyone, let alone an employee."

Polly raised her eyebrows at his stanch defense of Jessie before asking Lauren, "You'll be representing her, right?"

"This is a private matter, Polly. I would hope you'll keep this news to yourself?"

She looked like she'd been caught burning a tree in her parent's backyard. "Um, yeah. Nobody will hear it from me." She zipped her fingers across her lips.

"I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding." But what if it wasn't? What if Jessie was coming on to her staff at work? As her attorney, Lauren would want to slap her wrist then cuff it to her desk to keep her from doing anything inappropriate. As her one-time lover, well, twice, who still remembers the magic of her hands and mouth when she tries to go to sleep every night, she'd want to slap her, period.

She waved goodbye to Polly, deciding to like her a lot less even if she was only the messenger. Standing in the middle of the entryway, she no longer remembered why she was there. *God, Jessie! This can't be right.*

Remus slipped a heavy arm around her shoulders. "You'll get her out of this. J-dec's got the best lawyer in the state."

"Thanks, Remus. It's got to be a mistake."

"You know it is. That's not Jessie." Like Lauren, he'd been friends with Jessie since college. His unwavering certainty against these allegations made Lauren abandon all doubt.

When her client rolled up in his wheelchair, she pushed all disturbing thoughts out of her mind. She'd deal with Jessie's call when she got back to her office after her day in court.

"She called me," Austy told her over the phone.

"Why?" Lauren had been distracted all day in court. She raced back to the office to see if she'd been served a copy of the summons and complaint in Jessie's lawsuit and found nothing. Nor had Jessie called. Now her best friend, who lived on the other side of the country, was saying that Jessie had called her instead?

"She wanted me to recommend some attorneys."

The tears of frustration finally came to her eyes. Lauren had tried numbing herself since realizing that Jessie didn't place any significance on their nights together, but the anesthetizing process eluded her. She'd fallen for Jessie, and it ached like hell. Actually, it hurt like shit, but she didn't swear.

"Why would she do that?"

"She sounded really embarrassed. She didn't want to tell me, but I guess she figured she had no choice if she wanted someone that could handle this for her."

"I can handle this for her. I'm her attorney. Why would she do this?"

"I guess you guys haven't talked since...since you were here?" Austy asked cautiously.

"Since I stupidly slept with her, you mean? I told you, she brushed it off when we spoke the next day. Then like an idiot, I went back for more."

Two beats passed. "You what?"

"I slept with her again."

"Oh." Austy resorted to her filler word. Lauren wished she wouldn't do that with her, especially not on this subject. She needed her friend's advice, which meant Austy would have to give an opinion, not a polite, nonjudgmental reaction.

"Yeah, well, we haven't spoken since."

"Did something happen while you — or after?"

Lauren had to laugh at her friend's inability to ask a direct question when it came to ultra private matters. "You mean like me telling her that I loved her and her freezing up? Or like when I had to leave early to get to my trial and before I could

call her at the mid-morning break, she'd already left an oh-so-casual message on my phone wishing me good luck on the trial?"

"Let's go back to the whole admitting you love her part."

"Loved, past tense. I'm in the middle of a seven-step program to get over it."

"I have a three-step program if you're interested." Austy's programs only took three steps. She said it was because her legs were shorter.

"You're too sensible to fall for someone who doesn't want you, doesn't need you, and considers love a bother that only happens to other fools."

When the pause lasted longer than ten seconds, Lauren thought her cell phone had cut out. Austy finally replied, "You'd be surprised. And I don't think Jessie feels that love is a bother. I kinda think she has a touch of the romantic in her."

Lauren scoffed, "You're only saying that because she hit on you last summer."

"I already told you she didn't hit on me. But I didn't tell you that she sat me down, slapped some sense into me about my pathetic love life, and told me to go after love."

Lauren tried to contain her shock. She thought Jessie had tried to get Austy to come back to Virginia. Instead, she'd given Austy love advice? "My head's going to explode right now. Sometime soon, you're going to tell me everything she told you, including what you meant by pathetic love life. But none of that says that she can handle something deeper in her own life."

"Lauren, you know how much I love you, but you're not being very fair. She didn't seem ho-hum about it that morning when I went up to get her."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. She thought it was a huge mistake. You don't even want to know how offhand her voice sounded when she left that message for me after this time. Like she was confirming lunch or something, not like she'd spent the night making me doubt that I'd ever made love before being with her." Lauren squeezed her eyes shut against the assault of arousal flooding her senses.

"I wish I could do something to make this hurt less for you."

"Thanks, Young'un. I love you, too. I'll talk to you soon." Lauren clicked her cell phone shut, silently praising her provider for making long distance free after 9:00 p.m. She stared at her office phone, willing it to ring. Jessie should have called her, but instead, she was going to call another lawyer. Well, that really ticked her off. She yanked up the receiver.

"JX Fitness, this is Jessie."

"Why didn't you call me?" Lauren demanded, knowing the hurt made it into her tone.

A long pause passed before Jessie finally asked, "For?"

Lauren realized how loaded her question had sounded. "I'm your attorney. What are you doing calling Austy?"

"I can't believe she told you."

"She didn't. I mean, she told me but only after I'd already found out about the lawsuit. What do you think you're doing not telling me?"

Jessie's paused again, this time much longer. "I didn't want to disturb your trial."

"I'm capable of handling two things at once."

"It's going to get ugly because she wasn't happy when I fired her. I'd prefer you didn't hear what she had to say."

"Too bad," Lauren barked into the phone. Her frustration added pressure to the point that she felt her head might burst. "Right now, I'm on your side. If you keep ticking me off, I might start thinking that my friend was actually stupid enough to sexually harass one of her employees. So, tough tamales. You've got my representation whether you want it or not."

"What do I have to do?"

"Fax over a copy of the summons and complaint right now, and I mean right now. We'll talk tomorrow after I've read through the pleadings."

"I didn't do it, Laur." Jessie's voice held little of her familiar strength.

"I know that," she said firmly then added, "I know you."

Replacing the receiver, Lauren dropped her aching head into her hands. The sound of Jessie's voice ignited a twinge in

her groin. She wouldn't allow herself to admit exactly where in the groin region. This wouldn't be easy, but she'd have to push her personal feelings aside to help her friend.

Chapter 27

Lauren waited anxiously in her office for the start of Sophie's deposition. She'd spoken with Jessie on the phone once to take notes on what transpired, and she'd left a message for her about this appointment. Only on Step Five in her seven-step plan, she hadn't been quite ready to see Jessie, too afraid she'd have to start back over at Step One.

"Getting ready for Jessie's depo?" Kayin stood in the doorway of her office.

Lauren's eyes widened. She hadn't realized that Jessie told anyone else. She certainly hadn't.

"You really think that bitch would have passed up the chance to tell Jessie's other employees?"

Lauren cringed at the profanity, but only because she knew said "bitch" would be in the office momentarily. She had no problem acknowledging that Sophie was a bitch. She might even say it out loud.

"What are they saying about it?" Lauren motioned her inside so they could talk in private.

"Not much. Most of them know that she wouldn't do something so unprofessional. The rest of them know that she doesn't need to harass someone for sex."

Lauren felt the blood draining from her face so rapidly that she wondered if it would take her freckles as well. The group joked about Jessie's flings all the time. Now that she was one of

the women Jessie hadn't needed to arm twist to get into bed with her, she felt even more guilty for not defending her.

"You okay? You know we're behind Jess on this. As much as she may wreck the lesbians in town, she wouldn't do that to one of her employees."

Lauren cringed again at the idea that Jessie purposefully hurt women in town. She may have hurt Lauren, but she didn't do it purposefully. In fact, Lauren went into it with her eyes wide open. She was responsible for her own hurt right now.

Kayin glanced behind her at the sound of the front door. "Hey, Jess. We were just talking about you."

Lauren shook her head at Kayin's insensitivity. Jessie appeared, glaring at Kayin with restrained anger then flicked a hurt glance in Lauren's direction. The look stabbed even more at Lauren's chest.

"Thank you, Kayin." Lauren tried to dismiss her.

"Just wanted to give you much love, *sista*." She reached for a fist tap with Jessie. "If you decide you wanna take her out back to the shed, you give a holla."

And then they were alone. Jessie stayed in the doorway, shifting slightly after Kayin had walked through. She wore the black pant suit that Lauren had gotten for her as a choice for her mom's funeral. It was the one task Lauren could complete that Willa wouldn't do. Jessie surprised her by choosing to wear the dress she'd picked out instead. Surprising, because Jessie hadn't worn a dress in years. Even more unexpected was the fact that Jessie kept the two other selections of suits. Lauren had never seen Jessie in a suit before and the sight beguiled.

Realizing she'd been staring at Jessie's suit clad body, Lauren brought her gaze up to Jessie's eyes. Bad move, really, really stupid move. The mesmerizing brown imprisoned her thoughts and movements. The dark color acted as the perfect backdrop for the image she now had running through her mind. She could almost replay their entire night together two weeks ago with the light reflecting off her dark eyes. She hadn't yet blocked that particular night from her memory. That was Step Seven.

Probably only a minute passed, but the time allowed for enough memory flashes to raise the temperature in the room ten degrees. Jessie's expression stayed neutral, but along with the memory flashes, Lauren caught that hint of longing again. It made her shiver even with the rising heat wave that rolled through her office. She wanted so much to believe that it meant Jessie wanted her for more than just an object of lust.

"Excuse me," Becky spoke through the narrow gap in the doorway since Jessie hadn't moved from it. "Your ten o'clock is here. I've doused them all with coffee."

"Thanks, Becky." Lauren shifted into action. She could work on her foolishness later. Of course it would help if Jessie cleared the doorway, but it looked like she would make her squeeze by.

"Why am I here for this?"

Lauren stopped short, realizing how negligent she'd been as Jessie's attorney in this matter. She'd worked out the strategy on her own without consulting or informing her client. She'd done it because she didn't want to face this woman who made her pulse fly with acrobatic maneuvers.

"Come in here a minute." Lauren stepped aside, hoping that Jessie would follow her direction because she couldn't grab her arm to bring her in. No touching: Step Four. "You're here because it solidifies the appearance that you've done nothing wrong. I should have done a better job communicating with you."

After she said it, Lauren realized just how many statements have double meanings when trying for something uncomplicated. She shouldn't have left the note. She should have awakened Jessie and faced the reality of their situation. She should have forced herself to watch Jessie squirm trying to get Lauren out of the house. It might have helped in the seven-step process.

"Okay, I trust you."

Lauren wanted to kiss her for her trust, but also for her lips and tongue and hands. *Focus!* She pulled herself together enough to get them out of the office and into the conference room. Let the games begin.

Hazel eyes flicked up and to the right on nearly every response. Lauren checked her smile and silently thanked her college psych professor for teaching her how to read people's faces and gestures when they're testifying. She didn't need the evidence she had to recognize that Sophie was lying. In fact, if Sophie's nose started growing, Lauren wouldn't even blink an eye.

They'd already reached the hour mark of the deposition and nearly every word she spoke buzzed false. It really was too bad that this wouldn't go to court. Lauren would love to mince her into little flesh bits all over the witness stand before an open court.

She shifted to take in Jessie's reaction. Even her psych prof wouldn't be able to read Jessie. She sat comfortably, not slouching like Sophie, not ramrod straight like the stenographer, and not fidgeting like Sophie's attorney. She didn't react physically or verbally to anything.

"Can we move this along?" Paul, Sophie's attorney, shot smugly at Lauren.

Lauren didn't like to close her mind to people, but she really disliked Paul and always had since she'd met him in law school. "Sure. Take me through the events leading up to your dismissal on the day in question."

Sophie looked pleased to be asked a question that she'd obviously prepared for. "I was training a client when Ms. Ximena storms into the weight room all pissed off about the film crew following my client. I had to explain all the benefits this free publicity would provide her club before she starts to calm down. I figured she was just stressed and teased her, saying something like she needed to relax and go out on a date or something. That's when she started to harass me."

"And that took form how?" Lauren made sure her tone matched her disbelieving expression.

"She asked if I'd volunteer to help her out with that relaxation. When I reminded her that I was straight, she said that she'd converted many straight women. From everything I'd heard, I knew that was true, but I wasn't going to be one of them. She said that she never passed up a hot piece of ass. I

told her no again. She then said that I might want to think about whether or not the club was the right place for me to work if I couldn't see things her way. She said that she had a couch up in her office and she really needed to get laid. When I shut her down again, she fired me on the spot."

"Did anyone else overhear this conversation?"

"Nobody needed to. Ask around, she's the biggest slut in town. When she gets bored of sleeping with lesbians, she goes after straight chicks. If they're engaged like me, all the better."

"You will not refer to my client in that manner. We'll keep this deposition civil, or we will bring in the judge to hold you in contempt if you break that rule." Lauren stared Sophie into breaking her glance. "Getting back to my question, were there witnesses to this conversation?"

"It was just us, which is why she thought she could hold my job over my head if I didn't have sex with her."

"That's the extent of the alleged sexual harassment incident?"

"Well, yeah, but it's a lot. Have sex with her or get fired. That's pretty clear-cut."

"All right." Lauren nodded at Sophie then turned to Paul. "That's all for now."

They looked a little startled that Lauren had ended the deposition so abruptly. Paul spoke up, "I'll make an appointment for your client's deposition next week."

"The deposition won't be necessary. Not once we watch this videotape. I think you'll find that your client has been lying all along and has no grounds for this lawsuit." Lauren used the remote to start the video before they could protest. An unstable camera shot came on the screen and focused in on a young man working out in Jessie's health club. This footage, she'd been told, was for "B roll" and didn't include any dialogue of the young man. It did, however, record other sounds in the weight room while filming him.

Everyone in the conference room leaned forward in their seats when Jessie's voice could be heard in the background. She was addressing Sophie about the presence of the film crew. A moment later, the camera angle swung around to follow the

subject to a different machine. Jessie and Sophie stood talking in the background. They watched the conversation unfold. A lot of Sophie's language turned out to be accurate; however, the tape showed that it was Sophie who made the overt sexual maneuvers until Jessie finally fired her after two warnings.

Paul didn't hide either his defeat or his displeasure with his client. Like usual, he'd been too intent on wanting to beat Lauren that he didn't bother to verify his client's assertion.

"That's grounds for dismissal in live Technicolor," Lauren proclaimed.

Paul glared at her before turning his disapproval where it rightfully belonged to his client. "Fine. We'll withdraw our complaint."

"No. I'm making a motion to dismiss. Your client has made a very public claim against my client, and I plan to dispel all of her allegations on the public record and expose her for the lying, vindictive...person...that she is. I'll also be entering a motion to recover costs. Once your client pays all fees, maybe she'll finally appreciate just how costly her false accusations are."

"You've made your point," Paul spat.

"No, actually, I haven't. The tape and her deposition provide grounds for our countersuit of nuisance and defamation of a prominent business owner. On that, you can call my legal assistant to schedule a settlement conference. I think we're done for now. I'll see you next week."

Paul and Sophie blasted out of their chairs like Lauren had hit an ejection switch. They'd made it to the conference room door before Lauren managed to stand from her seat. She walked them to the front door and closed it behind them. Becky gave her a thumbs up when she turned back. The gesture made her grin, nothing like pummeling the opposition, especially when they lie outright.

Chapter 28

Sometime between her motionless victory dance and the shared giddiness with Becky, she realized that Jessie hadn't emerged from the conference room yet. She headed back and stilled suddenly at the vision through the doorway. Jessie, who had barely moved during the deposition, now slumped over in her chair, forehead dropped onto two fists on the table.

Without thinking, Lauren strode forward and clutched Jessie's shoulders in support. It didn't occur to her until too late that she'd done the same thing after Jessie'd played the piano for her. She didn't have time to think about it because Jessie immediately straightened up and swiveled her seat around out of Lauren's grasp.

"Thanks," Jessie rushed to speak. Her eyes flicked down to Lauren's now empty hands. "For making that whole thing go away."

Lauren studied her curiously, not recognizing the insecure look on her friend's face. No matter the amount of ribbing, Jessie always responded with bored disdain. She knew that Jessie put on an act occasionally, but more and more this past year, she recognized how much of her persona simply reflected what people expected of her. "You're welcome. The good news is you won't have to pay my bill."

"If the judge doesn't make her pay, you need to bill me."

"It was worth it for the look on that...bitch's face."

Jessie's eyes widened, her whole face opening up in amazement. "You just swore. I'm so proud of you!"

"She deserves it. No one lies about a friend of mine like that."

Jessie quickly lost her smile. "People do it all the time. It's just words. Words I wish you hadn't heard which is why I didn't want you on this."

"I know you all like to think I'm some innocent thing because I don't swear, but I can roll with the best of them. I hate that she said those things and lied about you. I wish I could go back in time and stop the case before it started."

"Is that the only thing you'd take back?" Jessie asked softly, seemingly to herself. Her head shook slightly and she came out of her seat hastily. "I need to go. Thanks again for taking care of this for me. You're a damn good lawyer, L."

"Wait, Jess." Lauren grabbed her arm before she could leave. Jessie's eyes snapped down to where their flesh connected. "This isn't working. Avoiding each other." She flicked the door shut. "We need to talk about what happened between us."

"I got the message." Jessie shrugged out of Lauren's grip. "Twice. In fact, I still have the notes you left in case I forget."

The bitter tone surprised her. What was she saying? That it was Lauren who didn't want her? Lauren was the one who idiotically told her that she loved her way too soon without prompting and without reciprocation. And Jessie more than flinched; she froze up then ignored it completely.

"I didn't know what to say," she admitted heavily.

"Well, everybody knows I do, so let me give you a tip. Next time you find yourself in that whole wake-up-and-panic situation, write this, 'Last night was incredible. Sorry to have to leave so early. Call you later.' All dolls buy that."

"I'm not one of your dolls, and I will strike you if you lump me in with one of your babydolls." Lauren's emphatic tone startled them both. "I've watched you a long time. You keep women at arm's length. I never judged you for that, but don't you dare treat me like any of your other castoffs. I won't lose your friendship because of our nights together."

"I don't want that either." Jessie couldn't meet her eyes. "I'm sorry if you feel I've been treating you like anyone else, because you're not. You're not. We'll get back to normal eventually. I'm actually thinking about taking a trip for a while. Spain, the Basque Country, a long break should do the trick. You'll have time to figure out that everything I warned you about Jordan goes double for me, and I'll have time to..."

"To what?" She prompted after a long pause.

Jessie finally looked into her eyes and that unbearable heat returned under the gaze. "To stop imagining what it would feel like to lock this door, close these blinds, and take you right here. I wouldn't even bother to undress you completely. I'd pull you into one of these chairs with me, and I wouldn't be able to stop my hands before they touched every part of you. That's what I need time to stop because I can't do it when I'm around you."

Lauren knew she'd stopped breathing at some point while Jessie was talking. She hoped she didn't release the whimper she'd felt building in her throat. Her heart thumped so loudly, she wasn't aware of any other sounds. The imagined scene that Jessie started ran through her mind. She wouldn't care if they stayed locked in the conference room for the rest of the day. She wanted to be in Jessie's lap, have her talented mouth kissing into the V of her blouse, have her equally skilled hands roam and stroke and take from her everything that she was. A shiver ran through her with the hail of images and sensations. A full-fledged moan moved from her core through her chest to her lips. She clenched her teeth to keep from letting it go.

She asked the first thing that came to mind that didn't involve the words *please, do anything you want to me right here*. "Will you go alone?"

Dark brown eyes flicked away, trying to mask a flinch. *God, how could she have asked that?* The most beautiful woman alive is telling her that she wants to rip her clothes off, or keep them on, but still do everything that comes with being naked together, and she asks about her trip? She really needed to reconsider getting that professional help.

"I *am* a loner," Jessie said derisively.

"You may think you are, but I know better. There's a difference between being alone and being a loner. You like to be alone, more so than most, but you're not a person who can't share at least part of herself."

Jessie gave her a dumbfounded look, causing Lauren to wonder if her belief that she was a loner was the reason she never stayed with anyone for any length of time. "Well," Jessie said with finality, turning toward the door.

Lauren didn't want her to go, but she couldn't say what she wanted to say. She'd tried that once, and it blew up in her face. "Tell me how I'm not the same."

"What?" Jessie whirled back to face her.

"You said I'm not like your other..."

Jessie shook her head and sighed. "God, if you have to ask that, then I'm an even bigger shit than I thought."

"What does that mean?" Lauren looked expectantly at her. It took every bit of bravery she had to ask that question and Jessie gave her another brush off answer. Frustrated that she couldn't get a meaningful response, she asked the question that had been scratching at the back of her mind for a while. "You know what, let's start with something else. Why did you lie to me about dating Tara? That night at your club when she came up to you, I asked you if you were going out with her and you lied to me."

"I didn't lie. You assumed I was going out with her, and I didn't deny it."

"Why not tell me?"

"What's it matter?"

"It doesn't, but it bothers me that you feel you need to put on an act, especially around me. I've known you too long for that." When Lauren didn't get anything but a slight shrug in reply, she got even more frustrated. Thinking about Tara, another question popped into her head. She asked it before she lost her nerve. "Why didn't we have safe sex?"

That question not only drew wide eyes but also a dropped jaw. Jessie snapped it shut immediately and looked away. "You don't have to worry. I'm disease free."

"That's not why I asked. I overheard Tara say that you always insist on safe sex. Was she lying or did it slip your mind with me?"

"It didn't slip my mind," Jessie spoke to the window. "I knew you would have told me if there was something to worry about. I've never trusted that with anyone else."

One honest, meaningful answer and it nearly detonated her heart. Lauren had to push the issue, even if she couldn't easily repair the damage. "I do have to ask, and it has nothing to do with you being a...expletive deleted, because I don't believe that about you. So, tell me why you think I'm not like anyone else."

"You're just not." Jessie gave her a solemn look. "You're different, Blue. I wish you weren't. It's why I need to get out of here for a while."

Lauren's head sizzled at the sound of Jessie calling her "Blue" again. Forever a reminder of the best sex of her life, better than anything she'd ever imagined. She wondered how long it would take before she could hear someone refer to the color without shivering. She really wanted to press her to admit how she felt about their nights together, but Kayin burst through the conference room door.

"How'd it go? Kick some ass? Or will I be posting bail for you later?" she kidded Jessie.

Jessie took the opportunity to escape. "Lauren took care of it. See you later."

Lauren wanted to physically stop her but knew with Kayin there that wouldn't happen. Jessie was running away, a very uncharacteristic trait. Usually it was the women she got involved with that pined, longed, begged, then finally had to run away from her just to get her out of their systems. Could she be doing the same thing? No, that would mean that she had feelings for Lauren. Jessie didn't have feelings for women, not in the all the years they'd known each other.

Lauren knew the death of Jessie's mom had changed her, but could she really have changed that much?

Chapter 29

The training schedule came together nicely. I'd never been this thorough on a schedule before. I had on-staff, backup, rovers, and in case of emergency personnel assigned to each shift, class, and fitness training time slot. Yesterday, I took the staff through the plan. One month of shifts in a color coded timetable. Even a five year old could figure out who was on which shift, teaching which class, and working each fitness room. It had been tons of work to plan it out, but now that I had, I'd think about continuing with this, if only for the consistency when I returned. One more thing to think about while I'm roaming around Europe for a month.

Sitting in my little cubbyhole of an office, I still couldn't believe I was going through with it. A whole month in Europe, where I've never been, by myself, which I've never done, away from my club for a month, which probably wouldn't be smart, and all planned in only two weeks, which made it a little pricey. Screw it. I had to do something. I was too chicken to move out of state after breaking my don't-sleep-with-your-best-friends rule, so taking a month away from the friend was really my only option. If it didn't work, Seattle, here I come.

Two items remained on my to-do list before I left town. I had to face the lesbians of Charlottesville at least once after Sophie's allegations and before I went on vacation. I didn't want any of them thinking I'd fled the country because I couldn't face the humiliation of being falsely accused. Then

tomorrow, Quinn and Willa were throwing me a send-off party. One last evening of awkwardness with Lauren before I began the process of getting her out of my system. I was looking forward to worrying about nothing more significant than when I'd eat and whether or not I could squeeze in three museums or tours a day over the next month.

By the time I made it to my favorite bar, the crowd was in full swing. I made eye contact with everyone I passed and said hello to many acquaintances before taking a stool at the bar. Dancing would come later once I'd had a couple of drinks. Reinstating goodwill, my ultimate goal. If I ever felt like dating again, I'd need these women not to hate me.

"Hello, gorgeous," the bartender greeted when she drifted over. "T&T tonight, or something else?"

"Scotch and soda. How's things, Erin?"

"Been kinda slow around here without you, Jess. Say you'll be in more regularly from now on?"

"I'm actually taking a trip, but after, I'll be around. Keep my seat warm."

"Love to. I heard about that bogus lawsuit, girl. Can't believe she'd pull that shit. I didn't buy it for a minute. I've been telling everyone what a bitch she was to you."

I chuckled because she expected it. Inside, I didn't feel like laughing. I'd forever be aware of gestures and speech from now on. Unless I was seducing someone who was interested, I didn't want to be dragged through any of that again. "Thanks, Erin."

She plopped my drink down in front of me and waved off my proffered ten spot. "First one's on the house. Good to have you back, foxy."

Several of the regulars wandered over to say hello. Some congratulated me on the lawsuit; others mentioned they wanted to take my next exercise class. The rest wanted a dance or a drink or a date. Guess I hadn't needed to worry too much about facing this crowd, either.

"If it isn't the harasser." Jordan butt in on the friendly hello I'd been sharing with a woman that deserved another glance

when I stopped remembering silky red hair, inconceivable blue eyes, feathery soft skin, and breathy moans.

I tipped my head in parting at the woman whose name I promised to learn if we did become involved again. No more callous can't-remember-her-name attitude for me. That was the least I could do. "Go away, Jordan." I barely glanced in her direction.

"You run out of people to molest down at your health club so you have to come down here for a whole new pool?"

"I said, go away. Away is any place else but here."

"Don't like striking out with the honeys much, do you?"

"You're not very bright, are you? We used to have an expression for that down in Georgia. We'd say you couldn't pour water out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel."

"Good one, Jess," Erin complimented, moving back toward my side of the bar.

"I'll take a beer," Jordan ordered, but Erin ignored her and continued down to the end of the bar. I laughed at the blatant dismissal. Little things amuse me now.

"Laugh all you want, Jessie Girl. I'm the one with my choice of any woman in this bar. Erin and your friends may have done a lot of work trying to clear your name, but there's still a little part of them that believes you fired Sophie because she wouldn't have sex with you. Hell, I figured that's how you got most of your sex in the past."

I sighed in a bothered manner and flicked a bored glance at her before studying my nearly full drink. Jordan inched in closer, trying to annoy me further.

"How's your little friend Lauren? Is she over not getting any from me?" She reared back when I swung my head toward her with a deadly glare. "Yeah, I had her all laid out on the bed so ready to fuck her silly and she went frigid on me."

I shot out of my chair, forcing her back three steps. The people around us turned to stare, expecting and hoping for the worst. Seething rage scorched the muscles in my arms. With a deadly calm to my voice, I let her know, "That is the last time you will say her name. Do you understand me?"

"Lauren, Lauren, Lauren," Jordan taunted. "She's so uptight even if I had fucked her, I probably wouldn't have been able to get—"

"That's it!" I spoke with controlled fury. "I warned you. You just lost your golf club membership, and now for my favorite." I turned back to the bar and called Erin over. "Hey, doll, what would you say if I asked you for a personal favor that whenever Jordan tries to order drinks from you, you just walk on by like you did before?"

"For you, gorgeous? I'd be happy to ignore her. You wouldn't even need to call it a favor." Erin grinned at me then snarled at Jordan.

"You can't do that. I'm a paying customer," Jordan whined.

"I can do anything I want, precious, you're not paying me. Try and flag down Lois when she's on. 'Course that won't help you tonight, will it?" Erin squeezed my hand before she tended to her other customers.

"You fucking bitch!" Jordan screamed at me.

"I told you to respect my friend or you'd be sorry. When I said you couldn't talk about her to anyone, I meant me as well. You aren't even fit to be in the same species as someone as amazing as Lauren. Now, scamper off before you lose access to your three favorite restaurants in town. This is my last warning. Say one more dishonorable thing about Lauren, and I'll spend all my time in here making sure every one of these women knows what a duplicitous bitch you are."

Jordan's glance moved over my shoulder. "Your champion's getting boring, Lauren. Have a talk with her before she loses the chance to fuck anyone else in this place."

"You're not a nice person, Jordan." Lauren spoke without any emotion. "My friend has more compassion than you could ever hope to have. She asked you to leave. I'd go if I were you; she doesn't look too happy."

"You two deserve each other." Jordan tried for malicious but her quick retreat spoiled the effort.

I softened the die-now glare I'd been wearing before turning to face Lauren. Not that I'd needed to because when I saw her I melted again. I couldn't wait until I was so

preoccupied in Europe that I could slough off these feelings. But damn if she wasn't the most beautiful creature to exist. Why did she have to be so gorgeous, and caring, and smart, and vibrant?

"Thank you for what you said."

A flush of heat rose to my face, horrified that she'd heard any of Jordan's filth. "I'm sorry she was so awful to you."

"I'm lucky to have such a loyal friend."

We stared at each other for a moment longer before I had to turn and reach for my drink. Any excuse not to lean forward and capture her lips. "You here alone?"

"Des and Skye, and Sam and Caroline are here. I came over to put in our drink order when I spotted you. Join us?"

I looked over to where she was pointing and waved at the group. "Actually, I was just leaving, but thanks."

Her brow furrowed, and I couldn't get over how unaffected she seemed by our situation. She'd gotten a little miffed with me after Sophie's deposition, but it was probably because she'd been tired from preparing my case. My head still replayed snippets of the conversation. Especially the part when I told her that I wanted to make love to her in the conference room and her only response was to ask if I'd be going to Europe alone. I'd probably just shocked her, but still, that was a pretty significant non sequitur.

"You haven't finished your drink yet," she observed.

"I've got stuff to drink at home."

"You haven't danced with me yet."

"Lauren," I started to object but didn't know how to finish.

"Dance with me, Jess."

Yes! "No."

"Please."

Any day, every day. "No."

She cocked her head, smiled softly, and crooked a finger into the bend of my arm. The strength of her finger tugged me to the dance floor. *Don't follow her. Break contact. May Day, May Day!*

Just my luck, when we squeezed into an open space, the DJ spun a slow song. Already barely standing in her presence, I

didn't think I'd make it through a slow dance. Lauren stayed a step away but reached her hands around my neck. When I didn't respond, she dropped her hands to pull mine around her waist. I moved them to her hips, not trusting that they'd stay at the small of her back otherwise. She led again, and I tried to look anywhere but at her. Especially at those lips that trembled when we kissed the first time and again when I'd kissed her at my house. God, I like when her lips tremble, I like when she trembles, and I really like when her blue eyes fixate on my mouth as I'm about to kiss her soft lips, her silken skin, her everywhere.

This wasn't going to be easy, but I felt pretty sure that within a week I wouldn't ache so badly for her. After two, I'd have mastered a more cavalier outlook about the whole affair. Week three, I'd barely remember that we'd been together. Four weeks and I'd be ready to come home to the once familiar scene of dating some of these beauties in this bar.

She swayed closer to me, and I felt her chest brush mine. When her hips connected I bit back a groan. Okay, maybe by week three I'd get around to the cavalier outlook, definitely by week four. She felt almost unreal and I had to slide my hands around her back and pull her closer to be sure I wasn't imagining this. Her soft face pressed in against my cheek and a tremor ran through her body.

Near the end of the song, her mouth brushed my ear as she spoke just loudly enough to be heard above the music. "Come home with me."

I twitched at her request. She adjusted her arms around my back, keeping me against her. What was she thinking? Hours passed, well, awkward seconds before I replied, "I can't." *I couldn't. I wouldn't. I really, really wanted to.*

"Come home with me," Lauren almost demanded.

I pushed back to look at her. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're leaving the day after tomorrow, and according to you, everything will be back to normal by the time you get back. You won't remember that we were ever together, so why not once more?"

"I can't."

"You mean you won't."

"I can't."

Those incredible turquoise eyes pinned me in place. "Come home with me."

I tried to shake the desperate need from my head before I replied. She wouldn't ask again; I knew that. Her gaze now displayed uncertainty. Another "I can't" and I wouldn't have to battle this rampant desire anymore. "I swear to God, Blue, if you leave again..."

She had the decency to only flash a wicked grin before her hand clasped mine. We walked off the dance floor and past the table of our friends. Lauren waved casually at them, saying something about being tired and needing a ride. All I could do was blindly follow her lead. One more night. It won't be any more difficult to get over her with one more night.

Chapter 30

This time when I opened my eyes, light filtered through the unfamiliar curtains. All other times my eyes blinked into darkness; I'd tighten my grip on Lauren and fall back to sleep. Only the memory of making love with her, the both familiar fragrance of her and exhilarating mixture of our scents, and the way she cuddled against me in slumber made for a decent night's sleep. Normally when I wake up every hour, I feel like hell. Not this morning.

Lauren had shifted positions to place her back against my chest, rear tucked into me. I breathed into her hair, taking in the lilac aroma which slowly brought me to full consciousness. I wouldn't fall back to sleep, even if she slept for another couple of hours. I'd be happy to lie here, pressed against her with my right arm around her front, forearm tunneled in the valley of her breasts. Lightly, I brushed my fingertips against the soft skin at her sternum. I didn't want to wake her, but I couldn't help moving my other hand up to stroke her hair delicately.

She burrowed into me further, no change in breathing. I tilted my head up and checked the hour. Still pretty early, but not horribly so. I slid my hand from her sternum, down her smooth breast bone, applying pressure to the side of her breast as it passed by. I fingered her rib cage, outlining every rib, feeling gooseflesh rise under my touch. When I skimmed her flat stomach, I felt her breathing change.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Lauren's groggy voice half whispered, half croaked.

I smiled into her fine red hair as bright as the light filling the room. "Good morning." She started to twist toward me, but I pressed against her back. "Stop squirming." I dropped my hand in between her legs and heard a loud gasp.

My thumb rested in the wide strip of silken curls and my fingers slowly rounded over her crest and down through her swollen lips. One of her legs shifted to give me what I wanted and my fingers met warm wetness. She moaned when my middle and index fingers circled her creases, igniting another flood of slickness.

"You feel heavenly," I murmured, knowing the words didn't do justice to how good she felt and how much I loved touching her.

Her hand brushed over my hip and moved around my back. When it reached my butt and squeezed, I let go of the groan I'd been holding in since my hand started its quest. I shoved my leg forward, spreading hers, pressing my thigh into the soft roundness of her rear. Time to get serious.

My fingers stopped teasing the arousal out of her and moved up to check how they'd done thus far. Just as they slid over the now protruding bundle of nerves, her ass jerked against my thigh in response. She tilted into my hand, adding more pressure because I was still teasing. A whimper escaped from her as my free hand brushed her hair aside so that I could kiss the back of her neck.

"Oh God, Jessie," she breathed out.

I could feel her heart pounding through her back against my chest, coaxing my fingers along. I started to circle her clit in fast, then slow strokes until her breathy exhales told me she would crash soon. I slid my hand down along her back to round the curve of her rear until it reached blissful wetness. Two fingers poised at her opening and I waited, breathless with impatience. Her hips lurched to impale herself on my fingers. I took over and drove into her tight, slick passage, noting again the divine squeeze as I penetrated her.

"Yes, oh yes. That feels incredible," Lauren groaned, rocking against my thigh, moving with my thrusts.

"Come for me, Blue," I ordered, adding pressure to the fingers circling her clit and pushing up against her G-spot repeatedly.

She cried out in tandem with her sheath gripping my thrusting fingers. Her body jerked in convulsions against me and the bed. I snaked my tongue out against the soft skin of her neck, grazing my teeth on the muscular connection between neck and shoulder. Her excited breathing blossomed to soft moans as her body shuddered through its final pulsations. Reluctantly, I pulled out of her, sliding my hand over the perfect globes of her buttocks and up to her back. My other hand still cupped her quivering swollen lips.

Her shoulder pressed into me as she flipped onto her back. Finally, I could see those sated blue eyes, now a slightly darker tint. "Good morning." I repeated, leaning down to take her lips and swallow any reply.

I planted a hand on the other side of her prone body, moving over her and dropping my knees on each side of her. Her hands pulled my hips onto her, wanting to feel my weight. My tongue reached into her mouth, meeting hers, tangling, thrusting, twisting. My head became so fuzzy I had to break the contact or risk losing any degree of control. She whimpered when my lips popped off of hers then kissed over her chin and down the side of her neck. I blew a stream of cool air onto the wet pathway I'd just created and her neck bowed against the pillow.

Her hand moved from my ass around my hips and shot through my legs, cupping me fully. I grunted softly and let her fingers slide my slickness around before I pulled back and fastened my mouth to her firm, freckle coated breast. This time I could see every freckle clearly in the morning light. When I realized this, I moved off her breast to study the puckered skin of her areola and dark crimson, erect nubs. Because I remembered how she reacted to my bite before, I gnawed gently then added my tongue and lips to suck, graze, and flick until her back arched into me.

She was no doubt the most responsive lover I've ever had. Open to everything I'd tried, crashing through boundaries with me. Talking wasn't necessary, neither were questions or whispered suggestions. She was equal parts tender and wild, caring and passionate, smoldering and blazing. A dichotomy of perfect traits usually found in different lovers all wrapped up in one amazing woman. Gentle at times, aggressive at others, making love with her was a constant surprise. Sensual serendipity.

Nothing felt better than this, touching her, kissing her, grinding with her, pulling the moans and groans and whispered words as she rose higher and higher toward ecstasy. I couldn't hope for anything more.

Other than to taste her. Feeling the need consume me, I backed down suddenly not touching any other part of her before my mouth affixed to her now soaking sex. So tangy, a taste I'd denied myself for over ten years, sampling through dental dams or cling wrap or not at all. I would crave this for another ten years, I already knew, but I pushed that thought from my mind. My tongue lapped flat against her, drinking in her essence while my hands tweaked one breast and rubbed the stretch of tummy just above her downy curls. Rolling up my tongue, I raised my chin and slid the half pipe over her clit touching every side as I stroked her.

"God, Jessie, what are you doing to me?" Lauren loudly moaned, her hips undulating to meet my laps. After several moments, her hands clasped the side of my head and pulled me from her sweet taste. "What? Tell me what," she exclaimed, eyes feral with desire.

"You want me to give away all my secrets?" I grinned, slowly crawling up over her to look into my favorite color.

"I have to know," Lauren whispered.

I shook my head playfully, loving the look of her stretched out beneath me. Her hands drifted across the small of my back and lower. When her thumbs and forefingers pinched my ass, I laughed in surprise. I rolled up my tongue and pushed it through my lips. Her eyes widened as my tongue darted in and out in its cylindrical form. I dropped my mouth to hers and

kissed her again. She seized my lower lip between her teeth, applying just enough pressure to startle me. Taking advantage of my shock, she rolled me onto my back.

Her face floated above mine with that wicked grin that got me to follow her home last night, and I could almost feel the moat around my heart dry up. All she'd have to do is knock on the door. I'd have plenty of time to regret this later. Right now, I planned nothing but enjoyment.

"I need to try that," Lauren declared before she kissed me.

I couldn't stop my body's stiffening response. Lauren felt it immediately and pulled her lips from mine with a smack. A look of concern adorned her face, and I tried to brush it off by tilting my hips into the start of a roll. Her hands dropped down beside my shoulders and her legs straddled a thigh to stop my attempt.

"You don't like having someone go down on you?"

"It's been years," I admitted. Ten years. When I trusted the woman I slept with until she cheated on me, and I've never been the same since.

"Good." Lauren looked more than pleased. "I like being different."

Her mouth attached itself to my neck, going lower and lower. I tried to relax and remembered that I'd given her access with her hands before. If I let her do this, I might never get over her. I'd open myself up for irreparable heartbreak. I'd barely survived the last time and it changed me. I didn't think I could handle changing again.

Her lips feathered kisses down my abdomen and my hands shot to her shoulders, holding her in place. Her face tilted up, and I forced myself to look at her. Arousal and hunger swirled through those remarkable eyes. Loosening my grip, I felt helpless to stop her.

When her mouth found me, I clenched my jaw, seizing up at the long forgotten feeling. Her hand caressed my stomach and the other curled under my thigh. I knew the instant she tried my trick, and I groaned at her mastery. I wasn't going to last so I hooked my hands under her shoulders and pulled

desperately. Her body dragged over mine as a whimper left her mouth.

I kissed it away and gripped her hips, sliding her mound against me. She moaned into my open mouth when our slickness met and smacked together. I'd been aching for release since I woke up with Lauren in my arms, but I'd gladly bring her off a thousand more times if it meant I could see the turquoise turn to cerulean and hear that sexy climactic shout.

She dropped her face next to mine, taking over the grinding of her hips against me. I slid a hand between us, stroking her molten heat while my knuckles brushed against me. Her body doubled its effort, rocking swiftly, and I met her with each sway. Our skin kissed and grazed and, for the first time, it didn't feel like just a surface sensation. Each touch penetrated, making an imprint on my heart.

When her breathing turned insistent, she lifted her head and looked into my eyes. "Come with me, Jessie. I want us to come together."

Just hearing the request almost did it for me. I love that she wanted that; she'd wanted it last night and the night together at my house, too. The only one of my lovers who'd ever made that demand. "Now, Lauren," I ordered because I both wanted and needed that, too.

"Yes, oh yes, Jessie," she cried out again, shuddering fiercely.

The sound triggered an internal churning of fire, setting off my orgasm. "Blue," I groaned loudly, feeling the crushing waves surge my body against her. I tilted up to kiss her and stayed connected until my heart and body stopped bucking wildly.

Her body collapsed boneless on top of me and she curled her hands under my hips. "I like when you call me that," she whispered.

"I'm glad." I didn't know if I'd ever call her that again because it would be too difficult a reminder of my inability to make her mine. I no longer had what it takes to share a life with someone. That went away when I packed and fled my apartment in Atlanta.

"Mornings are suddenly my favorite time of day," she spoke against my neck.

Tell her you love her! Now is the perfect time. This time will be different. Hope whispered in my ear.

Please! Lauren may be different, but you aren't. She's too good for you. The more familiar taunt screamed in my other ear.

"They are nice, yes," I agreed honestly. I'd wanted this, especially after how she'd bolted on me before. But feeling her heartbeat return so easily to normal when mine was still racing, I knew I had to leave or she'd obliterate all that remained of the vestige of my heart. "I hate to do this, but I've got to get to the club soon for a staff meeting."

Lauren grew taut over me and her head lifted up to search my eyes. Disappointment or possibly rejection flitted through her expression before her gaze turned a little hard. "Sure. Gotta get the ducks in a row before you leave, right?"

The warmth covering me disappeared immediately. I tilted toward her to try to take back any hurt I might have caused. How many women had I done this to? How had I smoothed it over with them? Oh yes, I'd lie, promise to see them soon, and tell them how fantastic they were. I'm not just a shit; I could be a trainer at the annual conference.

"I still have some things left to do. You'll be at Quinn's later, though, won't you?"

She blinked harshly then glanced away. I wanted to reach for her but decided touching her right now would make for a muscle memory I'd never be able to break around her. "Sure." Lauren kept her voice casual.

Because there was nothing left but more damage to inflict, I slid out of bed. I could feel her eyes on my nakedness as I bent to step into my clothes quickly. I turned back when I slid into my shoes, wishing I could think of something to say.

She spoke before I could. "What was it you told me to say before, 'last night was terrific, hate to have to go?'"

If her tone had been bitter, I would have known how to react. But she smiled without emotion, giving me an out. "More than terrific," I agreed because it was all I could think to say.

I moved through her bedroom doorway quickly. Her cat lounged in his favorite chair by the front door. Lauren had kicked him out of the bedroom when we got to her place last night. He didn't seem to resent being displaced from the bedroom where Lauren and I made love twice last night and twice this morning. Seeing him made me remember how much hope I'd felt coming home with her. For an entire night I forgot that I was an insensitive loner and an asshole who doesn't believe in forever love. I squatted down to rub behind his ears and under his chin.

"Bye, Reveler, be good to our girl." I whispered to him and left before I turned back and tried to convince her to stay in bed with me for the rest of our lives.

I mean how realistic was that? This was me we were talking about.

Chapter 31

I'd been wrong. It was going to be more difficult to get over her now that we'd been together a third time. Thank God I hadn't told her how I felt. I wouldn't be able to handle the heartbreak if I'd given power to those feelings by voicing them. As it was now, I'd be lucky if four weeks would be enough time for me to stop picturing her eyes and face and body and smile every single time I closed my eyes. Four weeks to get over her, who was I kidding?

One more night of socializing and I could escape. I'd be so worried about muddling through with limited language skills that I wouldn't have time to worry about how I'd continue to live in Charlottesville where I'd keep running into Lauren. It had been so much easier with Chloe because she stayed in Atlanta.

Twenty minutes late, I knocked on Quinn's door. I'd walked up from my house instead of driving. Easier to flee with, my dear.

"I was starting to get concerned." Quinn's blue eyes brightened as she pulled me inside by the hand. "Look who finally showed to her own send off party."

"Even for you, Jess, this is a little insensitive," Des inserted.

"I like to be consistent," I threw back at her. No one needed to know how much it hurt to be such a purposeful shit. "Sorry," I offered to Quinn.

"Hey, I was kidding. Today must have been crazy getting ready to go. Is the gym in order? Are you packed?"

"All set." I turned to greet everyone else. I got hugs from Caroline, Isa, and Skye, a punch on the arm from Des and Sam, a fist pound from Kayin, and a wave from Willa. Lauren sent a brave face and brief smile my way.

"Are you bringing a camera?" Sam asked. "I'm sure Will's got one you can borrow, don't you, Will?"

"Three," Willa joked. She didn't like taking pictures any more than she liked being in them.

"Where to first?" Isabel asked.

"I fly into Madrid but head to Bilbao right away."

"I can't believe you're going by yourself," Caroline said with awe.

"How else would she be able to woo all the women of Europe if she brought someone with her?" Des commented.

"Funny," I responded dryly.

"We all know the only reason you're going is because you've run out of women here." Des slipped her arm around Skye who gave me a sympathetic glance. Des cradled a tumbler with less than a fingernail of amber liquid left. I wouldn't be surprised if it was her third already.

"Enough, Des," Quinn commanded. Even Des wouldn't talk back to Quinn when she used her head coach voice.

Lauren swiveled and went into the kitchen to pour more wine into her nearly full glass. The sight added a squeezing pressure on my chest, making it hard to breathe. When I turned back, I caught Willa moving her glance from Lauren to me. She was better at hiding the fact that she knew about us than Austy had been, but it didn't ease the guilt any less. She gave a meaningful look at Quinn before centering on me.

"Come see the newest edition to the pool house, Jess." Willa crooked a finger at me.

"She just got here," Isabel whined.

"It's not like I'm taking her hostage." Willa started toward the back door without waiting for me to agree. Because I didn't want to bear this scrutiny, I left with her.

"Sorry I was late," I told her on the way past the pool.

"No need." She brushed a hand through the air. "I'm not going to ask if everything is okay this time, because I can see it's not."

"It will be," I said more for myself than for her.

"Yeah? A little Spanish tour and everything magically works out?" Willa's sarcastic tone flowed with us into the cabana.

I glanced around but couldn't detect anything different about it. "Did you change the color from green to moss or something?"

"No, I got you out of there before you smacked Des." She chuckled briefly before turning serious. "Did you change your mind?"

"About?"

"When you paid your little visit to me in the middle of my company's crisis, you told me you wanted the same thing I had." Willa shifted her gaze between me and other objects in the room because she often had trouble keeping eye contact. "What I have with Quinn. Did you change your mind?"

Why hadn't I kept my big mouth shut? *Because your best friend was slowly losing her confidence and the love of her life, and you couldn't stand by and do nothing. Nosy idiot.* "Someday," I admitted because I did want what she had.

"Not now?"

"I'm not there...I don't deser—"

"I will climb up there and beat you senseless if you say that you don't deserve it," Willa cut me off, staring up at me with every bit of her five foot three inch stature. "Don't you think I thought the same way? Before I met Quinn I didn't feel much of anything, good or bad. You're miles ahead of where I was."

"I doubt that."

"I didn't listen to you when you lectured me, either," Willa informed me in an unperturbed tone. "I'm going to say one thing, and you can listen now or realize later that what I'm telling you is right." She locked eyes with me which meant she was serious. "Other than your mom, I've only met one person who is pure joy. Don't pass up the chance to be surrounded by that again."

I stared at her, startled at her observation. I couldn't think of anything to say before I saw Quinn and Lauren headed our way through the French doors. Lovely, free spirited Lauren. Stunning in her cream colored dress. Red ringlets danced over her bare shoulders. She no longer seemed burdened with the hurt from Des's comment, but she wasn't sprinting to join us either.

Willa turned to me before they reached the door. "I could tell you what I think all night long, but your mom's the one who pointed it out to me. That night you were over at the college, she wondered aloud if you'd ever get around to noticing what you had so nearby."

Is that what she'd meant when she told me that the woman was already in my life? I didn't have time to think much about it before Quinn and Lauren were right on top of us. Quinn looped her arm around Willa who leaned into her reflexively. That envious look of unwavering devotion poured from her eyes when Willa looked up at her partner. A sigh puffed out of my lungs at the sight. Who wouldn't want that?

"What do you think?" Quinn asked Lauren about the pool table.

"Very nice. I know how much you love to play."

"Jess, too," Quinn indicated.

Lauren looked at me. "Yes, I remember." She and I used to play at the college bar hangout.

Quinn's eyes switched back and forth between us before Willa said, "We'd better get back to our guests, angel. You guys should try out the table, let Jessie get her pool fix before she leaves for Europe."

Lauren smiled at her and waved as they took a hasty retreat. "That's quite a best friend you've got there," she commented once they'd closed the door.

"She is amazing."

"I'm a little surprised you told her about us." Lauren casually inspected the pool cues and fingered the felt of the table.

"She guessed. And besides, you told Austy." I tried not to sound too defensive.

"That's because I panicked." A shy smile touched her lips. "I like not panicking better."

"Me, too." Several flashes of our morning together zapped my imagination, igniting a trail of sparks along my skin.

She studied me, seemingly waiting for me to say something more. "Since you and Quinn have already played pool on this thing, Willa had some other reason to bring you out here."

"She wanted to keep me from biting Des's head off."

"That's it?"

"I'm not going to Europe for what Des said."

"I know. You already told me why." Lauren stepped closer. God, she smelled good. I'd be happy to stand here and count the freckles on her face if it meant I could stare at her for hours. "That's all Will said?"

What did she want me to say? Did Quinn tell her something? Not that she knew much. My head started to hurt. I was still reeling from the idea of my mom and Willa discussing Lauren and me getting together. Why hadn't Mom said anything to me? Probably because she knew I'd reject the idea out of hand. I couldn't love someone the way Lauren needed to be loved. The only response left for me to give was to shrug stupidly.

"I think she said something else." Lauren wouldn't let up. "Something that worried you more than usual. What did she say? What are you so worried about?"

I'm worried that I'll never get over you. I'm worried that if I did try to become involved with you that you'd leave me. I'm worried that I can't possibly cherish you the way you deserve. And worst of all, I'm worried that I'm incapable of maintaining love.

She waited for me to voice the worries battering my head. When she realized I wasn't going to say anything, she stated calmly, "Both of our best friends are giving me advice. Yours was rather helpful, seeing as she's had a bit of practice with someone like you. Mine told me that someone needs to be brave. I guess that's going to be me." She stepped up so close we almost touched. "I'm in love with you, Jessamine."

My heartbeat pounded in every part of my body. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her, so intent on experiencing this, even if it wouldn't last. *She loves me!*

"Tell me how you feel," Lauren ordered with more confidence than I'd heard from her outside a courtroom before.

"I can't," my mouth spoke the words tangled with all my worries.

Lauren's hands reached out and grasped my hips, seizing me possessively. "You can't what? You can't tell me how you feel? You can't love me? You can't love?" Her blue eyes grew darker with determination.

I do love you! "I can't let you break my heart," I admitted in a whisper, not able to meet those troubled eyes. The last time I was in love, I let my broken heart change everything about me, and I didn't like who I became.

"Break your heart?" she asked incredulously. "I. Love. You. Why would I break your heart? It's taken me ages to figure out how I feel about you, and now that I have, I won't let you get away with trying to make me believe you're incapable of love. You can pull that stuff with the other friends, but Quinn and I know better. I love you, Jessie. I have no plans to break your heart. I want—no, I need to hear you tell me how you feel."

The heat of her stare caused a rush of fire that spread through me when she'd nailed me on how I normally functioned. I couldn't fool her. She knew me too well. That's what I get for falling in love with a good friend. Serves me right.

"Say it, Jess," she whispered, gripping my hips tightly and pulling me into her.

"I love you, Lauren." *There, I said it! I think I'm going to be sick. I think my heart is going to explode. I think I'm going to love this woman for the rest of my life.*

"Thank God," Lauren moaned. Her face pressed into my neck and she trailed a line of kisses up to my mouth. "You've made me so happy. I love you."

I felt terrified by her simple faith that we could make this work. An afterthought made its way into my muddled mind and even more panic took over. Before I could voice this

particular worry, Lauren stepped back and grabbed an envelope from the side table. She handed it over and curiosity got the better of me. Inside were two plane tickets, one in my name and one in Lauren's.

"Quinn told me the key to dealing with someone who doesn't voice her feelings often is to know that what you feel is what she's feeling unless she says otherwise. It makes every time she tells you she loves you ten times more significant. It also helps if she's got a special name for you. At least that's what Quinn thinks." She winked with adorable confidence. "So, because I love you that means you love me, and I'm not going to wait a month to start our love. I'm going with you on your trip. We can figure everything else out while we're traipsing around Europe." Her hands slid from my hips around my back, somehow sensing that I felt a little wobbly.

"That's the key, huh?" I finally found my voice.

"Well, she's had years of experience with Willa's non-demonstrative person. I'd say it's more like an instruction manual by now."

"Sounds complicated."

"Stop interrupting," she scolded in a lighthearted tone that moved from sure to decisive. "Two changes to the itinerary which I know you've packed full of activities. Actually, three, but we'll get to the third in a sec. We're leaving tomorrow night instead of tomorrow morning. I'm going to need a day at the firm to postpone things and make sure the associates can handle all open cases and trial prep. You'll just have to spend the day doing my packing and being good to my cat because he's going to miss me. Also we're flying into Ireland first so we can meet up with my parents for a few days. I don't want to wait to tell them about us."

I couldn't stop the wide smile that crept across my face at the thought of surprising Cap and Rena on the trip they'd been looking forward to for decades. Nothing would make them happier on their dream trip than to share it with the light of their life. I hoped they'd believe I could make her happy.

"Don't say it, Jessie. They love you. They'll be ecstatic about us."

I shook my head, wondering how she knew what I'd been worried about. "And the third change to my carefully planned itinerary? Not that I'm objecting so far."

Lauren leaned her forehead against mine. "You're going to have to give up one tour a day, because how we started this morning is going to take up some time every day."

I laughed softly, my heart finally feeling like it was back to full size, super size, actually. I kissed her tempting lips because they were right there and it had been too long since she'd kissed me. She smiled confidently, waiting me out. Her eyebrows crooked upward and now the smile infuriated me with its hint of telepathy.

"You're maddening, Blue."

"Yes, but you're in love with me, so now you're stuck with the madness." Her smile turned sinister asking for me to take her, touch her everywhere, make love to her until her body lay strung out from exhaustion. "And I can read your mind. Tell me again, or we're not leaving, and you'll never get to do what you're thinking about right now."

I laughed briefly in both giddiness and disbelief. Knowing that I'd never get away with anything, I relented because I had no choice. Not when she looked at me the way I'd always hoped someone would look at me. "I'm so in love with you, Lauren, that I don't even know how to be anymore."

Her eyes widened and tears formed at my revelation. I'd managed to surprise her. She nodded once. "Good."

She said it so simply I nearly lost all worry. "Stop worrying, I've got you now." Lauren wrapped her arms around me with a tight squeeze. "I can handle anything as long as I've got your love. There's nothing left to worry about."

"I believe you," I whispered, trying to convince myself. Only one worry left. *Please don't break my heart!*

"There's still a crease here," Lauren traced a finger along the line in my brow, "which means you're worried about something."

"No, just processing." I would keep that last worry to myself for as long as she'd put up with me.

"You get that this is it, right?" She gave me a stern look. "No more dating, no other women. When we get back, we're getting you a different cell phone to make sure only appropriate people have your number. You're with me, and we're going to be so good together."

Relief replaced the anxiety and love like I've never felt erased my last worry. Time to be brave myself, and more importantly, it was time to make my mom's wish for me come true. "I was going to say something similar."

Her smile defined elation. "Really? And how were you going to say it?"

"I was going to say that while you're adjusting your work schedule tomorrow and once I've finished packing all of your sexy underwear for our trip, Reveler and I will head over to the jeweler to pick out some rings. I'm going to need his help choosing a blue topaz that matches your eyes perfectly. He's got a sliver of the same color in his."

Those gorgeous eyes blinked repeatedly and her mouth popped ajar while she sorted out what I said. My heart pounded, the worry coming back for a second, thinking I might have misinterpreted her earlier statement.

"Are you asking me to marry you?" Hope stretched her face into wide eyes and a bright smile, eliminating all doubt on my part.

"I'm not showing up to surprise your parents without letting them know that I'm serious about this. Do you want platinum or gold bands? I like platinum, but whatever you want." I tried to sound casual, but this was the second most important question I'd ever ask her.

"Are you asking me to marry you, Jessamine?" she repeated forcefully. Her face came to within an inch of mine and her hands seized my hips again, trying to literally shake the information out of me. That wide grin took over her whole expression, making everything in my life suddenly seem buoyant.

"Not without the ring, I'm not. You'll just have to cage those critters for another day," I informed her with a confident smile. I could see her answer in every disappearing freckle

from the flush of her excitement. "A month in Europe sounds like a honeymoon to me, doesn't it to you? Then again, waking up next to you every morning sounds like a honeymoon for life."

"Oh...my...God!" Lauren shrieked and her lips found mine for a possessive kiss that took hold of my heart for good. She broke off the kiss with a teasing smile. "You are so mine now, and I knew I was right about you. Capital R, Romantic!" She twirled in my arms, dancing a little jig.

I grinned at the joyous beauty before me, knowing my life would never be the same and certain that I wouldn't miss a thing about the old one. "You deserve nothing less, Blue."

Epilogue

Three years later

When the doorbell rang, I was in the middle of showing my buddy, Caleb, how to throw a discus in my backyard. We'd been working through the ten events of the decathlon for three days, ever since my beautiful spouse opened her big mouth. A mouth I loved, but still, it got a little big every once in a while.

"That'll be Mom," Caleb said, half with disappointment, half with excitement.

The tone made me smile. I'd enjoyed our time together, too. "Should be."

"But we're not done," he protested even as he was tilting around me to see if Lauren had answered the door yet.

"We'll pick up the next time you visit, CeeGy. You're a natural at this stuff."

He beamed and hustled to help me put away the discus and shot put in the storage shed where I still kept a javelin and hurdle from my training days. Then we raced each other to the patio door. I couldn't resist reaching down to sling him over my shoulder. He giggled uncontrollably and grasped my waist as if afraid I'd drop him.

"Oh boy, here comes trouble," Briony muttered with a huge smile on her face. Her arm was wrapped around her partner's waist as they waited with Lauren for us to reach the front room.

I set her still laughing boy on the ground, and he immediately rushed into his mom's arms. "Hi Mom, missed ya."

"Not as much as I missed you." Her grin was as big as his. "Even with red hair." She ran a hand across his spiking hair, and I burst into laughter. "Your doing, Jess?" She pierced me with a teasing glare.

Before I could answer, Caleb spoke up. "Jessie says red hair is hot."

"It's the wash out kind," Lauren assured her even as we laughed at Caleb's declaration. She'd been fretting about it since we got back from the drug store and spiked his hair yesterday. She reached out and slid her hand into mine for a reassuring squeeze.

"I think we should make it permanent," his stepmom, M, kidded with him.

He grinned. "It looks cool, though, doesn't it?"

"Ham," his mother accused. She looked at me as I pulled Lauren closer and wrapped both arms around her. "I can't thank you both enough for stepping in like that." Her usual sitter had gotten called away only a day after Briony and M had gone out of town for a few days.

"It was our pleasure," I assured her. Briony didn't like to ask for help. She'd never asked before.

"We loved having him here, really. He's always welcome." Lauren smiled warmly trying to convey her sincerity. This type of consideration for her friends was just one of the many things I loved about her.

"Did you thank Jessie and Lauren for keeping you alive these past four days?" Briony prompted.

"Not for that," Caleb giggled again and swung around to face me. "Thanks for picking me up Thursday after school and letting me stay and bringing me everywhere with you." He squished me into a hug before turning to Lauren. "And thanks for teaching me how to play chess and how to make sopapillas. I had a lot of fun."

"You're welcome, Caleb. We loved having you here."

"Thanks again, you guys. I honestly don't know what we would have done if you hadn't stepped up like that." Briony hugged me first before turning to Lauren.

"Bye!" Caleb called out, darting out the door in front of his parents.

"Whew!" I blew out a breath as I dragged myself back to the living room and dropped onto the couch.

"Oh, you don't fool me, toughie." My beautiful partner sashayed toward me with a grin on her face. "You loved every minute of having that kid here."

I bit back a grin. I had loved it. Started me thinking, too, but I got all distracted as soon as Lauren slid first one knee onto the couch beside my thigh then the other to straddle me. Her devious grin kicked my heart rate into overdrive.

"You loved it so much, you're thinking about something, aren't you, darling?"

God, she knew me so well. I'd always thought having a lover who knew me so well would annoy me. But Lauren got to me on every level, crashed through every defense I'd ever set up, didn't let me get away with a damn thing. "Well, I don't know, shug. What do you think about what I'm thinking about?"

She gripped the front of my shirt and shook it slightly. "Do you really want us to have a baby, Jess?"

"That wasn't exactly what I was thinking," I replied. "But if you want to have a baby, L, I'll do anything for you."

She leaned down and kissed me with those lips that knew exactly how to drive me crazy whether they were touching me or not. "God, I love you. Tell me what you were thinking before I respond to that."

"I was thinking more like adoption or fostering," I stopped, checking her expression. "Of an older kid."

She beamed widely. "Like say 11 or 12?"

"Like say that, exactly," I kissed her again just because I could. "Would that be something you could handle, Laur?"

"Honey, I'm happy with anything you want. I love our life right now. I've loved it for the past three years, and I'll love it for as long as we live, with or without kids. You're the best

thing that's ever happened to me, and watching you with Caleb these past couple of days has been so amazing. You'd make a great mom."

I sucked in a breath. "Thanks, Lauren. So would you. He absolutely adores you. But I don't know how great I'd be with just any kid. I'm actually surprised Briony called us."

"I'm not." Lauren snuggled in closer, her breath tickling my neck.

"I was probably the last on her list. Well, we might have beat out Des and Skye."

Lauren tilted her head back to look at me. "Not even close. We, or I should say, you, were her first choice. You have to know that?"

"No, she must have called Caroline first, then Isabel. Hell, that's who I'd call."

"Darling, she doesn't trust just anyone, and she'd never trust her child with anyone that she doesn't think of as a close friend. She called you to take care of her baby. You should be proud of that."

I smiled in spite of myself. I kinda hoped that Briony had called us first. "She asked us, Blue. You're the anchor here. Without you, I wouldn't trust me with holding a baby much less taking care of a kid for four days."

She cuffed my shoulder. "Stop that. You are very trustworthy, very reliable, very maternal."

"You'd make a great mom, too. Maybe in a few years, we could think about the whole fostering thing. What do you think?"

"I think I married the wisest, most gorgeous woman in the world."

"You can't marry yourself, Laur."

"Oh, be quite, sexy." Her lips pulled at the part of my neck that always shut me up so I could enjoy the sensation. "Now tell me where you're taking me for our second anniversary."

My lips spread wide. I could feel a twinkle form in my eyes. I'd been planning this trip without her learning a thing for over two months now. She was getting impatient, despite loving the guessing game we'd been playing. "It's a surprise."

"You'll tell me." Her fingers flexed against my stomach trying to tickle me. "You want to tell me."

"You'll ruin the surprise."

"I don't care. Tell me. You're torturing me, Jess."

I laughed at her excitement. "Fine, if you don't want to be surprised."

She leaned in and kissed me quickly, bouncing on my lap. "This is going to be good. I can feel it."

"You did pretty well yourself last year. I have a lot to live up to." We no traded off planning our vacations. It took away a lot of pressure and added excitement in not knowing every little detail of the plan.

She raised a hand and blew on her fingernails then rubbed them against her chest. "It was pretty fantastic, wasn't it?"

"So good that I had to pull out all the stops this year. You sure you don't want to keep guessing?"

"I've been guessing for weeks now, darling. Tell me."

"Well, we're not going alone."

"What?" She jerked upright, surprised.

"Are you going to keep interrupting me?"

"I'll tickle you to death if you don't start talking, missy."

I laughed with her this time. "We had such a good time on our pre-honeymoon, I thought maybe we could repeat that."

Her eyes popped wide and she sucked in a deep breath. "My parents are coming with us?"

"For the first part, just like last time. Is that okay, honey?" I asked of the unexpected trip we'd taken just after getting together.

Her caressing mouth told me the answer with enthusiasm. "God, I love you. I can't believe you'd think of this. Do they know?"

"We've been plotting for a month now. We thought Dublin for a few days before we head over to where your extended family lives. They'll stay in that bed and breakfast they liked for a couple of weeks while we get on a plane for the rest of our trip."

"Back to Bilbao?" Her turquoise eyes sparkled, getting darker with excitement.

"Nope," I replied almost smugly. "You'll never guess."

"Don't make me."

"What would be your ideal?"

"We had my ideal last year. St. Barts, you in a bikini for two weeks, Gracious me, that was heaven."

"You can't resist this body, can you?" I fluttered my eyebrows. "You looked damn good in a bikini yourself, Blue."

"Stop trying to distract me, and get on with it."

"Okay, neither of us will be in a bikini this year, unless you want to have a private showing back in our hotel room." I paused hoping she'd offer, but she simply gripped my shirt harder, urging me to continue. "Fine, fine, if your ideal is a beach, water activities, and bikinis, this won't be near that. Sorry, shug. I really thought this would be perfect. Looks like I fell short."

"Jess!" Frustration marked her tone, but I knew she loved this as much as I did. "Where are we going?"

"Well, I thought I knew you well enough to guess what your ideal vacation would be, given that we'd already had Ireland and Spain at first, Australia for our official honeymoon, then St. Barts last year. I figured I'd crank it up a notch, but damn, if we peaked last year, I'm screwed."

"I will never speak to you again if you don't tell me right now!"

I laughed again, loving that I had her wrapped up so tight. "I just thought you might like to see Italy. Florence, Venice, the Roman steps, and a few places in between?"

"Oh, Italy! Absolutely perfect. Austy's told me so much about it. I've been dying to go."

I bit my lip, bursting to tell her. "Yeah? Your best friend kindled your appetite for the old country, did she?"

"You know she did, and she's only been twice."

"She mentioned that. She also mentioned that if you don't stick to the larger cities, you'll need a little Italian to get by. How's your Italian, Blue?"

"Since Aust moved away, it's gotten really, really rusty. We should pick up a conversational book before we leave."

"We could, or we could just take Austy at her word." Her brow furrowed and my smile widened. "She said we'd need a little Italian. I thought, hey, I know a little Italian, and she just happens to be my partner's best friend. So, while I was asking her all about where to visit in Italy, I told her to get a couple of weeks off and come with us."

"What?! You didn't, Jess? Oh, that's, oh, did she say yes?" Lauren was practically vibrating in my lap. "She did, didn't she? Austy and Elise are coming with us? Oh, Jess, I was wrong. This is my ideal, thank you, thank you." She squeezed me so hard I had trouble breathing.

"Anything for you, Blue, and I miss her, too. Plus, Elise is awesome. We'll have such a good time together. They can head back to Ireland with us to pick up your parents and travel back together. It'll be fun, right?"

"Perfect. I love you so much. You need to kiss me now," she demanded. I felt my heart expand. I loved when she got all demanding. "Kiss me like you did the first time you ever kissed me."

I smiled up at her, remembering that first time, remembering how she'd straddled my lap just like she was right now, and when our lips met, I knew then. I knew that she was it. She'd be my undoing. My close friend, my college mate, my buddy. One taste of her and I was done. She had me, completely and forever, like I'd never even allowed myself to think I could be had. "You kissed *me*, Blue. You keep forgetting that."

"Don't start with me, young lady." She loved emphasizing our two-year age difference. "I was innocently telling you about how I never wanted to date again and you attacked me."

"I did not. You artfully seduced me from the wine, to the sympathetic ear, to the play on my senses. You drew me out, and I didn't have a hope of resisting you. *You* kissed *me*."

"Delude yourself all you want, darling, but I wasn't as tipsy as you. I remember everything." The way her voice dipped had tingles shooting up my spine.

"How'd you end up in my lap then, huh? How'd that happen if you weren't trying to seduce me," I shot back.

"You reached for me, and well, you just looked so sexy. I knew you were going to kiss me, so I just had to get a better position. The upper hand, if you will."

"Oh, you've had the upper hand the entire time we've been together, and you know it."

"I know," she smiled, trying for smug, and I loved it because she didn't mean a word of it. I meant it, but she thought she was teasing.

"You do know it. You could tell me that I had to go stay with Des and Skye for a week and I'd do it. I wouldn't even question it. If it made you happy, I'd do it." I watched my words light up her eyes. "Anything for my brave one." I slid my fingers onto her engagement ring, which I'd had inscribed to remind her of when she'd first told me that she was in love with me.

"I can't believe how romantic you are sometimes."

"Never before you, Laur." I gripped her hand. "Speaking of which, I wanted to get you something to remind you of one of the happiest days of my life." I leaned over and reached into the side table, pulling out a flat jewelry box.

Her eyes widened. "What did you do? And how did you keep that hidden?"

"You never look in the obvious places, my dear. Open it."

Her long fingers cradled the box and nudged open the lid. A wide smile came across her face as she looked at the flat disc of two rose gold circles surrounding one of platinum. A matching piece to her wedding ring. Mine was the opposite, platinum surrounding rose gold. She fingered the nickel sized disc, then flipped it over, obviously surprised to see that I'd had it inscribed. "Oh, Jessie. You remembered," she whispered, reading the inscription. *For showing me how to be.*

"Of course I remember." I took the necklace from her fingers and fastened it around her neck. The disc rested dead center of her sternum, the rose gold chain and surrounding circles of the pendant looked lovely against the freckles on her skin.

"God, I love you. Did I happen to say that already? I don't like repeating myself, you know."

"I'd listen to that all day." I brushed my lips against her neck.

"Jessamine," she whispered with a hint of longing and that irresistible demanding tone that she only used in the most non-annoying way.

"Hmm?" I tracked my lips down her neck.

"Don't make me ask," she warned, regaining her senses.

"Oh? You need something?" I teased, reaching up to cup her breasts as further distraction.

"Jess!"

I chuckled, low and throaty, loving that I'd gotten her to the point of wanting to throw me down and have her way with me or throttle me. I leaned back to make sure I could see those beautiful turquoise eyes. "I love you, Lauren. I love everything about you, everything. I love your skin, your freckles, your eyes, your nose, your breasts, your long legs, your hair, your lips, your perfect rear end, your flat little tummy, the soft skin on your inner thighs. Did I mention your fingers and hands and what they do to me and for me? Or your laugh? I love your laugh. My day gets better every time I hear it. I love every bit of you. Or do you want to hear how much I love how smart you are, how you kick ass in court, how you make everyone happy around you, how good you are to your friends, what a great boss you are, how you spend so much time making sure that I get whatever I want. How I look forward to you waking up in the morning, stretching exactly like your cat before your turn to cuddle against me for a few minutes, not letting either of us move no matter how much of a hurry we might be in? Was that what you wanted to hear? That I have no idea how I didn't jump you the second I met you or how I managed to keep my hands off your sexy self for eleven years before I finally came to my senses and saw how perfect you are? That I can't imagine a life without you? That I don't want to think about missing even one night without falling asleep with you?"

Tears formed in her eyes, making my chest fill with so much love. "You are so amazing, Jessie, and mine, you know." She always thought of this as a tease, but I loved the sound of it.

"I am yours, Lauren. Completely, and I love it. I love how that makes me feel. I love that I belong with you and to you, and I love when you tell me I'm yours."

"Good," she said simply. "I love you, and I've gotta have you, right now. It's been four days because who knew you'd be a prude with a kid in the house?" she teased, fingering the flush that formed on my cheeks. "We'll have to work on that if we decide to adopt one of our own. Now stop making me want to cry and tell you how much I love you. We're making love, and I'm not going to make it all the way to the bedroom."

"No need. No kids, remember?" I fluttered my eyebrows, encouraging her. "Take me right here. I love when you get all aggressive, Blue. Make me yours again."

Please enjoy excerpts from Lynn Galli's novels, *Wasted Heart*, *Uncommon Emotions*, *Blessed Twice*, and *Full Court Pressure*, currently available.

Wasted Heart

"Somebody's having a good day," a now familiar voice pronounced from the doorway.

The smile I'd been wearing from the prospect of the new case widened when I looked up at Elise. That pesky school of fish swam swiftly through my midsection again, causing a little lightheadedness. She was in a skirt today conservatively an inch above the knee but plenty enticing. For instance, I was having a hard time not fantasizing about how soft the skin would be at the back of her knee. If my friend Des was here witnessing my perusal of Elise, she'd say something crass like how badly I needed to get laid. Crass, but true.

"Hi," I tried for nonchalant, but I'm guessing she saw right through me. "What are you doing here?"

She tipped her head back toward the hallway. "I was going over an investigation on a case that Rachel's taking to trial next week."

"Wasn't Jake on that?" I waved her inside the office to sit in one of my guest chairs. I tried to keep my eyes from staring at her toned calves as she floated into the chair and kicked one leg over the other. Her skirt rode up another couple of inches, and my mouth dried with each revealing hike of material.

Oblivious to my parched state, she responded, "He put in for a transfer to Phoenix to help out the family business now that his father's gone. He wanted to be more available to them."

Jake's dedication helped relieve my dazed reverie.
"Amazing how it takes a death to make us realize which things are really important in life."

"You're so right." She sloped into that sexy head tilt again.
"Jake asked me to tell you goodbye for him. I think he was a little enchanted with you."

"No." I tossed aside her remark without any consideration. Jake and I had worked seven cases together, and he was never more than affable with me.

Elise studied me for a long moment, not letting up on her sexiness. "Fascinating. You don't believe someone could be enchanted by you?" She was taking great enjoyment from my astonished expression. Before I could react, she stood up to leave. "I didn't really mean that as a question. Good seeing you, Austy."

Sassy, smart, and sexy: the very definition of trouble for me.

Uncommon Emotions

Raven pulled her car into the Paul Industries parking lot. Mine was the only vehicle left, so she didn't need to ask where I was parked. "Ahh, modern," she teased of my Lexus.

"Boring but functional and an automatic."

"Is your ankle still bothering you?" She couldn't hide the worry from her tone.

"No, but automatics are much easier with all the traffic around here."

We got out to load my share of the desserts into the back seat of my car. The process took a couple of trips, and we only bumped into each other once. When I surfaced from my last drop off of takeout boxes, Raven stood a foot away. The look in her eyes halted my sidestep.

She held my coat but made no move to give it to me. Her gaze didn't shutter the emotions this time. She took a step closer before glancing at my mouth. When her eyes returned to mine, I knew without doubt that she wanted to kiss me. This was so different from the men who'd dropped me off after a date in the past. They would look at me with determination; they were *going* to kiss me. Nothing in their gazes could be mistaken for this kind of wanting. No, the men let me know what they were going to do. This, this look was of a desire to kiss, a craving to kiss, a near Victorian yearning to kiss me. I felt my breath desert me as suddenly as when I'd fallen off her horse.

Unlike with the men on similar occasions, my heart thumped erratically and something of a ruckus roared through my ears. I felt hot and cold and trapped and free all at the same time. Never once had I experienced this strong of a reaction to anyone. Desire had always been an elusive emotion for me. If I were being totally honest, I'd have to admit that I'd never felt it. Until now.

I wanted this. I wanted her to kiss me like I've never wanted anything in my life. Not because I wanted another woman to kiss me for comparison. No, I wanted *this* woman to kiss me. This incredibly smart, sexy woman.

I should do something. Give her a signal to tell her that she could turn her desire into action. If I looked down at her lips, maybe that would be enough of an invitation. Instead, I stared at those eyes, feeling her breath barely touch my face from her spot inches away. Why couldn't I move my eyes from hers? Give her the simple go ahead, or better yet, tip my head forward and capture those sensuous lips to taste what I knew could become addictive? Perhaps it was my stupid sensibility stopping me; or maybe my concern for her that if we kissed and I felt nothing, as per usual, I'd hurt her desperately. God, I hate being sensible almost as much as I hate being emotionally bereft.

Before I could break the spell and reach for my jacket, Raven stepped back as suddenly as if she'd been yanked by some unseen force. She shook her head and offered my coat, not meeting my eyes. When I took the garment, she waved and hurried around to the driver's side of her car.

"Goodnight, Raven," I called out weakly as the door was closing. Her tires didn't exactly squeal as they left the parking lot, but the escape was no less dramatic.

Blessed Twice

There were about a million other things I could be doing right now. Playing tennis, reading a mystery, calling my son at summer camp, working out, rollerblading, base jumping, banging my head against a low hanging beam, and all would be more pleasant than my sixth first date. Cripes, my friend Caroline knew a lot of women. A lot of women who were so wrong for me.

This one's name was Polly, and she worked as a court clerk. After her third cup of coffee—I'd learned never to commit to anything that would last several courses—I could sum up Polly's personality with one word: drama. Or, issues. Or, get me the hell out of here, please!

"And then I was, like, 'what do you think you're doing with my stuff, bitch?' I mean, like, can you believe she was walking out on me and expected to take the one and only gift she, like, bought me in the entire two months we'd been together? I was, like, 'you didn't even pay me rent for two months, you're not taking my Maroon 5 with you.'" Her pretty green eyes stared expectantly at me, asking me to agree.

Still stuck on some of the other intimate details she'd shared prior to talking about a massive blowout over a piece of plastic that costs twelve dollars, I merely nodded then shook my head. I didn't know if she expected me to say, "Yes, I completely agree, even though you're a loon," or, "No, that's just awful, especially since there's no way you could ever replace such a priceless item. Unless, of course, you walked

into any music store, or better yet, downloaded the songs so no one can walk out of your life with her love and your CDs."

"You're so easy to talk to," she jabbered on after I'd apparently given the appropriate response. "I can't believe Caroline never introduced us before. I'm having so much fun." Yeah, because drinking coffee is a riot a minute. "So, like, what's your story?"

Well, I've never used the word "like" as a verbal pause, I've never moved in with someone after one night together, and I've never considered a CD worth the effort of an argument. Oh, and I now deem dating a soul draining experience.

"Briony?"

I looked up and felt my stomach plunge as swiftly as if I'd been pushed out of an airplane. M was standing by my table, iced coffee in hand on her way out. She was in casual clothes, showing a hint of midriff, envious calves, and just the barest promise of cleavage. "Hey there, M." I hoped she caught the relief in my tone. Wow, she looked good. No makeup today and her hair was a little more chaotically styled but wickedly attractive. Beyond, actually, more like hot. Yes, hot suited her just fine. Why wasn't I on a date with her? Oh, crap, Polly. "This is Polly. Polly, my friend and colleague, M."

Polly must have picked up on my blatant interest in M, because the next thing I knew, she was telling her, "We'd invite you to join us, but we're on a date."

I didn't know who cringed more, me at the idea that this could really be counted as a date or M at the rude dismissal. My eyes snapped up to hers in apology. Before I realized what I was doing, I made the ASL sign for "help." It was one of a few words I'd learned for when my son spent time with his hearing impaired best friend. This was the first time I'd ever used it, and I never imagined I'd be using it for evil instead of good.

"Pardon the intrusion, but I thought we said two o'clock?" M asked me with the perfect amount of urgency and innocence. "I grabbed a table up front and left all the lecture notes and business plans there. It's a few hours of work, and

I've got plans tonight, but if you need a little more time, I understand."

"Is it two o'clock already?" I brought my wrist up to check the time on my watch. "Gosh, I'm sorry, Polly. I didn't mention this work thing because I never thought we'd still be here. You just made the time fly by." Two hours that I'll never, ever get back.

She beamed at my compliment but disappointment showed through. "Caroline said you were a workaholic, but we can work on that." She reached for a hug, which I made lightning quick, and finally, the sixth date on my path through hell was over. Polly banged through the coffeehouse doors with all the drama she'd expressed during her diatribe.

"Thank you for saving me."

"Think nothing of it." M said it like she believed it when I was considering erecting a life-sized shrine and lighting a candle every night. Her eyes darted to the door as her customary introversion returned. "Nice running into you, Briony. Enjoy the rest of your weekend."

"Tell me about those plans you mentioned," I blurted before she could disappear.

"I lied," she admitted with a shy smile. "I figured if I didn't give a limited window of time, she might think she could get us to postpone our work meeting."

Strangely, I felt more relief hearing this than getting out of my date with Polly. "So, you've got nothing going?" She shook her head. I smiled and stepped toward her. "You do now."

I couldn't think of a better way to spend my Saturday than with this beautiful, enticing woman. Not really a date, but far better than anything my friends could set up for me.

Full Court Pressure

"Do you miss Washington? Leaving anyone special behind?" Darby's blue eyes sparkled.

"I used to be okay with living in three different cities while I played because of the offseason coaching or the overseas leagues, but ever since I retired, I've really taken to living in one place. Washington was great, but it's nice to be back on the west coast."

"You must miss your friends? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Both?"

Both? Yeah, I'm a hussy like that. "I do miss my friends. I had a great coaching staff working with me. Kristine, James, and Rebecca were close friends by the time I left. They were pretty angry that I made this move, but since Kristine is now the head coach, they'll get over it."

She laughed softly, the sound rolling over the table in featherlike waves. "You managed not to answer the question I wanted you most to answer." She smiled broadly at my furrowed brow. "Boyfriend or, please let it be, girlfriend?"

My mouth nudged ajar. Something about her question didn't seem like idle curiosity. And certainly not the way she asked if I had a girlfriend.

"C'mon. You're among friends. I've always had a vibe about you."

"Vibe?"

"You know, a gay vibe." The statement came out with certainty. I didn't have time to be startled. "You can tell me,

Gray. I'm sure you know I'm a lesbian, and you have to know I'm interested in you."

Holy...

"You're my fantasy woman, have been for decades since I first met you. So, spill, tell me you're going to make my fantasy come true."

...Hell. I was someone's fantasy? Hers? This beautiful woman whom everyone liked and so many lusted after? Did the world turn upside down as soon as I crossed into the Pacific Time Zone? "Fantasy?" I managed with a dry mouth.

"I'm coming on too strong, aren't I?" A touch of worry marred her expression. "My sisters always tell me that I need to tone it down, but I can't help it with you. After all these years, I finally have you in the same city and permanently. So, I'm putting it all out there tonight. I didn't want there to be any confusion about what I want."

"What you want?" *GAH!* Could I please stop repeating everything she said?

"You."

One word, sounds like sue, only less litigious. She wants me. Damn, that even sounds weird just thinking it. Why would she want me? I'm not a person who brings out wanting in people, or I never have been, or I've been oblivious to it my whole adult life.

Jeez, I mean, this was only my eighth date, if this was a date. And I know, eight dates, right? But, like I said, when you're really good at something, other things fall by the way side. My love life foremost among them. Since I'm pretty convinced I was born without a sex drive, I hadn't ever felt like I'd missed much. Why date when I felt nothing? Okay, this time, maybe I didn't feel nothing, maybe this time was a little different, and it wasn't because she was a woman when the others had been men. This time was different because it was Darby. Was she my fantasy woman, too? Honestly, no, but only because I didn't have fantasies of that nature. I must be broken. Everyone else had fantasies, right? Why didn't I? Maybe I just needed to think about it. I could try to fantasize about her. Hmm, that might work.

"Gray?"

Try later. "Huh?"

"Shocked?" She smiled understandingly, and my, was it a beautiful smile. "I wanted to be upfront about this. I want more than just friendship from you, have for a long time."

"This is...I mean, that's very flattering."

"Oh, God." A panicked look came over her face. "You're not going to say that you're flattered but it's not me it's you, are you? Just lie to me and say you've got a boyfriend. I can handle unavailable but don't crush my ego by telling me you're the biggest lesbian on the planet, but I do nothing for you."

My head shook, trying to snap all the whirling thoughts to attention. "I don't know what to say."

"That's better than turning the tables over and racing from the restaurant, I guess." She reached across and grasped my hand. The touch felt comforting. "Just tell me I have a chance?"

"I haven't thought about dating in a while." If she knew how long of a while it might put a stop to this before it had a chance to get started. "You've thrown me for a loop. I'm still trying to catch up."

The smile that surfaced on her face brought out sparkles in her blue eyes and added definition to her sleek cheekbones. "I'm still in the running, then. Good. Enough pressure for tonight, we'll save that for our second date."

Second date? In way over my head here, but it felt pretty good.