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Contents

Chapter 1 7

Chapter 2 11

Chapter 3 15

Chapter 4 20

Chapter 5 24

Chapter 6 28

Chapter 7 32

Chapter 8 36

Chapter 9 40

Chapter 10 44

Chapter 11 48

Chapter 12 52

Chapter 13 56

Chapter 14 60

Chapter 15 64

Chapter 16 68

Chapter 17 72

Chapter 18 76

Chapter 19 80

Chapter 20 84

Chapter 21 88

Chapter 22 92

Chapter 23 96

Chapter 24 100

Chapter 25 104

Chapter 26 108

Chapter 27 112

Chapter 28 116

Chapter 29 119

Chapter 30 123

Chapter 31 127

Chapter 32 131

Chapter 33 135

Chapter 34 139

Chapter 35 143

Chapter 36 147

Chapter 37 151

Chapter 38 155

Chapter 39 159

Chapter 40 163

Chapter 41 167

Chapter 42 171

Chapter 43 175

Chapter 44 179

Chapter 45 183

Chapter 46 187

Chapter 47 EPILOGUE 191

Chapter 48 PART 2 – Shay's Redemption 195

Chapter 2 198

Chapter 3 202

Chapter 4 206

Chapter 5 210

Chapter 6 214

Chapter 7 218

Chapter 8 222

Chapter 9 226

Chapter 10 230

Chapter 11 234

Chapter 12 238

Chapter 13 242

Chapter 14 246

Chapter 15 250

Chapter 16 254

Chapter 17 258

Chapter 18 262

Chapter 19 266

Chapter 20 270

Chapter 21 274

Chapter 22 278

Chapter 23 282

Chapter 24 286

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Chapter 1

Week 28: Baby's eyes partially open

Twenty-eight weeks into your pregnancy, or 26 weeks after conception, your baby's eyelids can partially open, and eyelashes have formed. The central nervous system can direct rhythmic breathing movements and control body temperature.

By now your baby might be nearly 10 inches long from crown to rump and weigh nearly 2 1/4 pounds.

***

“Mandy Johnson?”

Mandy hurriedly closed the magazine that she was reading and nearly dropped it in the process. She lurched to her feet. It was neither graceful nor pretty. Being seven-months along, Mandy had found that the simplest of tasks, such as standing, could be almost insurmountable.

Mandy smiled at Dr. Roberts’ assistant who was standing patiently at the door.

“It’s nice to have you back, Mrs. Johnson,” said the chubby middle-aged woman as she guided Mandy over to the scale.

“Um, I’m not married, Tina,” Mandy said with a sigh. It seemed that she needed to remind Dr. Roberts’ medical assistant of this at every appointment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, child,” she replied. “Up another three pounds this month.”

“Is that bad?” Mandy asked as looked at Tina in horror.

Tina laughed replying, “I have some women that gain almost seventy pounds with their pregnancies. You have gained twenty-one pounds which is perfectly normal. We did the urine sample while you were waiting, and everything came back fine. Shall we head into a room and listen to the heartbeat?”

Mandy nodded and followed Tina’s wide hips to the third waiting room. From there Tina asked her climb up on the table and squirted some jelly on Mandy’s belly. With the fetal doppler, Tina quickly found the baby’s heartbeat and recorded it on the chart.

“Are you experiencing anything unusual?” Tina asked, the tip of her pen resting on her full lips.

Mandy frowned before saying, “You always ask me that. But it seems that no matter what I tell you is happening you tell me that it’s perfectly normal.”

Tina raised a brow. “Pain, headaches, nightmares, heartburn, and occasional cramping are all typical of a normal pregnancy, Mandy. But should you come in with purple stripes and orange polka dots I promise to be properly impressed.”

Mandy laughed. “I haven’t experienced stripes or polka dots, so I suppose I should be grateful. It is nothing like that.”

“What is it, child? I have been seeing mother’s for over twenty years, and I don’t think that there is anything you could say that would surprise me.”

“I keep having sex dreams!” Mandy blurted out.

“About me?” Tina replied saucily as she winked at Mandy.

“No! Well, I couldn’t tell you who they were about because that changes from dream to dream. But I have these hot dreams of lovers, sometimes two at a time. And, I wake up in desperate need, but my vibrator isn’t cutting it anymore.”

Tina nodded sagely. “That is perfectly normal.”

Mandy groaned at the word *‘normal’*.

Dr. Roberts knocked on the door and slipped inside. He was a handsome man in his forties, and Mandy was been grateful he was able to slip her into his caseload. He was an excellent physician, but that didn’t mean that Mandy wanted to talk about her sex dreams with him.

“You need to get laid,” Tina advised.

Mandy’s cheeks heated and she looked to the floor.

Dr. Roberts paused putting on the second latex glove. “Am I missing something?”

Mandy wanted the earth to split so that she could sink into a deep hole.

Tina answered, “Mrs. Johnson is having wild sex dreams. I told her that she needs to get laid.”

Dr. Roberts cleared his throat and said, “While not completely medically ethical, I would have to agree with Tina. These dreams won’t harm you or your baby. But you might get some satisfaction from having an orgasm.”

“Kill me know,” Mandy uttered underneath her breath.

“Now,” Dr. Roberts replied with a grin that made him look younger and eminently more handsome. “There is nothing wrong with good sex, Mandy. It has been proven to solve many ailments.”

Mandy pointed to her belly and said wryly, “And cause a few as well.”

Dr. Roberts lips twitched. “That was just luck.”

Tina giggled. “Or poor planning.”

Dr. Roberts admonished his assistant. “Every baby is a blessing from God.”

Mandy wasn’t sure what she thought about the peanut. Sure, at this stage of her pregnancy she’d gotten used to the idea that there was indeed a baby in there and this wasn’t alien-nation. But she wasn’t sure she was on the *‘blessing from God’* train yet.

“You could always use a vibrator,” Dr. Roberts continued.

“It’s not tickling her fancy,” Tina responded before Mandy could get a word in edgewise. “Besides, Mrs. Johnson has a hankering for two lovers.”

Dr. Roberts looked impressed.

“I don’t!” Mandy shoved her maternity top over her belly. “It was only a dream! And I’m not Mrs. Johnson!”

Tina sniffed. “Apparently she is sensitive about a few things.”

Dr. Roberts ushered Tina out of the room before Mandy could strangle her.

“Tina is a good woman who can’t keep her mouth shut to save her life,” he said with a good-humored smile. “Everything is on schedule, Mandy you measure at twenty-eight weeks. Do you have plans for Christmas? It’s right around the corner you know.”

Mandy grimaced. “I’m still living in my parent’s basement. It’s been hard to find a job being the size of a water buffalo. So, no, nothing is exciting in my life this Christmas."

“Didn’t you say that you worked as a PA before?” Dr. Roberts threw away his gloves and began to wash his hands.

“Yes,” Mandy replied as she climbed down from the examination table. “But they let me go when I vomited nonstop for five months.”

“I have a friend who is looking for a personal assistant. I have his number here somewhere.” Dr. Roberts searched his pockets and came up empty. “Do you mind if I give your number to him?”

“Thank you, Dr. Roberts, that would be incredible. You have no idea what it means to me!”

The doctor smiled kindly at Mandy. “I can’t promise anything, Mandy. But he’s a good man and you will get an interview. Oh, and about the other thing?”

Mandy looked at him in confusion.

"The sexual dreams?" His smile was kind. "That is all perfectly…"

"Normal," they finished together.

"Don't let Tina bother you," he said as he walked Mandy to the waiting room and bid her farewell.

Mandy looked back at the magazine she'd been reading before her name was called. The story featured the best sexual positions while pregnant. Mandy glanced around the office and then walked over and picked up the magazine. She'd only read about the spoon, reverse cowgirl, and side by side. She'd five more positions to make herself feel worse about not having sex, and she wasn't going to miss them.

Walking out as nonchalantly as possible, Mandy made her way out of the doctor's office and headed toward her older sister Kim's coffee shop. Once she entered The Grind and smelled the familiar aroma of French roast and Columbian's finest, Mandy began to unwind.

She'd just finished up rear entry when her phone buzzed.

Unknown: Amanda Johnson? This is Elliot Brand. I was given your name by Dr. Roberts about a PA position in my firm. Are you interested in coming in for an interview?

Mandy gasped. *That certainly had been fast!* With fumbling fingers, she replied.

Amanda Johnson: Yes, Mr. Brand. I'm interested.

Unknown: Excellent. Are you available to interview tomorrow at 11 am?

Amanda Johnson: Yes, sir.

Unknown: Our offices are located on 5th and Main. I look forward to meeting you, Ms. Johnson.

Mandy squealed with delight. Perhaps fate was finally on her side.

Chapter 2

Mandy threw another skirt onto the growing pile of clothes on her bed—nothing fit right anymore.

“There was nothing wrong with that black skirt,” her older sister said as rolled her eyes. Kim had stopped by their parent’s home that morning for moral support.

“I look like a fatty,” Mandy cried out in disgust.

Kim’s lips twitched. “No, you look pregnant, which is exactly what you’re.”

Kim had married Andrew five years ago, and they were blissfully happy. Or at least, they had always seemed like they were. However, they had not yet been blessed with children. When Mandy had first discovered she was expecting it caused a rift between the usually impenetrable sisterhood.

It was only in the past few weeks that Kim had started acting more like her old self. Mandy had missed her sister more than she cared to think about. Flopping down onto the pile of clothes, Mandy moaned helplessly.

“Why would Mr. Brand want to hire me? Who hires a woman in her third trimester?”

Kim laughed as she got up from the overstuffed faded pink chair that they had picked up at a consignment store when Mandy was about twelve. Money had always been tight. But her sister had found a way to pay for the hideous thing.

“Mandy, you’re smart, funny and talented. If this man doesn’t hire you, just because you’re pregnant, he is an idiot.”

Mandy’s eyes sparkled with unshed tears. It seemed everything these days brought on emotions that she couldn’t quite control. “Do you really think so?”

Kim picked up the black knit skirt that had been previously discarded. “Yes, now put this on, and I will curl your hair.”

Mandy did as she was told and sat in front of her mirror as Kim grabbed the hot curling iron. Mandy had what she would call dishwater blonde hair. True, it was thick and shiny, but there was nothing spectacular about it.

She took her bronzer and gave her pale skin a light dusting. It wouldn’t do to look like a zombie. Her dark blue eyes sparkled with the rose-colored eyeshadow, and her long lashes were coated with black mascara.

After covering her pouty lips in pink gloss, Mandy added a hint of perfume behind her ears and at her wrists.

Once Kim had finished curling Mandy's hair, she sprayed it well with a long-holding hairspray.

"You look gorgeous," Kim said as she squeezed her shoulder as they both stared into the mirror.

"I look like an elephant," Mandy replied. "But it will have to do. Thanks, Kim, you're a life-saver."

Kim smiled sadly at their reflection causing Mandy's gaze to swing toward her. "I have been meaning to ask you something."

Mandy took her hand. "What is it?"

"Do you think," Kim asked nervously, "after the peanut arrives, that you might want help with childcare?"

Mandy felt her heart lodge in her throat. With all of Kim's infertility issues, Mandy knew how hard it would be for her sister. "Kim you don't have to do that."

Kim nodded. "I know. I want to help. Andrew and I have both talked about it. We have more leeway at the coffee shop than you will working in an office."

Mandy felt a tear slip down her cheek. "If I can't be with the peanut, you're the next best thing. Most likely, you will be better. What do I know about parenting?"

Kim brushed the tears from Mandy's cheek. "Don't mess up your makeup! You will be a fantastic mother, Mandy. Besides, we have a million examples of what not to do."

Mandy thought about their own mom and grimaced. "Indeed, we do."

Kim glanced at her watch saying, "You need to get moving if you need to be there by eleven."

The girls walked up the stairs and were immediately greeted by their mother. "Why are you walking around here like a whore?"

Kim opened her mouth to argue but Mandy shook her head as if to say it wasn't worth wasting her breath.

"I will be back in a few hours," Mandy's tone was deceptively light despite the hurt that her mother had inflicted.

Mandy knew what her mother was like. But it didn't mean that her words still hadn't the power to slice through her.

"Get a job yet?" Their mother sneered as she puffed on a cigarette.

"You shouldn't smoke around a pregnant woman," Kim replied angrily as she tugged on Mandy's arm trying to get her to leave.

"Shouldn't fuck strangers and come home knocked up." Their mother blew a cloud of smoke in their direction.

Kim yanked Mandy out of the house. "I hate that woman. Why won't you come and stay with Andrew and me?"

Mandy gently untangled her arm. "You and Andrew live in a one-bedroom apartment above the coffee-shop. Now, before you try and offer me a job again that we both know you can't afford, let me get going. Your shop is just now starting to turn a profit. I won't ruin your lives to help myself, Kim. Don't ask it of me."

Kim ground her teeth together but didn't say anything as they walked to their cars.

"Call me, after the interview, okay?" Kim asked as hugged her sister close.

Mandy drank in the familiar smell of her older sister who had been much more of a parental figure than her parents ever had. "I will, I promise."

Kim pulled back and gave Mandy a bright smile. "Knock 'em dead, kid!"

**

Mandy still had a smile on her face as she walked into the massive office building on 5th and Main. Brand Enterprises took up an entire square block. Mandy had thought the glass building was incredibly intimidating. Just who was Elliot Brand?

As Mandy approached a young man behind the reception desk. She noticed that he was wearing a headset and saying, "Mr. Brand isn't available. May I take a message?"

Seeing Mandy, the young man held up a silent finger asking Mandy to wait a moment. When he finished his call, he turned his attention to her. "Welcome to Brand Enterprises, my name is Ian. How may I help you?"

Mandy was impressed with his engaging smile and pleasant demeanor. "I'm Amanda Johnson. I have an eleven o'clock appointment with Mr. Elliot Brand."

Ian's perfectly sculpted brow rose exponentially. "Brave girl. I will tell him you're here."

The nerves in Mandy's stomach were dancing the tango, and she wanted to ask what in the hell he meant by *'brave girl.'*

But just as soon as Ian had made Mr. Brand aware of Mandy's arrival, he instructed her to take the private elevator that only stopped on one floor—the top.

Mandy felt ill.

Her nerves were starting to get the best of her. She couldn't help but wonder if this had been a mistake. She'd resolved to push the down button as soon as the elevator stopped at the top. With any luck, she hoped, Mr. Brand wouldn't see her at all.

The numbers seemed to crawl by at a snail's pace. Mandy counted the numbers and floor after floor passed. Then suddenly it was the moment of truth, the elevator dinged, and the doors opened. Mandy stuck her hand out to return to the lobby. But instead of reaching the control panel, a firm hand met her clammy palm.

She gasped as a tingle of desire wrapped around her skin and snaked up her arm. Mandy blinked as she gazed at the handsomest man she'd ever seen. Recognition rocketed through her—she'd seen him before!

"Ms. Johnson?" his dark voice was terribly familiar despite the length of time it had been since she'd first heard it. Her stomach roiled and she prayed that she wouldn't be ill.

This was Mr. Brand? Her breath caught in her throat—*it couldn't be.* Panic choked her lungs, and she couldn't draw air.

Those grey eyes, that dark hair, those sinful lips, she would know this man anywhere. The last time she'd seen him, he was burying his massive cock deeply inside of her.

Concern knit his brows together as he helped her from the elevator. "Are you, all right?" his voice was like a caress.

Mandy's internal monitor was screaming something about how she may never be *'all right'* ever again. But it wouldn't do to continue to stand there like an idiot. She'd to say something. Mr. Brand led her to the opposite side of his desk and continued to stare at her.

It took Mandy a moment to realize that she still hadn't said a word to him. With a shaky voice she replied, "Of course, everything is fine. It's nice to meet you."

Chapter 3

Elliot was having a difficult time not staring at the beauty across from him. Her long honey blonde curls fell about her shoulders, with one dangling delightfully over her left breast. She was wearing a short black skirt that showed off her endlessly long legs. Her flowy top was somewhat sheer and low cut enough to showcase her fantastic tits. Not that he was looking, but let's face it, they were glorious.

Her top also revealed that Mandy Johnson was pregnant, and far along at that. Elliot had known Ms. Johnson was expecting, his friend Dr. Alan Robert's had already filled him in on some of the finer details.

While Elliot wasn't running a charity house, he did have a soft spot in his heart for single mothers. His own had worked three jobs to keep a roof over their heads when Elliot was a child. Once he was one of the most successful billionaires in the city, his mother had worked tirelessly to help other women who were in the same situation.

It wasn't often to find someone in Elliot's position that truly knew what hunger and poverty were like. From what Alan had expressed, Mandy needed employment and possibly a place to live. Elliot had almost turned him down. But there had been something in his friend's tone that had Elliot pausing. He didn't need anyone currently, and he couldn't run a successful business helping every sob story that came his way.

Alan insisted that all he had promised was an interview. Rather than bother his secretary, Elliot had texted the girl himself. He had just had an opening on his schedule and knew that he could squeeze in the interview, turn the woman away, and be on with his day.

But all of that went out the window the moment he saw her.

No, it wasn't just that she was hot as sin, he reasoned.

Then he had to reconsider the thought. His cock had certainly taken notice of the beautiful woman. There was something familiar about the curve of her cheek.

Elliot shook the thought away. It wasn't likely that he knew this woman. They came from completely different worlds. However, Elliot could have sworn that there was a flash of recognition in her eyes the moment she saw him. Maybe it was wishful thinking? He couldn't be sure. But one thing was certain. He needed to know more about Mandy Johnson.

Elliot watched as she glanced around his office. He knew what she would see. The floor to ceiling windows, showcasing the city below them. A fireplace on the interior wall with a cream-colored sofa across from it.

Doors leading to a private bathroom with a walk-in closet. One never knew when you would get stuck at the office, and Elliot liked being prepared. A small bedroom that nobody entered except Elliot and the cleaning staff. Which left his massive desk and the two chairs facing it where Mandy currently sat.

Elliot couldn't take his eyes off her. She was lovely beyond description. He wanted to touch her again. The moment their hands had connected his pulse had raced to life, blood pumping in his veins, his mind sharper and brighter than before.

Whomever this woman was, he wouldn't let her slip between his fingers.

"Are you feeling better?" Elliot asked after handing her a water bottle and watching her take a long sip of water.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Brand," her husky tones had his dick, who was already aware of her allure, hardening in his slacks. "I must have gotten lightheaded."

He nodded. "I've heard that can happen during pregnancy."

Her eyes shot to his in surprise.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's just, most people ignore the fact that I'm expecting."

"I didn't mean to offend you?" he said hurriedly.

"You didn't," she replied with a smile.

Elliot felt it like a kick in the gut. He didn't think she was aware of just how attractive she really was.

"Unless they are elderly," Mandy continued. "Then they come up to you and touch your stomach like they know you. It's weird having strangers touch me."

Elliot wanted to touch her. He swallowed that thought and said instead, "I can imagine how uncomfortable that would be."

"Yes." Mandy nodded. Then she winked. "I suppose that's *normal*."

**

Mandy watched as Elliot's face broke into a wide smile. That smile was one of the things that had first attracted Mandy to Elliot. Only she hadn't had known his name back then. In reality, she hadn't even seen all of his face.

Mandy had been with her best friend Shay, working a private party downtown. They were serving drinks for a corporate event. Mandy had spent the entire day at her regular job only to race over to the party, slip into the skimpy uniform and black mask, to serve business moguls various alcoholic beverages.

Rent was expensive in the city, and Mandy had often filled in as a cocktail waitress when Shay needed it. Her best friend ran a successful catering business, or at least she'd until the accident.

Mandy shook her head to clear the past away, Shay's car accident had been yet another tragic accident with terrible consequences. Mandy hated to say it, but she hardly even recognized her best friend anymore.

"You do look familiar to me," Elliot was saying as he peered closer at Mandy.

She held her breath terrified that he would remember her from that night. It had only been the one night. But she supposed that it only took once.

Elliot had been sitting at a table with three other men. But Mandy couldn't have told you anything about the others. His gray eyes had caught hers and lingered on her figure. With a saucy smile, Mandy had flirted and teased with Elliot most of the night. It had started as a game, but the heat was palpable between them.

Later, when Elliot had come across Mandy as she waited outside. Was it any wonder that things escalated to a point where they were headed for his hotel room? She'd fallen for every smile, every kind word, and his temptingly hot body. It was a combination that she couldn't deny.

When he had pulled her close for a kiss. His firm lips captured hers in a way that no other man ever had. Any resistance that she could have possibly had melted away. Her hands sank into his thick dark hair and it had felt like silk against her skin. She cradled his head and held on while he kissed the ever-living shit out of her.

"Spend the night with me," he had growled against her lips, grinding his thick arousal that had been burning her through her clothes.

"Yes," she whispered, and he had scooped her up as if she weighed nothing at all.

And this was true. They hadn't been introduced all those months ago. She hadn't even known his name when they stumbled into that room. Hands, ripping each other's clothes off as they desperately searched for bare skin.

The first time had been against the door. Her back sliding up the cool wood as his cock rammed into her with lightning speed.

The second time had been in his bed. It was slower, mind-melting as he slid his length into her depths, heedless of her moans of ecstasy.

The last time she'd been leaving, almost to the door when he caught her arm and bent her over the couch. He had demanded her name, but she wouldn't give it.

The night had been magical, one that she would never forget. Mandy didn't want to confuse reality with fantasy. Rich men did not fall in love in one evening, especially not with the help.

And so, as he fucked her heedlessly over the couch. Mandy had savored every moment, knowing that this had been an opportunity of a lifetime, one she would never forget.

She wasn't stupid enough to suppose that it was anything other than a regular Friday night for her tall, handsome lover. And when she kissed him that final time, she knew it was her last.

He had begged to at least see her home and Mandy hadn't been strong enough to say no. All the way to her west side apartment that she shared with Shay. They had held each other's hands.

"You won't tell me your name, Beautiful?" he tried one last time.

Mandy smiled. She hadn't removed her mask all evening. It was better this way.

"Beautiful works for me," and then she raced out of the car not looking back. Once it pulled away, she doubled back three blocks to her real apartment. It was then that she noticed Shay still wasn't home.

It would be three more hours before Shay's parents would call and tell Mandy that there had been a car accident. Shay was going to be okay, but she'd broken her leg and several ribs.

"No," Elliot frowned, "I would have remembered if we had been introduced. My name is Elliot Brand, and I'm the CEO of Elliot Enterprises. Have you brought a resume along with you Ms. Johnson?"

Mandy nodded and reached for her bag.

She pulled it out and handed it over to him.

His nose wrinkled as if he smelled something.

Shit, Mandy knew the light scent he had discovered.

"I don't smoke!" the words flew out of her, "I know that smoking is bad for the baby."

Elliot's brow rose, "I didn't say you did."

Mandy flushed hotly, "I saw your face, as you took the paper. You had to have smelled it on me. It's my mother. I'm staying with her for a while until I can find better arrangements. It is she that smokes."

Elliot's brow furrowed, "I see."

Mandy could have kicked herself. There had been no reason to bring up the smell or her mother. She was ruining this every time she opened her mouth.

"Perhaps, this wasn't the best idea," Mandy mumbled as she prepared to rise to her feet.

"You're that sure my company wouldn't be a good fit for you?" Elliot's words were calm and assured.

Mandy swallowed, "What is it you're hiring for?"

Elliot blinked, trying desperately to come up with something.

"I'm in need of a personal assistant to help out with my domestic affairs," he was lying through his teeth. "I will need this individual to reside in-house. I own an apartment building on the east end where I live. This individual would be given their own apartment near mine and a living stipend as well as their salary. We have excellent paid maternity leave here at Brand. From the looks of your resume, I would say you're more than qualified. What do you say, Ms. Johnson? Shall we give it a trial run?"

Mandy stared, not quite believing that he had offered her the job. Not only would she be able to move out of her parents, but she would have a living stipend so that the peanut could have a crib maybe even a swing.

"Yes, sir," she couldn't accept fast enough, "Thank you, for the opportunity, Mr. Brand. I won't let you down."

Chapter 4

"When can you start?" his gray eyes held her blue ones, and Mandy felt her stomach flip.

"As soon as possible, Mr. Brand."

"Excellent, I will have movers come to your home in the morning," he turned and pressed the intercom key on his desk.

Mandy moved without thought touching his arm. The moment her fingers brushed the fabric of his suit coat he froze. It was as if she'd burned him.

To make matters worse, she was now in his personal space. She could smell his spicy cologne and the mint on his breath.

Immediately, Mandy backed away, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Brand."

He was frozen to the spot. His arm tingled where her fingers had just resided, and desire flared to life. Elliot was used to being around beautiful women. Hell, they threw themselves at him consistently. So, this insane attraction to a woman that was heavy with child was alarming to him.

"Is there anything amiss?" his voice had deepened an octave.

Mandy shivered as she remembered other things he had said in the same tone. Like, how amazing he found her tits and ass, and how he was going to fuck her until she couldn't see straight.

"Please, don't arrange for movers. I will only have a few boxes. I can rent a bed and dresser to be delivered."

She would most likely buy a cheap air mattress, but he didn't need to know that.

He was an ass, Elliot thought to himself. *Of course, she wouldn't have furniture living at her shit-head parents' home.*

"I do apologize if I didn't make myself clear," Elliot lied through his teeth, "The apartment is fully furnished, will that be a problem?"

Mandy's cheeks heated as a happy smile crossed her face, "No, sir. That would be perfect, Mr. Brand."

Elliot's dick hardened at her use of 'sir.' That was something he could get used to. And then he felt disgusting for lusting after this pregnant woman.

She was about to be a mother for fuck's sake! Pull yourself together!

“I will see that someone is there in the morning to convey anything you wish to take with you to the new apartment, Ms. Johnson. For now, I will turn you over to Ian. He will get you into human resources to fill out paperwork.”

Mandy nodded, “Of course, Sir.”

His dick throbbed. This was going to be interesting.

**

Mandy returned down the elevator feeling a kernel of hope flickering in her belly. For the first time in a long time, she felt like things were going to be okay.

The peanut kicked, and she laid a hand on her belly, “I agree, Peanut, he is sexy as fuck.”

Giggling at her own words, she exited the elevator when it opened and made her way back to where Ian was sitting behind the large reception desk.

“Got the job!” he whistled, “Are you ready for this?”

Mandy was beaming, “More than ready! Tell me, how long have you worked for Mr. Brand?”

Ian wrinkled his brow in thought, “It’s been almost seven years now. He is tough. I won’t lie. But the man is fair. Hang in there, beautiful lady, we are happy to have you with us!”

Mandy filled out all the necessary paperwork and then accepted the cab back to her sister’s coffee shop.

She opened her purse to pay the man, but he smiled kindly at her and said that Mr. Brand had already accepted the charges.

Mandy could hardly believe her luck. If she weren’t such a whale, she would have skipped into The Grind. As it was, she happily waddled inside to greet her sister Kim.

But what she found, wasn’t her usually bubbly sister. There was a line almost out the door, and poor Freddy behind the counter looked as if he was going to explode. His hair was frazzled, and his usual frat boy smile was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is Kim?” Mandy immediately walked behind the counter and grabbed an apron. Kim hadn’t wanted Mandy to work there, but she’d filled in on more than one occasion.

“She and the prick are fighting in the office.”

It was no secret that Freddy wasn’t a fan of Kim’s husband, Andrew. But Mandy had no idea why he felt that way.

“They don’t usually fight?” Mandy said as she wrapped the strings around her swollen belly.

Freddy scoffed and said something under his breath.

Mandy turned to the next customer, "What can I get you?"

As they rattled off their order, Freddy and Mandy got to work. It was another hour before the office door opened and Kim's husband, Andrew came storming out. Across his cheek was a large red handprint.

We wrenched our eyes to Kim who was next to appear.

Mandy had seen her sister upset. She knew what Kim looked like when the world was falling apart. You didn't grow up in their house without getting a few hard knocks, usually from their father but occasionally from their mother.

But the look on Kim's face startled her. Mandy had never seen Kim look
so completely devastated—broken.

Mandy didn't think about it as she marched up to Andrew and smacked his other cheek, "What did you do?"

He flushed a dark red, "You both are fucking crazy!"

"Get out," Kim's low tone was almost devoid of emotion. That scared Mandy most of all.

He huffed, "I won't be back!"

Kim's lip trembled as she straightened her shoulders and Mandy knew that something dreadful had happened. This wasn't just a run of the mill fight.

"Go to your bitch. It's over."

Andrew turned on his heel and slammed out of the coffee shop. Mandy immediately went to her sister and wrapped her arms around Kim's waist.

"He cheated on me," her whispered cry almost ripped Mandy apart.

"Kim, he is a bastard," Mandy clutched her sister tighter as she felt Kim's shoulders begin to shake.

"He said that I put too much pressure on him to have a baby. He didn't want kids, and he didn't want to be tied down."

The words were tumbling out of her, every syllable like a punch to Mandy's gut.

"It's been going on for almost a year," Kim clutched at Mandy's back.

Mandy felt the peanut kick out against her belly.

They were both pissed as hell.

“Did you get the job?” Kim’s hesitant note caused Mandy’s heart to sink.

“I can call and turn it down,” she said without a second thought, “I will move in here and help you, Kim.”

Kim pulled back shaking her head, “You can move in if you want. But I won’t take your new job away from you.”

“You’re more important than any damn job,” tears had gathered in Mandy’s eyes. “You’re the most important thing in the world.”

“I will be here,” Freddy said gruffly. “I can work more hours. You won’t be alone, Kim.”

Kim turned to look at him, “I should have believed you.”

Freddy hung his head, “I didn’t know for sure. Something had just been off about him.”

Mandy turned to Freddy, “You suspected Andrew was cheating?”

He shrugged, “I thought he was a little too friendly with the female customers is all. I mentioned it to Kim, but I didn’t realize it went this deep. I’m terribly sorry.”

And Kim fell apart in Mandy’s arms, “I’m pregnant,” she whispered in anguish.

Mandy’s eyes grew wide as she met Freddy’s over her sister’s head.

Freddy’s jaw clenched, neither one knowing how to respond.

Kim and Andrew had been trying for a long time to conceive. Why now? Why when the world was crumbling did fate decide to smile on them?

Kim pulled back drying her eyes, “I’m happy about the baby. I wanted to tell you, Mandy. I just was waiting to tell him first.”

“Does the prick know?” Freddy said through gritted teeth.

Kim nodded slowly, “That’s what started all of this.”

Freddy swore and ripped his apron off, “I’m going to kill him.”

Chapter 5

7:28 PM Elliot Brand: A driver will arrive at nine to assist you with anything you would like to bring to the new apartment.

8:02 PM Elliot Brand: Ms. Johnson, I would like to confirm that you will be available at nine in the morning tomorrow.

8:47 PM Elliot Brand: Is something amiss? Have you decided not to take the job? Might I remind you, Ms. Johnson, that you signed paperwork this afternoon and are already a Brand Employee?

9:13 PM Elliot Brand: If I cannot reach you, I will come and speak to you face to face.

Elliot was fuming by the time he pulled into the rundown neighborhood that could only be described as the slums. Sirens wailed in the night air, far louder than any crickets had hoped to achieve.

The home looked to be held together with chicken wire and clapboard. Crumbling brick littered the front porch along with hundreds of cigarette butts.

Elliot knocked firmly on the door. There was a rustle behind the curtains and then the lights went off.

Did she think she could hide from him? He knocked louder, “We both know that you’re in there, Ms. Johnson.”

The door cracked open and the unmistakable sound of the gun being cocked ripped through his ears.

“Amanda?” Elliot’s hands tightened into fists. How dare she pull a gun on him?

The door opened a little further and he saw a woman in her fifties with a light between her yellowed teeth wearing a dirty housecoat.

“What you want with Mandy? You the fucker that put that baby there?”

Elliot could only stare.

The woman raised the gun to be level with his chest, “Better start talking fancy man.”

“What’s going on out there?” A man’s voice bellowed from somewhere inside. “Can’t a man get some sleep, damn it all to hell!”

“I’m her new employer,” Elliot stumbled over the words just as he heard a rustling behind the woman. He looked up and saw Mandy.

Her eyes were wide with disbelief, “Mr. Brand? What are you doing here?”

Mandy scooted around her mother and unlatched the door. But rather than showing him inside, she went out onto the porch.

Mandy had on a tank that had seen better days. The thin material left little to the imagination and he could make out her lovely nipples through the material.

His cock was on high alert and tried to look elsewhere. But the tiny shorts she’d on weren’t helping. Her legs seemed to go on forever and even her baby bump was glorious and womanly.

“Fuck,” he breathed, “I’m so sorry for bothering you.”

Mandy tipped her head to the side, causing her honey blonde curls to wrap around one of her breasts and exposing part of her neck.

“You have no reason to be sorry, Mr. Brand. I apologize for my mother, she probably thought you were the landlord.”

Heat filled Mandy’s cheeks. “What can I do for you?”

Elliot couldn’t tear his eyes away from this beautiful woman that was apologizing for things that she’d no control over. A wave of protectiveness washed through him. He couldn’t let her stay here, not for another night, another hour, or another minute.

“I have found that I will need your services right away,” he stumbled over the words. “I tried to text you.”

Mandy frowned, “My phone is dead, I’m sorry! My sister had an emergency at her shop, and I stayed late to help. I just got home a few minutes ago and plugged it in.”

Elliot nodded, “Can I convince you to come tonight?”

Mandy blinked and looked down at herself. She squeaked and covered her breasts, noticing how see-through her pajamas were in the porch light.

“Of course, I just need a few minutes to pack.”

“Can I come in?” Elliot surprised himself with the request. But he didn’t want to lose sight of her.

Mandy hedged knowing that this man had no idea how they really lived.

“I will need to carry the boxes,” Elliot added with a smile.

Mandy let out the breath she was holding, “All right, Mr. Brand. But just a warning, we weren’t expecting company.”

Elliot raised a dark eyebrow, “I think I realized that the moment the revolver was pointed through the crack in the door.”

Mandy was mortified, “I truly am very sorry.”

He held up a hand and placed a long finger against her bow lips.

“Don’t be,” he whispered, “I’m glad that you’ve had someone to protect you.”

Mandy’s eyes skirted away from his, “Yes, well, something like that. Please come in.”

She opened the door and a wave of second-hand smoke hit them both. Mandy tried to ignore the way her mother was yelling at the television. She showed Elliot to the back stairs and then descended.

The basement smelled of rot and was damp. However, the bedroom that she led him too was clean even if terribly small.

Elliot’s voice was gruff, “Where are the boxes that you can use?”

Mandy swallowed and walked out of the room and returned with three beat-up liquor boxes. Elliot smiled at her, “What can I help you with?”

She blushed, “I don’t have much. Please just have a seat on my bed.”

She wished that she’d a chair to offer him. He looked huge sitting on the edge of her tiny twin bed.

As she opened one of the drawers of the dresser, Elliot stopped her.

“I can put these items in a box if you want.”

Mandy nodded gratefully and grabbed a different box to put her toiletries in. She gathered up her two nice pairs of shoes and a few dresses from her closet. The truth was that almost everything here was from before she was pregnant.

When she’d finished, she turned to see Elliot staring at a black lace bra that was dangling from his fingertips.

Mandy gasped, and Elliot dropped the garment as if he had been burned.

“I beg your pardon,” his voice was gruff, and Mandy realized that the drawer underneath the one he had started on contained all her bras and panties.

Mandy swallowed a hysterical laugh, “I suppose that you know more about me now than my last four boyfriends.”

And then she wanted to kick herself for spraying that out into the world.

“What do you mean?” Elliot took a step closer to her.

Mandy shook her head, “I was being stupid, it is nothing.”

Elliot moved until he was directly in front of her, “Amanda—tell me.”

Mandy ran a nervous hand through her hair.

“It is only that you have not only been to my house, which I have never brought anyone home before. But you have seen inside of my room, experienced my crazy mother, and then you packed my underwear, I think some of those have been around for the last century.”

His lips twitched, “A century?”

Mandy flushed, “Or longer.”

“I will let you rifle through my underwear drawer if it makes you feel any better?”

Elliot wasn’t sure who was more surprised at his offer, Ms. Johnson, or himself.

But the moment laughter bubbled over her lips he had been damn glad that he offered. Mandy’s flushed cheeks and sparkly eyes had him captivated as she giggled.

“You’re exceedingly kind, Mr. Brand. But I think I will leave your underwear alone for now.”

Elliot smirked, “Well, just so you know the offer is still open.

She laughed again, thinking that he was a good sport for helping her feel more at ease. Elliot wasn’t so sure that he wasn’t dead serious. He would let her see his underwear right now if she wanted to. And that shocked the hell out of him.

Chapter 6

"This is Mrs. Herrington," Elliot indicated the older woman with sharp blue eyes and weathered skin. "She will help you settle into your rooms."

Mandy could hardly believe her eyes. Elliot Brand had taken her to Skyridge Estates, only the most exclusive condominiums in the city. From there he gave her the special access code to enter on the keypad of the elevator.

Once the code was entered, the elevator began its climb to the top of the skyscraper. Mr. Brand not only owned the penthouse suite, but he also owned the entire building and most of the buildings surrounding Skyridge Estates.

The top floor had been converted into a sixteen thousand square foot luxury condominium. Mandy was given the east wing which had a bedroom almost as large as the home she'd grown up in and a sitting area that included a large screen television. The couch looked to be made of the softest fabric, and large fluffy pillows in shades of blue rested along its length.

The bedroom had a space that looked to be recently cleaned out. It did nothing to take away from the large sleigh bed and Audubon carpets that covered the hardwood floors.

Robert, the butler, had arranged for her boxes to be brought up from the car. They lay tucked into the corner like rubbish and Mandy couldn't help the surge of embarrassment that flooded her cheeks.

"Thank you, Mrs. Herrington," her voice shook slightly.

The older woman raised a white brow, "Whatever are you thanking me for, child?"

Mandy swallowed, "For showing me my rooms."

It came out as more of a question than an answer. Mrs. Herrington's mouth flattened into a line. And Mandy felt her stomach sink.

This is a mistake, Mandy thought to herself.

"I have some supper on the stove when you have washed up," Mrs. Herrington continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Mr. Brand has work to do and won't be joining you."

Mandy raised her eyes to the older woman, "Thank you, Mrs. Herrington. But I'm not hungry."

The older woman scoffed, "Come now, you're no bigger than a minute, and you have a babe inside of you. Don't be selfish, girl."

Mandy nodded because she wasn't sure what else she could do.

Silently, she walked into the en-suite bathroom and washed her hands. She tried not to notice the dark circles under her eyes or the baggy sweatshirt that she'd pulled on over her tank top and shorts.

Mandy glanced around at the white marble counters and the large clawfoot tub. It was gorgeous, far beyond anything she'd ever used before.

Mandy couldn't help but feel that this wasn't meant for her. A shiver of doubt crept up her spine. *What if Mr. Brand learned that this baby was his?*

As much as Mandy didn't want to leave, she knew that this was a game where she stood far too much to lose. Straightening her shoulders, she walked out of the bathroom and out of her suite of rooms. She followed the path back to the main living area and glanced once at the kitchen before making a direct turn and walking over to Mr. Brand's personal rooms.

Mandy knocked twice.

The door was flung open, and Elliot stood there with a small towel wrapped around his waist. Small droplets of water were still gathered on his pectoral muscles. Mandy followed one with her eyes as it made its way down his chiseled abs towards that small white towel.

"Ms. Johnson? Is everything all right?"

Mandy's throat was dryer than the Sahara Desert, and she couldn't seem to find her tongue.

Elliot felt the heat from her stare. She was by far the loveliest woman he had ever seen. And if he allowed her perusal to continue much longer, she would be very much aware of his interest in her.

"Amanda?" his voice was huskier this time, and she snapped her eyes to his.

The sweetest shade of pink tinged her perfect cheekbones.

"Mr. Brand," she choked out, "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

Mandy motioned with her hands to the space around her.

Elliot felt his gut clench, "Has someone upset you?"

She shook her head, "No, it is only that this is too much. I shouldn't be here."

Her eyes closed just as he saw the look of fear and remorse in them. He tipped her chin up with his thumb, "Amanda, please open your eyes."

She squeezed them tight for a second as if preparing herself. Her skin burned from his light touch and she remembered him touching her other places. A soft moan escaped her lips as her blue eyes blinked open.

Elliot's cock hardened fully at the sound escaping her lips. It was almost familiar, and easily the sexiest thing he had ever heard.

"You cannot leave," he ground out.

Mandy frowned.

"I need you," he hurried to say, "And you made a promise to me."

Mandy's frown deepened.

"You said that you would give this a trial run," he pressed, "Are you not going to honor your word?"

Her back snapped to attention, "I'm a woman of my word."

"Good," he caressed her skin softly before letting her chin go. "Give me a moment to change, and we will begin."

Mandy nodded at the very same moment that her stomach made a loud groan of protest.

Elliot's lips twitched, "We will have to do something about that, won't we?"

Mandy's blush deepened as he winked at her and walked into the room without closing the door. His muscled back and tight ass made him delectable coming and going. She really needed some water. Mandy was sure that he was trying to burn her up from the inside out.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Herrington's tone of disapproval rang out across the space.

Mandy turned in horror, realizing that this had to look bad.

"I told you that Mr. Brand had work to do," Mrs. Herrington scowled.

Elliot walked out of the closet at that moment in a pair of gray track pants and a black V-neck tee-shirt that fit him like a glove.

"Mrs. H, is there a problem?"

Mandy was shocked to see the instant change on the older woman's face. She softened and looked almost motherly to Elliot.

"No, Sir," Mrs. Herrington motioned to Mandy, "I had asked the girl not to disturb you. I'm sorry, Sir. It won't happen again."

Elliot placed a hand on the small of Mandy's back.

"Amanda wasn't disturbing me. She is my new personal assistant and will be working closely with me. You don't need to question her or keep tabs on her whereabouts."

The older woman looked clearly taken aback, "Sir?"

Elliot turned to Mandy, "Mrs. H has been with me for an exceptionally long time since my mother passed actually. I would like for you two to become friends."

Mandy swallowed, "Yes, of course."

Mrs. Herrington looked as if she'd been asked to swallow glass.

"Mrs. H, if I might have a moment of your time?"

Elliot's eyes were hard, and the older woman immediately agreed. Taking her arm firmly, he walked into the pantry until they were out of earshot of Mandy.

"That girl has been living in a clapboard house in the worst part of town. Her mother looked like an addict and pulled a gun on me tonight. Amanda graduated college with honors on a scholarship and is overly qualified for the position I have created for her. She lost her last job because of sickness with her pregnancy. I will not have you making her feel uncomfortable. She already wants to leave, and I'm barely keeping her here as it is."

Mrs. H put a hand to her throat, "I'm sorry. I thought you were taken in by a pretty face."

And then as if she couldn't help herself, she muttered, "Are you sure she isn't a gold-digger?"

"Positive," Elliot bit out. "I will need your word."

Mrs. H blinked in surprise, "You have my word, Mr. Brand."

He walked away from the older woman with clenched fists. Elliot had the strongest desire not to leave Mandy alone.

But when he walked back into the kitchen, the chair that Mandy had occupied was empty.

She was gone.

Chapter 7

Mandy had made it back to her bedroom and was calling a cab when Elliot found her. His heart was beating erratically, but he steeled his nerves so that she wouldn't notice.

"Is everything alright?" he said gently.

Mandy turned to face him. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears, and her hands betrayed her.

"I can't seem to dial," her voice was choked with emotion. "The damn buttons keep swimming around."

She was so beautiful standing there so lost and forlorn. He gently approached her and took the phone from her shaking fingers.

"Who would you like to call?" his tone was gentle as if soothing a wild animal.

Mandy swallowed, and a single tear dropped from her impossibly long lashes onto her pale cheek.

"I can't stay here, Mr. Brand."

She wanted to tell him that she'd spent her entire life being unwanted. That at her parents at least she knew the score. Here was a whole new element, and she wasn't strong enough to deal with more hatred and scorn.

The situation with Kim hadn't helped anything. She was hurting for her sister. Not only had Kim lost her husband, but she was now a soon to be a single mother. Mandy had seven months of experience with the judgments and scorn that came along with that package.

And then there was Elliot. She could hardly look at him without feeling guilty that he was the father of her child, and that he was a good man.

Mandy had convinced herself that the man that night wouldn't have cared that she'd gotten pregnant. Now, she knew better.

And then there was fear. Mandy had heard what Mrs. Herrington said about her being a 'gold digger.' What would happen if they did find out that Elliot was the father? What if they tried to take her baby away?

There were too many questions and not enough reasons to stay.

"Can't," he said softly, "Or won't?"

Mandy felt another teardrop fall and grit her teeth, "I don't belong in your home. You saw what I came from. Let's just pretend that we never met. That Dr. Roberts never called you, and that I never came in for that interview."

Elliot took a fraction of a step closer to her. He was well within her personal space, and she could feel the heat from his large body. He was rugged and handsome, fierce, and independent, and she knew that this was a man that got what he wanted.

"You're tired and hungry, and it is getting late. Eat something and get a good night's rest. We can speak more about this in the morning."

His tone was deceptively soothing. Mandy wanted to believe that a good night's sleep would cure everything. But she'd a feeling that it would only make her want to stay.

Mr. Brand pocketed the phone, and Mandy gasped.

"What do you think you're doing?" she protested.

"I don't want you leaving in the middle of the night."

"You can't keep me here against my will," Mandy was beginning to get angry, and her tears dried immediately.

"I'm Elliot Brand, one of the richest most powerful men in the city if not the world. My staff is explicitly loyal, and if I must place Robert outside of your door all night long, I will do so. It is for your safety and that of the baby."

Mandy scowled, "How dare you presume to know what is best for my child and me?"

He leaned closer until the front of their chests brushed. Mandy felt a jolt of electricity from that innocent encounter that had her remembering that night from so long ago in extreme detail.

His pectoral muscles had been like hard slabs of marble. Mandy blinked, trying to get the images to fade.

Elliot's minty breath brushed across her face, "I know that you have dark circles under your eyes from lack of sleep. I know that you were living in a home without adequate heat. I know that you need to eat. Despite the roundness of your belly, your arms and legs are terribly thin. There are hollows under your cheekbones, and you're swaying on your feet. I will not allow you to leave like this, Amanda. If I must sit here all night, I will."

"Why are you doing this?" Mandy whispered. "Why do you care?"

Elliot clenched his jaw. He didn't want to talk about his mother.

"Let's just say that I owe it to someone."

The tone of his voice, there was something there that Mandy hadn't heard before. He loved the individual he was speaking about with all his heart. She could see the fervent promise in his eyes.

"I'm not that person," the words slipped out and hung between them.

"No," he said softly, "You're not."

Mandy's heart felt like it had sustained a blow.

"But she isn't with us anymore, and you're."

Mandy wanted to argue. She wanted to leave and never look back. But the look in his eyes, the intent promise that he would do exactly as he said kept her still. Mandy didn't feel threatened any more, she felt oddly tired and hungry.

As if on cue, her stomach grumbled loudly.

A ghost of a smile crossed Elliot's face, "I will return with your supper."

Mrs. H spoke from the doorway, "I have brought a tray, Ms. Johnson. And I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier."

Mandy felt her cheeks heat, "Please, don't worry about it."

The older woman's lips lifted, "No, I behaved poorly, and I'm sorry."

A broad smile broke across Elliot's face, and he walked over to Mrs. H taking the tray of soup and sandwiches. He walked over to the little bistro table in the living area and set the tray down. Pulling out the chair, he motioned for Mandy to sit.

Mandy walked over and sat in the chair, "Thank you, Mrs. Herrington. This looks delicious."

It was a peace offering, and they both knew it.

"Please, call me Mrs. H, dear."

Mandy nodded and smiled as Elliot sat across from her.

He carefully removed the dishes from the tray and handed it back to Mrs. H, who nodded once and turned to leave. But she turned around again at the last moment.

"Please don't leave on my account, Child," the older woman caught Mandy mid-bite. "I tend to be territorial about Mr. Brand."

Mandy swallowed the bite, "He has a fine ally in you, Mrs. H."

The older woman beamed and with one final nod left the room.

“You handled that with grace and dignity,” Elliot said quietly.

Mandy turned to him, “Perhaps I overreacted earlier. I’m sorry as well.”

She went on to tell him about going to The Grind and learning of her sister’s husband’s infidelity. They talked for quite a while about a surprising number of topics. He learned that she liked to dance and loved swimming. There was an indoor pool that he offered her to use at any time.

They laughed about her doctor, Mr. Robert’s who was also Elliot’s friend having the same name as his butler. Elliot told her of a time when things had gotten very confusing when Dr. Roberts had stayed with him while his house was being painted.

It was comfortable, and Mandy found that her belly was soon full, and her eyes were getting droopy.

Elliot stood and gathered the things back on the tray. Mandy looked at him in surprise.

“You don’t wait for the servants to clean up after you?”

His lips twitched, “I should do better. But if I remember, I do try to do my part. We are a family here, not just employer and employee. I hope that you reconsider being a part of that, Amanda.”

“Mandy,” she corrected and then flushed, “My friends call me Mandy.”

“And I’m Elliot,” he said, his eyes never leaving her face.

“Elliot,” she said softly, and it pierced him right in the gut.

Chapter 8

"You took a PA? Why in the hell would you need a live-in PA?"

Nate had been Elliot's best friend for as long as he could remember. And on days like this one, Elliot was sure it had been too long.

He ran a hand down his face and spoke quietly into his phone. Not that Mandy could possibly see him, she was swimming laps in the pool.

He had never in his life found pregnant women sexy. Sure, some beautiful women had babies. But he had never seen an expectant mother on the street and thought *'man I'd like to hit that.'*

Until her.

Mandy had been living in his home for four days. And in that amount of time, Elliot had to rub one out in the office and beat another two off in the shower. He felt like a little kid instead of the grown ass man that he knew himself to be.

"Look, Nate, I don't want to talk about it. I just want you to spread the word before you, and the boys get here for poker tonight. I don't want anyone hitting on her or making her feel uncomfortable."

There was a long pause, some might call it a pregnant pause—but Elliot was rather sensitive to that word lately.

"Who the fuck, are you?"

Elliot wanted to kill Nate, but his questions continued, "Is this a joke? You're shitting me, right?"

"Nate, have you ever known me to joke around?" Elliot's sounded dangerous even to his own ears.

More silence.

"No, you have a shitty sense of humor most of the time," Nate replied like a man confident in his best friend status.

Elliot's lips curved involuntarily, "Well, there you go."

"Is she beautiful? Have you fallen for her? I can't believe that Mrs. H let another woman move in on her turf. Hell, you don't even bring girls home to fuck them, you get a hotel room."

Elliot felt his cheeks flush, "Just do it, fuck-head, I will see you tonight."

He hung up the phone just as Mandy started up the steps out of the pool. She was wearing a black bikini, and her belly was small and round. He felt an insane urge to touch it.

That's when Elliot wondered if Nate might be right, perhaps he had lost his shit.

Mandy paused when she saw him, "Elliot! I'm sorry, did you need me?"

Considering that Elliot was doing his damnedest to come up with things for her to do, he certainly wouldn't be interrupting her free time with work. Hell, he had resorted to sending clean clothes to the cleaners.

Mrs. H had laughed so hard that Elliot worried she would have an aneurysm. Thankfully, the older woman had suggested Mandy take on some of the human resource responsibilities that he struggled to find time for.

He had wanted to provide some kind of childcare at the site but hadn't had the time to meet with Charles, the VP of Human Resources at Brand.

Since this type of benefit would be crucial to Mandy, it was a perfect fit. She was thrilled with the project, and Elliot was finally drawing a sigh of relief.

Dr. Roberts had called to see how things were working out and Elliot found himself admitting the whole affair to his older friend. Dr. Roberts had also laughed his ass off, telling Elliot that he had never expected the man to save her.

But Elliot knew every time he looked into those dark blue eyes, that there was something special about this girl. And so, he took the teasing in good fun.

Elliot gathered Mandy's large fluffy towel and used it to cover his growing cock as he walked over to her and extended it to her.

"No, nothing like that," Elliot cleared his throat of the huskiness. "Some guys are coming by tonight. It is my Thursday night poker group. You know Dr. Roberts, but my best friend Nate will be there as well as Zeke from accounting."

Mandy wrapped the large towel around her body feeling like a whale in front of her handsome boss. The way his dark hair stood in sexy disarray she knew he had been running his fingers through it.

Her fingers itched to touch the dark locks because she knew just how silky they were.

"Um, poker night sounds fun. Can I do anything to prepare for it?"

Her voice was higher than normal, and she hated that she couldn't relax around Elliot. He had been nothing but generous and kind to her since the night he came to her parent's home.

“Nah,” Elliot smiled, and Mandy’s heart skipped a beat. “We have everything covered. The guys will bring some cases of beer. I just didn’t want you to be alarmed. They should be here within the hour.”

Mandy paled, the last thing she wanted to do was meet a bunch of his friends in a bathing suit at nearly twenty-nine weeks pregnant.

“We need to go,” she grabbed his arm and slid into her flip-flops. Granted, she’d only wanted to steady herself, and it had been an unconscious move.

But Elliot had stilled his gaze glued to where she was touching him.

Mandy pulled her fingers back as if she were burned, “I’m so sorry.”

Elliot’s gaze lazily came up to meet hers, but the fire in his orbs was unmistakable.

“No harm was done,” he then placed his hand on the small of her back to walk her to the elevator back up to the penthouse floors.

Mandy could feel the heat of his hand through the thick terry cloth towel. Her core felt achy, and she was worried that the dampness growing between her legs was more from him than it was the pool.

“I can stay out of the way,” she rambled, a habit that Mandy tended to fall into when she was nervous. “There isn’t any reason for me to leave my room. I mean, I can get dinner before they arrive, and I have a bathroom already, not that I want to talk about using the bathroom. That would be gross.”

The more verbal diarrhea that escaped her lips, the more she wanted to climb underneath the nearest lawn chair.

By the time they entered the elevator, she was praying for divine intervention.

He brought a finger up and placed it on her rambling lips.

His own were twitching traitorously, and his eyes were alight with humor.

“What did I say about my home since you arrived?”

Mandy swallowed a huge lump in her throat, “That I should consider it my own.”

Elliot nodded, “You will not hide away in your room unless that is what you want to do. But I’m sure that Dr. Roberts would love to say hello if you feel up to it.”

Mandy grumbled something about how he would be seeing her in less than a week, but Elliot ignored her.

“Mrs. H has her night off on Thursdays, so I usually order something in. What would you like to eat?”

Mandy immediately perked up, “Cheeseburgers! The big greasy ones with so many toppings that it gets all over the place. Oh! And fries! Spicy fries! No, no, not spicy. I threw those up a little while ago.”

Elliot laughed, “No, definitely not spicy.”

Mandy flushed, “I’m sorry. You probably don’t want burgers. We can get whatever you want. I can cook if you would like?”

Elliot noticed that the bags under her eyes had started to lessen. But there was no way he would allow her to cook dinner after the long day they had just had and her swim.

“I love burgers,” he grinned, “The bigger, the better.”

“That’s what she said!” Mandy said cheerily, and the elevator dinged they had reached the top floors.

Then Mandy realized what she just said to her boss no less.

“Shit,” she breathed.

And then she felt even worse.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where that came from,” it came from hanging out with Kim and Freddy at The Grind, but he didn’t need to know that.

Elliot’s eyes twinkled, “It was funny. Surprising coming from you, and it was adorable the way you blushed. Do you know any other naughty jokes?”

A voice from across the apartment startled them both, “Yes, I do love a dirty joke.

“Fuck!”

This time it wasn’t Mandy swearing under her breath.

“You got here awfully fast, Nate,” Elliot stood a little closer to Mandy.

Nate raised one of his blonde brows and smiled that boy next door, cover model smile that had landed more than one girl into his bed.

Elliot wanted to kill him—with his bare hands.

Chapter 9

“Um,” Mandy tucked a long-wet strand behind her ear. She was acutely aware that this man had been there the night that she’d first met Elliot.

Shay had been taken by his blonde gorgeousness and flirted with Nate most of the evening. Mandy wasn’t positive, but her friend may have gone home with him. He didn’t look like he recognized her, but his look was predatory all the same.

Mandy instinctively took a step closer to Elliot and Nate’s brows rose.

She lifted her chin, aware that she didn’t need to defend herself in front of Elliot’s friends.

Mandy turned to Elliot, “I’m going to change, I will come out in a bit to say hello to Dr. Roberts.”

Elliot stopped her with a burning hand on her elbow, “Before you go, let me introduce you to Nate. He is a bloody bastard, but also my best friend.”

Nate threw his head back and laughed in genuine amusement, “Ringing endorsement to be sure, mate!”

Mandy felt her lips twitch.

Elliot turned his hot gaze to her face, and she felt herself sinking just a little deeper under his spell.

“This is Mandy, my new personal assistant,” his voice was almost like a purr.

Mandy nodded to Nate, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I would love to talk further, but I’m dripping all over the floor.”

Elliot’s eyes darkened as his hand on her arm squeezed a little tighter. It was only then that she realized the innuendo in her words. Color suffused her cheeks, but Elliot was too much of a gentleman to point it out.

Nate looked like he wanted to but held his tongue.

With a squeak, vaguely resembling goodbye, she raced over to her rooms and slammed the door. Her heart was pounding, and she still felt the spot he had been holding on her arm, like a brand.

His brand—Elliot Brand.

Shaking these thoughts away, Mandy peeled off her wet swimming suit and tossed the towel into the laundry. She turned on the water to the shower and then brushed her teeth before getting under the spray.

It felt amazing, and she moaned aloud. Her breasts were heavy. They had always been sensitive, but now that she was pregnant, they almost hurt.

All she could see was Elliot's face as he smiled at her. Mandy could hear the silky caress in his words every time he spoke to her. This was madness. She needed to get away. He was going to find out her secret.

Her fingers slipped down her body and sank between her shaved pussy lips. She was indeed wet, and it had nothing to do with her swim. Her erotic dreams hadn't stopped when she'd moved in with Elliot. They had only increased a hundredfold.

She stroked her pussy softly, imagining it was his fingers playing in her folds. He had touched her once, and it was exquisite. Her other hand played with her sensitive nipple, circling, and then teasing the point. She'd always been proud of her breasts, and she knew that Elliot liked them.

He had made a point of telling her that over and over again the night they had shared together. When she was merely a masked stranger, and he was her secret lover.

Her rhythm increased, and she found herself opening her legs wider. Sinking her fingers deep into her core, she wished that it was his thick fingers or better yet his massive cock.

Mandy knew that this was foolish, but she couldn't help herself. She found that every time she was alone, she wanted to touch herself. She desperately wanted him to touch her, but that could never happen.

Moans gathered in her throat, and she bit them off as her fingers danced in her pussy. Harder, and harder she rode her hand as she climbed closer and closer to the pinnacle of her desire. And then it burst, his name slipped from her lips as she crashed over the edge. Her body was becoming weak as it contracted with her massive orgasm.

And then she heard it, the quiet sound of the door closing to her rooms. Someone had heard her.

Shit

Fuck.

Hell.

Holy fucking hell.

**

Mandy had just walked away, and Elliot couldn't peel his eyes away from her ass wrapped up in that silly towel. He needed to get her some more clothes and a swimsuit coverup.

When he turned, he saw Nate too was enjoying the show. It happened before he could even think. His fist balled up and he shoved Nate against the wall.

“Don’t you fucking look at her, speak to her, or breathe near her!” Elliot warned in a dangerous voice.

His best friend for nearly all his life gaped at him. They had both grown up poor and crawled their way to the top. They had shared more than one woman over the years, and Elliot supposed that Nate had a small right to be surprised at his possessiveness.

But he didn’t give a damn—Mandy was his.

Nate held his hands up, “Fuck, Elliot. I get it, hands off.”

“Hands, eyes, thoughts, she doesn’t exist to you!” he shoved Nate harder against the wall and noticed when Nate winced as his head made a cracking sound.

“I swear it,” Nate breathed, “I swear that I will not look, touch or think about her. Fuck, man, all you needed to tell me was that you were in love with her.”

Elliot dropped him, “I’m not in love with her.”

Nate stood wearily and massaged his throat, “Could have fooled me. I’ve known you a long time, mate. And I have never seen you like this.”

Elliot blew out a breath trying to steady his nerves, “I’m going to check on her. Just don’t be a douchebag around Mandy. She is special.”

Nate nodded solemnly, “I keep my promises, you know that.”

Elliot did know that and nodded once before stepping away and walking the same path that Mandy had just taken.

He wanted to assure her that she was safe with him. That men like Nate, and sadly himself, wouldn’t bother her. He would protect Mandy and her baby. He knew that she’d never had assurance like that before.

He heard the shower turn on as he knocked quietly and almost walked away. But the low moan that reached his ears had him slipping inside.

It was wrong, and he was the biggest letcher on the planet, he told himself as he crossed the carpet to her bathroom door.

Another stifled moan had his cock at attention, and he peaked through the crack. Her body was turned sideways so that he could see her rounded belly and full breasts.

One of her hands was gently playing with her nipple as the other hand delved between her thighs.

Elliot was frozen in place. He had never seen anything so erotic in his life. No fake porn could ever capture the sweet innocence of this simple act. She wasn't doing this for the show. Mandy needed the release and fuck if he didn't as well.

Elliot carefully pulled his heavy cock free of his pants and wrapped a fist around it. Moving his hand to the rhythm of hers, he watched this beautiful creature climb to glory. The way her nipples hardened to diamond points had precum oozing from his dick and making his pleasure that much more intense.

He gripped himself harder wishing that it were her small hands wrapped around him.
Her lips teasing his manhood or her pussy welcoming him in. He was close and prayed that she was as well. And then it happened, her mouth dropped open, and his name escaped from her lips.

Elliot barely stopped himself from shooting off all over her door. His cock as throbbing with need and wet with desire. But he had to leave, now before she realized what he had done. With a harsh grunt, he tucked himself back into his pants and then carefully left, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter 10

Week 29: Baby kicks and stretches

Twenty-nine weeks into your pregnancy, or 27 weeks after conception, your baby can kick, stretch, and make grasping movements.

Your baby now weighs about 2 1/2 pounds (about the size of a) and is a tad over 15 inches long from head to heel. His muscles and lungs are continuing to mature, and his head is growing bigger to make room for his developing brain.

***

“Dr. Roberts, with all due respect, please don’t tell me anything more about hemorrhoids!” Mandy felt sick.

His lips twitched, “Constipation and hemorrhoids are a large part of the end of pregnancy. As the baby grows, there is less room and the bowels slow down.”

“La, la, la, la,” Mandy had her fingers plugged into her ear, “You can’t scare me with your wicked tales, Dr. Roberts.”

There was a knock at the exam room door, and Tina poked her head in, “Oh hey, Mrs. Johnson!”

Mandy just ignored it, “Hello Tina.”

The assistant turned to the doctor, “I have those stool samples, did you want me to send them off to the lab?”

Mandy paled, “I’m not giving you people my poo.”

From behind Tina, there was a stifled laugh. It was most decidedly male in origin.

Tina grinned, “Also, I have Mr. Brand here with me, he was wondering if he could wait in your office, Dr. Roberts. Apparently, the patients are becoming a little too friendly.”

Mandy could have died right then and there. She could not believe that she said the word ‘poo’ in front of her employer. It was bad enough that he had driven her to the appointment. It was the last one of the days, and she’d meant to leave the office early and catch a cab.

Elliot would hear none of it and insisted that he take her on their way home. The way he said home made her heart thump and her blood race. But she knew that it was all a lie. Once he found out she was carrying his baby, she shuddered not even wanting to contemplate the consequences.

Dr. Roberts laughed, “We are finished here, Elliot. If you want to come in and gather up your favorite employee.”

Mandy’s blush deepened, and Elliot entered the room. Suddenly it felt much smaller than it had moments earlier.

“Oh,” Dr. Roberts turned to Mandy, “We were going to see if the baby had turned into position. Tina, would you come in and do a quick ultrasound and jot the results on her chart?”

Tina happily bustled in and before Mandy could protest, she’d her shirt up and was squeezing a goopy gel on her abdomen.

Mandy’s eyes shot straight to Elliot who was looking on wide-eyed.

“I can,” he sounded hoarse, “I can leave if you want.”

Tina looked at him like he was an idiot, “She isn’t getting naked, Mr. Brand.”

His eyes widened for a moment, and he adjusted his stance. The last thing he needed to be reminded of was Mandy naked. It already haunted his every thought of every day.

Mandy shook her head, “You don’t have to go, Elliot. This shouldn’t take long.”

She was trying to be nice, but Mandy noticed that the moment she’d told him he could stay. Elliot’s eyes were glued to the monitor where their baby was.

He asked Tina all sorts of questions. Mandy could hardly keep up. And then he moved in close to study the black and white screen. Tina showed Elliot all the baby’s features, the little hands and fingers, the feet and toes, and Elliot loved every minute of it.

He turned to Mandy with such a look of reverence in his eyes that it formed a knot in her throat.

“Why are looking at me like that?” she whispered.

A slow smile broke across his face each movement causing butterflies to fill her stomach.

Tina went on to tell them that the baby was at the current moment head down, but it was possible for the baby to move positions clear up until delivery.

Mandy’s chart was updated, and the goop wiped off her stomach.

“Do you know what you’re having?” Elliot asked as they walked out of the doctor’s office.

Mandy shook her head. She hadn’t wanted to know. At first, she was in denial about the entire affair, but once she’d come to terms with it. Mandy wanted to be surprised.

"No," a blonde strand of hair blew into her eyes and Elliot stopped to tuck it behind her ear before opening the door to the black town car. "But my sister, Kim, thinks that it is a boy."

Elliot knew that Mandy had been spending a lot of her free time with her sister. Mandy had explained to him about Kim's marriage falling apart. Elliot had often dropped Mandy at The Grind after work, but he hadn't come in.

When they pulled up, Mandy was more than a little surprised when he shut off the engine.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Nothing horrible," he smiled, "I promise. I just want to meet your sister and this Freddy fellow."

Mandy swallowed her nerves and led the way into the little coffee shop. There were only a few customers, many of whom were regulars and said hello to her.

She saw that Freddy was behind the counter and walked up to hug the man. Freddy looked badass and scary as fuck, but he was more like a teddy bear than anything else to those that truly knew him.

Elliot wasn't sure how he felt about Mandy going into the tattooed man's arms like she'd done it a thousand times before. But he swallowed that twinge of jealousy and shook hands with the younger man.

Kim came out shortly after. She'd the same look about her that Mandy did. Although there was a depth of sadness that was almost tangible. Elliot hadn't known her husband, Andrew. But he was shocked that someone would walk out on this beautiful woman.

She was almost as lovely as her sister. Elliot looked over at Mandy, almost.

"Mandy!" her sister took Mandy in her arms, and they hugged briefly.

Mandy had asked how she was feeling and if morning sickness had been a problem.
Elliot felt himself zone out on most the rest of the conversation. It was a cute little shop, but there didn't seem to be enough traffic coming and going. He wondered if Kim's shop was in the red and if Mandy knew about it.

Elliot would love to pitch in and help. But he was dealing with a huge multinational merger at the moment. There had to be someone who could look at the books, that is if Kim would let them.

Once he had grabbed a coffee for him and a peppermint hot chocolate for Mandy, he asked her about it.

Mandy blinked, "I think that they are barely in the black, that is why she doesn't hire more staff to help. I'm very worried about her working these long hours especially with a baby on the way."

“Would you be willing to speak to her about it?”

***

Thirty minutes later Nate was swearing up a blue streak as he strode into the little coffee shop in an area that was on the border of being sketchy.

“What in the hell is the emergency, Brand?”

Mandy scooted a little further away from the angry man, but Elliot just smiled.

“I have a dare for you. If you want, we can even make it interesting.”

Nate’s eyes perked up, “Do tell?”

“I dare you to triple the sales of this coffee shop by Valentine’s Day.”

Nate scoffed, “Please, what do I need with a coffee shop?”

It was true that he too was a busy man, but Elliot was fully aware that his workload was light at the moment.

“If you manage to triple the sales by Valentine’s Day, I will give you the Bugatti,” Elliot knew that Nate had been eying his car for quite a while now.

“You’re shitting me,” Nate breathed in excitement.

“Do we have a deal?” Elliot grinned extending his hand.

Nate grasped it in a heartbeat, “We sure as fuck do!”

Chapter 11

“I’m going to kill that idiot if he steps foot in my shop one more time.”

Mandy looked over at her sister Kim who had come into her office fuming. Her cheeks were pink, and for the first time since Andrew walked out on her, Kim had fire in her eyes.

“He can’t be that bad,” Mandy tried to soothe.

“Not that bad?” Kim’s voice rose, and her sister winced. “He’s a fucking lunatic, Mandy. Freddy wants to walk out the door!”

This surprised Mandy because Freddy was usually pretty mellow.

“What did Nate do to Freddy?” Mandy rubbed the spot between her brows that was beginning to ache.

Elliot had only asked Nate to help a few days ago. Surely, he couldn’t have pissed off everyone at The Grind.

“That ass hat told Freddy that he had to flirt with the ugly ones as much as the pretty ones or he wasn’t allowed to flirt at all.”

Mandy’s lips twitched, it sounded like good advice. But she replied, “The nerve of him!”

Kim’s gaze narrowed, “He also told Freddy that he would get more tips in tighter jeans and a better-fitted shirt. He wants to change the uniform altogether!”

Mandy quirked a brow, “There is a uniform at The Grind?”

The only thing Mandy had ever put on was a largely stained apron.

The muscle in Kim’s cheek twitched, “The skirt that he tried to get me to wear was indecent. But I suppose the new black aprons with our logo aren’t that bad.”

It sounded like Nate was trying to sex up the shop, but Mandy knew she couldn’t say that to Kim.

“Have you tried talking to him?”

Kim spluttered, “Talking to that Neanderthal? Mr. ‘I think with my dick?’ I don’t think so.”

There was a knock-on Mandy’s office door, and she called out, “Please come in.”

Elliot entered the smaller office that resided just outside of his own. She was wearing a cream sweater dress that wasn't meant for maternity wear. Meaning, the skirt was much shorter after covering up the peanut.

Even Elliot and Mrs. H had started referring to Mandy's baby by her affectionate nickname.

"Is everything okay in here?" Elliot glanced to where Kim sat with a clenched jaw, and her hands were gripping the sides of the chair.

Kim glared at him.

Mandy's cough sounded suspiciously like a laugh, and it warmed him all the way through.

"My sister and your friend are having disagreements as to how to help The Grind grow its business."

That was putting it mildly. Nate had already called and unloaded on Elliot that morning. There was a lot of complaining, and most of it centered around Kim. But Elliot had noticed that Nate hadn't wanted to quit, only bitch about the sassy owner.

If Elliot were a betting man, he would think that Nate had a thing for Kim. It wasn't like him to care this much about something, even for a wager. And as everyone knew, all businessmen were betting men in some way or another. Elliot was counting on Nate's attraction to see this through.

He had baited Nate with talk of forgetting everything if the task was too hard or if he couldn't get along with one small pregnant woman. Nate had bristled just as much as Elliot figured he would.

Trying to soothe the waters Elliot took a step inside Mandy's office, trying to ignore the way her perfume licked at his senses every time he came within ten feet of her.

"Do you want me to speak with him?" Elliot said calmly. "I know that some men are difficult to handle."

Was this manipulating? Of course, it was, and Kim bristled every bit as much as Nate had. They were so similar it was amusing.

Kim rose to her feet much as a queen would in front of her minions, "I don't need assistance in dealing with that man."

Mandy wanted to interject that she'd been asking Mandy to do something about him all morning. But she wasn't about to get involved. Mandy wanted to see who would be victorious at the end. She figured that Kim and Nate were evenly matched. So, let the games begin!

Kim turned to her sister, "Thank you, for seeing me on such short notice." Mandy hadn't had a choice, Kim had barged in. "But I need to get back to the coffee house."

Mandy walked around the desk and tugged on her dress that seemed much shorter than it had when she put it on that morning. Perhaps it was Elliot's presence or the way his eyes kept traveling down to her thighs only to jump back to her face with a heated glow.

Kim hugged Mandy to her, "I'm a bitch to go on the whole time. How was your appointment?"

Elliot answered, "We got to see the peanut! Those ultrasounds are incredible. You could see fingers and toes! I thought I saw boy parts, but the nurse just laughed and said it was the umbilical cord. She could be lying though. Rita has a warped sense of humor."

Both sister's jaws dropped.

"You took your boss to your appointment?" Kim squeaked.

Mandy felt her face go up in flames. But before she could respond, Elliot stepped in again.

"Oh no, I bullied my way in. Mandy wanted to take a cab after work, but since I always drive us home, I insisted on taking her."

Always—the word rang in Mandy's ears. It was like he had been driving them about for years and not a handful of days that could be counted with fingers only and not toes.

Kim's face said it all. She knew how fiercely protective Mandy was about her privacy. For hell's sake, she was her older sister and didn't even know who the baby's father was.

"It wasn't a big deal," Mandy stressed.

Elliot looked like he wanted to argue but then he saw how embarrassed that Mandy was in front of her sister. This was the first time she'd seemed almost guarded with Kim, and he wondered what was behind it.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he went on as if nothing had happened, "We have a meeting with HR in five minutes."

Mandy blew out a sigh of relief, "I will make sure to have the files ready. Do you want coffee or soda? I was going to grab something for Charles as well."

Elliot frowned, "You don't have to be getting drinks for anyone, Mandy."

Kim's eyes flew from her sister to this large man who if the critics were to be believed was ruthless. But he was treating her sister like a kitten. Something didn't add up.

Mandy lifted her chin, "I know I don't have to. I want to. There is nothing wrong with being kind to others, Elliot."

Kim stifled a smile, that was the sister she knew and loved. And it was beyond hilarious that she was chastising the man for being kind when he seemed to melt like butter every time Mandy was around.

Feeling better than she'd all morning, Kim kissed Mandy's cheek and went to the elevator to leave. It was the strangest thing, but she could have sworn that the smell of cheeseburgers was lingering in the elevator.

As Kim was walking out, she stopped to say goodbye to Ian at the front desk. He was flamboyant, sassy, fun, and way too outspoken for a mere receptionist.

"Hello, Gorgeous," Ian winked playfully at her, "When are you going to steal me away from here and be my Sugar Momma?"

He was a good-looking man, no doubt about it. But he also enjoyed good-looking men, and Kim was too close to her break-up to even think about dating.

Kim laughed, "Doesn't one have to have money to hold that title?"

Ian grinned, "Semantics, love."

Kim sighed and rubbed her forehead, "Thanks for allowing me up, Ian."

He winked at her, "Anything for Mandy's sister. Did you know that she brings me a muffin every morning? I happened to mention to her that I missed breakfast the first day she started and from that point forward there has been a pastry on my desk. You're good people, the both of you."

Kim cocked her head, not wanting to start gossip, but intensely interested.

"How does she seem to get along with, Mr. Brand?" Kim said innocently.

Ian huffed out a breath, "That's the craziest thing. Nobody lasts that long working with him because he bites their asses off until the escape. But today he has me ordering cheeseburgers because she's been craving them lately." Ian eyed Kim, "If I weren't here the day that they met, I would swear that they already knew each other. But she was so fucking nervous. There is no way she knew him beforehand."

Kim nodded, "It's true, they met through a mutual friend."

But Kim knew that there had to be more to the story, and she was going to get to the bottom of it.

Chapter 12

“What is it you’re opposed to most? The fact that you might actually look sexually attractive in the workplace or the fact that I came up with the idea?”

The look that Kim was giving Nate had scared lesser men away. A glare was much too simple of a way to phrase it. Her jaw twitched as her mouth flattened into a thin line.

Nate, who enjoyed riling up the honey blonde haired beauty, stood before her with two uniform options.

“I’m not selling sex in my shop,” Kim said through gritted teeth.

Nate who was a bit fairer than Kim raised a surprisingly dark brow. His laid-back, beach bum shaggy hair was in sharp contrast to his bright green eyes and tanned skin. When Kim had first met him, he was wearing a suit.

Some men end up having their suit wear them. They look uncomfortable, much like penguins or little-stuffed birds. But there are some men, that wear a suit like they were born to it. It becomes yet another weapon in their arsenal as does the swanky shoes and silk tie.

Nate was most certainly in the latter category. So, Kim had thought that she’d seen him in his prime. But when he showed up today in a pair of jeans molded to his muscular legs that rested low on his hips. She almost swallowed her tongue.

He was wearing a t-shirt that looked a size too small, at least to her. She hadn’t wanted to know he worked out, but it was obvious in that black t-shirt. But that wasn’t the worst of it. On the pocket had her logo for The Grind.

But when he turned around in silvery letters it said, ‘The Grind is the only way to start your morning.’

To most people, whose minds didn’t frolic in the gutter, this might be just a cheeky advertising slogan. But when Nate had turned around to look at Kim knowing full well what she’d just read and said that for him a good grind was imperative to a good day she saw red.

That was before she’d seen Freddy’s shirt which stated, ‘Can’t stop grinding.’ Or her shirt which said, “Queen of The Grind, and proud of it.’

“It makes me sound like a fucking prostitute or a nymphomaniac!”

Freddy had known to stay away when the boss was in this kind of mood. But Nate, he met it head-on.

"There is nothing suggestive about these shirts," Nate lied, "And if you see it otherwise, maybe it's your problem. Are you a little deprived maybe? I know you and your ex-split recently."

Some men didn't know when they were headed for thin ice. Nate went out in steel shoes and started jumping.

Kim grabbed the closest thing to her and threw it.

Thank heavens it wasn't boiling coffee! However, the vat of cream did a fantastic job of coating Nate's face and chest.

"Don't fucking talk about my husband!" Kim wasn't sad that she lost the cream. She was sad that it hadn't knocked him down.

Nate slowly wiped his eyes, flicking the excess liquid to the floor. His eyes narrowed a fraction. Kim began to feel a little nervous at his silence. She swallowed hard but didn't back down. He had no right to comment about her personal life.

Nate was constantly picking and picking at her. He wanted to change their uniforms and order board. He wanted her to order nicer napkins and sturdier cups. Spend, spend, spend was all she heard when he came around.

Didn't he have a job to go to?

The cream dripped off his chin onto his soaked chest which was clearly visible now that she'd bathed him.

He continued to eye her without speaking. Kim hated that. She hated the silent treatment, and she hated his knowing eyes that seemed to look into the depths of her soul. Could he see how frightened she was?

Did he have any idea what was going through her mind? She'd a douchebag for a husband that had just walked out on her. Parents that constantly were sucking money from her business. And now she was finally pregnant with a baby that she'd always wanted, but her husband didn't.

He wasn't her ex yet, although Kim was doing everything in her power to get the divorce to go through. She was run down, on her last nerve, and this man! This handsome ass hat dared to come into her shop and tear apart the only thing in her life that she was truly proud of.

She lifted her chin, "I'm not sorry."

Nate looked at the woman in front of him. She'd a lot more fire than he gave her credit for. He knew he shouldn't have poked at her about the husband. But he wanted to know where she was at with Andrew and if that was why she was so resistant to change.

He grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and ripped it over his head. Then he used it to mop up the rest of his face. He was sticky and needed a shower in the worst way. But the look on her face when he ripped his shirt off had him sticking around for a while longer.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Nate said in his deep voice. “It was uncalled for. Sometimes my mouth says things before the brain has a chance to edit. I owe you an apology.”

Kim had gathered all her anger to give him a piece of her mind. But standing there in front of a golden Green god with a dusting of blonde curls that started low on his abdomen and disappeared underneath his belt had thrown her off.

“Right,” she said blinking, “You were an ass!”

His green eyes met hers, and once again they had that twinkle of mischief that flat out pissed her off.

“I was an ass,” he agreed. “But I wasn’t wrong about the shirts. They are flirty, and people will get a kick out of them.”

“I don’t want to flirt. I just want to serve them their damn coffee!” Kim winced at the shrill tone of her voice.

“We have had several customers comment on them already,” Nate said soothingly, “And Freddy likes them.”

Kim’s eyes blazed, “You had to have bribed him.”

Nate shook his head innocently and grinned, “He has gotten two hot girl’s numbers already. We have a contest going. Whoever gets the most by six doesn’t have to clean the bathrooms.”

“You’re staying until six?” Kim wailed.

He rolled his eyes, “Out of everything I just said, that’s what you heard?”

“I don’t care if you sleep with every girl in the fucking city, Romeo,” Kim sneered. “I just want you out of my shop.”

“Can't-do Little Momma,” He moved, and the muscles in his chest temporarily distracted her from what he had said.

“Did you seriously just call me, Little Momma, ass hat?” her tone was dangerous.

Nate nodded, “Sure did, and you might want to work on that mouth of yours. Don’t want the little bean to pick up on its Mommy’s bad language.”

“Were you dropped on your head as a child?” Kim raged. “We aren’t friends. You can’t call me nicknames!”

Nate arched a brow, “I seem to recall you calling me Romeo.”

“That was for effect!” she almost stamped her foot.

Nate tossed the wet shirt under the counter and stretched. Kim’s eyes widened as every nook and cranny flexed before her eyes.

Hot damn, he was a fine piece of work.

“I could always call you Queenie,” he teased, those green eyes glinting as he referred to the shirt he had made. “You know—for effect!”

“How many years does one get for murder?” Kim yelled out to Freddy who scurried into the back and pretended he hadn’t heard her.

“Fucking coward,” Kim muttered.

Nate had gotten closer to her when she was turned to speak with Freddy. When she turned her head, he was inches away.

“What the hell?” was the first thing that came out of her mouth.

Nate smiled a naughty smile, “You have made me all wet. Are you going to do something about it?”

Kim could have sworn her teeth cracked as she grabbed the bastard's arm and trudged towards her apartment to let him shower and borrow something that Andrew had left.

“Freddy, get your ass out here and mind the store,” Kim yelled and opened her apartment door fairly dragging Nate behind her.

Chapter 13

Elliot was consumed with desire as he watched Mrs. H help Mandy with her stuck zipper. The skirt was too small and hugged the round globes of her ass. He had tried to be patient with her when she said she wouldn't accept money for clothing. But he couldn't walk around with a hard-on all day.

The time had come for a showdown.

"What do you have on the docket for this morning?"

The terseness in his voice had Mandy looking up in concern.

"I was to meet with a few of the local childcare facilities to find out what types of things were offered and then meet with Charles this afternoon."

Elliot nodded and then dialed a number on his phone. Mandy went over to take the piping hot bowl of brown sugar oatmeal that Mrs. H had made for her.

"You have to eat more, child," the older woman admonished kindly. "We want that baby to be big and strong."

Mandy could tell by the way her clothes were fitting that it was her that was growing, not necessarily the baby. But she accepted her meals with grace, knowing that both Elliot and Mrs. H would glower if she didn't partake.

In the short time, she'd gotten to know the funny pair she'd noticed that Mrs. H hovered over Elliot like a mother hen. It was strange to see and terribly endearing.

At the office, Elliot barked out commands on a regular basis to anyone and everyone around him. But not with her, never with her. It was true he was sometimes terse, but Mandy was starting to see that it was only his way.

Ian had marveled just the other day that he was surprised and thankful that she was still braving it out. Mandy didn't have the heart to tell him that this was the best she'd ever had it in her entire life.

"Mandy?"

She glanced up to see that Elliot had ended his call.

"I'm going to need you this morning, so Charles will take over the appointments you made. Hopefully, if we do return in time, you can meet with him this afternoon as planned. But if our task takes too long, he is prepared to postpone it until the morning."

Mandy blinked, "What task are we working on this morning?"

Elliot smiled, “Finish your breakfast, and we can talk more about it in the car.”

He handed his own dishes to Mrs. H and then went to his room to finish getting ready. Mandy had almost gotten used to the sight of his tanned, muscular forearms and strong bare feet at breakfast. He usually wore his suit pants, and a crisp shirt with the neck bare and the sleeves rolled up to breakfast.

Mandy could smell the woodsy scent of his body wash mixed raw male that had her panting and wet before the day even started. She wanted to blame pregnancy for her intense attraction, but sadly she knew it was otherwise.

Elliot came back out his room ten minutes later with his shoes, tie, cufflinks, and suit jacket on. He always managed to take her breath away.

“Shall we?” he asked as he grabbed his keys.

Mandy handed her empty bowl to Mrs. H and grabbed her purse to follow him into the elevator. She secretly loved this part of the day when she could be so close to him. Once he had even asked if she were catching a cold when she’d been trying to sniff him. It was beyond humiliating, and she’d to fake a cough for the rest of the day.

They hadn’t gone, but two or three floors when the elevator jerked to a halt and the lights went out.

Mandy screamed, being deathly afraid of the dark. Her hands struck out wildly to try and find something to hold on to.

Elliot acted quickly, finding her shaking body and wrapping her in his arms.

“It is okay,” he crooned against her hair, “You’re alright, I’m here.”

Mandy gave a jerky nod, but she continued to hold on to him with a tight grip.

Another fifteen seconds went by, and Elliot figured that if the elevator were going to restart it would have by now.

“I’m going to let you go for a second to grab my phone,” he said calmly.

Mandy nodded and allowed his arm to reach into his pocket and retrieve the phone. His call was short, and he spoke rapidly with the person on the other end. If Mandy weren’t already so upset, she might have wondered at his tone. He was clearly unhappy with what he had been told.

Pocketing the phone once again, he said grimly, “A car ran into a power line, cutting power to the entire block. The police have been notified that we are trapped, but there are pressing concerns with the accident that must be dealt with first.”

“Were many people injured?” Mandy whispered against his shirt front, and he closed his eyes at the sweetness that emanated from this girl.

“I’m afraid so, there were five cars in the accident. Traffic is backed up in all directions, and they are having trouble getting emergency vehicles on site. We might be here for quite a while.”

Mandy couldn’t help the shudder that ran through her.

Elliot tightened his arms, “Do you want to sit down?”

They sank to the floor and Elliot cradled her in his arms right to his side.

“Talk to me,” Mandy whispered, “Help me take my mind off this.”

“I grew up not too far from here,” he said slowly.

Mandy hadn’t heard much about his past, “You did?”

“Yes, my mother worked as a maid at the Regency Hotel and then did billing for a local doctor on her off hours. She also cleaned a few apartments in the building we lived in. I don’t know anyone who worked as hard as she did. Mrs. H was younger then and lived in our building. Mom had me stay with her the nights she worked.”

“You have known Mrs. H that long?”

He smiled, but she couldn’t see him in the darkness, “Yes. Nate also lived with his parents on the floor beneath ours. We have been best friends for a long time. I know that he can be a bit much, but the guy has a lot of heart.”

“Do his parents still live around here?” Mandy asked knowing that his mother had already passed on.

“No,” Elliot answered, “It is not a pretty story, actually. I was fortunate that my mother was kind. We were poor, and I never knew my father. But my mom always loved me and never hurt me. My only regret is that she worked herself into an early grave trying to provide for me. I found out after she passed that her body was full of cancer, and she’d could have been treated, but it would have been costly.”

Mandy hissed in a breath, “Do you think that she chose not to get treatment?”

Elliot was quiet for a moment, “A part of me wants to believe that she didn’t know she was sick. But we both knew that she hadn’t felt well for a while.”

“I’m sorry,” Mandy tightened her hand around his.

Elliot shrugged, “Thank you, it was a long time ago.”

They were quiet for a moment and then Mandy spoke, “I’m ashamed to admit that there were times I wished my parents would disappear.”

Elliot held her close in the darkness, “Why is that?”

Mandy spoke as if remembering something from long ago, “They never loved us. Kim was more of a parent than they ever were. I was a mistake, something that they rubbed in my face on a regular basis. I can still remember being four or five and being smacked upside the head for using too much toilet paper. ‘Fucking mistake’ is what my father called me instead of my name. My mother only spoke to me to criticize.”

Elliot tried hard not to show his anger, “I’m sorry that you went through that.”

Mandy let out a sigh, “A teacher once said to me that how we chose to react to the things that happen to us will shape who we become. Child services removed us a few times from the home when the bruising was too bad, and someone noticed. But we were always returned to them. I remember swearing to Kim that I would never darken their doorway again. But it was a lie when I lost my job when I was first pregnant I had nowhere else to go.”

His voice felt strangled in his throat, “Did they hit you then?”

Mandy’s pause was just a moment too long, and he cursed under his breath.

Chapter 14

Elliot's voice was raw, "You will never go back to them."

Mandy knew he was just being kind. But he was her employer and as much as she wanted to write the fairytale where he swept her off her pregnant feet and carried her away, she knew it wasn't real.

She pushed back widening her legs to move her ungainly body, but instead of moving she heard a giant ripping noise. This could not be happening. She prayed to whoever would listen to swallow her whole.

Elliot was immediately on his knees patting her down in the dark.

"Are you okay? What was that sound?"

Just as she was about to tell him the horrible truth that she'd split her dress when his bare fingers connected with her panties.

For a moment, he was frozen there. His hand full of her ass and the thin silk that protected her from him.

He wasn't sure who groaned, or how he went from a handful to smashing her up against his chest. He felt her belly against his abdomen, and that only spurred him on. His lips crashed down on her face, searching for hers and when he found them, it was like coming home.

Mandy didn't have time to go over every reason why this was a horrible idea. She no longer cared that she'd split her skirt, nor did she care that they were both kneeling in an elevator. What she did feel was the spiraling heat of his kiss that burned her all the way to her toes.

This is what it had been like the first night. Drunken kisses and seared their way into her brain, never to be eradicated. He was masterful, swiping his tongue into her heated mouth. She felt ablaze with the passion he radiated.

His tongue tasted, savored, and devoured her in the same moment. She would have fallen if it weren't for his arms securing her body. She didn't want to be a passive bystander. She wanted him to feel every bit as much as she was.

Elliot knew it was wrong to kiss Mandy. Besides being a human resources nightmare, she was under his protection and lived in his home. But kissing her felt like the most extraordinary thing in the world. He couldn't get enough of her taste, her shy advances, and her scent.

Fuck, her scent was driving him wild day and night. He held her by the small of her back, but the other hand explored her gorgeous skin. She was smooth and supple. And he couldn't get enough of her.

Suddenly she sucked his tongue into her mouth and sucked hard. Elliot felt it all the to his dick. Something was enchanting about her. She was shy and innocent in one moment and a seductress in the next.

When her hands slid up his shoulders to sink into his dark hair, he felt the kisses slip from passionate to almost desperate. His hand cupped her breast through her clothes, and he wanted more than anything to see her, to taste her, and to take her.

Elliot's hand slipped lower to where her skirt was ripped.

He couldn't help the words that were escaping his mouth.

"I want you so fucking bad."

Mandy moaned as she felt his fingers trace her mound through her panties. She knew that he wouldn't do anything that she didn't want to do, but she wanted him. Mandy had wanted him from the moment he had walked back into her life.

"Please," she muttered into their kiss, "Touch me!"

Elliot growled, and his fingers slipped to the elastic of her panties. He didn't rush, wanting to remember every moment, terrified that he was dreaming and would wake up before he had her.

His fingers slipped beneath the elastic, and he glided them across her lower lips.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," It took Mandy a moment to realize that the chant was coming from her.

"Your pussy is soaked, Sweetheart."

Mandy mewled and opened her legs, begging him to touch her, to enter her folds.

He continued to tease her with open-mouthed kisses on her neck as he glided gently over her pussy. She was dripping with need, and Elliot wanted nothing more than to taste Mandy.

He drew his hand out, and Mandy whined at the loss of contact. Elliot's chest rumbled with a laugh as he replaced his hand and began to slowly stroke her, parting her folds and sinking his finger deep inside of her aching heat.

Mandy cried out, the feeling of him inside of her was heaven, and she wanted it to go on and on.

"More," she pleaded with him, "Please, Elliot!"

Perhaps it was the sexy way, she'd pleaded his name. Or the begging—he'd really enjoyed that. Needless to say, Elliot felt the need to bury himself inside of her to the hilt.

"I don't have a condom," he rasped.

They both stilled.

Her pussy aching and his cock smashed against the fly of his pants.

"I'm clean," Elliot said gruffly, "There hasn't been anyone for quite a while now."

Mandy knew that the last person she'd been with was him. At that moment she prayed it was the same for Elliot.

"Please," she clutched at his pants trying to undo them and finally succeeding. "Fuck me. It's okay! I trust you."

Elliot moaned loudly as Mandy reached inside his boxer briefs and stroked his aching cock. It was pure heaven, and he never wanted it to end.

Mandy was getting closer and closer to her orgasm. Elliot had increased to two fingers and was pumping and scissoring as he glided in and out of her with his long fingers.

"I'm going to move you to your hands and knees," Elliot gravel tones sent heat through her body. "I don't want to hurt the baby."

It briefly occurred to her that they were fucking in the elevator like animals. But she didn't care. Mandy knew what heaven it was to have him inside of her. She would do this in Central Park if it meant he would be with her.

Her panties were ripped away, and the blunt head of his cock started rubbing at her slick folds. He cursed at the contact. Shit, everything about her was an aphrodisiac, and he was helpless to her siren's call.

He gently entered her. Mandy was so fucking tight that he couldn't breathe. Her sheath felt like a fist around him, and he lost all sense of gentleness.

His cock swelled, and he began to thrust holding her hips as he drove himself deeper and deeper. Mandy cried, begging, and pleading for him to go harder. It had been so long, and he felt so amazing.

She hovered on the brink, knowing that any second, he would send her crashing. He cried out shoving himself inside of her one last time, and they both flew over the edge, crashing into a million pieces.

How long they stayed there, he wouldn't know. Elliot was vaguely aware of taking off his shirt and offering it to her. It was strange in the darkness, almost as if it were a dream.

Neither spoke, not knowing what to say, and unsure if all of this was happening.

The lights flicked on and the elevator jolted before beginning to move again.

Elliot looked over at Mandy. Her hair was disheveled in a just been fucked way that had his gut in knots. She was standing again in his button-down shirt that pulled against her baby bump.

She looked so damn beautiful that it took his breath away. So, what she said next completely shook him to the core.

"This was a mistake. I'm sorry, Mr. Brand. I understand if you have to let me go."

Elliot didn't think before grasping her arm just as the door was about to open. He whipped her around so that she was sheltered from whoever was standing in the lobby and quickly pushed the button back to the penthouse.

Tears had begun to form on her lashes. Elliot felt like the worst sort of cad in the world. But one thing was clear. He would never let her go. He just needed to prove that to her.

Chapter 15

“So, I think my friend has the hots for your sister.”

Kim choked on the glass of water she was drinking. Even if the statement hadn’t been jarring enough, Nate walking out in a bitty towel and nothing else caused her lungs to seize.

“Fucking hell, Nate!”

The bastard had the nerve to smile. Kim felt the irritation curling her toenails.

“Where are the clothes I gave you?” she spat, not caring if her tone was harsh.

She wondered if the man even knew how to dry off properly. Rivulets of water lazily made its way down his sculpted chest. Her eyes were immediately drawn the ridges and bumps of muscle in his abdomen. Shit, even his broad shoulders and cut arms had her creaming in her panties.

It wasn’t fair. It damn well wasn’t fair.

Nate lifted a brow, “I can’t wear that shit.”

Kim knew her eyelid was twitching like a crazy person. She’d always considered herself rationally sound. There were many times in her life when shit had hit the fan and Kim was always the rock in those situations.

Kim had been the only one to attend Mandy’s graduations from both high school and college. She’d managed to keep her cool. Kim had caught her parents cooking meth and threatened to turn them in if they kept doing it at the house. It was all in a day’s work.

Kim had seen her dad passed out drunk on more times than she could count. Caught their mother trying to give a twelve-year-old Mandy weed for cramps because she didn’t want to buy a damn bottle of aspirin.

But no matter what had happened, Kim didn’t fly off the deep end. Even when Andrew the ass hat had cheated on her and left. Kim had plowed through. So, what was it about this man that got under her skin?

Was it that sexy smirk that never seemed to come off his face? Was it his killer body that had somehow managed to sneak its way into her dreams? Or was it that smooth whiskey voice that seemed to taunt her at every turn?

“You’re not leaving here naked,” Kim said firmly.

A grin broke across Nate's face. He walked over to her couch. With every step, the little towel parted showing more of his muscular thigh.

Kim hadn't even realized she was staring until Nate cleared his throat—damn it!

"I would love to spend more time with you and the little bean," Nate said conversationally and spread his arms out across the back of the couch.

"Are you fucking insane? Did Andrew send you here to screw with me?"

Nate shook his head, "I have nothing to do with Andrew the ass hat."

Kim's lips twitched when Nate used the name Freddy has christened Andrew with. But she wasn't going to smile. This idiot needed to get some clothes on and get out of her apartment, store, and her life.

"Tell me what was wrong with the clothes I loaned you."

Nate ran his hand through his damp honey blonde hair. Kim felt her mouth water as she watched the play of muscles dance across his flesh. No man should ever be that good-looking, she thought to herself.

"First off, they are small enough to fit you."

Andrew was smaller than Nate, but it wasn't that bad.

"Just go put them on!" Kim demanded.

Nate shrugged as if to say suit yourself and got up to go back to her bathroom. Every move he made was like a great jungle beast lumbering through the forest. He was grace and agility and had no sense of hurry whatsoever.

When he returned a moment later, Kim dropped her cup.

The sweatpants ended about three inches above his ankles and were so tight that she could see every nuance of his body. Let's just say that Nate is both a grower and a shower. The bulge in the front of his pants made Kim involuntarily squeeze her thighs together. The longer she looked, the larger it became.

"You can't wear that," Kim croaked and only met Nate's eyes when he shouted out a bark of laughter. "What?"

Nate continued to laugh as he stuck his thumbs inside the waistband of the tight sweats and began to tug downward. Every ounce of flesh that he exposed had Kim panting.

Kim whirled around right before he pulled the elastic band away from his large erection.

"What in the fuck are you doing?" she demanded.

There was a rustle, and then the sweatpants flew over her shoulder and stupidly she caught them.

"You didn't like me wearing your towel, and you don't like me in the ass hat's pants. So, it looks like I'm stuck with what my momma gave me."

"You can't," she stumbled, "You're not—naked people don't fraternize with the general public!"

She heard the amusement in his voice, "That's good to know. I've only recently joined the naked population. I'm not sure what the rules are yet."

Kim whipped around, but whatever she was going to say lodged in her throat.

Standing before her, in all his glory, Nate smirked before taking a step closer to Kim. If the room had seemed tense before, it was nothing compared to the sexual tension that clung in the air.

Her throat was dry, and her heart seemed to be pounding at about a million beats per minute. She couldn't think, couldn't speak, and most definitely couldn't look away.

The way she looked at him had Nate digging his nails into his palms. The woman wasn't only eye-fucking him. She was doing a hell of a job on round two or three. He couldn't remember a time when he wanted a woman more than now.

Nate knew that he was easy on the eyes. He had never had a problem with the ladies not falling at his feet. Slowly, he bent down and picked up the cup that she'd dropped.

"I believe that this is yours," he rasped, trying to hand it to her.

Kim hadn't missed one second of the action. She didn't take the cup that he was offering. Her eyes only stared.

"Why?" she finally blurted out, "Why are you doing this to me? If you're trying to hit it, then I must tell you. I will buy whatever you're selling. If this to prove a point, that sex sells? Then you win. Is this just your way of showing me that I'm weak? I don't understand."

He tipped her chin up and placed the gentlest of kisses on her parted lips.

"I want to fuck you right now. I have wanted to be inside of you the first moment I saw you. I picture your body bent in a hundred different ways as you scream out my name. You're a beautiful woman, and I want you. But that has nothing to do with your store. I want to help you, and I will. But you need to let me in."

Kim swallowed and to her horror tears filled her eyes, "Nobody is that nice. What is it you want from me?"

“I could take you right now,” he murmured as his eyes searched her face. “But you would hate me for it, and crazily enough, I don’t want that. Let me help you, Kim. Not because of any payback, and not because I want to get into your pants. Although, I do. I won’t hide it.”

“Then why?” Kim whispered.

“Because someone needs to take care of you for once. I see how you watch out for your sister. I can tell that you have taken far too much out of the business account for your parents. You even still have Andrew the ass hat on the payroll, and he walked out on you and the bean.”

Kim closed her eyes, not able to meet him with the shame that was filling her.

“I want to help you, Kim. But first, you need to realize that I’m not your enemy.”

It took her a moment to finally open her eyes, but when she met his, she knew that it was the right choice.

“Okay.”

It was one word, but she felt all her defenses that she’d built for years shaking in their foundations. Maybe this was a mistake, she wondered.

Then she glanced down and was reminded that this golden Greek god was still naked and within touching distance.

“On one condition!” her hand shot out and wrapped itself around his cock.

His response was hoarse, “What?”

“You teach me what pleasure is, real honest pleasure. I have gone down the ‘love’ route, and that is a bunch of fucking bullshit. I want to know what it is like to want to scream someone’s name. To be so far gone in desire that I want to do the things that you talked about. Do we have a deal?”

Chapter 16

Week 30: Baby's hair grows

Thirty weeks into your pregnancy, or 28 weeks after conception, your baby's eyes can open wide. Your baby might have a good head of hair by this week. Red blood cells are forming in your baby's bone marrow.

By now your baby might be more than 10 1/2 inches long from crown to rump and weigh nearly 3 pounds.

***

“That new dress looks lovely on you, dear.”

Mandy looked up as she walked into the penthouse apartment to see Mrs. H and Robert playing cards. She flushed at the compliment, knowing that the older woman was most likely trying to make her feel better.

“Thanks, Mrs. H, what are you playing?”

Mandy set her purse down on an end table and kicked her shoes off. She’d been waiting to do that all day, and it felt amazing.

“Let’s get your feet up, lass,” Robert stood and pulled out a chair for Mandy. He then positioned a footstool, so she could prop her feet up.

“Robert, I don’t understand why you’re not married,” Mandy said sinking into the chair and sighing. Mrs. H had gotten up to grab Mandy a water bottle and didn’t hesitate to hand it over.

“Are you asking?” Robert’s faded blue eyes twinkled under his gray brows.

Mandy smiled, “I can’t decide between you and Mrs. H, she is quite a catch as well.”

Mrs. H waved her hand at their nonsense, “Go on with you, now. How did your appointment go today?”

“The peanut is growing well. I measure right, for the most part, it was a pretty straightforward visit.”

“For the most part?” Mrs. H prodded.

Mandy winced, “I’m retaining some water in my extremities. They have assured me that is it…”

The three of them spoke at the same time, “*Normal!*”

Mrs. H looked worried, “Did they say that there was anything you could do?”

Mandy shrugged, “I need to make sure and stay hydrated. He said the swimming is excellent exercise and to continue it. He also mentioned when I’m swelling, I need to stay off my feet.”

“Makes sense,” Robert added, “Do you feel like a game of Blackjack?”

Mandy smiled, “Are you ready to lose?”

Mrs. H snorted, “He fancies himself a card shark, but we all know that he would lose his drawers if we played for real money.”

Robert didn’t even pretend to be offended, he laughed and passed Mandy her allotted chips—chocolate chips.

The white chocolate was worth five dollars, milk chocolate was worth ten, and dark chocolate was fifteen. The first time Mandy played she ate more than she gambled and laughed until she almost wet herself.

Robert regaled them with stories about when he was in the navy. Some of the antics those sailors had gotten into were downright shameful and positively hilarious. Mrs. H told stories about when Elliot and Nate were young. Mandy secretly liked these best.

The image of a young Elliot that whistled as he delivered papers at five thirty in the morning warmed her heart all over. Elliot had been distant since that day they were trapped in the elevator. Oh, Mandy supposed it was her fault for pushing him away. But she hadn’t known what else to do.

These people were becoming friends to her. Mandy couldn’t jeopardize that. A niggling feeling of unease swept through her. She’d heard from Shay today.

Shay had been Mandy’s best friend for several years now, and she was the one to invite Mandy to work that party where she first met Elliot. Mandy was also fairly confident that Shay had gone home with Nate that night.

Shay’s grandma had been sick and passed shortly after that, so Shay had been out in Tennessee dealing with funeral arrangements, selling her grandmother’s home, and settling the estate. While they still spoke on the phone often, Mandy hadn’t seen Shay in nearly three months.

Mandy didn’t know she was keeping her job a secret from her best friend. Well, that was a lie. She was terrified that Shay would tell Eliot who she really was and that he would either kick her out or try and take the baby from her.

For the first time in a long time, she ignored the call when Shay had tried her earlier. Elliot had a business meeting this afternoon and then a gala that he had to attend that night. Since Mandy had an appointment, she spent the time in the cab calling Shay back.

It was good to hear her friend's Tennessee twang, and Mandy really was excited for her to come back. She just didn't know how to explain it all.

"You're off your game, pumpkin," Robert gave her an inquiring look.

Mandy bristled, "What do you mean?"

He arched a brow, "Well, you just had nineteen and asked to hit again."

"Oh, shit!" Mandy looked down to see most of her chocolate money had been given to the other players.

"Is something bothering you, dear?" Mrs. H gazed at Mandy assessing, and suddenly she felt as they could see right through her.

"I'm just going to go to my room now," Mandy muttered.

Forgetting about the footstool by her feet, she caught her toe on the edge and tripped. The ungainly weight of her belly was causing Mandy not to be able to readjust. It happened so quickly. One moment she was sitting and the next she was sprawled out on her hip. It had to be bruised, but Mandy was certain that she was okay.

Mrs. H and Robert, on the other hand, were near hysterics. Before Mandy knew what was happening, an ambulance had been called. She tried to reassure them that she was fine, but when she tried to stand there was a massive pain that shot up from her ankle.

The paramedics were there in less than fifteen minutes. To Mandy's utter humiliation they not only placed her on the gurney, but they strapped her to it.

It was this sight that Elliot walked into.

A very pale Mandy, whose swollen belly looked awkward as she was strapped down. Mrs. H was crying, and Robert was reenacting some sort of Greek tragedy. Elliot felt his heart stop. He went straight to Mandy.

"Are you hurt? What happened?"

"I'm afraid that we need to get her to the hospital, Sir," the young redhead tried to escort Elliot out of the way.

"Hospital?" his voice sounded panicked to his ears, "What is wrong?"

The raised the gurney and placed oxygen over Mandy's face much to her ire. She didn't want to have oxygen. She just wanted her damn ankle to stop hurting. She didn't like the way that everyone was fussing over her.

They wheeled her to the elevator with Elliot, Mrs. H, and Robert hot on their heels. Once they arrived in the lobby, they loaded Mandy into the ambulance.

Her look of sheer panic cut Elliot to the core.

“I’m going with her,” he demanded and began to climb into the back of the ambulance.

Mandy’s eyes widened in horror. Shakily she removed the oxygen mask despite the redhead frowning at her.

“You have the Gala tonight,” Mandy said breathlessly.

“Fuck the Gala,” Elliot replied in an instant. “You’re a million times more important than any of that.”

Mrs. H and Robert shared a surprised look. The Mr. Brand they knew would never miss the Haven shore Gala. It had been created by Elliot’s own mother to help single mother’s better their work environment. Charity work had become her life’s work after Elliot had become so incredibly successful.

“Call Nate,” Elliot instructed Mrs. H, “Tell him to deal with it.”

The doors were shut, and the siren’s flipped on as the ambulance raced through the city towards their local hospital.

Chapter 17

Nate didn't hesitate before smashing his lips against this infuriating woman. If she wanted passion, he could bring it in spades. The way she gasped when his lips met hers gave him access to those plump, juicy lips and he plundered inside not waiting for an invitation.

Kim clung to his naked chest, her fingers reveling in the heat of his body and the hard curves of his muscles. She couldn't believe that someone has handsome as Nate would want anything to do with her.

Kim's breasts tightened, and her nipples puckered as he drew her closer against that rock-hard chest. She'd never been kissed like this and hadn't known it existed outside of the pages of a steamy romance novel. Her hands explored his back, loving how he reacted to every light touch of her fingertips.

His mouth which had started out insistent and even a little demanding had mellowed a fraction so that he tasted her, drank from her lips as if she were the finest wine he had ever consumed.

His hands slipped down to her ass. Kim's backside had been haunting him for days and he couldn't help molding the globes, wishing that it were her skin he was touching and not the material of her jeans.

She whimpered in her throat, and Nate felt like a king. Kim wanted him, and he knew it as much as he knew he had to have her. But Nate didn't want to rush it. He wasn't interested in a quick fuck. With his face and body, he could get that anywhere. He wanted to give her what she'd asked for—passion.

His hands came up, one hand cradling the back of her neck to tip her head giving him further access to the regions of her mouth. The other slipped into her hair, feeling the silky blonde strands that curled around his finger, much like he wanted to be curled around her.

The kisses had his blood racing, his heart pumping, and his cock throbbing with need. He could think of a million ways he wanted to taste her, to have her.

Kim's fingers slipped inside the elastic waistband of the sweats that were much too small for him. She heard him hiss and his grip increase as she stroked the top of his ass with her fingertip.

In an instant, she was whipped around so that his erection rested against the crack of her ass. He kissed his way down her neck, and she couldn't help reaching her arms up and wrapping them around his neck.

"I want you so fucking bad," his voice was gravelly as he gave her open mouth kisses on the sensitive skin. "I want to bend you over this table. I want to lay you on the countertop and lick every inch of you. I want to watch your eyes darken with need and hunger as I lap at you between your thighs."

Kim's couldn't help her body's response to his words. Her panties were soaked, and she was aching for him to touch her, fill her.

"I want you under me as I pound into you, Kim," Nate gently bit the fleshy part of her ear. "I want to watch your tits bounce as you ride my dick. Are you sure you want to make a deal with a man that would have you every possible way and still hunger for more?"

Kim response was instant, "Yes, please, yes, I want you, Nate. Everything you said, yes, yes, yes!"

He turned her back around to stare into her eyes. They were stormy and pleaded with him to ravish her.

Just as he bent to kiss her again, his cell phone began to ring. He ignored it and gently took her lips anyway, melting into her so that there wasn't a lick of space between them. It wasn't until her cell phone began to ring that she pushed him away.

Frowning, she walked over and picked it up, "Hello?"

Nate watched as the blood drained from Kim's face.

"Is she alright? We are on our way!"

Nate didn't hesitate when Kim grabbed her purse and yelled at him to get in the car. It was only when they arrived at the hospital that he realized he was still shirtless and in sweatpants that left nothing to the imagination.

Security stopped him at the door, something about not having shoes and health code. Kim tossed her keys to him without thinking and raced to where they said her sister was resting.

Nate eyed the security guards. One was glaring at him like he was pedophile the other winked and mouthed *call me.* With a shudder, Nate went back to Kim's car, but this time drove to his apartment. Larry, the doorman let him in because his keys were still back at Kim's. He quickly changed his clothes into a t-shirt and jeans and grabbed some cash.

This time he remembered shoes.

By the time he had returned to the hospital, they were getting ready to discharge Kim's sister Mandy. She'd a sprained ankle, but they had kept her for observation to make sure that the baby wasn't harmed.

Thankfully, everything had gone well. Elliot had even called Dr. Roberts in to look her over.

Kim wanted to insist that Mandy come home with her. She worried about her sister and the closeness that seemed to be developing between Mandy and her employer. But she knew that with the housekeeper and butler, Mandy would be better taken care of at Elliot's.

Besides the fact that he could call the OBGYN at any moment if necessary.

Mandy had blushed all over the place, insisting that it wasn't a big deal and she felt terrible for scaring everyone.

Nate glanced at Kim's sister. She was very pretty and terribly thin. He hoped that she was eating enough. In his life, it seemed that there were too many women that went without meals to fit into an unattainable size.

As an expectant mother, Mandy would be doing herself and the baby harm.

Kim looked tired after she kissed her sister goodbye with the promise to call in the morning.

Nate wrapped an arm around Kim's waist and escorted her back to her car. Settling Kim into the passenger seat, he went around to the driver's seat and started the car.

"Has your sister always been that thin?" he began hesitantly.

Kim was automatically defensive, "She has a hard time gaining weight!"

Nate made a left turn and glanced back at Kim's angry face, "I don't mean to imply anything."

"Yes, you do!" Kim refuted hotly, "You just implied that my pregnant sister was starving herself."

Nate sighed, "Look, I don't want to fight. I just—my cousin died from anorexia, and I'm a little sensitive to it."

Kim's outraged expression faded, "Oh, I'm sorry, Nate. That must have been terrible."

"It was," he said simply.

"Mandy has always been small," Kim opened a little. "I suppose that is why I'm so protective of her. She was bullied in school, and we didn't have the best home life. But I promise you, the girl eats. I guess she is lucky when it comes to her metabolism."

Kim glanced down at her rounded hips and blushed.

Nate followed her gaze, "I don't think she is lucky. When a man sinks into a woman, he wants something to hold on to."

Kim's eyes flashed to his, and a shy smile crept across her face, "is that so?"

“Damn truth,” his eyes met hers for a second before returning to the road.

“The woman my, I mean, Andrew had an affair with is much skinnier than I’m. In the back of my mind, I can’t help but think that might be why he left.”

Nate’s hands tightened on the wheel, but he was silent the last few minutes they had left before pulling into The Grind. Just as Kim was about to open the door, Nate stopped her.

“Andrew was a fucking idiot. He had the cream of the crop at home and went to wallow in pig shit. You’re lucky to be rid of him, Kim. He doesn’t deserve to lick your boots.”

Kim’s eyes filled with something that looked suspiciously like tears and a touch of hope.

She’d to swallow twice before speaking, “Thanks, Nate, not just for your words. But for coming with me, I haven’t had someone to rely on in a long time. Andrew would have stayed behind.”

Nate’s eyes met hers as he passed Kim the keys. He didn’t speak, but his smile held promise, and Kim tucked that away into the secret treasures of her heart.

Chapter 18

The first delivery came at noon the following day. Boxes and boxes that had both Mrs. H and Robert in a frenzy.

“Mr. Brand never celebrates the holidays, Mandy,” Mrs. H said as she opened yet another package with yuletide cheer. “I can’t imagine what has come over him.”

Robert had been relatively silent as far as comments go, but he moved with a peppier step and had begun to whistle Christmas carols under his breath.

The final delivery was a twelve-foot Douglas fir. Its scent filled the spacious penthouse with thoughts of the forest. The earthy pine smell had been just what was needed.

Elliot had called to check on Mandy no less than three times that morning and every phone call she’d seemed more and more withdrawn.

The truth was that Mandy had awoken to feel irritated at herself for such a stupid accident. Not only had Elliot missed the gala, but Nate had as well. Nothing was said to her about it, but she caught a snippet on the news that morning.

There was quite a bit of speculation as to where the playboy billionaire had been and whom he had found more important than his mother’s charity.

Mandy hadn’t said a word to Elliot about catching the story. She knew full well that his publicist and public relations team would be all over it.

But it had been her fault, and she was aware of it.

So, when the boxes began to arrive, Mandy had been disinclined to participate. That was until she saw what had been sent.

“Where should we place the tree, Mandy?” Robert glanced her way, “I was thinking perhaps in the foyer?”

“In front of the windows,” Mandy replied, “So that the lights can reflect off the glass and people outside can share in its beauty.”

Robert had called a few men in to assist him with the décor, and they immediately began moving the tree to where Mandy had specified.

Once the fifteen strands of lights were added to the tree, the reflection in the floor to ceiling windows was mesmerizing.

The ornaments that had been delivered from Neiman Marcus were a mixture of Faberge Eggs and hand painted Christopher Radko's latest collection. Everything was seen to, the garlands, wreaths, even a sprig of mistletoe that caused Mrs. H to give Robert's cheek a small peck. The butler had blushed three shades of red.

Mandy's poor mood had dissipated throughout the afternoon as she helped to supervise the decorating from her position on the couch. Elliot had refused to allow her to go to work that morning, much to her dismay.

But all thoughts of work had fled, and once the last ribbon was hung Mandy settled down on the couch and watched the sparkling lights until her eyes grew heavy.

Elliot arrived home an hour later. He opened the door expecting to see the holiday decorations, hell, he had sent them. But he hadn't been prepared for the attack of past that enveloped him.

His mother had always been keen on celebrating each holiday. After she passed, he hadn't the heart to continue the tradition. It reminded him too much of what he had lost. But walking into his home, with all its fineries displayed so beautifully, and the woman who haunted his dreams sweetly sleeping on his couch had his gut clenching in an unfamiliar way.

He glanced over at the mantle over the fireplace and noted that they had handwritten Mrs. H, Robert, Elliot, and Mandy a stocking in gold letters.

Elliot had to swallow twice before setting his things down and walking into the kitchen to greet the staff and grab a much-needed beer.

Mrs. H glanced up from cooking when she saw him enter, "Good evening, Mr. Brand, it was a kind thing you did today."

Elliot opened the double refrigerator and grabbed a drink, "Did she like it?"

Mrs. H raised a brow, "She was upset this morning, and understandably so. I wish you could have seen the light in her eyes as each box was emptied. You would have thought the poor girl had won the lottery."

Elliot kicked himself for not being there. Indeed, he would have loved to have seen Mandy's reactions.

"Where is Robert?" Elliot asked noticing that the older gentleman hadn't greeted him upon entering.

"He went to the pharmacy to pick up Mandy's medication. Dr. Roberts called a mild painkiller in that would be safe to use during pregnancy."

Elliot nodded and went to respond but was interrupted by a sleepy voice coming from the doorway.

He turned around and saw Mandy standing there with a wrinkle on her cheek and just fucked hair. She was stunningly gorgeous without a lick of makeup and in yoga pants pulled under her belly and one of his t-shirts.

“I don’t need any painkillers,” Mandy frowned before limping in and sitting in the chair that Elliot had pulled out for her. “I told Dr. Roberts that at the hospital.”

Mrs. H didn’t tell Mandy that Elliot had her call the doctor’s office today to ensure she would have the medication if she needed it.

Elliot smiled and abruptly changed the subject, “Did you have a nice day?”

Mandy’s face brightened, and she leaned toward him, “Elliot, I cannot believe what you sent to us. I can’t remember when I have had a better day. My parents rarely did anything for Christmas. When we were little, the school would do Sub for Santa, but my parents would return everything and keep the money. I have never had a tree before!”

Elliot’s chest tightened. He knew that her upbringing had been different than his. But with every revelation, he could picture the thin younger version of her trying to make do without presents or decorations.

“We like to celebrate here,” Elliot fibbed, and Mrs. H choked on a laugh behind him. He turned and gave her a stiff glare.

Mandy’s brow furrowed, “They said that you had never had a tree before.”

Mrs. H, bustled over, “I real tree. This is our first year to have a live Christmas tree.”

Elliot was thankful for the save and aware that he was revealing far too much of his hand to Mrs. H.

“Are you feeling up for company?” he asked Mandy.

She looked down in horror at her outfit. Her hand went up to touch the wild blonde strands.

“No!” she wailed.

“Not even your sister?” Elliot added.

“Oh!” Mandy laughed, “Of course, I’m always up for Kim to come over. What about the coffee shop?”

“I believe that Nate has convinced her to hire another part-time employee. So, since she opened, she has the evening off.”

“Kim called a little while ago to check on you,” Mrs. H added bringing plates of parmesan chicken, salad, and steamed vegetables to where they were sitting at the informal kitchen table.

“I should call her back,” Mandy smiled sheepishly, “I didn’t return her call this morning. I was a tab bit cranky.”

Elliot wisely took a drink of his beer not responding.

Mrs. H broke into laughter, “More than a tad bit, darling. But you seem to have come around.”

Mandy blushed, “I’m sorry if I was a bear.”

“Not at all, dear!” Mrs. H brought over a plate for herself, and they began to eat. “I’m just grateful that you’re feeling better.”

Elliot couldn’t take her eyes away from Mandy as she ate. Every move was unconsciously seductive, from the moan of delight at the chicken to her licking her fingertips to get the dressing that had splashed there.

He was hard and hadn’t taken more than a handful of bites from his plate.

Elliot was starving, but it wasn’t for parmesan chicken.

Chapter 19

“Can you grab another box of medium-sized cups?” Kim called out to Nate who was still in the back.

“Sure thing, Sweetcheeks,” Nate hollered back.

Kim closed her eyes in exasperation, but she didn’t say anything back. He had been trying to get her goat ever since that night when they raced to the hospital for Mandy.

Kim knew that it had been a mistake to proposition the man. She didn’t even know what she’d been thinking.

Well, she did. She was horny as hell and wanted a piece of his fine ass. It was too bad that his caustic attitude came along with it. Now that he knew she wanted him. Nate was relentless.

He had smacked her ass, flipped her bra and Kim halfway expected him to tug on her ponytail. She wished that he wasn’t so fucking endearing with his attention. Half schoolboy, half sex god, it was a heady mixture that she was struggling to combat.

Nate hadn’t brought up the fact that she asked him to teach her about passion. But it was there in his eyes every time he looked at her. The need and want that resided there was beyond indecent and Nate did nothing to hide it.

Kim supposed that she should have seen it coming.

Andrew hadn’t been back in the shop for weeks. She didn’t know what he was expecting, but it certainly hadn’t been his soon to be ex-wife looking better than she’d in years. Even worse, she was accompanied by a man who easily could have played Captain America in the movies.

“Who the hell is this?”

Nate took a protective step forward, “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m the owner, Jack Ass,” Andrew tried to puff up his thin chest, “You better watch how you talk to me.”

Kim gasped, “Why are you here, Andrew?”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed, “Is this your new boy-toy?”

Nate’s hand closed into a fist, “If you speak to her like that again you will be knocked to the floor. I’m giving you fair warning.”

Freddy walked out of the backroom with Stacy at his heels.

“How can you afford all of these new employees, Kim?” Andrew sneered, “Are you holding out on me?”

Kim’s mouth opened and closed twice before she could speak.

“If you need something, Andrew, please say it. If not, I’m going to ask you to leave.”

Ruddy color splashed Andrew’s cheeks, “I have every right to be here. It’s my fucking shop.”

“No, it isn’t,” Freddy crossed his arms, the tattooed muscles flexing dangerously. “You sold your half to me. Said that you needed the money for your ‘habit.’”

Kim stared, “What habit? What are you talking about? Andrew?”

“That was supposed to be confidential,” Andrew roared at the larger man.

Freddy got right in Andrew’s face, “I was willing to keep your secret when you stayed away. But you screwed Kim over. You have no right to come in here and disrespect her.”

“I want my shares back!” Andrew demanded harshly, “I have the money.”

Freddy smiled, but it never reached his eyes, “Sorry, friend. But I already sold it to someone else.”

Kim was whirling at each revelation. Nate had moved in close to her and taken her hand. It was a move that Andrew didn’t miss.

“Get your hands off my wife!”

Kim blew her stack, “I’m not your fucking wife. I’m not your fucking partner. You’re nothing to me, and you will either leave, or I will call the police.”

Nate shrugged, “No need for that, I can take out the garbage.”

He walked over to Andrew and ducked a crazy punch. Nate nailed him once on his glass jaw, and the small man went crashing to the floor.

Picking him up by the seat of his pants he fairly threw him out the door.

Kim was shaking, her hands were clutched together, and her knees were knocking.

“It’s okay,” Nate murmured as he wrapped an arm around her.

“What was he talking about?” Kim trembled, “How could he sell half of my shop without my knowledge?”

Nate knew that he would need to tell her everything, but it wasn't in her best interest to do it here. He looked over at Freddy who nodded in agreement.

Kim could hear Freddy asking their new employee Stacy to man the counter while he finished the stocking that she and Nate had left behind. It wasn't a busy time at The Grind, but there had been a few customers.

Her cheeks burned at the thought of embarrassing herself that way.

Nate kindly led her to the couch and sat beside her.

"Kim, are you okay?"

Her shoulders were hunched, and she seemed downtrodden in a way that bothered him. Kim was usually so sassy, always on his ass for something he had done. He didn't like seeing her try to fold in on herself.

"How did he sell my shop?" Kim asked shakily.

"Did you look at all the papers in the divorce settlement?" Nate was careful not to get too close.

Kim frowned, "I thought so. There were a lot of them, and I just signed where it was indicated."

"Your douche bag, ex must have slipped the sale into those papers. You're lucky that Freddy was there."

Kim's eyes were filling with tears, "But Freddy said he already sold it, and where would he get the money for something like that?"

Nate took a deep breath, "Freddy bought half the shop for a silent partner. He was only the go-between, Kim."

"It was you, wasn't it?" A tear splashed onto her cheek. "Why Nate? I know that you're a lawyer and run a business for Elliot. Why would you do that?"

Nate's jaw tightened, "I wasn't about to let that prick take away your livelihood, Kim. He has some real problems, serious problems. I know that you knew about the cheating. But I wanted to protect you from everything else."

Her face paled, "Tell me. I need to know."

Nate sighed rubbing his chin.

"Tell me, Nate. I need to know!"

“He is in deep with a meth operation. Part of your funds from the shop has disappeared, and I can only assume that it has gone to pay for the drugs. He is pushing it now, Kim, I feel that you’re in danger here.”

Kim felt her body chill. She’d known what it was like living with parents who were users. How had she missed the signs with Andrew? Had they been there, underneath the surface?

Nate wrapped Kim tightly in his arms.

“I won’t let you deal with this alone. I won’t allow you to lose your coffee shop.”

She made a wailing sound, “Don’t you mean our coffee shop? You now own half of it.”

He shook his head, and she brought her confused, teary gaze to his kind eyes.

“You’re the sole owner of The Grind. I’m a lawyer, Kim. It wasn’t hard to do.”

“How can I ever repay you?” she choked out.

His face crumpled, “I don’t want you to repay me!”

Nate’s tone was almost harsh, “I want to be there for you, Kim. I want to make things easier for you. Shit, I just want to spend time with you. Can’t you see that?”

Kim swallowed, “I’m starting to.”

Chapter 20

Kim leaned up to take Nate's face into her small hands, "You're not the man that I thought you were."

Nate held his breath. This was the first time that Kim had voluntarily touched him. He had been hoping that she would initiate something physical with him. Nate didn't want to scare her away. He knew that her ex had been a shit bag, and he wanted to prove that he was different.

"I'm not?" he replied softly.

Kim's face flushed, as she shook her head. She moved even closer so that there was hardly a space between their bodies.

"I thought we made a deal?"

Her breathing increased as he slipped his hands around her waist and settled on her hips. Then he lifted Kim until she straddled his lap.

"I wanted to make sure that was what you really wanted," Nate growled, his eyes boring down into hers.

Kim leaned in and kissed the underside of his chin, "What do I need to do to convince you?"

Nate cut off her question as his lips covered hers. A maelstrom of emotion was swirling in his gut. He had never felt this way about a woman before. She'd him twisted up in all the tiny spaces of his heart.

Nate had always been a player, a love her and leave her kind of guy. The sad truth was that he had been the man that Kim had thought him to be. But he didn't want to be that guy anymore. He didn't want a different girl in his bed every night.

That shocked the hell out of him.

He wasn't ready to profess his love or to buy a diamond ring. But he sure as hell was ready to stake his claim. He didn't want Andrew the douche bag to think that she was unprotected or unspoken for because neither one was true.

He tilted his head to deepen the kiss and almost smiled at the whimper that escaped her throat. She tasted of coffee and cherries, and he couldn't get enough of it. His hands dug into her hips as she slipped her fingers into his hair.

Kim was drowning as he took her mouth repeatedly. Kim thought that she knew everything there was to know about kissing. Hell, she'd been married! But everything in the past paled to what was happening now.

Her body felt alive, sparks of electricity shooting every which way. Kim's stomach was in knots, and her breasts pressed heavily against his chest. She was so damn aroused by his simple kiss that she wanted to rip his clothes off.

Much to Nate's surprise, she bit his lower lip, and their kiss darkened into something akin to lovemaking with teeth and tongues and bodies that writhed against each other.

Her hands slipped around his waist and crept up under his t-shirt. Andrew had been the only man Kim had ever been with. Where Andrew was lean on the verge of skinny, Nate was thick and heavily muscled.

Her panties were a wreck. She knew that she'd soaked them. His hands had pushed up the edges of her skirt so that they rested on her bare thighs.

Kim couldn't help the need to grind her pussy against his lap. She'd never felt to frenzied before, her desire taking full control of reason.

Nate grunted as he felt her wetness through his jeans.

"Fuck," he moaned, as his hands slipped around and grabbed her ass. He molded the globes as she ground her core harder against the bulge in his jeans.

"Fuck, baby, we need to stop," Nate whispered against her neck before placing open mouth kisses that had her mewling with need.

"No!" Kim's answer was more than clear, "No stopping, I need more!"

Nate's hand slipped to the front panel of her panties.

"You're so fucking wet, Kim. Do you know what that does to me?"

But Kim couldn't answer with his fingers lightly tracing the lips of her pussy. She moaned and arched against his fingertips, wanting more, needing more.

He pushed her panties to the side and traced the moisture on her bare pussy.

Kim gasped in shock as he brought his hand up to her lips and painted them with her juices before taking another sole drugging kiss.

It was naughty and should have disgusted her, but her pussy gushed instead. He growled his approval into the kiss as he slipped a finger into her wet folds.

This was what Kim had been silently begging for. Her body knew its master and would have done anything he asked.

Nate gently stroked her folds, licking, and lapping at her mouth in the same way that reminded her of what some men did between a woman's thighs.

The desire that had been building in the pit of her stomach began to spread out. She felt it at the core of her back, the tips of her toes, and in her aching breasts that had hardened to diamond points.

Kim hadn't known that lovemaking could feel this way. She hadn't realized what her body was capable of.

When Nate began to thrust his finger in and out of her pussy, Kim's hips began to move. One finger became two, and when a third was added, she whimpered at the feeling of fullness. She rode his hand, her hips gyrating and thrusting against his thick fingers.

"Fuck, baby, you're so damn sexy," Nate whispered against her cheek. "Take your pleasure kitten, take it all."

He increased his speed, and Kim was almost manic. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Her eyes were wild.

Nate used his thumb to caress her clit that had popped out from behind its hood. He circled it, again and again, lightly flicking, and gauging her responses to know that would send her to ecstasy.

As he rubbed, he leaned down to suck one of her nipples through her t-shirt, the combination of his hands between her thighs and his mouth on her breath proved to be too much, she flew.

Kim shattered, her voice screaming out his name as her pussy gushed with her release. Kim's body continued to ride his fingers until the final contraction had shaken her body. She felt exhausted and vulnerable.

Never had she behaved so wantonly. Never had Kim been pushed to the point of no return. She'd always had control during sex. But what they had just done, defied all reason.

That had only been his hand.

"You're so fucking beautiful, baby."

He kissed her temple tenderly and then tucked her against his body. When she started to tremble, I grabbed the blanket on the back of the couch and covered her.

"I'm probably squishing you," she muttered against his neck.

Nate smiled and tightened his arms around her, "I will most likely die, but it will be worth it."

Kim laughed and smacked his stomach.

Nate loved the sheer joy in the sound of her laughter. It wasn't often that Kim laughed like that. Usually, it was more of a polite, cultured tone. But this wasn't anything like that.

Her eyes were sparkling underneath those tired lids.

"I'm not that heavy," she mumbled her cheeks heating.

"There is nothing about you, baby that I can't handle."

The words were innocent enough, but Kim's heart began to melt a little. Because she felt like Nate really meant what he said, and as scary as that was, it was also comforting.

Chapter 21

Week 32: Baby practices breathing

Thirty-two weeks into your pregnancy, or 30 weeks after conception, your baby's toenails are visible.

The layer of soft, downy hair that has covered your baby's skin for the past few months starts to fall off this week.

By now your baby might be 11 inches long from crown to rump and weigh 3 3/4 pounds.

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“Look,” Elliot ran a hand over his face in exasperation, “All I’m saying is that you might want to reconsider working from home. I know that you feel like your ankle is healed. But what if you twist it again in those heels you insist on wearing?”

Mandy gasped, “What in the hell is wrong with my shoes?”

Elliot scowled and ignored the snort of laughter that came from Mrs. H’s direction.

“I just want to make sure you’re safe,” he ground out.

Mandy shrugged indifferently, “I have been holed up in this apartment for almost two weeks. I’m going to work, and if you try and stop me, I will call a cab.”

“Why are you so fucking stubborn?” Elliot asked through clenched teeth.

Mrs. H cleared her throat causing both parties to turn and glare in her direction.

“I won’t be home today,” she smiled, ignoring their foul attitudes. “I believe that Robert is taking one of the cars in. So, it might be better for Mandy to go into the office today.”

Mandy beamed at the older woman, “Just what I thought as well.”

Elliot grumbled something about women always sticking together, but he didn’t stop Mandy as she grabbed her coat and tugged it on.

She’d taken her own money to purchase a few maternity outfits refusing Elliot’s offer. The woman was stubborn and pigheaded, Elliot thought. But he had to admire the way that she didn’t jump at every offer that was handed to her.

Mandy had pride and self-respect. He remembered how much it chafed as a child to take someone’s handout.

Placing his hand on her lower back, he escorted her to the elevator. In the small box, his senses were filled with her sweet perfume. His cock twitched in his Italian suit pants, and he tried picturing anything else but her fantastic ass.

The workday was hectic, and Elliot found himself daydreaming about the gorgeous mother-to-be more often than he should have.

Nate had come in to discuss a merger with an overseas company and called him out on it.

"What's with you, man? I just said that our stocks would go to the shitter. Your comment was, *'sounds great'* Dude, are you feeling okay?"

Elliot glanced up at his lifelong friend and was about to answer when there was a light knock at the door. Frowning, he stood and went to open it. He had asked not to be disturbed.

His expression immediately softened when he realized that it was Mandy, and he ushered her in. Nate was careful to control his appearance, but a part of him wanted to throw his head back and howl. The only reason he didn't was that he was reasonably sure he acted the same way around Mandy's sister Kim.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," Mandy said shyly, as she tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

"Of course not," Elliot assured her and led her to a comfortable chair.

Nate caught Elliot's eye and smirked knowingly at him. He had never known his best friend to call forty million dollars not significant. But that was before the delicious Mandy had appeared on the scene.

"I just got a call from my parents," Mandy swallowed, and Elliot tracked the delicate movement of her throat. "They said that Andrew came by accusing Kim of being the one that stepped out on him and that she was screwing him out of business somehow. My mother said he threatened them. That doesn't sound anything like the Andrew I knew."

Nate blew out a breath and told Elliot and Mandy what had happened a few days back when Andrew had come into the shop. He left off the part where he had held her in his arms, but his body remembered every drop of what had happened.

"Andrew is into drugs?" Mandy whispered, "Shit, I should have known."

"What makes you say that?" Nate inquired, hoping to find out more about the man who was threatening Kim.

“He always seemed to get on with my parents,” Mandy sighed, “That should have been my first clue. I just thought he was one of those guys that get along with everyone. But who would like my parents?”

Elliot was careful not to offend, Mandy but secretly agreed.

“There were times where he needed to be somewhere, and I came in to cover at The Grind. It was always a different excuse, and at first, I figured that was how he covered the affair.”

“It most likely was part of it,” Elliot murmured, “We need to get a private investigator on him.”

Nate smiled, “Already in progress, but the douche bag has been laying low.”

“Do you think that he would try and do something to Kim?” Mandy asked hesitantly. “I don’t worry as much about her when Freddy is there, but after he leaves, she is all alone in that apartment above the shop. I know she changed the locks, but if he is desperate enough.”

She let that thought trail off as both men tightened their fists.

“She won’t be alone,” Nate said suddenly, “I will try and get her to move into a hotel or my place, but if she refuses, I will stay there with her. That prick isn’t going to take anything more from Kim that he already has.”

Mandy’s eyes widened, “Thank you, Nate. I don’t know what to say, but I’m incredibly grateful.”

Elliot didn’t like the look of appreciation in Mandy’s eyes as she looked at his friend. And then it struck him. He was jealous. Stupidity and idiotically jealous, which didn’t make sense because Elliot knew that Nate was developing feelings for Kim, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

Much like himself—Elliot wasn’t ready to admit that either.

Nate left shortly after and Mandy rubbed her arms absently before making a move to rise. Elliot stopped her and walked around his desk to take the chair adjacent to Mandy’s that Nate had just vacated.

“What else did you parents want?” his tone was gentle, but there was a commanding note that Mandy didn’t miss.

“N-Nothing,” she stammered, guilty as hell.

Elliot sighed, “I need you to be honest with me, Mandy. Are they asking for money from you?”

Mandy swallowed twice, “Um, no, well, a little, you see, I’m just paying them back for the time I stayed with them.”

Elliot wanted to wring their necks.

“How much?” he ground out.

Mandy’s cheeks colored, “Not too much, nothing I can’t handle.”

“How much? I don’t want to ask again, Mandy.”

Her expression changed, and she bolted to her feet.

“I’m grateful for this job, Mr. Brand, and for everything you have done for me. But you can’t control my personal life.”

“The hell I can’t,” he too shot up to his feet.

Mandy’s eyes flashed, “Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

His lips came crashing down to hers.

Chapter 22

Mandy thought about fighting him for about two point four seconds. His bruising kiss forced her lips open all thoughts and reason flew out the window. She didn't stop to consider that this was how she ended up single and pregnant in the first place.

Mandy didn't want to think about the repercussions, especially when she'd already said this wouldn't happen again. It was only that there was something about Elliot Brand kiss that caused her brain to shut down and her synapses to go on a rampage.

She kissed him every bit as hard as he kissed her.

Mandy was tired of being told what to do. Her parents and older sister had done that her entire life. Even her best friend Shay, whom she was supposed to be meeting up with later, always thought Mandy incapable of deciding.

Well, she could choose what was best for her and her baby. Right now, what she needed was more of Elliot's drugging kisses. She clutched at his chest not caring that she was wrinkling his crisp white shirt.

Elliot also hadn't any compunction to her attire as his hands ran over every dip and curve of her back and ass.

He knew this is was insanity. But the friend in his pants had taken over, having been ignored for far too long.

His tongue mated with hers, dragging alongside it as he tasted every inch of her mouth. Mandy not only felt butterflies, but she was sure there was a stampede going on inside of her.

She leaned up on the tips of her toes, needing to be nearer to him.

Elliot growled and picked her up gently on the backs of her thighs to set her on his desk.

Mandy's skirt had ridden up, and she didn't hesitate to open her legs so that he could slip between them. His hard length behind his suit pants pressed against her wet panties.

He broke away from her mouth only to place hot, open-mouthed kisses along her cheeks and jawbone. From there he paid attention to her neck, loving the way that she shivered and shook when he reached a sensitive area.

His hand slipped between her thighs, and he drew lazy circles there, close but not touching where she needed him most.

Mandy wasn't having that. She reached down and grabbed his hand. His breath caught as Mandy shoved it into her panties.

Elliot didn't pull away or even hesitate to curl his digits and let the juices of her arousal coat his fingers.

Mandy panted as he parted her folds and ever so slowly got to know the most intimate part of her by touch. The time in the elevator had been rushed and hurried. Not to mention, the first time they had gotten together was a blur of alcohol, masks, and frenzied fucking.

Even though Mandy felt feverish now, she could appreciate that he was taking his time to really find out what made her sing. He traced lazy patterns on her clit and then sank a finger into her core.

Mandy threw her head back, the moan ripping through her throat was almost primal. Through hooded eyes, she watched Elliot who hadn't taken his eyes off her. His gaze went from her lips which she knew were puffy and swollen by his kisses. To the spot where his hand lay beneath her silky underwear.

He pulled his hand away, and Mandy cried out in dismay only to see that he took hold of her panties and removed them. Elliot cleared his desk with one swipe of his muscular arm, and then he helped Mandy lay back against the cold wood.

He sunk to his knees, grabbing her ass, and squeezing it almost painfully before blowing softly across her dampened folds.

Mandy had no recollection of the way she mewled and panted. She only knew that he needed to do something immediately about the ache in her pussy.

Elliot's dark hair between her milky thighs was one of the most erotic sights she'd ever seen. Mandy knew that they weren't only crossing boundaries they were eradicating them.

It was one thing to make love in a pitch-black elevator. One could almost think it was a dream. But here in Elliot's office during the light of day, there could be no excuses.

Elliot pulled her gently closer to him and then buried his head. Licking her firmly, he growled at the sticky sweet juices coating his tongue.

"You're so wet, baby! Holy fuck!"

Every word he spoke seemed to radiate through her. She felt beautiful in his arms. And nothing like the pregnant cow that she usually resembled.

Her fingers sunk into his hair pulling him closer to her pussy. There would be time to talk later. She couldn't reason with words or sentences. Mandy needed him in the most primal way possible.

Elliot licked and stroked her core, lapping at her as he gently licked and sucked at her most tender place.

Mandy began to writhe beneath him, He slipped a finger back inside of her tight passage and sucked her clit inside of his hot mouth.

“Elliot,” Mandy began to chant his name.

“Elliot!”

“Elliot!”

He felt like a fucking hero. This was one place where he could happily spend the rest of his days. Elliot added another finger and then a third, filling her to the brim.

Mandy’s hands had moved to cup her breasts. Elliot noticed that the front of her shirt had started to become damp with what could only be mother’s milk. Instead of disgusting him, it only made his cock surge.

This was his woman. He was the one to drive her to the edge of reason. He loved that her rounded figure held a child safely in her womb. The proof of that only urged him to mark her, to make sure that everyone knew that she belonged to him.

He felt a pang in his chest that the baby wasn’t his. But Elliot pushed that thought aside. It didn’t matter who had fathered the child. He would be the one that took care of Mandy and the little one. He would be the one that fixed bottles and helped in the night.

Not like some faceless bastard that got Mandy pregnant and left her on her own.

He sucked harder on that tender nub and watched as Mandy shattered in his arms. Her legs shook, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Her walls were pulling his fingers in deeper as wave after wave of ecstasy rolled through Mandy’s body.

Elliot unzipped her slacks and didn’t even take the time to push them down before he had taken out his cock. Rubbing her damp folds with his dick, Elliot knew that nothing and no one had ever made him feel the way that Mandy did.

“Please,” her whispered plea was all it took to have him thrusting inside.

She gasped at the fullness of his massive length, and he growled at the impossibly tight sheath.

Mandy lifted her hips, and he slipped even further inside causing them both to grunt. He wished that he could say he took things slow from there.

But with Mandy spayed out wantonly before him and the smell of their arousals coating the air, Elliot lost all control. He speared his cock inside of her again and again. He kept a tight hold on her so that she couldn't slip away from him on the slick surface.

Mandy opened her thighs as wide as she could and tightened her inner muscles, loving the way that he seemed to come unglued.

His thrusts no longer held a pattern. They were wild and frantic. He reached between her thighs and began to rub circles on her clit, loving the way that he could feel his own dick slipping into her again and again.

Mandy's cried increased, and she bit her arm to keep from screaming outright. It was then that her orgasm swept through her, dragging Elliot's out of him as he whispered her name like a prayer.

Chapter 23

“Oh, my holy hell, Mandy! You’re fucking huge!”

Mandy found herself enveloped in a tight hug by her best friend, Shay.

“That’s what happens when you’re gone forever and a day, Shay! I really am sorry about your Grandma. Tell me all about Tennessee,” Mandy settled into the chair at the restaurant.

Shay tucked a strand of her short red bob behind her ear, “Girl, you know I love my family. But they are jack shit crazy. Maybe it was because I spent so much time at my mom’s after the accident. Shit, I don’t know. But they were on my nerves faster than flies on poop.”

Mandy giggled, “I’ve missed you. Nobody else I know brings up feces at dinner.”

Shay’s green eyes twinkled, “Us country girls aren’t too worried about being fancy. You get what you get, you know it?”

Mandy’s smile was genuine, “I wouldn’t have you any other way. So, your family drove you nuts, and you survived the funeral. What else? Is there someone tall dark and handsome back home that caused you to take such a long time to return?”

Shay made a face, “If you mean, short, wet, and stupid you could be talking about my brother’s dog. But sadly, there were no bumping uglies back home. I’m dying for a good night out. I would say, let’s get out of here and hit the club. But I don’t think that it would be good for the peanut. I’m telling you, Mandy, I wore out Magic Steve!”

Mandy’s face blushed, “Isn’t that the one you got last Christmas?”

Shay didn’t even miss a beat, “Hell yeah, it was almost twelve inches of thick blue dick that was rechargeable. Magic Steve will certainly be missed, but alas, he will also be replaced.”

The waiter came over just about the time Shay blurted out ‘blue dick.’ He muttered some apology and took off before Mandy could get Shay quiet. It was always this way. Shay was bold, bright, and brassy. Mandy really loved her friend, despite the embarrassing moments, or perhaps because of them.

“I don’t think he is coming back,” Mandy’s lips twitched.

“You think his Peter was intimidated by Magic Steve?” Shay tilted her head and looked for the errant waiter.

"No," Mandy shook her head, "I think he is worried about what you might have done to some poor guys dick to make it turn blue."

Shay blinked at Mandy before bursting into laughter.

"That gives me all kinds of good ideas for what to do to the next douchebag that comes my way."

The waiter peered around the corner and when he met Mandy's eye resigned himself to come and take their order.

Shay stared at the man's crotch and had to be asked three times what she wanted for dinner. When she asked why there wasn't a thick sausage on the menu, Mandy choked back a laugh. Eventually, they both ordered grilled chicken, salad, and dessert.

As Mandy licked the chocolate fudge that was dripping off her spoon, she asked, "Where are you going to live now that the apartment is gone?"

Shay looked up from her cheesecake, "I have been staying with Richard, and before you ask why I haven't had any dick when I live with one, I will have you know that the man is gay."

Mandy's stomach hurt from all the laughter they had shared over dinner.

"Richard, from Guys and Dolls?"

Shay shook her head, "He used to work there, but that bar wasn't so great to their honey's. So now he is swinging his plastic titties as Lady Rose at the Cock Pitt."

Mandy had seen the man in action before. He was one of the best trans dancers in the business.

"How did you get hooked up with him?" Mandy asked, taking another bite of the chocolatey goodness.

Shay shrugged, "I knew that you were at your parents. So, I stayed at Emma's for a night or two, and she is friends with Richard."

Mandy had never liked Shay's friend Emma. The woman seemed sneaky and draped herself over every guy in the vicinity. She'd always been one of the waitresses that night when Mandy had first met Elliot.

Mandy cleared her throat, "Are you working with Emma again?"

Shay put the last bite of cheesecake into her mouth, licking the tines of the folk until they were clean.

"I could eat cheesecake for every meal! Damn that stuff is amazing!"

Shay could see that her attempt to change the subject hadn't worked. She didn't want to talk about the catering company, waitressing, or Emma with Mandy.

"Yeah," Shay replied shortly. "I needed a job, and Emma has work for me. What about you? What is this I hear about you working in the Brand building downtown? Fuck, Mandy, that is high class!"

Mandy squirmed a bit in her seat, "I started a month or so ago. It's not a big deal, just a personal assistant position."

Shay noticed that Mandy had seemed to withdraw a bit when she'd asked her about her new job.

"Are they nice to you?" the tone of Shay's voice was sharp.

Mandy nodded, "They have been very kind."

Shay breathed a sigh of relief, "Good, I didn't know if I needed to go kick some jerk-hole asses for you. Speaking of jerk-holes how life back in the family domicile?"

Mandy felt her color mount, "Um, well, I'm not living at home. My new job comes with room and board."

Shay sat back, confused, "What kind of personal assistant position comes with a place to live?"

Mandy tried to sound nonchalant, "You see, sometimes Mr. Brand works crazy hours and, so it is easier if his close staff lives with him."

Shay stared at her friend in shock.

"You're working for Elliot Brand, the Elliot Brand? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Mandy looked for the waiter who was nowhere to be found.

"Um, yeah, that's his name. Do you know him?"

Shay dropped her napkin and leaned forward to touch Mandy's forehead.

"Do I know him? Are you serious? Mandy, he was named one of the top five eligible bachelors. He's hot as hell, has so much money he uses it when he shits to wipe his ass. Every girl on the planet wants to lick the bastard. Do I know him? Let's just say. I don't know many who don't know who Elliot Brand is. Hell, he was at the party you worked at with me. Do you remember seeing him there? He was one of the guests."

Mandy knew that all the color had left her face. This was what she'd been dreading. Within moments of hearing Elliot's name, Shay was already piecing things together way too quickly.

"I didn't recognize him," Mandy said truthfully. Because that night when she'd gone home with him, she hadn't known he was Elliot Brand.

All she knew was that an incredibly handsome man wanted her, not her best friend Shay or slutty Emma. He had chosen her.

The waiter finally came with their cheeks, and it was silent for a moment while they paid. Once they stood to put their jackets on, Mandy noted that Shay still hadn't spoken.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked taking Shay's hand.

Shay looked over at Mandy and nodded, "Yeah, just thinking."

"What about?" Mandy asked.

Shay shook her head, "It doesn't matter. I'm simply happy to see you."

Mandy heard someone calling her name and turned to see that Richard was waiting for her with the car.

Shay's eyes doubled, "You have your own car service?"

Mandy was quick to shake her head, "No, no, nothing like that. Richard and I work together for Mr. Brand. He offered to pick me up after he ran some errands."

Shay looked like she wanted to say something else, but at the last moment, she decided against it.

"Do you need a ride home?" Mandy asked kindly.

Richard was too well mannered to comment on Mandy's friend. But from his perspective, the girl looked worldly in a way that Mandy never could. There was a hardness behind Shay's eyes, which Richard didn't like. Nor was he comfortable with the idea she seemed to be appraising Mandy's situation.

Finally, Shay answered, "I'm meeting Emma at the club. I knew we wouldn't be long, and so I promised I would head over. It's only a block away. I will walk."

Mandy felt a moment of sadness that her friend hadn't planned to spend more time with her after being apart for months. But Mandy knew that Shay must have missed city life and didn't blame her for not wanting to sit home with a pregnant woman.

"Okay, well, please have a wonderful time and be safe!"

Mandy hugged Shay close to her as she whispered, "I really am glad you're back."

Shay returned the squeeze, "Me too, Mandy, me too."

Chapter 24

Kim stared in disbelief as Nate carried in bag after bag into her small apartment.

“I thought you were staying a few nights?” her voice was tentative as if she weren’t quite sure if she was dreaming or not.

Nate shot her a panty melting grin, “A few nights, a week, maybe more.”

“Um,” Kim shook her head, “That’s not going to work for me.”

She could feel her stomach twisting in knots and knew that having Nate underfoot day and night would definitely cause her to go off the deep end.

Kim walked over and grabbed one of the suitcases, intending to take it back outside. She made it three or four steps before Nate caught her arm.

“What are you doing?” his deep voice had her pussy clenching.

“Shit, look, Nate, I like you. I do,” she wrinkled her brow, “Mostly, anyhow, but that’s not the point. I can’t have you here all the time. It’s too much.”

Nate reached over and took the suitcase from her grasp but didn’t let go of her arm even when she tugged on it.

“What are you afraid of?” his whispered question had her back stiffening.

“I’m not afraid, Nate. I just need some privacy. This apartment isn’t that big. You plan on being here indefinitely, no, that isn’t happening.”

Nate’s thumb caressed her silky skin, “You didn’t want to come to my place, remember? This was the compromise.”

“For a few days, Nate,” Kim’s voice began to rise.

He observed her, not wanting to upset Kim, but he was determined to protect her.

“Can’t we just get a restraining order or something?” Kim’s worried gaze met his.

Nate slowly nodded, “We can try to get a restraining order. But as of right now he hasn’t laid a hand on you, has he? I’m afraid that without solid proof of the drug use the police will have nothing to go with. Will your parents testify against him?”

Kim let out a harsh laugh, “My scum bag parents go to the police? Hardly. They are most likely his dealer or vice versa.”

Nate sighed, "What are you worried about happening if I'm here? I promise that I won't touch you if that is what you want."

Kim flushed, that was positively not what she wanted. How did she explain to him that she was terrified of falling in love with him? That she was scared that she was already half-way and that her heart could so easily be his? With more time together how could she protect herself from falling?

"No," her reply was so quiet that Nate had to lean forward to hear her.

"No, you don't want me to touch you?" the words that left his lips seemed to pain him.

Kim swallowed, "That's not what I meant. No, I don't want promises that you won't touch me."

Nate felt something flutter in the vicinity of his heart, "Then what is it, sweetheart?"

"Nothing," she muttered trying to paste a smile on her face.

"I call bullshit, tell me, Kim," he was firm, and Kim knew that she needed to tell him something.

"What if I want to walk around in my underwear or I fart or something equally humiliating? There is a certain intimacy that comes from living in such close quarters Nate. Does that not worry you even a little?" Her cheeks darkened after her little outburst, but Nate didn't laugh as she expected him.

His eyes darkened, "You could walk around in a garbage bag, and I would still want you. Bad breath, passing gas, snoring, you could do all this and more Kim, and I will still be hard as fuck. I will do everything I can to respect your privacy. I promise you. But I can also guarantee that my hands are going to gravitate towards you. That my eyes are going to be undressing you, and my mind will be bending you over the nearest surface anytime I'm close to you."

Kim stepped in closer to his larger frame to gain courage and to break the connection of their gazes. Into his shirt, she muttered, "What if I disappoint you?"

The question hung in the air between them. Kim had given voice to one of her greatest concerns. That maybe she wasn't enough, that she didn't have what it took to satisfy a man, especially one like Nate. Hell, her own husband had gone looking for better, and she'd thought they were in love.

Andrew and Kim's love-life hadn't been bad. She usually came, and he seemed to find his pleasure as well. Granted, it wasn't the heated stuff that she read in secret on her tablet. But that was fiction, and this was real life. Wasn't it?

"Look at me," his tone was gruff, and Kim shook her head indicating that there was no way in hell she would be obeying him.

"Kim," he demanded, "Look at me!"

She hesitated for another few seconds before reluctantly pulling away and glaring at him belligerently.

He almost smiled at Kim's brazen look, but this was too important.

"You could never disappoint me. Do you understand that?"

"You don't know that," she cried out, "Maybe I suck at fucking, maybe I'm shit between the sheets, and you won't have the heart to tell me the truth. Things will be awkward and I…"

He cut her off by smashing his lips against hers. Nate wasn't sure what else he could do to prove to Kim that she wasn't the reason that jackass cheated.

Her mouth automatically opened for him, and Nate groaned at the taste of his woman.

His woman.

It had a nice ring to it, and Nate wasn't above admitting that to himself. She tasted of coffee and cherry lip balm, and of her.

Nate's hands moved to cup her face as he tenderly held her head immobilized in his grasp. He wanted to taste every inch of this gorgeously stubborn creature. Everything about her called out to him.

His fingers tingled where he touched her warm skin. The soft moans escaping from her lips spurred him on to deepen the kiss. Nate moved so that there wasn't an inch of space between them. Her firm breasts were pressed up against his chest, and Nate felt every inch of her sexy body.

Kim was sinking, her mind no longer focused on what she wasn't, but determined to have this man devour her.

She slipped her arms around him and up the back of the shirt to caress his heated naked skin.

Nate's sharp inhalation was enough to have Kim smiling into their kiss.

Nate growled and pulled away long enough to wrench his shirt over his head and to lift Kim's off her. He flicked the back of her bra and pulled it off her shoulders. This time when they came together, it was all skin on skin.

Her nipples pebbled as they rubbed against his muscular chest, the light dusting of hair abrading the fine points.

Kim's hands explored every inch of him. She loved the ridges of his chest and the way that his flat brown nipples would react to her teasing them.

Nate pulled his mouth away from hers and captured one of her breasts within it. Kim arched her back, as her eyes rolled back. Nate wasn't soft or delicate with her. His mouth demanded her response, and she willingly gave it.

The wet heat between her thighs growing exponentially with every suck of his mouth on her breast. Her fingers buried themselves in his hair, and she pulled, not realizing that she was urging him on with her blatant need.

Nate kissed the other breast and had her thrust her hips helplessly.

"Nate, please," she pulled in his hair, trying to get him to understand that she needed more. He needed to be inside of her—now!

Nate began to undo her pants, and Kim shimmied out of them kicking them to the side. Her hands automatically went to his fly, and within seconds they both stood before each other naked and desperate for the other.

Nate cupped her face once again, the tenderness of it nearly breaking her.

"Tell me now, Kim. If you don't want this as fucking bad as I want you, you need to tell me, right now."

Chapter 25

With his hands wrapped around her cheeks, Kim could hardly breath let alone think. But the last thing she wanted him to do was to stop.

Was she scared? Hell yeah, Kim knew that she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the world. Her hips had a few white faded stretch marks from when she was growing, and her breasts were getting larger by the day with this pregnancy.

She didn't have a six-pack as Nate did, her stomach had a gentle curve that she knew would soon be growing, just like Mandy's had.

But the way that Nate looked at her, you would have thought that she was the most perfect creation that he had ever seen. The reverence in his eyes as he dipped his gaze again and again. He made her feel beautiful, worthy, and it was because of him that she didn't hesitate when Nate asked if she wanted to stop.

She craved the way that he was holding her like she could shatter at any moment. Kim couldn't remember a time when someone had evoked such feelings inside of her. She raised up on her toes and kissed him.

Then she whispered, "Don't ever stop."

Nate grabbed her by the thighs and lifted Kim so that she could straddle his waist. Her soaked folds were pressed wide against his lower abdomen, and she felt his cock nestled against her ass.

Nate's kisses were drugging. Kim had never experienced anything like it and knew that she could kiss this man for hours and never get tired. His taste and touch were forever imprinted on her body. He had stolen a small piece of her heart, and she hadn't even seen it coming.

Nate carried her to her bedroom and laid her down on the soft counterpane.

"You're so fucking amazing. I wish you could see yourself."

Kim wrinkled her nose as a flush spread across her body, "I have a mirror."

Nate's lip twitched, "I think it's broken."

Kim frowned. Nate's hot gaze continued to stare at her naked body. It hadn't been a long time, but it wasn't something she was comfortable with.

"What are you doing?"

Nate smiled, "Memorizing every inch of you so that I can remember it when I was jerking off."

Kim blurted out a bubble of laughter, “I beg your pardon.”

“I want to fuck you so hard that you can’t walk for a week. I want to fuck your breasts and your mouth and come all over your stomach. I want to erase any memories you have of that douchebag until it’s only me that you think about.”

“Holy shit,” Kim breathed her eyes blinking in surprise.

Nate opened her thighs and traced the soaked folds with a long finger. He then brought it to his mouth and closed his eyes as he savored the very essence of her.

“Fuck,” Kim whispered, not realizing she’d spoken.

Nate’s eyes flashed open, and he sank to his knees to give her the most intimate of kisses. His mouth took her repeatedly. His tongue was circling and flicking her clit until it was swollen and throbbing with need.

He sank lower and licked her core, his tongue sinking inside of her tight pussy as he fucked her with his mouth.

The sounds that she made spurned him onward until she shattered, her orgasm ripping through her with a strength that Kim hadn’t known was possible.

Her arms and legs felt like Jell-O, and she tried to push his head away when he continued to lap at her gently.

“It’s too sensitive,” she cried out, as her hips continued to jerk with random remnants of her ferocious orgasm.

But Nate wasn’t done with her and continued to lick until Kim felt the coiling in her belly once again. Soon she was screaming his name as she pulled his hair, forcing his face deeper into her pussy.

Kim had lost all sense of shamelessness and when he came up for air the second time. She pulled Nate’s face to hers and kissed him, tasting herself on his lips and tongue.

Nate growled his approval and kissed Kim back, letting her know how much he had loved eating her out.

He broke away and went to enter her, but Kim had other ideas. She pushed Nate onto his back and began to explore his muscular body with her lips, teeth, and tongue. From the soft shell of his ear to the arches on his feet, Kim left no areas unscathed.

She circled back around to where his dick was standing up away from his body. The massive organ was a deep reddish purple and looked painful. She took the base in her hand and gently licked the slit.

Nate's hips flew off the bed, "Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Kim stopped, "Did I do something wrong?"

His breathing was labored when he answered, "No. baby. It just feels so fucking good."

Armed with that knowledge, Kim smiled confidently and bent down to lick the rim of his large mushroomed head.

Nate felt his eyes roll back and knew that he had finally met the woman who would tame him. Never had fucked someone, and had it feel like this intense feeling. Could it be love? He had never felt so connected to another individual and knew he would take a bullet for her without even flinching.

Kim opened her mouth and slipped his length inside. The intense heat of her mouth had Nate coming unglued.

He tried to be patient and to let her explore him. But her mouth had started to suck him in deeper and deeper. He was holding on by a thread. It was then that she sank down taking him to the back of her throat.

Nate's balls tightened, and he yanked her off his dick with a loud pop. In seconds she was pulled onto him, and he pressed himself into her entrance and thrust. She screamed as her pussy tried to accommodate Nate's massive size.

Andrew had been the only man she'd ever slept with, and he wasn't anything compared to the monster that Nate had between his thighs.

Nate's teeth were gritted together as he tried to let her become accustomed to him. But soon it was a lost cause, and Nate began to thrust his cock deep inside of her.

"Ride me, baby. Ride my cock," he encouraged, and Kim began to tentatively rub herself back and forth against his body. When her pussy started tingling, and she felt that pull, deep in her stomach, her body began to move faster and faster.

Soon he was matching her thrusts, and they were both dancing on the edge of oblivion. Her breasts tightened as her orgasm rushed upon her.

Nate felt that tingling in the small of his back and could barely warn her that he was coming before Kim had shouted that she was too.

Their bodies shook as they came together in the most beautiful way possible. It had been earth-shattering, world-changing, and Kim couldn't believe that this was what love making really was all about.

He didn't want to slip out of her yet and so when Kim showed signs of being tired, he grabbed a blanket and covered her up. He left her to sleep on his chest as his cock slowly deflated and eventually slid out.

Chapter 26

“Have you seen Mandy?” Elliot had just walked out of his study and greeted the older woman with a smile.

Mrs. H gave him a knowing look. There was a definite twinkle in her faded eyes.

“I believe she is freshening up for supper,” the older woman continued to set the elaborate dinner table. “Her sister and Nate called, and they will be here in about fifteen minutes. It seemed that something came up to delay them.”

Elliot had a good idea what had come up. It was the same thing that tended to salute his favorite sister as well.

“I’m just going to go and check on her,” he mumbled before internally rolling his eyes at himself. He didn’t need to explain his actions to the woman.

Even though he had known her most of his life and especially through the hard times, he didn’t have to answer to her.

Mrs. H only nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Elliot knocked on Mandy’s closed door, but there wasn’t an answering call. Testing the knob, he said a silent thank you that she hadn’t locked it and slipped inside.

He immediately heard rustling in her bathroom followed by the sweetest soprano voice singing a popular song on the radio. Elliot had no idea that Mandy could sing. She was good, not a diva by any means, but there was something hauntingly beautiful in her tone that wrapped around his lungs and embedded itself in his heart.

There was a click, and the bathroom door opened, and Mandy walked into her room halting when she saw him standing there.

A flush stained her cheeks, and Elliot could no more have stopped himself from going to her than he could have stopped the earth from revolving around the sun.

She was the center of his universe, and he was starting to see that he was in over his head.

Elliot gathered Mandy into his arms, “I had no idea we were housing such musical talent.”

Mandy’s shy smile had his cock on alert, “You’re just being nice.”

Elliot laughed, “It is not often that I’m accused of being nice.”

She leaned up and kissed the underside of his chin, “Then they don’t really know you.”

Fuck it, Elliot thought as he leaned down to kiss her. They really didn’t have time for this, but he didn’t care.

Their lips met gently at first. He could taste the toothpaste that she’d just used, and her light perfume swirled around them causing him to harden even further. She was becoming braver in their exchanges, and Elliot found that it turned him on when she tried to dominate him.

Mandy pushed Elliot backward until his legs met with her bed and he sat down. She slipped between his legs and cupped his face in her small hands. She loved the stubble abrading her palms and the way his silky black hair slipped through her fingertips.

She tilted her head and began to really taste him with long, broad strokes. When a growl erupted him his throat, she felt her panties dampen even further. There was a heady kind of power knowing that she could bring this powerful man to his knees.

Mandy pushed him back on the bed and went for his belt buckle.

Elliot wasn’t about to stop her and wondered what she was up to when she pushed his slacks and underwear down on his thighs. But nothing prepared him for when she licked a broad circle around the rim of his mushroomed head.

“Fuuuck!” he cried out as his hands clutched the bedding beneath him.

Mandy smiled and looked up into Elliot's eyes. Not breaking eye contact, she took him into her mouth.

Elliot had never in his life seen anything more erotic than Mandy sucking on his cock while staring straight at him. There was a confident glint in her eye that caused his heart to swell. He wanted Mandy always to feel this way, which she could do whatever she wanted and that he didn’t give a damn about where she’d come from.

He hated the things she’d endured at the hands of her parents. But she was starting to see that she was more than just a drug abuser’s daughter.

Mandy sank down to take more of him into her mouth, and Elliot swore as his eyes tried to roll back at the intense pleasure. She used her hand to cup his balls, caressing them gently as she licked and sucked at every inch of his cock.

She angled her mouth over him, and he slid all the way to the back of her throat. He knew that he wouldn’t last, not with her deep throating him.

He tried to pull himself away from her, but Mandy grasped his hips and sucked harder.

“I’m going to come, Sweetheart! You need to let me go!”

But she wouldn’t, and he shot off his load into her hungry mouth. She didn’t stop until he had given her everything. It was one of the most humbling experiences of his life. She smiled after using her fingers to wipe the corners of her mouth.

“Fuck, Mandy,” he was still panting.

She laughed, “You alright?”

Elliot shook his head, gathering her close, “No! I think you killed me.”

Mandy snuggled into his arms and sighed as she felt him kiss her temple.

“I want to tell your sister about us,” the words were out before Elliot could consider the repercussions. He was speaking from the heart.

Mandy pulled back out of his arms, “What about us?”

Elliot frowned and before he spoke, he pulled his pants up and fixed his clothing. He needed time to think about what he was going to say.

“I care about Mandy,” he began. “I don’t want to scare you away. But could you just think about the idea of there being an us?”

Mandy felt her stomach turn, but not in a good way. What would happen when Elliot found out that the baby really was his? Should she tell him?

“Look,” he continued, “I want to be with you, I want to be there for you when the baby is born.”

Her anxiety skyrocketed.

“Elliot, you don’t understand.”

But he didn’t want to hear Mandy tell him all the reasons why they couldn’t be together.

“You don’t need to make a decision right now,” his voice was patient, but she heard a hint of exasperation that usually wasn’t present.

“No,” she swallowed the panic that was racing up her throat.

He looked sick. “No? What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” her words were rushed, and her hands began to shake.

“Mandy,” his whispered plea almost broke her heart.

But he wasn’t getting it. She needed to explain better.

“I don’t need to think about there being an us,” she continued like he hadn’t spoken. “I care about you too. I want there to be an us.”

He crushed her in his arms his mouth crashing down into a hungry possessive kiss.

“You won’t be sorry, Mandy! I swear it, I will do everything in my power to make you happy.”

Mandy felt overwhelmed by the emotion in his voice and the guilt that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in her heart.

“Elliot,” she began, “There are things you need to know.”

There was a knock on the door and Elliot called, “Yes?”

Mrs. H’s voice rang out, “Nate and Kim are here!”

Elliot stood and pulled Mandy up with him.

Mandy tried to stop him, “Elliot, I need to talk to you!”

He grinned at her, “There is so much I want to talk to you about as well. We will tonight after your sister and Nate leave. Does that sound okay?”

Mandy knew that the longer she waited, the harder it would be to tell him. But the coward in her loved that she was being given an opportunity to let it slide once again.

She nodded, and they joined their guests.

Chapter 27

"And there we were, stranded at junior prom, our dates were passed out drunk and Mandy had vomit on her new dress."

Mandy's eyes sparkled as she laughed at Kim's retelling of their *'worst date ever'* story.

"I had saved and saved for that pink dress," Mandy added. "It took me a long time to forgive Jimmy for throwing up on it."

Kim's eyes danced, "I think she forgave him so that he would stop apologizing. My daddy tried to run him off with a shotgun more times than I can count."

Mandy winced at the memory, "Jimmy was sweet, but not necessarily the brightest of boyfriends."

"Who spiked the punch?" Nate asked leaning forward to rest his hands on the table.

They had finished their deserts and just pushed their plates away.

"Let's go into the living room where we can be more comfortable," Elliot suggested.

He had noticed the way that Mandy was twisting and turning on the hard dining room chairs. He made a mental note to ask Mrs. H to order richly upholstered chairs as soon as possible.

Elliot went to Mandy and helped her to her feet. The chivalrous gesture wasn't missed by Nate and Kim who gave each other a knowing look.

Mandy chose to ignore when her sister winked at her and gestured with her eyes towards Elliot. She was nervous enough about the amount of affection that he was showing her in front of company.

Kim continued the story, "We never did learn who spiked the punch, although it happens almost every year, so our dates should have known better. It just was unusually strong that night."

Elliot tried to remember is junior prom. Had it been Amy or Sarah maybe? He had borrowed his mom's car and ended up getting to third base in the back seat before a police officer had stuck his flashlight in the window.

Nate laughed his ass off when Elliot had been marched home to tell his mom just what he had been up to. He hadn't a clue whatever happened to his date, she hadn't meant anything to him.

Nothing like what he felt for Mandy, that was all-encompassing.

He sat beside her on the couch and placed a possessive arm around her shoulder. Kim and Nate chose to sit in a few side chairs, but Elliot noticed the glances that Nate was sending to Mandy's older sister.

Nate might think that he had things under control, but Elliot could tell that his best friend was in deep with Kim.

"How is the coffee shop?" he asked cordially.

"Getting worried?" Nate teased.

Elliot rolled his eyes, "Please, like I would ever run away scared from your lazy ass. The Bugatti will be safe and sound in my garage."

Kim choked, "What are you talking about?"

Mandy elbowed Elliot hard in the ribs.

"Mandy, what is he talking about?" Kim knew that if she questioned her sister, she would tell her the truth, even if she didn't want to.

Mandy sighed, "Nate and Elliot have a little bet on something. It isn't a big deal."

Kim's brow rose, "If it isn't a big deal then you can tell me the details."

"Does anyone want some coffee?" Nate tried to interject but Kim gave him a terrifying look and the man sat back down.

"Elliot wagered his Bugatti against Nate's ability to triple The Grind's profit by Valentine's Day."

Kim's jaw dropped, "But it's Christmas in four days?"

She turned to Nate who returned her gaze steadily. Then Kim glanced back at Elliot who seemed a bit contrite now that Mandy was upset with him.

"I'm sorry," Elliot's smooth voice didn't settle Mandy's nerves. "I thought you knew about it, Kim."

Her eyes flew to Nate, "So, that is why you have been hanging out at the coffee shop, to win a Bugatti? The new uniforms, schedules, employees, it all makes sense now. Is that what you stepped in with Andrew?"

Her voice was rising with each accusation. Kim was becoming more and more upset.

"Baby," Nate tried to soothe her, "It isn't like that?"

But she was too far gone.

Kim jumped to her feet, "Thank you, Elliot and Mandy, for a lovely evening. I need to go."

Nate hopped up to join her, “I will grab our coats!”

“Oh!” her blue eyes shot icy waves into his heart, “You’re not coming home with me. You can stay here or get a cab to your place.”

Nate’s jaw clenched, “You’re making a big deal of nothing, Kim. I don’t even want his fucking car anymore.”

“Why?” tears had begun to form in her eyes, “because you’re already fucking the bimbo that is too stupid to figure out why a handsome rich man would be helping her?”

Mandy gasped, but Elliot put a protective hand on her shoulder. But they could have been statues for all the attention that Nate and Kim were paying them.

“I didn’t fuck you for the shop, Kim!” Nate’s temper flared, and he grasped her hand, so she couldn’t leave. “If I remember correctly it was you the propositioned me!”

Kim looked like she’d been hit, her face crumpled but not before she swung her arm out connecting the flat of her palm with Nate’s cheek. It was a resounding crack and her handprint immediately began to appear on his face.

“Don’t help me, don’t speak to me, and don’t come near me!” Kim’s throat was clogged with tears as she uttered her final words, “I’m such an idiot. I should have known.”

She raced across the expansive apartment and wrenched open the door. Nate stood there in shock with his hand covering his cheek. It looked like it might bruise by morning.

Mandy went to go after her sister, but Elliot held her back.

“What are you doing?” she pulled at the wrist he had trapped in his large hand.

“Nate needs to follow her if he has any chance of fixing this, it has to be now.”

Nate jerked his head almost as if clearing it and then raced after Kim.

Mandy jumped with the door slammed shut for the second time.

“Are you alright?” Elliot released her arm and cupped her jaw.

Mandy’s heart was pounding, she’d never liked fighting. And when Kim struck Nate it was jarring how much it reminded her of abuse that surrounded their childhood.

Elliot gathered Mandy in his arms. He hated the way that she was shaking uncontrollably. He doubted that she even realized she was doing it. Her fingers dug into his shirt and she clutched him like a lifeline.

“It will be okay,” he murmured, wanting to take away the hurt and pain in her eyes.

Mandy nodded, but she wasn't sure that it would be. She knew all about this part of life. Hell, in a lot of respects, this was a typical night in their home. She just hadn't expected her sister to get so enraged.

If that could happen to Kim, could it happen to Mandy?

Were they doomed to become their parents?

She felt the baby kicking her stomach between them. And didn't protest when Elliot's concerned gaze followed her hand she'd unconsciously placed there.

Elliot gently guided her to his room, bypassing hers. She would be sleeping with him—from now on if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter 28

Kim angrily pushed the tears from her cheeks, and she rushed through the city streets. She wasn't paying close attention to where she was going. All she knew was that she'd to get away from him.

Her mind kept replaying the scene over and over again. Nate's face as he realized how angry she really was. Mandy's shock when she'd smacked Nate. Elliot's surprise as she admitted to sleeping with Nate.

Shame burned her face as she choked back a sob. Kim had thought that Nate might be falling in love with her.

Or perhaps the truth was that she'd fallen in love with him. How had Kim allowed that to happen? What kind of fool was she to believe that someone like him could ever possibly want to help someone like her unless there was something major on the line?

And a fucking Bugatti? That could buy and sell her shop three times over again. What did Kim know about living in a world where every dime wasn't scrutinized over?

A firm hand grasping her shoulder stopped Kim mid-stride. She screamed, trying to knock her assailant to the ground.

"Fuck! Stop it! Kim, it's just me," Nate dodged as many blows as he could.

"Why are you following me, Nate?"

Kim shook his hand off her shoulder not waiting for an answer and tried to walk away again.

Nate grabbed her wrist this time, tight enough that she couldn't get away.

"You're so fucking stubborn, woman!" Nate exploded, "You had your chance to say what you wanted to. Now you listen to me for a change."

He used his finger to tilt her face up to meet his gaze. Her stormy blue eyes were still shiny, the evidence of her crying jag still on those gorgeous lashes. Her mouth was pressed into a stubborn line and a muscle tightened near her temple.

"You have one hell of a temper," he hadn't really meant to lead with that statement, but Nate was one to call it like he saw it. "Do you want to know the truth? Or do you just want to believe that everyone is out to get you? You're stronger than this Kim, you don't have to be the fucking victim. If you want to fight me on, feel free. I'm ready for anything you throw at me. But don't you fucking walk away from me. I'm not letting you go that easily. Do you understand me?"

Victim—the word stuck in her mind and played repeatedly. Was she acting like the victim? Fury licked her veins at the thought of someone else taking advantage of her or her sister. She'd been the victim in the past, it was true. Even with Andrew, she'd allowed herself to live in an ignorant state.

Never again, she vowed to herself.

"You're a fucking prick!" She screamed back at him, "How dare you call me a victim? Do you have any idea what I have lived through? No, you don't"

Her eyes were mocking as she continued, "You might have grown up poor, but you didn't grow like we did. Hiding bruises from teachers that would unknowingly put us in more danger by reporting things to the authorities. My parents were masters at covering up their deeds."

She hadn't realized that she was crying again, "You want to know how I lost my virginity?"

He flinched, but Kim was too far gone to stop.

"My father traded it for a high ball. And then when he was drug off his ass and I couldn't fight him off he would sneak into my room. I couldn't say anything! I tried to tell my mother and she just called me a whore—said I had made the whole thing up. When I found out that he had done the same thing to Mandy I tried to kill him. Did you know that? And you call me a fucking victim? I beat the shit out of him with a rolling pin one night when Mandy was at her friend Shay's."

Nate was stunned by the horrifying images and admissions that kept pouring from Kim's lips.

"Yeah," her tone was bitter, "I might have latched onto Andrew because he was the first person in my life who didn't treat me like shit. Was a stupid to trust him—obviously. You can't know what it is like to hide the food that school sends home over the weekend so that you and your baby sister can eat. You don't know what it is like to hide underneath the boxes in the basement and listen to a drunken orgy going on upstairs when you're eight years old. So, go ahead and call me the victim, Jackass. You know nothing about me."

Nate yanked her to him, encasing Kim into his arms.

"You're right," his voice sounded gruff as is he was fighting back the emotion. "I'm sorry. I don't know nearly as much about you as I want to. But know this, Kim. I'm falling in love with you. I know you're broken and that you come with some serious baggage. But I won't allow you to push me away from you. I won't let you carry this burden alone anymore. So, rage at me, hit me, call me names, whatever you need to do. Just don't walk away, I won't let you."

The violent anger that had been boiling inside of her started to abate and it was replaced with such a deep heart-wrenching sadness that she felt she would drown in it. Clutching Nate's coat with her gloved hands she sobbed into his chest.

She cried for the little girl that she was never allowed to be. She cried for all the times that she'd tried to protect Mandy, and those monsters had taken it out on Kim and got to Mandy anyway.

All these years later, Kim had thought she'd gotten past this. But right here, right now on the city streets with Nate's arms around her, she hurt every bit as bad as she'd back then.

Kim didn't really recall when he hailed a cab and bustled them both inside of it. She vaguely remembered the drive back The Grind and Nate ushering her back to her apartment. He tenderly removed her clothes until she was in her panties and a large t-shirt. Then stripping down to his boxers, he climbed into the bed behind her and pulled Kim's body against his warm chest.

The exhaustion that had been lingering ever since her break down enveloped her and Kim fell into a deep sleep. She didn't dream about her childhood or her husband cheating on her. She didn't dream about the shop closing or one of the other fears that constantly hovered in her mind.

No, on this night, she dreamed of Nate. They were happy and in love. Kim felt safe. It was an odd notion to her that she could live this way. That there could be an existence with her and Nate where she wasn't constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

A little girl with blond pigtails and sparkling blue eyes that raced along in front of them. Kim felt a surge of protectiveness for this innocent little girl who danced in the sunlight with childlike laughter. This is how it is supposed to be.

When she awoke, Kim wouldn't remember the dream. But what she would recall was that sense of safety that she'd felt. And that it was largely due to the sexy man that was lightly snoring in her ear. She wouldn't be angry that his hand had slipped down the back of her panties and was cupping her ass in a decidedly territorial manner. Nor, that he was holding her close enough that she felt every inch of his massive cock against her thigh.

She would feel safe—and that was a beginning.

Chapter 29

Week 34: Baby's fingernails grow

Thirty-four weeks into your pregnancy, or 32 weeks after conception, your baby's fingernails have reached his or her fingertips.

By now your baby might be nearly 12 inches long from crown to rump and weigh more than 4 1/2 pounds.

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“Don’t think I haven’t noticed the pep in your step, Mrs. Johnson,” Tina waggled her eyebrows at Mandy. “You don’t come in here moping about anymore.”

Mandy sighed, “Tina, I’m not married. So, I can’t be Mrs. Johnson, now can I?”

Tina went on as if she hadn’t spoken, “You took my advice and got you one of those new fangle-dangle vibrators, didn’t you? Oh, don’t deny it! I can tell, Mrs. Johnson, you know, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

Mandy wasn’t sure why she even tried to converse with Dr. Roberts’ medical assistant. She doubted that the woman heard anything that came out of her mouth.

“That one by Jimmy-John might come with a hefty price tag, but I’m telling you, Mrs. Johnson it is worth every penny. And the Bionic Bunny Bullet, Sugar, that will rock your world.”

The door opened, and Dr. Roberts entered the room.

“How is my favorite mother-to-be?” he said kindly as he took the chart that Tina was offering him. “It looks like there isn’t anything new going on, that’s good. Your urine test was fine, weight gain normal. So, tell me, Mandy, how are you feeling?”

Mandy went over her aches and pains before Dr. Roberts measured her belly and told her what to expect in the next few weeks. He said at their next appointment he would begin doing internal exams to check how her body is preparing for the delivery.

“If everything goes according to plan, we should be meeting this little one the week of Valentine’s Day.”

Mandy could hardly believe that they were discussing delivery. In some ways, it seemed like she’d been pregnant forever. But in another, it scared the shit out of Mandy to think about bringing a baby home from the hospital.

“What are you plans for the holidays?” Dr. Roberts inquired as he threw his gloves into the bin.

Mandy blushed, “We were supposed to have my sister over, but I’m not sure if that will still happen.”

Dr. Roberts raised his eyebrow at the term ‘we’ and asked, “How are things working out with Elliot Brand?”

Mandy knew her cheeks were only getting redder, “Very good, Dr. Roberts, he is a good employer.”

Thankfully, Tina had already slipped out to help other patients because she would have noticed how flustered Mandy was getting. Dr. Roberts had too much tact to call her out on it.

“Well, I won’t see you again until after the holiday, so, have a Merry Christmas! And we will see you just before New Year’s.”

Mandy nodded gratefully and said a silent prayer of relief as the doctor left the room and she could gather her things.

The entire morning, she’d spent in meeting with Charles from human resources. They had begun ordering the equipment necessary for the child watch facility. It would be housed on the main floor of the building with an entrance into a private alcove outside. When it was warmer, they would put in a playground and picnic tables.

Charles had protested some of the things that Mandy had picked out stating that they were too expensive. But her thoughts had been more geared toward safety ratings and what would be best for the children.

When Charles loftily said that he would call Mr. Brand to confirm the purchases, Mandy felt a shiver of unease race across her skin.

Was she not doing the right thing?

Elliot had been in a conference but came as soon as he was able to see in person what Charles was concerned about. It took approximately four minutes for Elliot to see what the issue was.

He informed Charles in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t to question Mandy’s purchases or decisions during this project. He was merely there for assistance if she asked for it. He then said something about Mandy’s position has changed to director level.

After Elliot left, Charles was subdued, and Mandy had been mortified. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Later, when Mandy went to grab some lunch, she saw Pam from accounting talking with some girls from marketing.

The instant Mandy had walked into the break room they all went silent. Mandy tried to offer a small smile, confused on why they were less than friendly. Pam rolled her eyes at Mandy and got up to leave.

But not before offering a sneeze that sounded suspiciously like, 'slut.'

Mandy didn't want to think badly of Pam, but when the girls she'd been speaking with started laughing. Mandy knew that she hadn't misheard the woman.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she left the office a little early before her scheduled appointment with Dr. Roberts. She'd intended on trying to find Elliot something for Christmas. After all, the next day was Christmas Eve. Mandy was running out of time.

She walked around the mall at least twice not seeing anything that Elliot might like. Robert, Elliot's butler, had picked her up at the mall and waited until her appointment was finished before driving Mandy back home.

Elliot noticed that Mandy hadn't eaten very much of her dinner and seemed to be distracted.

"How was your appointment?" he asked cautiously.

Mandy's faint smile heated him clear through.

"Baby is growing well, and they did a nonstress test that went great. Dr. Roberts said that during the weekly appointments they would most likely begin to see if the baby is getting into position."

Elliot asked with enthusiasm, "And your due date is Valentine's, right?"

Mandy nodded, "Dr. Roberts said it would be that week most likely. I think I'm going to lie down for a while. Please excuse me."

Elliot immediately stood and helped her with her chair. He didn't like the way that she'd seemed so withdrawn. After Mandy went into her rooms, Elliot asked Robert if anything unusual had happened that day.

Robert reported to Elliot that she'd left work crying, but once they had gone to the mall, Mandy seemed to be feeling better.

It took Elliot three phone calls to find out what had happened. The first was to Charles to feigned ignorance of the entire affair. Stating that Mandy was fine when she left him. It was Ian from the front desk that told Elliot of the rumors that were circulating the building. The worst being that Mandy was carrying his child and that he refused to acknowledge it.

What kind of bastard does something like that? Elliot wondered.

The third phone call was Elliot redialing Charles' number. Elliot told Charles to have Pam from accounting and Lisa and Mary from marketing in his office at 8:30 am the following morning.

When Charles protested that it was Christmas Eve, Elliot told him that he didn't give a damn.

When Mandy awoke the next morning, it was quiet in the home. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was after nine. Mandy never usually slept this long. There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. H had a tray of breakfast for her.

"You're spoiling me, Mrs. H," Mandy was secretly delighted, "I've never had breakfast in bed before."

Mrs. H helped her to sit up and arranged the pillows so that when her breakfast tray was set up, she could eat comfortably.

Mandy spilled her secret to the older woman that she hadn't found anything yet for Elliot. Mrs. H said that she'd a few last-minute chores to run as well and invited Mandy along.

When Elliot arrived back home, he found the spacious apartments empty. Surprised he glanced over at the counter and saw a white notecard with his name on it. Immediately he walked over and picked it up.

Elliot,

Mrs. H and I had some last-minute shopping to do. I spoke with Kim. She and Nate will be around for dinner tonight after all. We will be home soon. Please don't worry.

Yours- Mandy

Elliot stared at the words, *'Yours- Mandy'* for quite some time. It struck him to the core that he wanted Mandy to be his. Mandy and the little peanut she was carrying had come to mean far too much to him.

Chapter 30

Nate shuddered in his sleep muttering her name. The sound waking Kim from what had been the best night's rest she's had in quite a while. She felt his hardened length being pressed rhythmically against her ass. If it weren't for his soft snores, she might have thought he was awake.

Kim thought about the previous evening and everything she'd unloaded on him. Any normal man would have run for the hills. But Nate was still there beside her. Kim was worried that the cracks he had put in the wall surrounding her heart might be fatal.

Could she be falling in love? Hell, was she in love with him?

Kim turned her body so that she could see his face. Nate grumbled something under his breath but allowed the motion. He was different like this, more innocent and less the hardened player.

Kim felt a wave of embarrassment for the way she'd treated him. She knew full well that much of the emotionally charged outburst had to do with her parents and Andrew. Nate just happened to be the closest person at hand. Sadly, he ended up getting the worst of her temper.

His cheek had a faint bruise from where she'd struck him.

That more than anything made her feel ashamed. Her parents had used brute force and Kim had vowed to never be like them. But in a moment of anger, she'd lashed out the same way that they had.

That wasn't who she wanted to be, Kim resolved right then and right there that she wouldn't do that ever again.

Yesterday it had been Nate, what if it had been her child?

Nate's eyes blinked open, unfocused at first but as his eyes met hers a smile began to form.

"Good morning, Beautiful," his low gravelly tones sent sparks of desire running through her.

"Nate," Kim said hesitantly, "I need to apologize for last night."

His arms tightened, "Like hell you do. You have been through worse things than most people can even imagine. Don't apologize for getting things off your chest. I want to be there for you Kim. I want to be the one that puts you back together when things start falling apart. I told you, I'm falling in love with you."

Kim's fingers came up on their own accord to trace his handsome face. His whiskers prickling her palms as she gently cupped his cheek.

"I'm scared," Kim whispered.

Nate's gaze didn't leave hers, "Of what?"

Kim continued, "I'm scared that you don't know the real me. And when you do, you will leave. I'm scared that Andrew is going to do or say something that fucks all of this up. I'm scared that my parents are going to threaten or harm you. I'm scared that when you realize how much trouble I really am, you will decide that I'm not worth it. But most of all I'm scared because of how much I love you."

Nate's eyes widened, "You love me?"

"Out of everything I just said, that is the only thing you heard?" Kim's voice rose in exasperation.

"Out of everything you said, that was the most important part," He placed a finger on her lips when she went to argue with him. "Kim, I'm scared too. I'm terrified that you're going to run from me and what is happening between us. I'm not going anywhere. I don't have you on a pedestal Kim. I know that you can be short-tempered, opinionated, obstinately loyal—even to shit heads like your parents who don't deserve it."

Kim tried to jerk out of his arms her temper flaring.

Nate's smile deepened, "I also know how fiercely protective you can be. How hardworking and determined to make a better life for you and your child. I'm not wearing rose-colored glasses. When I tell you I love you, it is all the different bits and pieces, the good and the bad."

Kim huffed, "I thought love was blind!"

Nate laughed, "Are you saying that I don't have any faults?"

Kim rolled her eyes, her temper fading, "What? The great egotistical, bossy, thinks he's God's gift to mankind, Nate have any defects? Impossible."

Nate leaned down and kissed her quickly on the mouth, "It's hard to find something wrong with such an incredible specimen, I agree wholeheartedly."

Kim felt her lips twitched, "Did I mention humble? Surely, I added that?"

Nate leaned down to feather soft kisses across her cheeks and ending at the corner of her mouth.

"I'm a prize," he mumbled against her skin and she laughed.

He took advantage of her opened mouth to really kiss her.

Kim felt her stomach clench as he dominated the kiss. Rolling her onto her back, Nate braced himself above her on his forearms. From there it became a battle of wills as to who could kiss the other more deeply.

Reasoning and fear went out the window as Kim melted underneath him. Being putty in his arms her legs fell open and he settled between her parted thighs. Nothing but her silky panties and his boxer briefs.

She felt his hardened length pressed against her soaked panties and moaned deep in her throat. Nate was desperately trying to keep things light and not to attack her like a rutting bull. But when she moaned like that, he felt his handle on the situation slipping further away.

He could feel the dampness of her core starting to soak his underwear, or perhaps that was his precum. He was so fucking aroused around her. And in this position, his dick knew precisely where it wanted to be.

“Nate,” her muttered cry as she clutched his back had him gritting his teeth.

He pushed his cock against her panties and was rewarded by another of those low moans.

“I want to be inside of you,” he rasped.

“Please!” she whimpered, thrusting her hips forward so that she could feel his length.

Nate cursed and rolled off her yanking his underwear off. It sailed across the room and landed on a lampshade.

Kim’s wide eyes met his, the laughter dancing in her blue orbs.

“Nice shot, Cowboy,” she teased.

His fingers slipped to her panties and began to pull them over her hips and down her thighs. Nate tossed the silky fabric in the same direction of his and was rewarded with a giggle when they too managed to hook onto the lampshade.

“It’s a gift,” he licked the side of her throat and gently bit down as he took his cock and stroked her heated pussy.

Kim clawed at his back, begging him to enter her, to fill her up so that she never felt empty again.

Nate growled his approval at her words and pushed inside of her. Kim mewled as a ripple of pleasure raced through her. Her nipples were rock hard beneath the t-shirt that she was still wearing.

If she’d been thinking clearly, Kim would have insisted that he yank it off. But as it was, she wanted him to fuck her right then and there.

Nate moved within her, slowly at first until she accommodated to his size. And then to Kim's surprise, he flipped them positions so that she was on top.

"Take your shirt off," he demanded hoarsely.

Kim slid down his entire length so that he was impaled on him before lifting the cotton top off her. Her breasts bouncing with the movement.

"You're so fucking, sexy, Kim," Nate gripped her hips and Kim couldn't stop from grinding her pussy against him.

It was fast and furious, the sound of their fucking filling the room as she lifted and slammed her way back down.

Nate thrust his hips up to meet the frantic pace that she set, feeling his orgasm getting closer and closer.

Her breasts bounced with every thrust and he found himself mesmerized by their beauty. There was nothing about this complicated, stubborn woman that he didn't like.

"I love you," she whispered and then her mouth dropped open and her eyes rolled back as her pleasure swept through the both of them.

Nate shot his load so hard and fast that the pleasure was borderline painful, and he loved every fucking minute of it.

Once he had regained a small strip of sanity, he replied to her, "I love you, too."

Chapter 31

“Mandy, wake up!”

Someone was shaking Mandy’s shoulder, and she was considering doing said individual some bodily harm. That was until she recognized Elliot’s excited voice whispering far too close to what she assumed would be hideous morning breath.

Mandy shot up covering her mouth, “What is it?” Did something happen?”

Elliot shook his head grinning like an idiot, “No! It’s Christmas!”

She wrinkled her brow.

“You woke me up at… What time is it?” Mandy paused groggily as she glanced over at the clock on her nightstand. “Seven in the morning, to tell me it was Christmas. Elliot, I’m aware of the date. I’m going back to bed.”

Elliot frowned, looking like a little boy with this favorite toy taken away.

“Mandy, you’re supposed to get up early on Christmas. Don’t you want to see if Santa Clause came?”

She snorted, “I haven’t believed in Santa Clause since I was four.”

He wasn’t taking no for an answer. So, Elliot scooped up Mandy, bedcoverings and all and began to walk out into the living room.

Her protests died on her lips as she saw the wonderland that had once been Elliot’s lavish living area. There were beautifully wrapped boxes everywhere. Not to mention a swing, top of the line highchair, and other baby items that Mandy hadn’t bought yet.

“Elliot,” she breathed in amazement.

He wasn’t sure if she would be angry or not, but he wanted to spoil her and decided that she deserved it.

Mandy’s eyes darted around, “Who are all of these for?”

Elliot blushed, “Um, well some are for Mrs. H, and one or two for Robert as well.”

Mandy narrowed her eyes, “What about the other eighteen thousand?”

“There aren’t that many presents,” Elliot set Mandy on the couch trying not to stare at the way her rounded breasts curved against the tank top she’d worn to bed.

Mandy was beginning to feel panicked, but right at that moment, Mrs. H came out of the kitchen with breakfast trays for the both of them.

"I knew that you would want to get on with the presents, Mr. Brand. So, I thought we could make a picnic for breakfast."

Elliot loved that idea, and soon Robert had joined them for pancakes, eggs, sausage, and toast. Mrs. H wiped her mouth gently with her napkin and smiled at the way Elliot was watching Mandy.

After Elliot's mother had passed, Mrs. H had taken him on as an adoptive son. She was thrilled to see him falling in love with such a worthy young lady.

Mrs. H still didn't know who the father of Mandy's baby was. But she'd come to adore Mandy in the short time they had all lived together. It felt nice to spend Christmas morning as a family, even if it was rather unusual.

Robert gave Elliot a few books that he had been looking at. Elliot, in turn, gave Robert an all-expense paid trip to anywhere in the world for a week. With one stipulation, he had to come back!

Mrs. H gave Elliot a hand knitted scarf that was every bit as fine as something one would find in a fancy boutique. Elliot gave Mrs. H a years' subscription to her favorite audiobooks service, along with a gift card for her favorite teas and cakes shop. She too was given the all-expense paid holiday.

Elliot gave Mandy so many different things that one could hardly list them all. There were clothing and gift cards to all her favorite shops. Every book in her favorite series had been wrapped up and signed by the author. Mandy felt overwhelmed by the outpouring of love.

There were gifts for the baby, and Mrs. H confessed that many of them she'd gone out to shop for. It was so exciting to have a new baby coming, she said.

When it came time for Mandy to give Elliot her gift, she hung back feeling shy.

Mrs. H and Robert promptly got up stating that they had things which needed to be taken care of immediately.

Elliot quirked a brow and waited for Mandy to hand him the gift. When he opened it, he stared at it for a long while without speaking.

Finally, in a gruff voice, he asked, "Where did you find this?"

Mandy felt sick. It had been a stupid idea, she told herself.

But she wasn't one to back down, "Mrs. H was showing me some of the photo albums from when you were a child. I thought maybe you might like to have something like this."

He turned the frame over so that she could see her own artwork. Mandy wasn't a professional by any means, but she'd an eye for design and had been drawing since she was a child. It was often an escape for her when life got too overbearing.

In the picture, there were two sketches facing each other. One was of Elliot, and the other was of his mother in the last picture Elliot had of her.

He wasn't sure how she'd done it. But somehow Mandy had managed to create love in his mother's gaze as she looked at her adult son.

Elliot would have done anything to have one more moment with his mom. This was the next best thing.

He tried swallowing the lump in his throat and partially succeeded.

"This is the best gift I have ever been given," he rasped.

Mandy shook her head, "I know it isn't much."

"No," Elliot's voice was firmer than she was used to as he spoke with her. "This is priceless. Do you understand what you have done here? Mandy, you have given me back my mom."

Mandy didn't know what it was like to love your parent as much as Elliot loved and missed his mother. But she was thrilled that he liked her gift. She gave him another one of the packages that she'd set aside for him and he opened a navy striped tie.

"Hey," he wrapped it around his neck, "How do I look?"

Mandy giggled, "Very handsome!"

He clutched her then and brought her in close to give her a hard kiss.

"This is the best Christmas I have ever had," she whispered against his lips.

He smiled, "It is the first of many."

**

Nate and Kim arrived around noon, and there were more presents passed around. They had a large dinner with turkey, stuffing, ham, mashed potatoes, and all the sides. Elliot insisted that Mrs. H and Robert joined them again for dinner and they all laughed and talked for hours, long after the food had gotten cold.

When it was time for Nate and Kim to leave, there was a knock at the door. Elliot shrugged, not sure who would be calling at his house on Christmas day.

Robert returned with the visitor and Mandy felt the color leaving her face.

“Hiya, Mandy-girl!”

Kim narrowed her eyes. She’d never been a huge fan or Shay’s. And she didn’t like the way her sister’s friend was eyeing Nate like she knew him from somewhere.

Nate looked ill, “Shay? Isn’t it?”

Chapter 32

Shay blinked twice before answering, “It’s been a long time, Nate—too long.”

Nate didn’t answer, as he rubbed the back of his neck. Kim stiffened beside him.

Immediately Shay slipped into femme fatal mode. She jutted out her hip and raised a delicately arched brow as she assessed the situation. It seemed the Johnson sisters were rolling with the big time now.

It wasn’t lost on Shay that her supposed best friend, Mandy hadn’t mentioned a word of this when they met up the other day. Hell, Shay would still be in the dark if she hadn’t of stopped over at Mandy’s parents and been told this address.

Her eyes taking in the two sisters and the handsome gentleman, that were standing rather closely beside them. This was going to be fun, she thought to herself.

Kim was starting between Shay and Nate, “You two know each other?”

Shay smiled. It was the cat who had invariably gotten the cream type of smile. And to add insult to injury, Shay licked her bottom lip before answering, “Oh, we know each other—intimately.”

What Shay hadn’t expected was the pandemonium that ensued.

Kim didn’t respond to Shay. She didn’t scream or yell, or even hit anyone. She turned on her heel and walked straight out the door. Nate was busy grabbing keys and her purse but followed hot on Kim’s heels.

Shay turned a smug look to Mandy. She wasn’t sure who this other guy was. But he looked remarkably familiar. And the fact that he was in the same room as Nate led her to one conclusion.

“Do you work with Nate?” Shay asked in what one could only call and accusatory tone.

“Who are you?” Elliot barked out, “And how dare you come into my home and treat my guests so rudely.”

Shay didn’t bother to look ashamed because she wasn’t. But her eyes narrowed at Mandy who seemed frozen in the space she was in.

“I’m Mandy’s best friend and former roommate. I hadn’t realized that she kept in touch with anyone after the party.”

“What party?” Elliot expostulated, “What are you talking about?”

Shay's smile widened, "The costume party that Mandy and I served it with a bunch of corporate bigwigs. It was, seven or eight months, ago."

And then she stopped, eyes rounding, and looking over to where Mandy stood white as a ghost. Shay started to laugh. It was a nasty bitter sound that grated on everyone's ears.

"This is too good!" Shay shook her head, "Only you, Mandy, can manage to get knocked up by the richest prick in town."

And it was those words that did it.

Elliot swung wild eyes to Mandy and her guilt and shame was written clearly across her face.

It seemed to spur her into action, "You don't know anything about it, Shay. Elliot Brand is my boss, nothing more."

She ignored the hurt in his eyes.

Shay took a step toward Mandy, "You don't sleep around, hell you don't have one-night stands, and you don't pick up guys at parties. But you did that night. You went home with a man in a royal blue mask with thick dark hair just like his."

Tears gathered in Mandy's eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

"Shay, your accident was just after that. You're not remembering things right."

Elliot gripped Mandy's arm, "Did you work at that masquerade party down on the wharf?"

A tear slipped, unbidden as Mandy nodded once.

Doing the math, he looked from her stricken face to her rounded stomach and immediately released her arm.

"Is that my child?" his tone was firm and demanding.

Mandy did the first thing that came to mind and tried to put some distance between them.

He raised his voice, "Answer me!"

Mrs. H and Robert came sailing out of the backrooms. Seeing the tense situation and the strange woman they weren't sure what was going on.

Mandy's lips trembled as she lowered her head and one syllable slipped out, "Yes."

It was as if time stood still.

Their beautiful holiday seemed to be melting away as lies and betrayal took precedence.

Elliot turned to Robert, “Get her out of here and never admit her again.”

Shay squawked her outrage and Robert firmly escorted her to the door. He would be following her all the way to the lobby where he could inform the doorman that she was banned from the premises.

“Did you always know?” Elliot’s voice had deepened to a dangerous degree. “Is that why Dr. Roberts suggested you come work for me? Was this all a game? I suppose it would be a great coop to pull one over on Elliot Brand.”

“It was nothing like that!” Mandy protested. “I didn’t know your name. So, when I found out that I was pregnant I couldn’t contact you. And then I lost my job and my apartment and ended up at my parents again. Dr. Roberts was just trying to help me out. I didn’t know it was you until I walked into that interview.”

His glare was full of icy disdain, “You have known since the day of the interview?”

“Yes,” another admission that seemed ripped from her soul.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” he asked coldly.

Mandy couldn’t stop the tears from falling, “Of course, I was. I almost have so many times.”

“But you were afraid that I would be mean to you? That I would turn away my child?” his tone was incredulous.

“No!” she blurted out, “You’re not understanding, Elliot. I didn’t tell you because I thought you would be angry, that you would hate me. And the more time passed the harder it was to admit the truth.”

“You’re right about one thing,” his lips compressed into a line before he nailed the coffin shut, “I’m extremely angry.”

Mandy turned and ran toward her room, tears blurring the way and he didn’t stop her this time. Mrs. H looked from him to Mandy and back again before shaking her head and following Mandy.

Elliot swore.

Picking up the closest thing to him he hurled it at the wall. It wasn’t until he looked down that he realized it had been the drawing of himself and his mother that Mandy had given him. A surge of remorse so strong swept through him. He walked over and ignoring the gash in the wall picked up the broken frame.

He pushed the glass away and removed the drawing dropping the rest.

Elliot stared at it for a long time.

Finally, he folded the drawing and put it in his pocket next to his heart. Then grabbing some keys, he left the apartments. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he couldn't be there another moment.

He didn't hate her. He couldn't. But Elliot was far too angry to remain there and the last thing that he wanted to do was hurt Mandy with words that were better off unsaid. Once he calmed down, they could talk about things.

It would better this way, he tried to convince himself.

Elliot got into his sports car and sped out of the parking garage. He drove for what seemed like hours and ended up grabbing a drink at a seedy bar. The time was beneficial for him to see the kind of position that Mandy had been in. He still didn't like that she hadn't been honest with him.

But a large part of him understood why she was out to protect herself and her unborn child. He had to respect that. He didn't know where things stood between them and he wasn't sure how things would play out.

But he was finally ready to talk.

Chapter 33

"Kim! Kim, would you please slow down?"

Nate raced after Kim as she barreled down the sidewalk to Nate's car. He said a silent prayer that at least she'd stopped this time and he wasn't going to have to chase her halfway through the city in bitter cold temperatures.

"Kim, can we talk about this?"

"Open the door, Nate," Kim tugged on the handle.

Nate sighed and unlocked the door. Kim was inside before he could blink. She turned to him with a furious expression.

"Are you coming?"

He blinked, "Um, yeah, of course." Rounding the car, he got into the driver's seat and asked, "Where are we going?"

Kim looked at him like he was crazy, "To my fucking parents' house. Didn't you hear Slutty Shay in there? My parents told her where to find Mandy which only means one thing."

Nate wasn't following the conversation very well at all. But what he had noticed was that Kim didn't seem pissed at him. Thank the good Lord, he sent another silent prayer up thanking whoever was listening for Christmas miracles.

Kim gave Nate curt directions to the run-down bungalow that she and Mandy had grown up in. The neighborhood looked like something one would see on the six o'clock news, and Nate was certain that he had at one point or another.

Kim wrenched the door open the moment the car stopped and was halfway across the yard before Nate caught up with her.

"You don't need to come in with me," Kim said in a low voice.

Nate's hand clamped down on her elbow, "Like hell, I don't. You have told me a lot about your parents and none of it is good. Do you honestly think I would let you go in there alone?"

Kim wrinkled her brow but didn't comment when he stepped along beside her up to the front porch. Kim tried the knob, but it was locked which wasn't unusual. She pounded on the door.

There was some scuffling from inside, but no one came to answer her knock. Kim pounded again, louder, and more insistent this time.

"It's Kim, open up mom."

A few clicks of bolts being undone followed by the creak of a hinge that had never seen oil and the door was opened to reveal an older woman with indescribably matted gray hair. She smiled at her daughter but there wasn't love in her gaze. In fact, it seemed almost menacing to Nate and he yanked Kim closer to his side.

Kim glared at her mother, "Are you going to let us in?"

Kim's mom shrugged, "Don't see why you're here."

Nate felt his blood heat, "You don't understand why your daughter would want to see her mother on Christmas Day?"

Both Kim and her mom let out a harsh laugh.

"There isn't anything special about today, boy."

Mrs. Johnson coughed, the sound rattling her thin frame and for a moment she looked vulnerable. That is until she looked back up at her daughter, then hatred filled that space in her eyes.

"My money isn't enough for you?" Kim spat at her. "You had to go and take Mandy's as well?"

Mrs. Johnson smiled, her brown and rotting teeth turned Nate's stomach.

"It gets expensive to live these days, Kimmy. We allowed Mandy to move in here and she needs to pay her way."

The corners of Kim's mouth turned white with fury.

"I paid your rent the entire time that Mandy lived here. I know for a fact that she bought groceries. Almost everything else is covered by government assistance, so tell me Mom, is Mandy covering your drug money, or am I?"

Mrs. Johnson's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "Get the fuck out of my house!"

"Gladly," Kim retorted, "But you will not see another dime from me or from Mandy. Do you understand that? Your little trick tonight, sending Shay to where Mandy lives backfired. What was she supposed to do, Mom, steal something? Find out the codes and a way into the place?"

Mrs. Johnson didn't even pretend that she didn't know what Kim was talking about. "You think your shit doesn't stink? Let me tell you something, Kim. Your loving husband has been fucking Shay off and on for years. She was only too happy to go and see what you both were leaving her out of. Your husband didn't mind sharing you both, maybe this new boyfriend won't mind Shay in his bed either."

Nate barely restrained Kim before she attacked her mother. He tossed her over his shoulder and went to leave. He couldn't believe that Kim and Mandy had managed to thrive in such horrible circumstances.

But before he got out the door he turned to Mrs. Johnson, "If you try and extort money from either of them, I will have you brought up on charges so fast that your head will spin. I have friends in the DEA as well as at the precinct. Go ahead and try me, lady. I'm a lawyer as well as a businessman. Let me tell you this, the abuse you and your husband have inflicted on these girls could have you locked away for an awfully long time. So, please, contact them—I dare you."

Once outside he set Kim back on her feet. He hated to see the angry tears rushing down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Kim. I was with Shay a long time ago. I can hardly remember that night and it was only once. I had never met you. I would never cheat on you. I swear it."

Kim's watery blue eyes glanced up at his, "I know, Nate. I'm not mad at you—not really. I'm pissed at Andrew, and what a shitty husband that he was. I'm furious at myself for allowing the situation with my parents to get to this point. I have worried that if I didn't help them, they would die, and it would be on my shoulders."

"No, sweetheart," Nate pulled her close, "You're not responsible for them."

Kim nodded against his chest, "I know. The way she threw Shay in my face brought back so many other crappy things that she has done to us. I'm not giving them a dime, and Mandy better not either."

Kim swallowed and pushed back a little to look into Nate's face, "Do you really think that Elliot is the baby's father?"

Nate shrugged, "It doesn't look good. Has she ever said anything about who the father is?"

Kim shook her head, "No, and Mandy has only slept with three people her entire life. That's why I was so surprised when she told me she was pregnant. I should have been there for her, and I tried, honestly, I did. But I was so damn jealous. I wanted a baby of my own and it seemed cruelly unfair that Mandy would get pregnant when she wasn't even trying. Hell, for all I knew she wasn't having sex."

Nate raised a brow, "And what about now?"

Kim's lips trembled, "Now that I'm having a baby with my estranged ex-husband that has been sleeping with my sister's best friend and supplies my parents with drugs? I sound like I should be on a daytime talk show. How did things get so confusing?"

Nate guided Kim back to the car and buckled her in, “Or you could think of it as you’re pregnant with the child you always wanted. You have met the man who will love you more than life itself and you’re finally cutting ties with the parents who tried to destroy you. From the way I see it, you’re an inspiration Kim—not daytime drama fodder.”

A tear escaped her damp lashes, “I love you, Nate. So much that it scares me a little, but the fact that you didn’t walk away after tonight tells me that you might just love me too.”

He growled, “You know I love you!”

His phone rang, and he went to ignore it, but when he saw Elliot’s name he answered.

“Fuck,” Nate said under his breath, “We are on our way.”

“What is it?” Kim clutched his sleeve.

“Mandy is missing.”

Chapter 34

Approximately seven and a half months before—give or take a day or two.

"Mandy, come on, I really need your help tonight. I've already promised Emma that I would find someone else to work for the party!"

Mandy looked up at her roommate who was standing in the middle of their tiny apartment with one hand on her hip and an intent look on her face. It seemed to Mandy that Shay always needed something.

"Look, Shay, I would be terrible at it. I haven't waitressed before, and I have two left feet. Besides," Mandy gulped feeling self-conscious as she looked at the other woman who was dressed in the skimpiest of outfits. "I don't think I could wear something like that."

Shay rolled her eyes, "Please, Mandy you're smoking hot and if you would wear something other than those frumpy business suits you bought at the salvage store for work someone might just notice how gorgeous you really are."

Mandy didn't feel like her clothes were frumpy, she looked professional. She felt that working in an office one had to present themselves accordingly. But Shay wouldn't understand that. Mandy was quiet, hardworking, dependable, and often according to the Shay—boring.

Shay was her complete opposite. She was wild and carefree, the life of the party and friends with everyone. It wasn't unusual for her to bring a man home at night, hell it would be strange if she didn't.

Many people couldn't understand how their friendship worked. How could two people with such different tastes possibly be best friends? Emma asked this very question all the time. She and Shay were alike in almost every aspect. Emma loved to go out and party, pick up guys, and occasionally share them with Shay.

What Emma didn't like was Shay's friendship with Mandy. It could have been jealousy. Mandy didn't know what else to account for it. She'd never been rude or unkind to Emma. But it was apparent that even the way Mandy stayed out of her way irritated Emma.

Mandy had long since stopped trying with the girl. That is why this request for Mandy to help with Emma's family catering business didn't make sense. Emma had never wanted Mandy around before.

And that wasn't all of it. Mandy wasn't sure what kind of catering company had their waitstaff go around in tube tops, short shorts, micro minis and barely their bodycon ensembles. Some of the things that Shay left the house into work had her looking more like a streetwalker than a waitress.

Mandy sighed, "Emma hates me, there is no way that she really wants me there. Is this a setup so that she can humiliate me somehow?"

Shay puffed out her bottom lip, "Emma doesn't hate you! She doesn't understand why you don't like her and won't come out with us."

Mandy knew this to be a lie and wasn't about to fall into that trap. "I have no issues with Emma, but I don't want to go, Shay. It's not my kind of thing."

Shay's eyes hardened, "Look, if we don't find another person to work tonight, Emma and I are going to be in so much trouble. We both promised to find someone extra to help, and I said I would bring you. If you don't want to do it again after tonight, you don't have to. But Mandy if you don't come, they will fire me. How are we supposed to make rent if I don't have a job? This means a lot to me, Mandy. I wouldn't ask you otherwise. You're my best friend. I really thought I could count on you."

Mandy set the book down that she'd been reading, "One night, Shay, I will help out one night. But you need to find someone else to take the job. I'm not interested."

Shay bounded over to Mandy wrapping her in a large hug, "Thank you, thank you, thank you! I knew that you wouldn't let me down! You're the best, Mandy. I love your guts!"

Mandy smiled and pushed out of Shay's arms, "I love your guts too. Alright, what do I have to wear?"

**

Mandy tugged at the bottom of her short flapper dress with one hand as she tried to balance the tray of bit size sushi in the other. The skimpy uniform, if one could call it that, barely covered her ass cheeks. If it weren't for the fringe, Mandy would have flashed half the party by now.

Her boobs were pushed up and forward so that they looked like an offering to whomever she faced. Thankfully, they had been given masks that covered two-thirds of their faces. She wasn't recognizable and knew that for a fact because Shay had almost walked right by her.

When Mandy grabbed her arm, Shay had squealed with delight seeing Mandy all dolled up for once. Emma had even said that Mandy looked good. That was the highest praise Mandy had ever gotten from Emma.

When the guests arrived at the venue, it was apparent to Mandy that they were from a completely different world than the one she was used to. More than one guest had come in a limo, and many others drove cars that Mandy couldn't even pronounce let alone think of riding in.

When he arrived, time seemed to stand still for the briefest of moments. Mandy had just served a couple some champagne and turned to go and return the empties when she caught a glimpse of his dark hair.

She allowed her eyes to trail from the top of his head to the broad shoulders he could have only earned in the gym. From there he tapered down to a flat stomach and lean hips. Mandy would be willing to bet her right ovary that the man was cut underneath that expensive suit.

He wasn't wearing a costume, only a black mask that matched his perfectly tailored suit. Another man walked in behind him, he was blonde with a wide smile and knowing eyes.

The two of them were perfection and Mandy might have gone on staring if the dark-haired man hadn't caught her gaze. A slow smile spread across his handsome features, and Mandy felt her insides melt.

Holy fuck!

Mandy quickly turned around the got back to what she was supposed to be doing—serving, not ogling the guests.

His eyes remained on her the entire night. She felt naked under his gaze, but rather than intimidating her. It made Mandy feel empowered—strong.

This wealthy handsome man wanted her, Mandy. He didn't want the broken girl that she was in her real life. He wanted the attractive waitress that gave him shy smiles as her eyes raked over his incredible body.

It wasn't surprising that as the party dwindled down, he approached her. Shay had ripped off her mask and was making out with the blonde man from before. It was obvious that Shay had drunk too much. They were told that the alcohol was for the guests, not the staff. But Shay often came home inebriated after work, so this wasn't anything new.

When the dark-haired man had approached her at the hotel bar, Mandy had only hesitated for a second. But when she saw his kind smile and heated eyes, she was caught—hook, line, and sinker.

One drink at the bar turned into two and then a half dozen. By the time they stumbled up to his hotel room, she was tearing at her own clothes in-between trying to get him out of his.

The stranger was just as needy as Mandy, nearly ripping all the buttons from his shirt as he wrenched it off. That first time they didn't make it to the bed. He took her right against the door. The handle was pressing on her back as he sank inside of her.

Mandy had never felt so full, so whole, in her entire life.

The first time turned into two and then a third. And as he pounded into her from behind, balls deep and moaned, Mandy came for what seemed like the hundredth time.

He had begged her for her name the next morning. But Mandy knew that this had been a fairy tale. Men like him don't stick with girls like her. So, she'd merely kissed him with all the pent-up emotion of what could have been and escaped into a taxi before the real world could taint their perfect night together.

**

Today

Tears streamed down Mandy's cheeks as she stood in front of the same hotel from that fateful night.

The doorman seeing the pregnant women rushed out to greet her and ushered Mandy inside. She knew that she couldn't afford to stay long. But it was Christmas, and perhaps this small indulgence for only one night would be alright?

In the morning she would have to call Kim and her parents. Kim would be worried, and her parents would have to be told that she couldn't give them any more money. Mandy didn't want to think about that conversation. Nor, did she want to think about where she and the baby would go.

The doorman led her up to the least expensive room available and helped her with her bags. When Mandy tried to tip him, the man shook his head, "You look like you will need that more than I do."

Mandy looked down at her swollen belly. More tears rushed to her eyes, "Thank you, Sir. Merry Christmas!"

The older gentleman nodded and gently closed the door.

In half an hour there was a knock at the door, room service had been ordered on the house for her.

She ate a few bites and then fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 35

Elliot felt a panic like no other when he came home to find Mandy missing and Mrs. H in hysterics.

“I was cleaning up the supper dishes, Mr. Brand. That is the only time that I wasn’t with her. How could I have left that poor girl alone? She could be anywhere out there in the freezing cold.”

Elliot was doing everything in his power to remain calm. But all he could picture was her wandering the lonely city streets. He had been a fool to react so harshly. He knew that now. Everything about her spoke of survival, and that is what Mandy did, she survived.

She’d lived through the most auspicious of upbringings. Mandy had endured living in poverty, getting fired from her job, moving back in with her abusive parents, gossiping co-workers, and an unplanned pregnancy.

All the hurt that he had been feeling about her keeping secrets from him washed away. He felt ten years older and at least ten more the wiser. She hadn’t kept the baby from him to manipulate anything. Mandy was protecting herself and her unborn child.

He was proud of her and what she’d done with her life.

If he had any doubts as to how much he loved her before they were smashed to smithereens. How often had he wished that the baby really was his? Elliot knew that it was ridiculous to be jealous of something that had happened before he met her. But he had been jealous of the man that had been with her.

Elliot was jealous of himself.

“Who have you called?” Elliot took Mrs. H’s hand in his larger one. She seemed frailer than usual and her thin weathered hand shook in his.

“I called your cell phone and when you didn’t answer I called Nate’s. He said that they had just come from Mandy’s parents and she wasn’t there. Robert is out with one of the cars searching the streets. I have called every hospital in a thirty-mile radius. Mr. Brand, I’m so sorry that I lost her.”

Elliot shook his head and led her to a comfortable chair, “You’re not to blame, Mrs. H, I’m. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I should have stayed to talk about things instead of running off to try and gather my thoughts. I didn’t dream that she would leave, but it was stupid of me not to consider it. Mandy wouldn’t stay where she didn’t think she was wanted.”

Mrs. H nodded and then asked, “What about that Shay woman? Would she know where Mandy went?”

Elliot shrugged, “It’s possible, I don’t have her number, but Kim should. How long ago did you speak with them?”

Mrs. H was about to answer when there was a pounding on the door. Elliot raced over and wrenched it open. Nate and Kim stood there looking stricken.

“Have you heard from her?” Kim blurted out.

Elliot could hear the fear in her voice, and it shook him to his core. “No, not yet. Is there any possible way that she could have gone to Shay’s?”

Kim wrinkled her brow, “I don’t think it is likely, but we can check.”

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. After a moment someone answered, and Kim asked about her sister.

It was seconds before the conversation was over and Kim was scowling at her phone, “The bitch hung up on me.”

“Should we go over there and see if she’s there?” Nate suggested.

Elliot was grabbing his jacket, “That was just what I was thinking. Mrs. H would you please stay here and phone if there is any news?”

Mrs. H agreed and hurried them out the door. It was strange that Mandy had come to mean so much to her in such a short time. But Mrs. H, not being able to have children of her own, found a rather large piece of her heart being stolen by the slight woman who was so desperately in need of love and family.

**

Elliot raced up the dank corridor of a fifth-floor walkup. He ignored the way it smelled of mildew and piss, something that as a child he had been used to. When he reached Emma’s apartment he pounded on the door, not caring about what the neighbors might think.

After a moment, a latch was slid open and the door creaked as an eye peered out between the chain and the doorframe. He recognized Shay from his home.

“Where is she?” Elliot demanded.

Shay’s eyes widened, “Mandy’s not here.”

“Who is it?” a sultry female voice asked.

Shay turned her head to answer the other woman, “Nobody, Emma, just a friend of Mandy’s.”

Shay found herself being shoved to the side as the tall voluptuous woman removed the chain and posed for her guest. The negligee that Emma was wearing was hardly suitable for December.

Her nipples tightened against the cold and Emma's lids lowered, "Hello there, handsome."

Elliot wasn't sure there had been a time in his life when he wanted to kill someone more than that moment. These women were no friends of Mandy's.

Kim and Nate came huffing up the stairs and saw Emma striking her come and get me look. Nate grimaced and looked away. Kim walked right up to the door.

"Have you two skanks seen my sister?"

Emma's eyes narrowed, "Lost the pregnant nun, have you?"

Kim wanted to re-evaluate her no violence policy, "Have you seen her or not?"

Shay opened the door wider so that she could be seen, "I haven't seen her since the apartment."

Kim ground her teeth, "Do you know that because of you she is out on the streets? What did my parents promise you, Shay? Oh, and I heard about how you and Andrew have been bumping uglies. Well, you're free to have him with my blessing."

Shay looked a little ashamed, but that quickly morphed into something cold. "I can't help it if you want my sloppy seconds."

Kim lunged, and Nate grabbed her just in the nick of time.

"First off, Shay, you were a drunken mistake before I ever met Kim. I don't even remember most of the night, so it couldn't have been that fantastic. And second, the fact that you slept with her husband while they were married only makes you a whore. It says nothing about who Kim is," Nate growled.

Emma dropped the come-hither look and grabbed the door, "She isn't here, and she isn't welcome. So, I guess we are done here."

Elliot shoved a foot inside of the door before she could close it.

"If either of you goes near Kim or Mandy, I will destroy you."

Shay gasped, "Are you actually threatening us?"

"No, sweetheart," Kim spat from Nate's arms, "That's a promise."

Elliot nodded, "You heard it from the lady."

He moved his foot back and the door slammed in their faces. Nate let Kim go but held onto her hand as they started back down the five floors to the street.

“I just don’t know where she could be,” Kim’s voice warbled with emotion.

Elliot called to check in with Robert and Mrs. H. She hadn’t been found at the coffee shop, wandering the streets, or at the office.

Elliot wracked his brain for another place that could possibly mean something to her, and then it hit him.

“I’ve got to go!”

Nate frowned, “Do you know where she is?”

Elliot’s words trailed behind him as he ran to the car, “It’s a long shot, but I think she might be at the hotel where we first met.”

“I pray to God that she is,” Kim answered and watched as Elliot flew into his sports car and peeled out into the street.

Chapter 36

When someone knocked on the door the second time Mandy wondered what else the kind doorman could have sent up to her. She never dreamed that when she opened the door Elliot would be standing there.

His hair was crazier than she'd ever seen it. Mandy could only assume that it was from him raking his hands through it out of frustration or fear. The look on his face when she opened the door was so raw and real that it felt like a punch to the gut.

She'd figured that the next time she saw him she would have her shit together enough to handle a polite conversation. But there was nothing polite about the way his eyes raked over her. The possessive glint was far too prominent in his eyes, and the way he growled when yanking her to him was damn near perfection.

She didn't want to cry, but the more she fought it the increasingly tender he was as he held her stroking her back. Elliot hadn't chastised her or yelled. He hadn't even spoken. His body needed the reassurance of hers next to him.

There was a polite cough in the hallway, "I see you have found your girl, Mr. Brand. I will leave you two alone now."

Mandy glanced back at the kind doorman, "Thank you, for everything."

"I really appreciate your help, Frank," Elliot added.

"Sure thing, Boss," with a wink he was off.

Elliot kicked the door closed before responding to Mandy's inquisitive eyes. "I own this hotel, but I don't manage it. Frank has been with us for a long time and is one of the few employees here that know. Most of them don't look twice at me and I prefer it that way."

Mandy nodded, trying to understand, "How many companies do you own?"

Elliot shrugged, "Over a hundred, give or take, we have nearly seven thousand employees nationwide in all of the different divisions."

He moved closer to her again, "But I didn't tear this town apart to talk to you about business."

Mandy shuddered a little in his arms, "I'm really sorry, Elliot. I should have told you the truth that first day during the interview. I was scared, but I know it isn't a valid excuse."

Elliot smiled at her and Mandy felt the knot in her chest ease the slightest bit.

"Mandy, I should have listened to you today instead of flying off the handle. I can't say that if I were in your shoes, I would have done it any other way. Lord knows that if you had tried to claim that I had fathered your child during the interview I wouldn't have believed you."

Mandy moved in closer and tucked her head under his chin, "I don't want you to resent me or the baby, Elliot. I would like you to be a part of our lives, but I have no intention of trapping you."

Elliot stiffened, "Trapping me? Mandy, I have every intention of trapping you. So, this is a forewarning that I want you and our baby to live with me. I want to go to your appointments and be there when our child is born. But, Mandy, there is one more thing."

Mandy felt a shiver of something race down her spine. She wasn't sure if it was fear, excitement, or a forewarning. But before she could dissect it, Elliot laid down the law.

"My child will not come from a broken home. I want for us to get married as soon as possible."

Mandy choked on thin air, "Married? You and me? Are you serious?"

"Look, Mandy, I grew up with a single mother and I knew of all the sacrifices that she made for me. I'm damn grateful for it, but I don't want my child to live the same way. I want for my son or daughter to have a mother and father in the same home. I'm not negotiable on this, please don't try and fight me."

"I-I don't know what to say," Mandy whispered and pushed out of his arms to walk over and sit on the edge of the bed.

Elliot went over to her and bent down on one knee, "Say that you will marry me, Mandy. Tell me that we can be a family."

What he was offering sounded so perfect to her. But there was one vital component that he was missing. Elliot hadn't mentioned love. Did Mandy want to enter a loveless marriage? Especially when she suspected that she was head over heels in love with him, would he grow to resent her?

Elliot was worried that she hadn't answered him. His heart was trying to escape his chest either through his throat or his stomach. He felt like he would be ill if she refused him. He couldn't let that happen.

Elliot swept her into his arms and kissed her pouring out his passion and need in his desperate kiss. Elliot didn't know what he would do if she wouldn't accept him, he didn't want to even think about the possibility. He knew that she belonged to him just as surely as he knew the sun came up in the morning.

Her scent, her taste, her presence in his life was like a drug that he needed to survive. How could he convince her of that?

The questions and fear of the day causing him to kiss her a little deeper and to hold her a little tighter.

Mandy didn't protest when he pushed her back against the mattress. She rolled onto her side facing him and reached up to cup his whiskered cheeks. He was so damn handsome that she could hardly breathe.

"Why would you want to marry me?"

What she meant was, could he possibly find it in him to love her someday? Did they really have a chance to make this work? Would he find someone new and regret that he had impulsively asked her to marry him the day he found out he was going to be a father?

Elliot growled deep in his throat.

Mandy rushed on to try and put her thoughts into words, "Elliot, you don't know me well enough to marry me."

His eyes narrowed, and Mandy knew that it was now or never, she needed to get this last piece out and then if he really wanted to do this, she was in.

"I'm not saying no," she rushed on, "I'm just asking that we wait a little bit. The baby isn't due for six more weeks. There is no reason to run out tomorrow. Today has been an emotional rollercoaster for both of us. If you promise to grant me this time, I swear to you that I will marry you."

Elliot felt his heart skip a beat. He wasn't sure if he heard her correctly.

"You want to wait until closer to when the baby is due?" he clarified.

Mandy nodded, a bit of hope entering her eyes, "Yes, I just want us to spend these next few weeks getting to know each other as a couple. And if you still want to marry me after that, then I will."

"Three weeks," Elliot negotiated.

Mandy frowned, "Five weeks."

Elliot shook his head, "Babies can come early, and I don't want you to be stressed out. Four weeks or I haul you over to the courthouse tomorrow morning."

Mandy laughed, "That was terribly romantic. If I wasn't already lying down, I would have most likely swooned."

Elliot's lips twitched, "I never took you for a swooner, Mandy."

Her eyes danced, "There are a lot of things that you don't know about me."

And with that, his gaze intensified on hers as his eyes darkened, “I want to know everything about you. From what you’re allergic to, to your favorite candy bar, I already know you like cheeseburgers, but I want to know it all.”

Mandy felt a lump in her throat, maybe this could work after all?

“Do we have a deal?” she asked.

Elliot leaned over and kissed her softly parted lips, “As long as I can hold you and kiss you like you’re mine, we have a deal, fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” Mandy repeated in wonder. “Are you sure?”

Elliot slid a hand down her body resting it against their child, “I have never been surer of anything before in my life.”

And so, she took that leap of faith, the one that would have her questioning her sanity and his mental acuity. She said yes.

Chapter 37

Mandy was eating cereal three days later when she heard her name being said on TV. Almost dumping the bowl in front of her trying to get out of her seat, Mandy finally wiggled herself and that belly away from the table and raced to the television.

“You heard it here first ladies, the city’s most eligible bachelor is no longer on the market. That’s right Elliot Brand, founder, and CEO of Brand Enterprises is no longer a single man. Sources close to Brand have confirmed that he is engaged to be married.”

The female talk-show host was shaking her head as if some tragedy had occurred, “That’s right, Bryan, not only is Elliot Brand off the market, but he is about to become a father.”

“Well, that was quick, Shelley!” the male host flashed his perfectly straight teeth, “Who is this mysterious woman?”

Shelley, a cute blonde with leaned forward as if she were going to whisper the secret to the camera, “Her name is Amanda Johnson, and from what we have been able to gather she is an employee of Mr. Brands. However, we have heard reports that Johnson has only been working at Brand Enterprises for little more than a month.”

Bryan waggled his eyebrows, “It must have been love at first sight.”

Shelley winked, “There is far more to it than that. Luckily, Ms. Johnson’s best friend Emma Graves was available to come on the set for a one on one interview.”

To Mandy’s horror, the two hosts stood to greet slutty Emma as she sashayed out onto the set.

Black dots began to appear in front of Mandy’s eyes. It was like a train wreck that she just couldn’t take her eyes away from. Emma sat there looking like a million dollars and spewed lies about Mandy.

She twisted things to make it sound like Mandy had set out to trap Elliot at that party all those months ago. Emma had said that she tried to warn Elliot away from Mandy.

The talk-show host’s eye glittered with what they knew would be sensational ratings. They asked if Mandy had done something like this with another wealthy businessman. Emma had the sheer balls the blush and said that she didn’t want to malign her best friend’s character, so it was best that she plead the fifth on that question.

Before Mandy could watch anymore, the television was switched off and then she was being yanked back against a massive wall that could only be Elliot’s chest.

Mandy turned in his arms and buried her face into the soft cotton of his shirt.

“How much did you hear?” he barely made out her muffled question.

Elliot’s reply was sharp, “Enough.”

Mandy pulled back to look at him, afraid that he might have believed the lies that Emma had been telling. “I never tried to trap you, Elliot. I swear it!”

Elliot’s expression softened a degree, “Sweetheart, don’t you think I know you by now?”

“What are we going to do?” she bit her lip, “There have been some strange things at the office as well. Maybe I shouldn’t go in for a few days.”

Anger colored his cheeks, “Who has been giving you problems? I already got rid of Charles and those bitches from accounting.”

Mandy’s color ebbed, “You fired them?”

Elliot scoffed, “I can’t have the head of human resources treating people the way that he did you, Mandy. It was unacceptable and intolerable. The same goes for those women. This is my company that I built up from the ground. I won’t tolerate that type of behavior in my employees.”

Mandy closed her eyes, “That must be what the talk is about then. I couldn’t get Ian to tell me yesterday what was going on. But people acted almost like there were afraid of me.”

Elliot blew out an angry breath, “Do you like working at the office?”

Mandy nodded, “I really think the childcare facility will be a great benefit to your employees. The construction crew has already begun to draw up plans.”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed in on hers, “You’re going to be my wife, Mandy. Our child won’t need to go there. Do you still feel the same way?”

Mandy felt her back stiffen, “Are you implying that I was only doing this for my baby? How selfish do you think I’m? This was about helping to make Brand Enterprises better, not to find me a babysitter!”

Elliot grinned widely and tried to hug her close was Mandy was irritated with him and pushed away.

“Don’t be mad,” he chuckled, “I just wanted to be sure that you really wanted to go forward with this. And for the record, I completely agree with everything that you have said. I wouldn’t have scrapped the project, Mandy. But I wanted to make sure that you were doing this because you wanted to and not because you felt you had to. I don’t care if you work another day in your life. If

you want to stay home with the baby, if you want to work from home, or if you want to bring our children to the office…"

Mandy gasped, "Children? There is only one baby in my womb, Elliot."

She started to back away, somewhat flustered.

Elliot wasn't about to let her escape, "Children, as in two or three? Maybe four if I'm lucky, but I won't press you to commit to it."

She was confused. It sounded to her like Elliot was planning on having a large family. Secretly Mandy had always wanted a big family, but she figured that was something that wasn't in the cards for her. It scared Mandy that she would start to believe in his vision only to have it ripped away.

She'd learned a long time ago not to plan on good things happening. It was better to prepare yourself for the worst, that way if things went okay you were pleasantly surprised. But to actually hope and wish for things? That was suicidal.

"Am I going too fast?" he tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "Mandy, we can just take it a day at a time."

She gulped and nodded appreciatively before asking, "What are you going to do about the story?"

The frown returned to Elliot's face, "I will get my lawyers on it immediately of course. If Emma was offered any money for the story, she won't be seeing a penny of it. There isn't a whole lot they can do beyond that, but we will pursue it. I'm sorry, Mandy. There are times when the news is slow, and they poke around in my life. But I will do everything in my power to protect you and our baby."

Elliot stilled for a moment.

"What is it?" Mandy whispered looking up with concern.

He placed his hand on her belly bump and smiled so wide that Mandy couldn't help but smile at him and covered his larger hand with her smaller one.

Elliot laughed, "Our baby! It is so strange and wonderful to be saying that. I hadn't even realized that I wanted to be a father until you came into my life."

Her eyes were wary, but she met him bravely, "And now that you're going to be a father? How do you feel?"

"Fucking, fantastic," and he kissed her hard on the mouth.

Mandy had decided that there were a whole host of things that Elliot did well, but he was an expert in the art of melting her panties. She clung to him and lifted onto her toes just as Mrs. H came out of the kitchen with Elliot's ringing cell phone.

Chapter 38

Week 35: Baby is the size of a papaya!

Your baby doesn't have much room to maneuver now that he's over 18 inches long and tips the scales at 5 1/4 pounds. Because it's so snug in your womb, he isn't likely to be doing somersaults anymore, but the number of times he kicks should remain about the same. His kidneys are fully developed now, and his liver can process some waste products. Most of his basic physical development is now complete.

***

“Mrs. Johnson? The doctor will see you now.”

Mandy didn’t bother correcting Tina. She just followed the chubby woman into the back to get her vitals done.

Elliot was supposed to be meeting Mandy at Dr. Roberts’ office. There was some trouble from the other day that he was still dealing with. It was when the news story about Mandy and Elliot had first come out. Paparazzi had surrounded their apartment building and it made coming and going difficult.

In the meantime, Elliot had hired guards to protect Mandy, but she didn’t like having them hovering over her any better than she liked those slimy reporters yelling things at her.

To make matters worse, Andrew had come into the coffee shop drunk a day or two after Christmas. He broke a few things before the police had been able to arrive and arrest him. A new restraining order was in place so that the ‘douchebag’ as Nate called him, couldn’t come back and harm Kim.

Mandy was worried about her ex-brother in law. Andrew wasn’t stable. Kim and Nate went down to the police station and filled out reports on his threats of violence as well as the information about his drug usage. Elliot had been in contact with someone he knew on the DEA. The agent had asked for a meeting with Elliot, Kim & Nate.

Mandy glanced at her watch. He was a half an hour late. But she knew that he wouldn’t miss the appointment unless it was necessary. And keeping Kim safe would always be a top priority.

“I’m going to need you to strip from the waist down.”

Tina's words permeated Mandy's head and she frowned. Mandy hated the 'naked' appointments. She loathed being handed a piece of tissue paper that was supposed to be a gown and left in a room where it couldn't be more than fifty degrees.

She grumbled a response and Tina left the room for Mandy to have some privacy. For a second, Mandy contemplated making a run for it. Or in Mandy case it would be a brisk waddle, she was thirty-five weeks pregnant.

There was a sharp knock on the door and then Elliot slipped inside. He stared at her questioningly as she stood there in her panties and socks.

"Do you and Dr. Roberts have something going on that I should know about?"

Mandy threw her jeans at him, "Go ahead and laugh it up. I have heard there is a machine that they can hook up to the husbands so that they can feel the pain of labor. There is a theory that it helps the father be more involved with the delivery. I thought that since you have missed so much, that you would want to do something like that."

Elliot sexy grin told her that he wasn't buying it, "What kind of idiot would strap something like that on?"

Dr. Roberts entered the room, "How is my favorite patient?"

Elliot's smile fell, and he growled at his friend.

Mandy had slipped her panties off and was sitting on the examination table with her tissue gown covering her legs.

"Dr. Roberts! I'm so glad you're here. Elliot and I were wondering if you might have that special machine that helps fathers to feel the pains of labor?"

Dr. Roberts looked from his friend who was scowling at this point back to Mandy who looked happier than he had ever seen her.

"As a matter of fact, I have one here," Dr. Roberts patted Elliot on the back before going over to the sink to scrub up and put his gloves on. "We will give it a whirl right after we finish your exam, Mandy."

Elliot's color had started to ebb, "There is no need to take up your valuable time."

Dr. Roberts' shit-eating grin told Elliot that he was well and truly fucked.

**

"What happened next?"

Robert the butler and Mrs. H leaned over the table in anticipation. Elliot was full-on pouting at the end of the table. He was the only one that was attempting to eat the dinner that Mrs. H had prepared. He for one would rather forget this entire afternoon from the moment he had walked into the OBGYN office.

“They hooked him up to an electronic device which simulates the experience of having a baby.

Which means that it stimulates the muscles in the abdomen with electric shocks to make it contract and at the same time simulate the pain endured by mothers during childbirth. Dr. Roberts said that Elliot did really well.”

Mrs. H looked perplexed and Robert was downright flabbergasted.

“Must we talk about this over dinner?” Elliot knew that he sounded like a prick. But the last thing he wanted to do was finish this conversation.

“They begin with the low level of fifty,” Mandy explained.

Elliot snorted, there had been nothing *low* about that first wave of agony. He felt like his skin was ripping apart and had said as much to Dr. Roberts. What he hadn’t anticipated was that his friend would nod and say that usually, the mother was in such pain that they didn’t feel when their skin ripped.

Elliot had almost lost it. What in the fuck was Dr. Roberts talking about?

And then horror of all horrors he began to explain himself. Elliot had never heard of an episiotomy let alone ripping and tearing. His lunch had started to rebel against him and that was when the sadistic doctor cranked up that damn machine.

Robert looked over at Elliot, “What possessed you to agree to it?”

How in the hell was Elliot supposed to explain to them that his manhood was at stake? How could he expect Mandy to go through the same thing and not be willing to at least try? Mandy smirked but she didn’t comment. Elliot understood he had been played like a damn fiddle.

“How far on the pain scale did he make it?” Mrs. H asked.

Mandy’s grin widened, “So when a mother delivers the simulated pain threshold is five hundred. And before I tell you how far he went, Dr. Roberts said that Elliot did better than most fathers in his practice.”

“One-seventy-five!” Elliot boomed, “I made it to one-seventy-five. I’m a pussy and there is no way that I could possibly ever give birth to a child. I bow down to the female superiority.”

Mrs. H lips twitched, and Mandy outright laughed. Elliot could feel his own resolve start to crumble.

“It hurt! That stupid mother fucker was the worst thing I have ever been through.”

Mrs. H tied to be properly scandalized at Elliot’s colorful language, but Mandy saw the wink that she gave him, and it warmed her heart. Mrs. H was such a large part of who Elliot was. Even though the older woman hadn’t given birth to any children, Mandy knew that she would be invaluable to them when the baby came.

“You know?” Elliot tapped his chin, “I bet that Nate will tap out before I did.”

Robert barked out a laugh before pretending to cough and excusing himself. Mrs. H shook her head and began to clear the table. Mandy leaned over to kiss Elliot softly on the lips.

She didn’t want to tell him that it scared the shit out of her to see how much pain that he was in. Mandy had worried that he would be angry with her, but Elliot took it all in his stride.

“I’m going to call the bastard. Dr. Roberts needs to bring that thing to the next poker night!”

Chapter 39

Kim glanced over at Nate as was driving them home from the DEA office. She loved the way his blonde hair brushed the top of his collar. And how he tapped his long fingers absentmindedly along with the tune of the radio.

“Why don’t you just ask me?” Nate turned and flashed Kim that sexy ass grin that always had her wanting more.

Kim raised her brows, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nate laughed, “It is killing you that Elliot and I went out together today and that you don’t know where we were.”

She shrugged, “I don’t care where you go. It’s not like I own you.”

His eyes darkened, and he gripped the wheel tighter, “I don’t know why you would say that.”

Kim blinked in confusion, “What?”

Nate pulled over to the side of the road and parked the car. Then with deliberateness, he leaned over the center console, “I don’t know why you would say that you don’t own me. Because I sure as hell own you.”

Kim felt her insides turn to mush, “You think so?”

Nate captured the side of her face in his large hand and pulled her forward to place a devastating kiss on her lips.

Kim leaned into him not caring that the seat belt was about to strangle her. Nate reached over and unbuckled her all the while devastating her senses with deep drugging kisses that clouded her judgment.

And then he pulled back a fraction of an inch. Kim followed his movement and sealed their lips once again. Butterflies were erupting in her stomach. Her skin felt alive with want and need. She moaned low in her throat and clutched his dress shirt with both hands.

A car went by and honked at them.

Kim reluctantly pulled away, but not before she heard his growl, “I own you.”

She laughed at his possessiveness, “Fine! I’m dying to know where you went with Elliot and why I couldn’t go. Are you happy now that you have dragged it out me?”

Her eyes danced as she playfully punched his shoulder. Nate helped to refasten Kim's seatbelt and then signaled to pull back onto the road. He began to hum along with the radio and Kim reached up and switched it off.

Nate frowned, "Why did you do that?"

"Um, you forgot something," Kim prompted.

Nate shook his head, "No, I have everything with me."

"Are you going to tell me where you and Elliot went?"

Nate's amused gaze met her exasperated one, "Nope!"

She didn't speak to him the entire way back to the coffee shop. They waived to Freddy and Lisa, another new barista, before going back to Kim's apartment.

Nate began unzipping Kim's dress before she even had the key out of the lock. He kissed the bare skin of her back, and she nearly dropped her purse. He kicked the door open and rushed her inside. Kim's hands immediately went to his belt buckle and she'd his pants open in seconds.

Before Nate could stop her, she'd sunk to her knees and pulled his massive dick out. He hissed as she stroked the entire length of his thick cock. Kim winked at him before leaning over and licking the broadhead. She dipped her tongue into the slit and swirled it.

"Fuuuuck," Nate's hands sunk into her honey blonde hair.

Kim loved it when he lost control. She loved having the upper hand and knowing that she could reduce this sexy man into a raving beast. She licked his length, tasting his salty goodness and smelling his heady cologne.

He slid into the cavern of her mouth, and his knees nearly buckled when she tried to take him all the way. His dick hit the back of her throat, and Kim's eyes watered as she sucked and laved at his perfect cock.

Nate had never in his life felt this strongly about anyone. Kim had not only stolen his heart, but she'd invaded every aspect of his person until she was all he thought about. And no one on earth could be as amazing as Kim with their tongue.

She let his cock slip out and leaned down to suck on his heavy balls. Nate swore in three different languages as his eyes rolled back into his head and he prayed that he would not make an ass of himself.

She came back to his cock and sucked and licked, her saliva building up until there was a trail of it between her lips and his shiny wet dick. Nate didn't know when he had ever seen anything so attractive as her pouty lips reaching to suck him back inside.

"Fuck my mouth," Kim begged him as her hands grasped his thighs.

"I don't want to hurt you, baby," Nate rasped, "I'm barely hanging on."

Kim pulled the head of his cock inside of her mouth and sucked as hard as she could, He jerked, and precum coated her tongue. She moaned at the taste, the vibrations causing Nate to see stars and suddenly he was doing just as she'd asked him.

He fucked her mouth relentlessly. His fingers tightly tangled in her hair pulling to the point of pain. His cock was ramming into her mouth over and over again, burning her throat and causing her to gag. It was raw and real, and Kim loved every second of driving her man wild.

She loved the sounds he made and the crazed look that he had in his eyes.

"I fucking love you, woman!"

And then he came, hot spurts of cum exploding into her mouth and she sucked it up greedily as fast as she could, not wanting to miss even a little bit. She licked him clean and then sat back a little punch drunk on what she'd done.

Nate picked her up like she was a rag doll and carried her into the bedroom. There he stripped off the rest of her clothes until she was gloriously naked. Her lower abdomen was a little distended and hard where the baby was starting to form.

He kissed every inch of her belly, whispering words of nonsense to the baby about its sexy mother and how much Nate loved her. She felt her heart squeeze at the way he was able to strip not only her body but her soul.

Nate wasn't satisfied with surface feelings or emotions. He had to push her until she was forced to show herself until she was angry enough to let it all go. And in doing so, she felt freer than she ever had before.

He gently bit her hip and then pushed her thighs open. Kim didn't even pretend that she didn't want his magic mouth right against the very core of her. She moaned long and loud and thrust her hips into his face.

Nate's sexy laugh had even more moisture gathering in her pussy and dripping down her thighs.

"Do you want to know what Elliot and I did today?" he teased as he blew a hot breath against her distended clit.

“I’m going to rip your balls off if you don’t eat me, now!”

Nate grinned, “Yes, Ma’am.”

Chapter 40

Nate picked up her ass and settled his face on his new favorite place to be. Her scent and taste were all over his face as he licked and sucked at her weeping pussy. Kim sank her hands into his hair, trying to hold on to reality as he pushed her further and further toward oblivion.

Nate's dick was beginning to ache again, he had hardened amazingly fast after coming in her mouth. But then it was always like that with Kim. He loved the way that she worked for what she wanted. In life and in the bedroom.

Her hands cupped her swollen breasts and she squeezed them together, molding and shaping them, before tugging on the tips.

"Fuck, baby, you're so hot," he smiled at her and Kim could see his face was covered with her juices. She should have been embarrassed but it only made her want him more.

He sucked her clit into his mouth and at the same time sank two thick fingers inside of her taking things to a whole new level. Kim screamed out his name and he bit down gently on her clit causing an eruption of epic proportions.

"Breathe, baby," Nate's amused tone wasn't lost on Kim, but breathing seemed secondary when all she could do was feel the contractions overtake her. Her body riding on the greatest high that she'd ever known.

Nate positioned himself at her entrance and slammed inside. She was so wet that it didn't hurt, at least not very much. His eyes threatened to roll back in his head as he felt the last vestiges of her orgasm still gripping him.

Upon his knees, Nate lifted her ass and slammed into her again and again. Kim had kicked her legs over his shoulders, and he bent her over so that he could slam even deeper inside of her. The sounds of their fucking rent the air as his balls slapped repeatedly against her ass. It was frantic and animalistic, and Kim loved every minute of it.

Nate moved her leg one over the other and slapped her ass, "I'm going to fuck you sideways, baby. I want you to feel every inch of me as I make you mine."

Kim screamed as he thrust into her, deeper than ever before. He rubbed her ass cheek where he had smacked it and leaned over to kiss her reddened skin right before smacking it again. He felt her pussy clench and the moisture that followed.

Kim liked being spanked that was for certain. He fucked her long and hard until they were both dripping with sweat and barely hanging on.

Nate pulled out of her and flipped Kim over so that he could enter her from behind. His hand wrapped around her thigh rubbing tight circles on her pussy while he rammed his length inside once, twice, and then they shattered together. Kim came hard, her pussy clenching, pulsing on his length as he filled her with his hot cum.

“Fuck, Nate,” Kim panted, clutching him close to her, “I love you so much.”

He chuckled into her neck, “You love me or my cock?”

Kim pinched his ass, “Both! Now, where did you and Elliot go this afternoon?”

Nate pulled his head back to look into Kim’s flushed face, “Now, you want to know?”

“Stop teasing me!” Kim pouted, puffing out her lower lip.

Nate pretended to consider and then got up from the bed and walked over to where his pants were laying on the floor.

Kim sat up so that she could watch his sexy naked ass move around.

“Are you objectifying me?” Nate’s eyes danced.

“Hell, yes I’m. I might need to take pictures.”

Nate pulled something out of the pocket and tucked it behind his back before Kim could see what it was.

She sat forward a little further when he stopped about a foot away from the bed. His teasing expression had slid from his face and in its place, was something that Kim didn’t recognize. He almost looked nervous.

“Is everything okay with Mandy?” Kim asked softly.

Nate nodded.

“And Elliot isn’t in trouble?”

Nate shook his head.

“Then what is it? I swear Nate you’re driving me crazy!”

He sank down on one knee and pulled a small black box around from behind his back. Kim’s eyes grew round with surprise.

“I know you’re going to say this is too soon. And that you’re in the middle of a messy divorce. I know that you have a bun in the oven and that you think I’m going to run away screaming at any

moment. But, Kim, I'm in it for the long haul." He flipped the box open and in it lay a pair of diamond earrings.

At first, Kim was slightly crestfallen. It wasn't like she would have said yes, it would have been too soon. But damn, he was on one knee for heaven's sake, and she'd gotten her hopes up.

Nate grinned at her, "I bought you three things today. This is the first gift, think of it as a promise. I want you to wear these earrings knowing that you're a million times more beautiful than they are. I want you to know as you put them in that there are two more gifts still to come. I love you, Kim. I will love you until the day I die. And that I would have given you all of them right now, but I know you well enough that you're not ready yet. But when you're ready, I expect you to wear all of them when you promise to be my wife."

Kim felt a wide smile break across her face, "Did you just not propose to me?"

Nate's cheeks pinked, "Oh it's a proposal all right, just an extended one."

"You do realize that your buck ass naked and bought me earrings instead of a ring?"

Nate nodded, "Yes, all of that is true."

"And you do realize that this was the sweetest non-proposal I have ever been given?"

Kim scooted to the edge of the bed and took the black box he had been extending out to her. There were gorgeous, at least three carats and of the finest standard.

"For the record, it was a proposal, just an extended one."

"Y," Kim slipped the earrings out of the box and began to put them in.

"Why what?" Nate moved so that he kneeled in between her thighs. "Those look sexy as fuck on you, I knew they would."

"Not why?" Kim placed her hands on his whiskered cheeks, "Y—as in the letter. It's my answer to your extended proposal."

"What kind of an answer starts with…" Nate blinked as it all came together for him, "Really?"

Kim laughed and kissed him on the lips her throat clogging with emotion.

"You will get the rest of your answer in time," she said against his lips. "But I will make this easy for you. On the day that I promise to be your wife, I will be wearing the things you bought for your non-proposals."

Nate nipped at her bottom lip, joy like he had never felt before swelling up inside of him. He kissed her with all the love in his heart. This was only the beginning for them, and he knew that this

woman had become more important to him than breathing. And that she just might feel the same way about him.

Chapter 41

Elliot couldn't sleep. He glanced at Mandy lying beside him. She looked tired even while dreaming. There were telling faint purple bruises around her eyes that he didn't like seeing there. He brushed a few honey-colored strands away from her face and just watched her.

Mandy laid on her side with one arm curved protectively around their baby. He could hardly believe that he was going to be a father soon. In truth, he could hardly believe that this gorgeous creature was even know sleeping in his bed.

Elliot loved the way that her eyes had lit up at Dr. Roberts' office when he was hooked up to that infernal machine. He would have endured a hundred times more just to see her happy. He was in deep, and he didn't care that the guys at poker night would be invoking is man card.

Who needed a man card when you had a goddess sleeping next to you?

Elliot thought about the ring that he and Nate had purchased earlier. Well, Elliot had bought a ring. Nate had some crazy scheme that involved a bunch of jewelry. Elliot would gladly shower Mandy with jewelry if he thought she would want it.

She barely wanted to accept her salary as it was. She kept going on about how her living expenses should be taken out. Elliot hoped that the money wouldn't be such an issue once she married him. He wasn't having her sign a prenup. It seemed insulting, and he knew that Mandy would never be the type of person who would try and take advantage of him.

She was refreshingly honest and straightforward. He knew that she still felt guilty about keeping the baby from him, but he didn't blame her—not any longer.

Mandy's eyes fluttered open, her dusky lashes brushing against her cheeks.

She was beautiful, shit, she took his breath away.

"Is everything okay?" Mandy asked reaching a handout to touch his arm.

Elliot couldn't help the sudden urge to gather her tightly against him. As he did so, one of his hands covered hers on her pregnant belly. He felt a definite kick and reared back in surprise.

Mandy laughed and lifted her shirt so that they could watch the baby kick or punch, visible through her skin.

"It's getting a little crowded in there," she explained shyly.

"Does it hurt?" his question was a hushed whisper.

Mandy shook her head, "Not usually. There are times when it feels like the baby gets caught in my ribcage and that doesn't feel particularly good, but I don't know what is really happening in there. There are other times when the baby gets the hiccups, and my belly bounces with every time."

Elliot was fascinated by her stomach. His large hands covered the delicate skin, and he delighted every time the baby moved.

Mandy was trying not to feel self-conscious about the red stretch marks at the bottom of her baby bump. She'd used lotion every day, but they had come anyway. However, Elliot didn't seem to care. His hands touched them as reverently as he did any other part of her.

"You're so damn beautiful, sometimes it hurts to look at you," he whispered.

Mandy blushed, her hands coming up to cover her cheeks. "I'm as huge as a hippopotamus. My ass has spread, my nose has spread, and I hardly recognize myself in the mirror."

He looked up into her face and gently pulled her hands away, "You're gorgeous, Mandy. The fact that your body is swollen with my child makes me want to put a dozen in you. I love the way that you look, don't ever doubt that."

Mandy blew out a short laugh, "A dozen, Elliot we are going to need to negotiate on that number!"

He kissed her bare belly, "Fine. I can knock it down to ten."

Mandy felt her smile widen, "I was thinking three."

"Eight is my final offer," he teased.

"Well, one is a nice number," she winked at him, and he moved up to kiss her lips.

Slowly he lowered his head until their lips touched in the softest and sweetest of kisses.

"How about we get to three and then leave the possibility of negotiations open?" He growled and kissed her a little harder.

Mandy sank her hand into his hair, pulling him closer to her. She kissed him back hungrily. She hadn't thought that she would still be so sexually attracted to him at this stage in the pregnancy. But she was starting to realize that if they were both breathing, she would want him.

"Do you have a deal, future Mrs. Brand?"

Mandy froze for the briefest of moments—she'd agreed to be the future Mrs. Brand. It was as if the reality of it was hitting her for the first time. And what was even more surprising is that she didn't want to run away from it. She loved this man, and she was almost sure that even though he hadn't said the words to her that he loved her too.

"Elliot," her voice was hoarse.

He frowned and then kissed her temple, "Am I going too fast?"

Mandy shook her head, "No, it's not that."

He tipped his head to the side, "Then what is it, sweetheart?"

"I-I need to tell you something," she stammered, "And I don't want you to say anything. I just feel like I need to tell you. I don't want to force you into anything that you're not ready for."

His lips twitched, "Mandy."

"No," she hurried on, "Don't say anything! I will lose my nerve and then who knows when I will get it out again. I just wanted to tell you that-well, Elliot I'm terrible… Damn it, why is this so hard?"

"Mandy," he said more forcefully this time, but she wasn't finished.

"No! I need to say this. And I'm not just telling you because you saved me, or because I like working with you, which I really do. And it's not because you have an amazing apartment or that Mrs. H and Robert are like the family Kim and I never had."

"Mandy!" he demanded, and she blinked at him in surprise.

"What?"

"I love you, too."

The words hung between them until she grasped them with all her heart.

"I love you, Elliot Brand. I love everything about you. And I want to be your wife, whenever you want to do it."

It was Elliot's turn to be surprised, "You will?"

She nodded, her eyes filling up with tears, "Are you sure you love me?"

"Oh, Mandy, so fucking much, you have no idea."

There was something a little bit more when he kissed her this time. The depth of his emotion was urging him onward until he had to have her—now.

His hand slipped between her silky thighs, and he stroked her wet heat. Mandy was more than ready for him. He turned her so that her back was against his chest and she lifted her leg and placed it over his. His massive cock bumped against her soaked folds, and she gasped and pushed her hips back trying to get him to enter her.

Elliot moaned as his dick became coated with her juices, and he thrust himself inside of her.

His hands were coming around to stroke her breast as he moved back and forth in a delicious slow dance that had her crazy with need.

The more that she tried to get him to speed up the slower that he took things until she finally submitted to him and let Elliot control their lovemaking. His strokes were long and deep. She could swear that she felt every inch of his hard length and she never wanted it to end.

Elliot pinched at pulled at her nipples, loving the sounds that she made as she hurled closer and closer to her release. He started to go a little faster and changed the angle slightly until he heard that hitch in her labored breathing. The one that told him he had found her sweet spot. And then she was clenching him, crying out, her hands reaching back to dig her fingers into his skin. Her tight pussy milked him until he couldn't hold back any longer and he came inside of her causing another orgasm to rip through her.

Elliot had known a great deal about sex, hell. Some would say that he was a master. But what they had together was so much greater, and more fulfilling than he even knew was possible.

He was a man in love and didn't care who knew it.

Chapter 42

Mandy and Elliot sat in horrified silence as the birthing video came to its conclusion. Mandy had read about having a baby, she knew the particulars. Her book had gone into detail about the hormones that caused the muscular walls of the uterus to contract. She understood that the mother's body would naturally know how to expel the fetus.

But none of that had prepared Mandy for what childbirth actually looked like. To make matters worse, Elliot hadn't said a word, not one during the thirty-minute video. He had sucked in harshly during a few moments and his hand on Mandy's leg had seemed almost painful at times.

She knew that she should reassure him somehow. But all the terms kept floating around in her mind vying to attention. There was breech presentation, APGAR scores, placenta, amniotic fluid, meconium, the cephalopelvic disproportion.

Mandy didn't know what to think, but one thing was certain, she couldn't do this.

Her hands were shaking, and she tried to push herself up from the couch.

Elliot's hand on her arm stopped her, "Where are you going?"

Mandy tried to brush him off, "I can't do that. You need to call Dr. Roberts and tell him that there has been a mistake. Elliot, I cannot push a watermelon out of my vagina. Did you see what happened to that woman? This is insane."

Elliot's eyes widened. Mandy was seriously freaking out. "Hey," he tried to reason with her, "You will have doctors and medicine if you want it, whatever you need."

"I need to not have this baby!" Mandy wailed, her eyes rapidly filling with tears. "Did you see everything that could go wrong? Elliot, I'm the poster child for things going badly. You must stop this. I'm not kidding."

"Mandy, you're four weeks away from delivery, I would say we are committed at this point."

Tears ran down her face and she buried herself in his neck, "I'm sorry, of course, I want our baby. I'm so just damn scared. What if I screw this up? What if something goes wrong?"

Elliot gathered her close and whispered against her hair, "I refuse to let anything go wrong."

"You're not God!" Mandy weakly hit his chest.

Elliot's brows rose, "Sweetheart, every new mother gets scared. Shit, I'm terrified."

Mandy wiped her nose on her sleeve and hiccups, "You're?"

Even during an ugly cry, she was still the most beautiful woman in the world to him.

“Fuck yeah,” he answered honestly, “What if I’m a terrible father? What if I lose my business and I can’t support my family?”

Mandy frowned at him, “That’s ridiculous, you will be an amazing father. And even if you lost the business you have more money than you could spend in ten lifetimes.”

His lips twitched, and she realized that he had been making a point.

Mandy hiccupped again, “D-Damn I hate when you’re right.”

“Maybe we could talk to a doula?” Elliot offered, “I’m sure that Dr. Roberts won’t mind.”

Mandy arched a brow, “What do you know about doulas?”

Elliot’s cheeks were flushed, “I’ve been studying up on my birth plans. I know a thing or two.”

Mandy felt the knot inside of her loosen a little. Elliot was so good for her, and she knew that.

“Okay,” Mandy nodded, “Let’s talk to a doula.”

**

Elliot called Dr. Roberts and was given a few names of doulas that Mandy could choose from. On the third interview, she knew that she’d met the woman that would help her through the birthing process.

Her name was Faith and she was in her early thirties. Having had three children of her own, Faith had gone back to school to be a midwife and was working as a doula on the side. She spoke highly of Dr. Roberts and liked working with him.

For the first time since watching the video, Mandy felt like she’d a sliver of control back. They talked about medication options, things that Mandy could use in place of those methods or in conjunction with them. Faith said that she would be there every step of the way. And as much as Mandy loved Elliot’s support, she needed someone who knew what they were doing to help them.

Mandy had been having nightmares of Dr. Roberts’ assistant Tina being the only one to help her. It was crazy and not at all likely, but then Mandy figured that pregnant dreams were meant to be crazy.

She was rushing home to speak with Elliot when he was struck on the head from behind. One moment she was walking on the street and the next she was trying to push the obnoxious thing off her face. The paramedics fought her to keep the oxygen mask on.

When Mandy realized that she was on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance she really began to panic.

“Is my baby okay?” she pleaded repeatedly.

“Ma’am, there is no reason to assume that anything is wrong with the baby. But you have a nasty gash on the back of your head. You’re lucky that someone caught you before you could fall to the pavement.”

Mandy wracked her brain over and over again to try and see if she could remember who might have hit her. But the faces on the sidewalk were a blur to her, she hadn’t been paying the least bit of attention. Mandy’s focus was to get to the apartment to tell Elliot after he had gotten home from work.

She was rushed to the emergency room. There Mandy was immediately taken back to check vital signs on the baby. The doctor seemed young. Mandy wanted to ask him how old he was.

“Did you call Elliot Brand? I need Elliot Brand!”

The doctor motioned for a nurse to call Elliot and hooked her up to a fetal monitor. He did a regular ultrasound and a vaginal one.

“Mrs. Brand, you were incredibly lucky. Your baby seems to be doing well, I wish the same could be said for you. I had to put in five stitches to seal the wound. Your hair will most likely cover the scar in the long term. I will be keeping you overnight for observation and Dr. Roberts will be coming over shortly to evaluate you further. But rest assured that your baby is fine.”

Mandy hadn’t even known she was crying. She thanked the young doctor repeatedly. And then felt the medication that he had given her start to kick in. Her eyelids became heavy and she was drifting off when she heard a great commotion in the hospital. But she was too far gone to know what all the fuss was all about.

Elliot was livid. The police had tracked down Andrew three blocks over, he was still carrying Mandy’s purse. The junky cockily admitted to hitting Mandy and then boasted how he gently laid her down afterward.

Elliot had been told as he was on his way home and immediately traveled to the hospital. With his heart on his sleeve and his stomach in his throat, he demanded that she be moved to a private room and be given the best care that money could buy.

She seemed so tiny, lying there with machines hooked up to her belly to monitor the baby, oxygen mask and an IV in her arm.

He had sworn to protect her and let her down. Elliot felt like he wanted to vomit. He spoke with the police but refused to leave her side.

Dr. Roberts arrived shortly after and was followed by Nate and Kim. Apparently, Kim and Mandy's parents had been involved in a drug-related shooting. They were both dead. Kim was a mess and Nate promised to bring her back in the morning after she'd gotten a little sleep.

Elliot nodded mechanically before looking down at Mandy's small body still under the influence of the medication. His heart broke for Mandy because he knew that no matter what they had done to her she would grieve their loss.

It was a long quiet night, the sounds of the machines the only thing breaking the silence as he sat beside her and prayed.

Chapter 43

Mrs. Brand has been in an accident. The sentence kept replaying itself over and over again in Elliot's mind. In truth, she wasn't Mrs. Brand—yet. When Mandy had been rushed to the hospital, she kept repeating Elliot's name to the medical team that was assisting her.

Mandy didn't have any identification; her driver's license had been in her purse along with her wallet and other forms of identification. They had assumed that he was her husband, after all, she wanted him by her side, and she was very pregnant.

He wanted that to be the truth. Elliot wanted Mandy to share his name and his life more than he had ever wanted anything before. Kim and Nate had shown up early the next morning. The sisters held each other and cried.

Nate and Elliot looked on in helplessness as their grief manifested. There were so many conflicting emotions. Andrew had been charged with conspiracy for the murders and wasn't offered bail. The sisters could have never dreamed of that the man Kim had once married would be capable of such atrocities.

Mandy was released later that day with the assurance that everything with the baby was fine. Elliot took her home to where Mrs. H had homemade chicken noodle soup on the stove top. There were plans to be made for the funeral, but for now, Elliot had called a reputable mortuary and gotten the ball rolling.

The next few days were a myriad of sadness for Mandy. It seemed that she was going through the motions of living but that the world had stopped spinning the moment she was struck. Elliot was attentive and had even taken off work to be with her.

Mandy wanted to talk to him, she wanted to break free from whatever trap she was being held captive in. The hazy fog threatened to envelop her, and she fought to stay present. On the fourth day after the accident, Mandy slipped on a somber black dress with plenty of stretch and stood side by side with Kim as they bid their parent's goodbye.

It seemed strange to Mandy that after all the tears she'd shed over the past few days she couldn't summon even one at the graveside. In fact, the longer she stood there listening to the priest tell lies about the individuals being laid to rest the angrier she became.

The priest who was officiating the service was one who worked with the mortuary, and in truth never knew the Johnson parent's personality. His words were more of a generic send off than anything personal.

But Mandy couldn't take it anymore, "Stop! Just stop! They weren't loving or kind. And I sure as fuck can't imagine that they will end up in heaven."

The priest's eyes bulged, and his mouth snapped shut.

Kim gave Mandy a comforting squeeze of her hand to show her support of Mandy's words.

When Mandy spoke again it was directed toward her dead parents. "All I ever wanted was to be loved by you two. And you refused to give it to me. No matter how hard I tried, how many A's I'd bring home, or how quiet I could be, it was never enough! And now you're gone."

Her laugh was a harsh sound that raked at Elliot's soul.

"I wish I had been the one to do it," her fingers squeezing Kim's tight enough to burn, "I wish I had been the one to finally stand up to you. I wish that I could go back and protect those little girls that you should never have been allowed to keep. You deserved this, and frankly a whole lot more. I hate you! I hate you!"

Elliot wrapped her in his arms and Mandy clung to his dress coat as the tears that wouldn't come, finally fell from her eyes.

"I hate them!" she choked, "I hate them, and I hate that there is still a part of me that wants them to love me. How fucked up is that?"

Elliot made soothing noises as he stroked her back. He noticed that Kim had slipped into Nate's arms as well.

The priest tried clearing his throat to resume the service, but Elliot shook his head. As harsh as Mandy's words were, they were a whole lot more fitting and what the Johnson parents deserved. They would be laid to rest in plots that Elliot bought, and a stone would be placed marking their final resting place.

But that would be the last thing he ever did for the people who had tried to break his Mandy. They didn't deserve any of it. But she did. And Mandy would know that she was the bigger person in this messed up family.

He would never force her to return here to see them, but if she wished to come, he would be by her side. If she wanted to rant, he would let her and if she wanted to cry, he would hold her.

"I-I'm so sorry," she whispered, "I ruined everything."

Elliot kissed her forehead, "Nonsense, I planned on spitting on their grave when you weren't looking."

Of course, he had planned no such thing, but it was nice to see her tentative smile through the tears. And for the first time since the accident, Mandy felt some of the fog lift from her mind.

**

Kim was quiet as they drove back to Nate's apartment. He lived in a building near Elliot's and his place was just as vast and expensive as his best friend. Kim felt uncomfortable there, and Nate could sense her unease.

He glanced around the space taking in the stark angles, which were aesthetically appealing but not necessarily friendly. It was a vast difference from her cozy place that was decorated with colorful rugs and soft pillows.

"I was wondering if you could help me with something," Nate picked up Kim's hand as they sat side by side on his contemporary couch.

Kim's eyes met his. They were red-rimmed and sad, there was a fragile brokenness to her that was killing him.

"Anything," she replied.

"Would you help me redo the apartment?"

Kim's brow furrowed, "Redo? Nate, your apartment is top of the line, didn't you have a designer put everything together for you?"

Nate had used a designer, in fact, one of the most expensive and most sought-after interior designers in the city.

"I like the feel of your place. But I think that when the baby comes, we will want to have more room," he said cautiously.

Kim's lips trembled, "You still want to live with me even though Andrew is locked up. There isn't any danger anymore Nate, you don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," he leaned forward to kiss her softly on the lips, "I absolutely must, because I need to have you by my side, Kim. I need to know that you will be there for me and that I can be there for you. If you insist on it, we will live at your place, even after the baby comes. Hell, I will sell this apartment in a heartbeat if that's what you want."

Kim looked around the large space with a new glint in her eye. It spoke of curiosity, wonder, and a hint of excitement.

"You really want to redo the place?" she asked tentatively.

Nate felt ten feet tall knowing that he had removed some of the sadness from Kim's beautiful blue eyes. He nodded, "I really do."

Kim squealed a little, "I really like purple, is that going to be a problem?"

Nate winced but quickly recovered, "I like what you like."

"And zebra print! No, leopard!"

"It will be educational as well as festive," he said weakly.

Kim laughed, the sound filling the empty space, and he knew that no matter what she did it wouldn't matter. It wasn't the furnishings that made the home, it was the people.

Chapter 44

Week 36: Your baby is likely between 17 and 19 inches long and 5-6 pounds. You may notice an increase in the number of contractions you experience. Many women experiencing Braxton Hicks head to the hospital, only to be told that they are experiencing a false alarm.

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"You don't have to be so nice about it," Mandy grumbled as they stumbled into the elevator.

They were both exhausted after racing to the hospital hours before only to learn that Mandy had been experiencing a bout of false labor. She was mortified that she'd called Faith and dragged her away from her family for nothing. Not to mention that Elliot looked like he hadn't slept in days.

And he likely hadn't because he insisted on sleeping with her, and Mandy couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a good night's rest. Everything hurt, from her tailbone to her ribs, she couldn't breathe, and heaven only knew the state of her lady bits because she could no longer see to shave down there.

"I'm glad we went and checked things out," Elliot helped her out of the elevator and into the apartment. It was early in the morning and Robert and Mrs. H were still sleeping.

Mandy felt her eyes welling with tears, but she angrily brushed them away. "You know, I don't think we are ready for the baby to come yet."

Elliot wasn't sure what his reply should be. They had taken Mandy's old bedroom and turned it into a nursery. Not wanting to commit to a certain color, the room had been done in an antique white.

The finest of furniture had been ordered as well as two rocking chairs, a plush velvet overstuffed chair and a massive turn of the century French armoire. There were dozens of stuffed animals, a bassinet, and a swing. Three car seats had been purchased and installed in each of Elliot's cars.

"What do you think we need to do?" he asked cautiously.

Mandy knew that she was being unreasonable, but she couldn't help it. Her hormones seemed to be reigning supreme, and she was merely an innocent bystander to it all.

"We need to baby proof the apartment," Mandy decided and then let her mind run away with it. "Look at all of these sharp angles around the coffee table and the stone on the fireplace. We can't bring a baby home to this! Elliot, you need to go get those plug things that they stick in the electrical sockets and the child protective door openers. We can't let our baby get lost!"

Elliot knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would not be getting any rest that night.

"Okay," he said with a tired smile, "Let's get you to bed and I will go to the store."

Mandy nodded and then frowned, "Elliot, you don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

Elliot looked like a deer in the headlights, "Erm, no! Fuck, no! You're just trying to keep things safe for our toddler. I mean, newborn!"

Mandy let out a long sigh and it seemed that some of the anxiety escaped at that moment.

"I'm sorry, you're not going out in search of baby proofing items in the middle of the night. I don't know what I was thinking. Let's try and get some sleep."

Elliot eyed her warily, wondering if this was a trick. But Mandy did look like she was dead on her feet. Elliot said a quick prayer of thank you to whatever god might be listening and helped her back into their bedroom.

He bent down and helped her to remove her shoes and then her leggings. She was so tired that she'd begun to sway on her feet. Her swollen belly looked almost angry and Elliot worried that their child might be too large for her small frame.

He scooped her up and gently laid Mandy down on the bed. She rolled onto her side and he handed her the body pillow that he had read would help support her belly better.

Elliot gathered her things and set the hospital bag back next to the door. In a lot of ways, he was grateful that Baby Brand hadn't decided to join the world today. Most babies at thirty-six weeks are healthy, but there is still a chance that their lungs wouldn't be fully developed.

Dr. Roberts had met them at the hospital and evaluated Mandy. She was dilated to a three, but only about twenty percent effaced. He said that she could have weeks left. Mandy let out a low moan and Elliot almost fell on his ass trying to get back to her half-dressed.

But once he had gotten to the bed, he realized that she'd only been dreaming. He worried incessantly about Mandy and the baby. Never in his life had Elliot been so worried about another individual and soon there would be two of them. He only hoped that their child could wait a little bit longer.

Mandy had promised him that she would go down to the courthouse this Friday to get married. Elliot had tried to talk her into a bigger ceremony, but Mandy had refused. There wasn't anyone to invite she'd muttered quietly. And Elliot was reminded once again of how she'd lost her parents and best friend all within a matter of days.

Her eyes flickered open, "Coming to bed?"

Elliot smiled and kissed her temple, "Yes."

He pulled her close and held onto her as if he were worried that she might disappear. They drifted into sleep and thankfully were able to rest until late in the morning. When they woke Mandy had boundless energy.

Elliot tried to suppress a smile as she beamed at Mrs. H and rambled on about this and that as they ate their brunch. When that was finished, Mandy had their entire Sunday planned with a trip to The Grind and an afternoon movie.

Every once and a while they would hear the familiar clicks of a camera. But Mandy was getting better at ignoring the press and it had died down recently due to a high-speed car chase in the area and the following investigation.

They were leaving the theatre when Mandy heard someone calling her name. She turned to see Emma and Shay standing there with a group of men.

Mandy immediately turned around to ignore them, but Shay was persistent and ran up to her.

"Mandy don't ignore me! Please, I didn't know that Emma was going to do that. We are best friends! Don't throw that all away."

Elliot wanted to knock the woman down and considering his aversion to violence against women that was really saying something.

But Mandy answered before he could say anything, "Shay, this isn't about Emma. I already knew that she was a bitch, I told you that time and again. What I didn't realize was that you were just like her."

Shay paled and took a step back, "You don't mean that!"

"I don't?" Mandy's laugh held to trace of humor, "You slept with my brother in law multiple times Shay? How fucking stupid do you think I'm? Is that supposed to be okay? You knew that Kim wanted to have a baby and you were sleeping with her husband. You knew that Emma was bad news, but you insisted on hanging out with her. Shit, I don't know who you're, but one thing is for certain, you're not my best friend. Friends don't do that."

Shay's eyes filled with tears and for a moment Mandy almost relented. But Shay stiffened her spine and brushed her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Fuck you, Mandy! You think that he is going to want to stay with a white trash loser like yourself? Just remember, you burned this bridge, not me. So, when he dumps you on your poor ass, and he damn well will. Don't come running to me, we are through."

Elliot took a menacing step toward Shay, “If you ever speak to my fiancé like that again, woman or not there will be consequences.”

Shay laughed bitterly, “You’re going to marry her? How stupid are you?”

Mandy grabbed Elliot’s arm and began to walk away.

Shay screamed out, “She’s just a pregnant whore!”

Elliot stopped in his tracks. But instead of following her he pulled out his phone and dialed a number.

“Agent Collins? Yeah, Elliot Brand, that suspect we were speaking of earlier? We just ran into her at Rightway Cinema on fourth. I have a home address as well. Get a warrant, I think the place is hot.”

He began to rattle off Emma’s apartment address to Shay’s absolute horror. It had been a calculated guess on his part. But he couldn’t see why a girl like Shay would be hanging out with a druggie unless she was involved in some way.

Shay sprinted back to where Emma was and after a few terse words, they both bolted out of the theater.

“Where do you think they are going?” Mandy asked.

Elliot smiled, “They could be making a run for it, or headed back to Emma’s apartment to try and flush the drugs. I doubt we will be seeing either of them anytime soon.”

Chapter 45

Kim threw the third skirt across the bedroom landing precariously on the side of the bed. Nate didn't even look up from his laptop as she muttered, "Why are my clothes not fitting?"

Nate knew better than the answer such a heated question, "You look really hot in the red dress with the zipper on the side," he ventured.

Kim cast him a scathing glance, "I can't wear red to my sister's wedding."

Nate wasn't sure what was wrong with wearing red but made a mental note to slip on a blue tie. "Wear the black on then."

"Black?" Kim was almost shrieking, "Who in the hell wears black to a wedding?"

Grey suit it is, Nate thought to himself as he reviewed the work project on his laptop and made the necessary changes so that he could be prepared for the boardroom.

"Are you listening to me?" Kim flung herself down on the bed, "This is a disaster, I'm not going!"

Nate carefully closed the laptop and set it on his nightstand, "You're going to miss your sister's wedding because you don't have anything to wear?"

Kim knew that it was illogical and likely the hormones talking but she nodded, ignoring the tightening in her gut that told her she would be attending if it was in sweatpants.

Nate nodded, "I will call Elliot and let him know, don't worry I will give my love to Mandy."

Her eyes popped open, "You're still going?"

She was going too. She just didn't want to admit it at the moment.

"I'm not going to miss my best friend's wedding."

Kim huffed, "I thought we were a team!"

Nate grinned at her, "Oh, we are, I just refuse to allow you to wallow in 'Pity-Ville?'"

Her eyes narrowed on his naked chest and lean hips, if there weren't in a hurry, she would make him eat those words.

His eyes darkened.

Then again Kim was sure that Mandy and Elliot would wait for them.

She pounced on Nate, her teeth grabbing the edge of his thin sleeping pants. He helped her drag them down past his massive cock and thickly corded thighs. Damn the man had thighs that women cry over.

"We are supposed to leave in twenty minutes," Nate's voice was thick with lust and she could tell by the glint in his eye that he was all in.

He flipped her onto her back and yanked her panties off her. Crudely he parted her thighs, not waiting for an invitation before his mouth started sucking on her pussy. Kim screamed out, the sensation feeling amazing and calming anxiety only to replace it with raging passion.

Nate loved the sound of breaking Kim's walls down. It made him feel like a king that he had this kind of control of her, that her response to him was so raw and so real. She was fucking amazing and he didn't care if she went to the wedding naked. He wasn't about to let her feel bad about what the pregnancy was doing to her body.

Nate fucking loved her swollen breasts and the way that he could trace some of the purple veins through her delicate skin. He loved that she was always horny no matter where they were and what was going on around him.

Half of the time they were out in public he wanted to sink his fingers into her panties just to check and see how wet she was. Because she was always wet—for him.

He ate her out with no mercy, riding her higher and higher as Kim helplessly ground her pussy against his mouth. Right before she was able to climb that last peak he pulled away. She cried out, hating that he was leaving her needing—wanting.

There was no need to worry, within seconds he was slamming into her tight pussy. His thick cock stretching her walls to the max as his heat tore her up and gave her everything that she'd been needing.

"Fuuuck, you're so damn beautiful," his guttural words causing goosebumps to form on her skin.

Her breasts were feeling neglected and so she reached up and started pinching her nipples. His eyes narrowed in on her movements and he felt his cock jerk in her pussy. Kim opened her eyes and watched him watching her. He had paused his hips and was looking at her considering. Kim whined and tried to get him to sink into her.

"Do you want my cock?"

Kim growled, "You know I do!"

"Then show me," he reached down and pulled one of nipples, pinching hard.

They both felt the gush of fluid between her thighs and she cried out.

"Show me, Kim!" he demanded.

Kim cupped her breasts, molded them before pinching them every bit as hard as he did. Nate fought his eyes rolling back in his head. Her pussy squeezing him to an impossible degree. He couldn't hold back, not any longer. He began to pound into her, balls deep. She grasped his forearms and held on for dear life.

It was hot as fuck and Kim loved when he finally lost control. She sank her fingers into his skin and wrapped her legs around him, digging her heels into his ass, urging him closer.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chanted as Kim rose higher and higher, her release was seconds away.

He grabbed her hips and rammed into her at a new angle and that was all it took. Kim shattered beneath him, her body jerking uncontrollably as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. Nate felt his seed explode into her, the heat of her milking him until they were both panting, a tangled sweaty mess in each other's arms.

"Wear the red dress," Nate said gruffly as he slapped her naked ass. Her pussy clenched on his softening dick and if there weren't so damn late, he would have taken her again.

They rushed to get ready, Nate's red tie not even tied as they raced to the car and slipped inside. It wasn't long before they reached the justice of the peace. Kim's hair was thrown up in a ponytail and the only make-up she'd on was a coat of mascara from the car and some lip gloss that had been at the bottom of her purse.

She looked down and noticed that Nate had two different pairs of dress shoes. They laughed as their eyes met each other.

Nate reached into his pocket and pulled out a long black box. There wasn't time for this, but it seemed like the right moment and he was a man that listened to his gut instincts.

Kim froze, before carefully opening the box. The necklace inside was of a family. You could make out the two adults holding hands and then a smaller figure that was to represent a child. There were delicate diamonds along the circle that each of the figures was holding.

"Nate?" her voice was laced with tears.

He cleared his throat nervously, "So, this is step two of my extended proposal. I want you to know Kim that I'm so fucking excited about the baby. And that even though I'm terrified I will be a shit dad. I want to be there for both of you. I want to have a big noisy family with you. But even if it were only you and me, I would still want you to be my family. I haven't had that in a long time, but I want it so fucking bad I can taste it."

Kim's tears glittered on her lashes, "You're going to make my mascara run!"

Nate's crooked smile warmed her clear through.

"I love you, Nate, so very much. You will be an amazing dad." She laid a hand on her slightly rounded stomach, "We are both lucky to have you. I love you. The words don't seem to be enough to describe everything I feel for you, but they are all I have. I love you!"

Nate was just about to respond when there was a flurry of movement from the courthouse steps. Elliot was helping a very pregnant Mandy down the stairs. The moment he saw Nate's car relief swept over Elliot's features. Nate popped out of the car and went to Elliot just as Mandy let out another terrible cry.

"Can you take us to the hospital? We are having a baby!"

Chapter 46

There are moments in life when you know that what you're doing isn't what you should be doing. For example, when you're a kid, and someone puts on a movie that is inappropriate, everyone knows it's supposed to be bad. But you don't get up no matter how uncomfortable it makes you.

Or when you're batshit crazy exhausted and you know you should wash your face, but the bed looks so soft and inviting that you throw caution to the wind. Only to wake up the next morning with your eyes matted together in leftover mascara and your pillowcase looking like a crime scene.

Mandy knew that something was different about the pains when she and Elliot made their way up the Court House steps. It seemed to be more in her back, and she'd bands of pain wrapping all the way around her middle.

However, this was her wedding day. And the last thing that she wanted to do was ruin it by racing off to the hospital. Especially when the last time she was so positive it was labor, and the hospital staff patted her on the head and sent her home.

Perhaps she was a bit irrational in her logic, but Mandy wanted to get married. So, she bargained with herself that if she was still having the pains after the ceremony, she would say something.

Elliot had asked her no less than eleven times if she was feeling alright, "Mandy you're awfully pale."

Mandy gave him a wan smile, "Just what every woman wants to hear on her wedding day."

Elliot's brows furrowed, "Are you sure that you're alright?"

She nodded while pasting a glowing smile on her face, "Perfect! Now, where are Kim and Nate?"

Elliot looked around the room, "It's not like Nate to be late. Let's go sit down for a few moments."

He ushered her over to the soft couch and Mandy sank into it. But instead of that feeling better she only felt worse. Scrambling to get up she caught Elliot's arm and he helped her to stand.

"Mandy, we are going to the hospital," he said firmly, "I can see the strain in your eyes, you can't hide it from me."

Another particularly tight pain shot through her back and she cried out. That was enough to convince Elliot to get his girl out of there. With hurried steps, he ushered her out the door and thankfully Nate and Kim were parked at the curb.

Nate hopped out of the car and held the door open for Elliot so that he could see Mandy safely inside.

“How far apart are the contractions?” Kim’s worried tone cut through Mandy’s haze.

“I’m not sure, pretty close I think,” Mandy replied. She was holding onto the car door with a white-knuckle grip.

Nate tore out of there and rushed through the streets towards the hospital. Another pain gripped her, and Elliot barked instructions for Nate to take them straight to the emergency room doors. Elliot called and left a message at the hospital that they were coming and to alert Dr. Roberts.

The moment that they pulled up, Elliot got out and helped Mandy out of the car. Another pain gripped her, and she felt liquid running down her legs. With a cry, she looked at Elliot in horror. An orderly had come out of the hospital with a wheelchair. Seeing that her water had broken the hospital staff quickly got Mandy into the chair and wheeled her into the closest examining room.

“I have to use the bathroom,” Mandy cried out, “Right now! Let me use the bathroom!”

The staff lifted her onto the exam table and flipped up her dress. It was seconds before they had removed her panties and the nurse cried out, “The baby has crowned!”

Dr. Roberts came rushing into the room and got there just in time to help with the baby’s shoulders and with a final push, the baby had arrived. The most beautiful sound of a newborn’s cry filled the air.

Mandy was covered in amniotic fluid, blood, sweat, and tears. She’d one shoe on and wasn’t sure where the other one had gone to. Dr. Roberts wrapped the baby and handed it to Elliot. They were rushed into another room with some nurses to check the baby out.

Nate and Kim rushed in through the emergency room doors only to be told that Mandy had just delivered the baby.

“I just dropped her off?” Nate asked in confusion. “I thought deliveries took hours?”

The hospital staff just smiled at them, “Every birth is unique and this one was a doozy.”

Meanwhile back in the room, Mandy pushed again, expelling the after birth and then flopped back onto the table tears running down her face.

“The first baby in my career that I delivered without gloves,” Dr. Roberts chuckled, “That was a near miss, Mandy. But I’m so grateful that we were able to get your daughter here safely.”

Daughter.

They had a little girl.

Mandy was a mother.

The tears were clouding her vision, “Is she going to be alright?”

Dr. Roberts smiled, “They will be back in a few moments. We don’t usually deliver in here, so the nurses just needed to make sure that everything was alright. From what I could see, the baby has a good set of lungs on her and that’s what we worry about with early babies.”

By the time that Dr. Roberts had sewn Mandy’s tear, Elliot came back into the room holding their little girl. There were tears in his eyes as he handed her to Mandy.

“She is perfect,” he kissed Mandy’s forehead, “You did amazing, Mandy. I love you so much!”

Mandy unwrapped the blankets and the looked at their daughter. She was red and wrinkly with dark eyes and the tiniest of hands. There was fine white hair on some of her body and a shock of black hair that she’d gotten from her daddy.

Mandy’s nurse helped her to remove the soiled dress and then Mandy placed her baby at her breast.

It was a moment so surreal and beautiful that Elliot knew he would never forget this day. Later when Mandy had a chance to shower and Kim and Nate were able to greet them, they talked about what a crazy day it had been.

Charlotte Grace Brand was born at 1:48 pm weighing in at six pounds and twelve ounces and was eighteen inches long.

Mrs. H declared her to be the most beautiful baby that she’d ever seen. Some of the other parents took affront to her statement, seeing as how Mrs. H told that to nearly everyone in the maternity ward.

Later when Mandy had been given something for the pain, she drifted off to sleep. Elliot held his daughter firmly against his chest while he watched the two women, he loved more than anything else in this world.

Who would have thought that one night all those months ago could bring him everything that he had today? Elliot had never been much of a crier, but he found emotion clogging his throat time and time again. Who knows what would have happened if Dr. Roberts hadn’t sent Mandy his way?

Call it fate, divine intervention, good karma, Elliot didn’t care just as long as Mandy and Charlotte were his to keep forever. It was a trifle unorthodox, but Elliot called in some favors and that night in the hospital chapel Mandy consented to be his wife.

Kim and Mandy cried but not nearly as loud as Charlotte who thought it was time for another meal. It was indeed a special wedding on an incredibly special delivery day.

As Kim and Nate were driving home, she turned to him in the car, “Do you want a large wedding?”

Nate smiled at her, “All I need is you to be there.”

Kim touched the necklace at the throat, “What would happen if I proposed to you? Would that ruin the extended proposal?”

Nate pulled over on the side of the road, “Kim, I just want to be with you. I don’t care how or what we do to make that happen. I love you and want to marry you.”

Kim’s cheeks pinked, “I thought I was proposing to you?”

Nate’s wolfish smile had her panties melting clear away, “Technically I proposed first, it was just a three-step process.”

Kim laughed, “Well, I’m proposing last. Nate, will you marry me?”

Chapter 47 EPILOGUE

Valentine's Day

"Do you think the wind is too cold for Charlotte?" Elliot hurried around the side of the car to open the door for Mandy and escort her to the sidewalk.

"Nonsense," Mrs. H huffed from the front seat. "It must be sixty degrees today, and you have three blankets on the child. She is going to end up with heat rash at the rate you're going."

Elliot slid back into the car to get Charlotte's car seat. Mandy had insisted on riding in the back next to her and Elliot had sat on the opposite side. Robert dutifully drove their unique family as Mrs. H handed out parenting advice like a dentist gives out lollipops.

The four of them made their way up the courthouse steps and through the main doors. Kim and Nate were already inside and rose to greet them.

"Where is my perfect niece?" Kim kissed Mandy's cheek and then peered down at Charlotte Grace who was peacefully sleeping in her soft cocoon of blankets. "Is she sleeping any better?"

Elliot's tired eyes met Mandy's and she saw the twinkle that was always there.

"She slept four hours in a row last night," Mandy boasted, "I think we are getting the hang of this parenting thing."

Elliot moved to Mandy wrapping an arm around her and whispering, "You're an incredible mother."

Kim loved seeing how affectionate Elliot was with Mandy. She deserved a man that loved her, and Elliot was head over heels in love.

One of the clerk's walked over where they were standing, "If everyone has arrived, Judge Thompson will see you now."

A flutter of anxiety swished through Mandy's stomach and she instinctively grasped Elliot's free hand. In his opposite arm, he carried baby Charlotte in the car seat. The group walked into the Judge's office and he introduced himself.

"I understand we are having a wedding today?" The judge was in his fifties, a large man with a powerful stature. Age had softened some of his harsher features and his stomach wasn't as trim as it had been in his earlier years. What Mandy noted right off was that he had kind eyes.

Elliot nodded, "Yes, sir."

Before anything else could take place, Nate cleared his throat nervously. Elliot smiled as if he knew what his best friend was going to say even before he said it. Right there in the Judge's office, Nate sank down on one knee.

Kim blinked as he took her hand in his own. She was already wearing his ring, so she hadn't the slightest idea what he could be doing. Glancing around wildly she noticed that everyone had made a circle around them and her younger sister Mandy was smiling widely.

"What are you doing?" Kim hissed trying to yank her hand free.

Nate's brow quirked, "Step three of your extended proposal. You can't think that I would allow you to miss out on the third step."

"We are already engaged," Kim said stupidly, not understanding why her heart felt like it was beating out of her chest or why emotion was suddenly clogging her throat.

"That we are," Nate agreed, "So, I had to step up my game. I knew that you didn't want a big fancy wedding, but I wanted this day to be special for you. It was Mandy's idea actually. She said that the only way today could be better would be if she could share it with you."

Kim's eyes met Mandy's, she was nodding at Kim, the brightest smile on her face showing all the love and appreciation that she'd for her older sister.

"I don't understand," Kim whispered.

Nate kissed her shaking hand, "Kim, will you marry me—today?"

Mandy let out a tiny squeal of excitement and Elliot hugged her closer to his body. Kim felt the fat tears plop onto her carefully made up cheeks. She loved Nate more than life itself, and he knew it.

"You won't mind?" Kim could hardly choke out the words as she asked Mandy if she really was offering to share her wedding day.

Mandy shook her head, "Nothing could make me happier!"

Kim turned back to Nate who was starting to get a little nervous, "The answer is yes, in case you have forgotten."

Kim laughed through her tears and there was a distinct sniffling sound from Mrs. H.

"Yes, a thousand times yes!" She cupped Nate's face in her hands, and he rose to kiss her. Their lips met and the people that loved them most watched as he kissed her tenderly.

Judge Thompson cleared his throat, "You're jumping the gun, son. We don't usually have you kiss the brides until after the ceremony."

Nate pulled back, the smile on his face was contagious, "I have always been quick on the draw."

**

"We are assembled here in the presence of these witnesses to celebrate the joining of Elliot Brand and Amanda Johnson and Nathanial Livingston and Kimberly Johnson in the unity of marriage. There are no obligations on earth sweeter or tender than those you're about to assume. There are no vows more solemn than those you're about to make. There is no human institution more sacred than that of the home you're about to form. True marriage is the holiest of all earthly relationships. The state of matrimony is based this deep, invisible union of two souls who seek to find completion in one another."

Judge Thompson's deep voice filled the office as he asked them to face each other and join hands. He asked them if they would love each other in sickness and in health. He spoke of comforting through the good times and in bad. There were promises to honor and be faithful to one another, to cling to each other in all things.

The each solemnly vowed that they would. Mrs. H was opening crying at this point and Robert seemed to have something stuck in his eye. Charlotte chose that moment to be heard and started wailing from the car seat. Mrs. H went and took her out, but it was obvious that she wanted her mother.

Mandy released Elliot's hand and went to take the baby. She returned to where she'd been standing, "It is better this way. Charlotte should be a part of this too. The baby was now swaddled in her blankets happily sucking in her pacifier. Her deep blue eyes flashing up at her parents. There wasn't a lot that Charlotte knew about. But she did know that the two-people staring down at her loved her more than life. She knew that she would be safe with them and that they would see her through all the challenges that life had in store for her.

Judge Thompson cleared his throat, "Where was I? Oh yes, by the power invested in me by the state I hereby pronounce you, Elliot Brand and Amanda Johnson, and you, Nathanial Livingston and Kimberly Johnson, man, and wife. You may now kiss the brides."

Mrs. H wiped at her eyes as she watched the man that she'd known as a child turn into the person that he was always meant to be. Mrs. H wondered if Elliot's mother was there in some small way and felt warmth in her heart telling her that she was pleased with how Mrs. H had taken care of her son.

Mrs. H handed Robert a tissue. He didn't even try and pretend that he didn't know what it was for as he blew his nose noisily. This startled Charlotte and a fresh set of tears began. There was a flurry of movement as Elliot fussed over Mandy who was certain that the baby needed to nurse again.

Kim and Nate argued over who had really proposed to whom or vice versa and Judge Thompson was smiling at the group with a fond expression.

Life would have their ups and downs for these newlyweds, that was just the way of the world. But he was confident that the two marriages he had performed that day would withstand the test of time. You can't be in the people business as long as he was and not know a thing or two about love.

And these two couples—they were something special.

Chapter 48 PART 2 – Shay's Redemption

Shay

Step one: *I admit I am powerless over my addiction and that my life has become unmanageable.*

My throat was dry, my hands were shaking, and I almost dropped my water glass when I tried to take a drink. Maybe it's best if I just fold my hands in my lap. Does that look weird? What am I talking about? I look like a June Cleaver want to be in my sensible suit and fake pearls. This was a mistake. I should never have come. I can't do this.

Step two: *I believe that a power greater than myself can restore my life and my sanity.*

I'm a lunatic to think that she will ever forgive me. Shit, I fucked her sister's husband for drugs. Self-loathing washed over me, and I wanted to get up—to run away from here. I don't deserve to be in the same city, let alone the same room as her. I almost ruined her life. I sure as hell tried to.

Step three: *I have made the decision to turn my will and life over to the care of God.*

I have never been a religious person. My momma went to church when I was young, and she was always praying/cursing God for all of her mishaps. But what did I know about the big guy in the sky? He pretty much kept away from me and I sure as shit never invited him in. It was only in the darkest of moments when I was sitting in a county cell in my own urine that I finally asked if he was really there. If he cared about a meth whore like me because nobody else did. I had seen to that.

Step four: *I have made a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.*

My name is Shay Montgomery, I'm from a little city called Deepwater in Tennessee. I'm a methadone addict. I have stolen money from friends and family. I have had sex with men for drug money. I drove my best friend Mandy away and treated her like shit. To make matters worse, I slept with her sister's husband Andrew—my dealer. If that wasn't bad enough, he murdered their parents because they couldn't pay what they owed him. I'm not sure I would have stopped using on my own. I was picked up nearly a year ago by the local police and served a little under a year for drug possession. I'm now clean and in a twelve-step program. This is my truth.

Step five: *I have admitted to God, to myself and all other human beings the exact nature of my wrongs.*

And now you know why I'm here. Sitting at a café in an ill-fitting suit that I picked up at the thrift store, with a set of fake pearls loaned to me by my roommate, Stacy. I met her at the bar that I work at. Her dark skin and kicking body have men flocking to her like flies to honey.

Shit, if I was into girls, I would put her at the top of my list. But the most important thing is that Stacy is one of the kindest people I have ever met. She doesn't put up with my bullshit and she doesn't tolerate drugs of any kind.

It was her idea for me to try and make amends with Mandy. I had sent letters to both Mandy and Kim when I was locked up. Not surprisingly, I never heard anything back and didn't expect to. But Stacy was right, Mandy deserved for me to apologize to her face. We were best friends, and I shit all over it.

I noticed her out of the corner of my eye. Mandy's handsome husband was glued to her side and glowering right at me. Mandy's slender shape and blonde hair were so familiar to me. I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face.

Mandy didn't return it. She approached the table and didn't sit down.

I nervously stood. "Mandy, it is good to see you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Shay, I wish I could say the same. Haven't you done enough for my family? The only reason I'm here is that the lawyers said that it was your testimony that put Andrew away. I figured that I owed you the decency to listen to what you have to say. But now that I am here, I don't want to hear it. I don't want your excuses. I'm happy now. You can't take that away from me."

She turned on her heel to leave and I felt my panic racing up my throat.

"No, no, no! Please, Mandy, don't leave!"

Elliot growled at me and I took a nervous step back.

Mandy turned, and I saw tears swimming in her blue eyes. Shit, I didn't come here to hurt her.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I am," I started, and she actually laughed in my face.

"You? Are you sorry? You know what? Whatever, thanks for letting me know."

She whipped back around and stormed out of the café, her expensive shoes clicking on the tiles. Her husband glared at me. "Don't contact us again."

I nodded—defeated. "I won't."

He followed her, and I sank back down in my chair. The snotty waitress who had shamelessly watched the whole scene raised a brow. "Are you going to order anything? Because if you aren't, we really need the table."

The fucking café was empty, and she knew it as well as I did. They wanted the trash out of the establishment—me.

I stood, tucking the strap of my purse over my shoulder, only to have the thin leather snap. Suddenly everything I had in my bag was scattered over the tiles. There were tampons, lip gloss, my phone, some lotion, gum, and my twelve-step book. The waitress grabbed the book and looked at me again with a hint of pity.

I thanked her and tucked the bag under my arm with my possessions shoved back inside.

The voices had already started up.

'Just one hit, it won't hurt anything. You will fell so much better. All of this will go away. Do it, Shay, we need it.'

I choked back a sob. This had been a mistake. I didn't feel any better; if anything, I felt a crapload worse. But this wasn't about me feeling better. It was about owning up to my mistakes.

I pulled out my phone and started to dial Stacy's number.

"Hey, Shay, how did it go?"

Right as I was about to answer, a hand wrapped around my mouth and yanked me back against a hard chest. The other arm wrapped around me like a vise and lifted me up off the pavement.

"Shay? Girl, did you butt-dial me?"

My phone fell to the pavement as my captor shoved me inside of an unmarked van that I hadn't noticed parked at the curb. I couldn't call out, couldn't move, and didn't expect when the blow came to my head and black dots appeared in front of my eyes.

"Shit, there is no need to rough her up!"

The man's voice was somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place where.

"She was going to scream!" the man who hit me argued. "What do you care if I hit the bitch?"

I didn't hear the other man's answer because I had finally escaped into nothingness.

Chapter 2

Shay

Step six: *I am ready to have God remove all defects of character.*

When I awakened, my hands were tied behind my back and there was a blindfold over my eyes. The strange thing was that I was laying on a soft surface, possibly a bed. Living in jail for all of those months I know all about bad mattresses. The one I was currently on was high end. There was no saggy middle. I tried to bounce myself a little and felt the plush softness envelop me.

I expected to be waking on a cold floor or basement. It was little more than I deserved for how I spent the years leading up to my arrest and prison sentence. But I wasn't cold, and I certainly wasn't in a basement. Hell, there was even a soft blanket covering my body. What kind of kidnapper made sure you were covered with a blanket?

Kidnapper.

Fuck! How had I managed to get into trouble this time? I hadn't been in contact with anyone from that previous life. I was just getting my shit together. And now what? Was I about to die here?

I felt panic rising in my throat and realized that my mouth wasn't covered. A scream wrenched from the very heart of me, the terror apparent in the high-pitched wail.

There was a mad rush of footsteps; it sounded like someone was running up some stairs. I heard the sound of a door crashing against the wall.

"What the fuck, bitch?" A voice snarled right before he grabbed my hair and yanked it back painfully.

I whimpered and tried to curl into a ball.

The man wasn't impressed and pulled even harder. I felt tears dampening my blindfold.

"Stop, please stop," I begged.

Something nasty smelling and even worse tasting was shoved into my mouth. My cries were now silenced, and the tears were ignored.

"You are more trouble than you are worth," he growled, and then he struck me across the cheek. The pain was excruciating. I huddled, trying to make my body as small as possible. I don't know what he would have done if the other man hadn't come up.

"Jamie! Fuck, you weren't to hurt her!"

The man named Jamie sneered at the newcomer, "Who the fuck cares, Marco?"

"The boss cares, dick for brains! There is a fucking bruise forming on her face. Are you trying to get us killed?" Marco demanded

"What is so special about her anyway?" Jamie scoffed.

"I don't know, but I do know that your ass is grass if the boss sees this. Get the fuck out of here!"

Jamie stormed off just as I felt the bed compress where Marco must have sat.

"I'm sorry, Hermosa." He removed the gag and tenderly touched my cheek.

I shied away from his touch and whimpered. My cheek hurt, and my mouth tasted like dirty socks. Marco got up and for a second; I thought he too was leaving. But then his body was back, and he was helping me to sit.

"What, what are you doing?" My voice didn't even sound like my own.

"A drink, Hermosa, it will help you feel better." His accent was soothing, and I gulped down the fresh drink of water that he had given me.

"Careful, Novia, you don't want to choke."

I pulled back and whispered, "Why are you doing this to me? Who are you?"

I didn't know anyone named Marco. I was appreciative of his kindness but that didn't negate the fact that I was being held prisoner.

He sighed, "I cannot tell you that. The boss has his own agenda and he did not share it with me."

"Who is the boss?" My voice broke on a sob. "Please just let me go, there has to be some kind of mistake. I don't have any money."

The mattress shifted as Marco stood. Instead of answering me I heard that familiar voice from before. This was the man who had taken me off the street.

"You!" My accusation hung in the air.

"It's lovely to see you again as well, Shay."

I knew that voice. Suddenly my mind flashed to another time. It was before I ever moved to the city before the drugs and the partying. The man who belonged to that voice had been little more than a boy.

"Will?"

His low chuckle had the hair on my arms standing up.

"I don't understand; why you are doing this?" I tried to face where his voice was coming from.

For a moment he was quiet and then he barked out, "Leave us."

I had forgotten about Marco and Jamie.

The bed sank down again but this time I felt the heat radiating from the body next to me. I felt my nipples tighten as his hands loosened the blindfolds and pushed my reddish-brown hair back from my face.

I blinked a few times trying to adjust to the bright light.

William Ethan Jennings' face came into view. He was broader than I remembered. His muscular form was new to me. I remembered him being the lanky boy that had followed me around and asked me out a million times.

I could hardly recognize the boy I knew from the man sitting in front of me. His inky black curls were shorter, and I wondered what they felt like. His icy blue eyes were locked on my face.

"Who struck you?"

It was only three words, but I'm not sure I have ever heard anything more menacing.

"Shay, who struck you?" he demanded, eyes flaring.

I blinked and noticed that he winced at my glazed expression.

"The-the man, Jamie." I stumbled over my words, noticing the way that his fists clenched. "Please, Will, why am I here?"

His eyes darkened. "I don't go by Will anymore. And they weren't supposed to hurt you. I will deal with Jamie."

His face was expressionless, and I felt the power radiating from his muscular form. I was intimidated and turned on at the same time.

"Will," I prompted.

He stood and straightened his immaculate black suit. I knew nice clothes, and this had to be six grand if it was a dollar. The Will Jennings that I had known lived in a trailer park with his mom.

"I will send Marco in to tend to you. I'm sure you will feel better after a bath and something to eat."

"Will," it came out sharper than I intended, "Why am I here? What are you involved in?"

He turned to leave, and I worried that I was going to be left without any answers. But at the last moment, he turned and spoke. "I'm saving you, Shay."

“Saving me?” I screeched. “From what? I wasn’t hurt until you took me off the street. Will, what in the fuck is going on? You can’t just leave me tied up here!”

But he was no longer listening. The man I knew as Will was gone and my captor had nothing more to say.

Moments later Marco came back in the room and went to the en-suite bathroom to start the water. I could smell something feminine that he must have squirted into the water.

“Why am I here?” I begged Marco as he came back in the room and cut the ties on my wrists.

“I cannot tell you, Hermosa.” He was a little taller than I was, of Hispanic descent and rather good looking.

“Marco, please, I don’t know what has happened to Will but there must be some mistake.”

Marco shrugged. “The boss doesn’t make mistakes. You had better go get your bath. I cannot leave you here alone, but you can shut the door partially for your privacy.”

“Can you tell me why?” I begged him, rubbing my sore wrists.

Marco shook his head. “No, Hermosa, I do not know.”

Chapter 3

Shay

The next time I awakened to fire rapid Spanish being spoken in the hallway. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn't tied up. My next thought was that it was a man and woman arguing, was one of the voices Marco? I had hopes that he wasn't as cruel as the first man had been. I wished to God I had paid attention during Spanish class at school because I had no idea what they were talking about.

I did catch her name, however. Because he yelled it at her like someone who knew you would. The roll of the g sound followed by an emphasis on the a. Who in the hell was Gina? Really, who was Marco for that matter. And why did they want me?

After that bath from the night before, I had climbed into bed in my wrinkled blouse and panties. Marco raised a brow at my unusual outfit, but thankfully didn't say anything. I was so exhausted, and I knew that he wouldn't tell me what the fuck was going on.

I slid from the bed and yanked on my skirt. If it looked bad yesterday, it was nothing compared to the train wreck that I was today. Slipping into the bathroom, I tried to freshen up. I found a comb in one of the drawers and washed it with the hand soap and hot water. I wanted to think that it would sanitize anything that might still be living there.

Thankfully, there was a new toothbrush under the sink, and I grabbed it as well as the toothpaste. My hair was a tangled mess from sleeping on it wet. The bruise on my face from Jamie had turned a deep purplish black. Cocking my head to the side, I assessed the damage. It was nothing that wouldn't heal, but it sure looked bad.

I wrapped my reddish-brown hair up into a bun and secured it with the bobby pins I had taken out before my bath the night before. I looked like shit, no doubt about it, but this was as presentable as I was going to get in the current circumstances.

I heard the outside door open and a woman's voice called out to me. "Shay? Where are you?"

"In the bathroom," I called out and hurriedly cleaned up my mess.

When I opened the door, I was faced with the meanest looking girl I had ever seen. Her features were beautiful, high cheekbones, full lips, and dark curly hair. She had great boobs and a curvy figure that most women would die for. But her expression and cut arms gave me pause; this girl didn't mess around.

"So, I am to be your babysitter for the time being. My name is Gina."

I walked a little further into the room. “Can you tell me why they have me here?”

Gina laughed. “Can I? Yes. Will I? No.”

My heart sank, and I felt that urge to use, to escape. Trying to shove that down, I tightened my fists. “What do they want with me? I don’t have any money, I’m a fucking waitress.”

The gleam in her eyes was cold. “What part of no aren’t you understanding? I won’t give you any information.”

I sighed and sank down onto the bed. “Can you at least tell me where Marco and Jamie went?”

I was hoping that Jamie was far away from where we were. He was a mean bastard and I didn’t need any more enemies at the moment.

“Marco is downstairs, and Jamie, well, he won’t be bothering you again,” she snorted. “He won’t be bothering anyone ever again.”

I felt the color draining from my face.” What-what do you mean?”

“The boss doesn’t like to be crossed. I can see Jamie’s handy work on your face. He was a liability that was dealt with.”

Dead.

Jamie was dead.

“Are you going to throw up? Because if you are, I would prefer you use the toilet.”

I glanced back up at Gina’s amused gaze. How could she find anything about this remotely funny?

“Who killed him?”

She raised a carefully manicured brow. “I never said anybody killed him.”

No. Because that would mean that she had given me information which she clearly had stated multiple times that she won’t do.

“Is Will the boss?”

Gina wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know any Will.”

This surprised me. “He was here yesterday with Marco. A tall man with black hair…?”

Gina eyed me with a new-found interest. “That sounds like the boss, but I have never heard his first name. Jennings is sexy as fuck, muscles upon muscles, and mean as hell. If that is who you are talking about…?”

Sexy as fuck—it's funny because I would never have considered calling Will. I knew back in Tennessee anything close to this. But the man who had caressed my face last night, yeah, he was something else. I wondered what had happened to him in all the years that I hadn't seen him.

I certainly didn't turn out to be any prize. A former addict, cheater, thief, whore—these words could all be used to describe who I had become.

And yet the thought that Will Jennings was a murderer? That didn't sit well with me.

"Yeah," I said shortly. "The same guy."

She looked surprised. "Well, Cupcake, you just became a fuck load more interesting to me. Tell me how you know the boss."

It was my turn to raise a brow. "No information from you? No information from me."

Her lips pursed. "Touché. I can tell you that your face is plastered all over the news. Someone named Stacy had a press conference this morning stating your disappearance."

She opened one of the drawers of the dresser and found the remote. A smartly dressed reporter was speaking on the television.

"The FBI has joined police in Riverdale, NY, in the search for a 28-year-old woman who hasn't been seen since Saturday afternoon. Police say Shay Montgomery was last seen by a waitress at the Cricket Café around 1 pm before she exited the building, ABD 48 reports.

The woman was reported missing at 6:15 pm Sunday evening by a friend. The officers are now searching a wider area after scouring their home, neighborhood, and workplace.

Authorities say Shay has reddish-brown hair, green eyes, and weighs about one hundred and fifteen pounds, ABD News reports. She was last seen in a gray suit jacket and skirt in the company of business mogul Elliot Brand and his wife.

"A family friend tells ABD News that Shay was in the midst of completing the twelve-step program, having recently recovered from methadone addiction. She fears for Shay's welfare and has concerns that there may be foul play involving the business tycoon.

Brand has released a statement that he and his wife had nothing to do with the disappearance and that they pray along with Montgomery's family for a swift recovery. FBI agents are looking into the matter. If you have any information about Shay Montgomery or her whereabouts, please contact the police. Numbers will be provided on the screen."

"Turn it off," I croaked.

The images of Elliot and Mandy were plastered all over the television. They had more shots of them than they did of me. I felt sick inside and knew that Mandy would never forgive me now. How could things have gone so wrong?

I was trying to do the right thing and, in the process, fucked everything up.

My demons were insistent. You are worthless. You are nothing. This is all your fault. You shouldn't be allowed to live. You fuck up everything.

I hadn't noticed that Gina had approached me and jumped when her hand touched my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

Her concern touched me, and I looked up at her and answered as honestly as I knew how.

"No."

Chapter 4

Will

The fucking punk ass Jamie was tied up and left in a warehouse until I could get to him. I knew that if I went in hot, I would kill the bastard before I got any information out of him. And I needed to know who had it out for Shay.

When Jamie came to work for me a few months ago I tolerated his idiocy because good marksmen were tough to come by and he was one of the best. I'm what you would call an assassin, butcher, hired gun, hitman, killer. It really doesn't matter what you name it, I kill people for a living. And I am damn good at it.

I don't have a traumatic backstory nor am I a war vet. I'm not suffering from PTSD or have mommy issues. I fell into the work via my Uncle Scotty. I was always a skinny lanky kid who usually faded into the background. When I graduated, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and my uncle asked if I would come out and help him on a job.

I think I threw up three times on the first mission. Scotty told me to grow a pair of balls or go home. You can guess the route I chose. That was years ago and now Scotty is retired on his millions and I am running the show. There is one thing that he taught me above all else.

"You can't have feelings, kid. You have a steady head and a killer shot. You are a machine. You go in, get the job done and get out—no traces, no clues."

I had lived by this and it served me well. I had several healthy offshore bank accounts and a crew of snipers that did not miss. When Jamie approached me three days ago with this job, I assumed it was like others he had brought my way.

His cousin had mafia ties and I assumed that it would be another stupid fuck that stomped on the wrong toes. You can imagine my horror when I opened the file and saw her—Shay Montgomery.

Her hair was a little shorter than she wore it in high school. Then it had trailed down her back and now it was just below her shoulders. The thick reddish-brown waves that I have always wanted to sink my hands into. She was thinner than she used to be as well.

My eyes traveled down the file and in detail I read what the girl I had fantasized over a million times had been doing all these years. It was nothing good. Shay had made one bad mistake after another.

The innocent girl I knew would never have gotten wrapped up in partying and drugs. I wondered if she even knew that she had pissed off the mafia. I also wanted to know why. Needless to say, I took the job. But instead of killing her, I made sure that we brought her to a safe place alive.

I was breaking the cardinal rule. I didn't even think I had a fucking heart anymore, but I must have something in there somewhere because I could no more harm that girl than I could my own mother.

Jamie was a complication I knew I would have to deal with. I had planned on making it painless. That was until he hit Shay. Now I wanted the bastard to pay.

I flipped the light switch and walked into the cold warehouse. A single bulb illuminated Jamie's bruised and bloodied face.

"I'm sorry, boss." Jamie's one eye that wasn't swollen shut tried to focus on me. "I knew I wasn't supposed to touch her. I fucked up. I'm sorry."

He was practically begging, and it turned my stomach. I wondered if Shay had begged him to stop hurting her, and I felt a rage so intense race through my body that I had to take a moment to control myself.

"Who wanted the girl dead?" I bit out the words slowly, so he could hear them.

He looked confused. "I don't know, boss. My cousin didn't tell me that part."

"What is your cousin's name?" I pulled out my gun and stroked the cold metal.

Jamie blanched. "Fuck, please, boss! I'm sorry! I fucked up, please don't kill me!"

"Who?" I asked again, feeling impatient.

He shook his head and I lifted the gun and cocked my head to the side, wondering just where I wanted to put my bullet.

He shits his pants, which wasn't surprising, men often did before you killed them. The fear expelling all bodily secretions. Jamie was blubbering now, something about his cousin Vinnie.

"His last name?" I demanded and shoved the gun against his temple.

Jamie shook his head. "I can't tell you."

"Is his name more important than your life?"

I knew that this question gave him second thoughts. I also knew that he was considering his chances of me actually letting him live. If he thought he had a chance at survival, he was stupider than I originally thought.

"Please boss, don't kill me! I didn't know you had a thing for the girl. I didn't know."

Had a thing for the girl—that seemed almost too ridiculous to consider. I didn't have a thing for Shay Montgomery. It was a fucking obsession and I would do anything to keep her safe. And that is why I didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

His brains splattered out the other side of his head and he slumped down against the ropes that held him. Dead. I turned on my heels and walked away, not looking back once. At the door, I called Marco and told him to send the cleaners in.

When my cleaning crew was done there would be no sign of Jamie or what had happened. An FBI forensic scientist wouldn't be able to trace a speck of blood. They were that good. The best in the business, and they belonged to me.

I had little to go off of. A cousin named Vinnie in the mafia was akin to a needle in a haystack. Shit, half of the mob could answer to that name. I got into the black town car and signaled the driver to take me back to the mansion where Shay was hidden. I trusted my crew implicitly. Mostly because they knew that they would end up just like Jamie if they crossed me.

Maybe I didn't have a heart after all.

I had to be missing something. Back in my office, I went over Shay's file again, trying to find the missing link. I had men watching some of the people that had been close to her.

There was a chick named Emma that she had often worked with and even was her roommate for a short time before Shay was taken into custody for the drugs. I was having the hardest time tracking her down.

Her new roommate Stacy, I had a guy watching her and she was clean. There was another few watching that billionaire Elliot Brand and his wife, Mandy. I didn't seriously think they were involved. But the police did and that was enough to rouse my suspicions.

Brand had never been involved in anything shady in the past. But that didn't mean that his wife hadn't put a hit out on her former best friend. I had to make sure.

Then there was Mandy's sister Kim and her husband, Nate. She had the biggest reason to hate Shay. Not only had Shay fucked her husband while they were married, but she gave the testimony to put him away in the murder. Maybe Kim was out for revenge?

All of these different theories I kept rolling over in my mind. I knew that one of them would screw up eventually and when they did, I would be there. And that would be the end of them.

Shoving the file back into my desk, I locked the drawer and got up. It had only been a few hours since I had seen Shay and I needed another fix.

Shit.

Don't feel.

I'm a machine.

With that thought, I made my way up the stairs.

Chapter 5

Shay

Several years before in high school.

“Hey Babe.” Tyler wrapped his meaty arm around me stuck his nose in my hair.

I literally felt my skin crawl as my back smacked against the school lockers. Why wouldn’t this douchebag go away?

I shoved against his muscled chest. “Leave me alone, Tyler. We aren’t going out anymore.”

His jaw tightened, and his face turned pink with embarrassment. I looked up and saw two of his friends smirking at us.

“Don’t be mad, baby. She didn’t mean anything to me.”

I couldn’t believe he was trying to pull this here. In the middle of the hallway with half the student body gawking at us. But if he thought that I would back down, the stupid prick had another thing coming.

“You were fucking Casey Ingalls in the drama club, Tyler. I don’t know how to make it clearer to you. That is not okay, and I should never have gone out with you in the first place.”

He rolled his eyes. “It was nothing.”

A crowd had begun to form around us. I hated being the center of attention and Tyler knew it. He was captain of the basketball team and played shortstop on the baseball team. Everyone who knew him loved him.

That was the problem. Tyler wasn’t used to being told no.

I nervously twisted the purity ring around my finger and his eyes darted to my hands. I hated the look in his eyes when he glanced back at me. It was a part pity, part defiance and a whole lot of cocky bastard.

“We are through, Tyler.” I wrenched out of his grasp and went to walk away when he stuck his foot out and deliberately tripped me.

My books went flying one way and I fell, spread eagle on the floor. My glasses had fallen off and all I could hear was the sound of laughter as my schoolmates mocked me. Tyler no doubt looked like a fucking hero and I was the butt of the joke.

What a surprise.

I felt someone put their hand on my shoulder and thinking that Tyler was back for round two, I flinched visibly.

But it wasn't his voice that I heard. "Shay, are you alright?"

He handed me my glasses and the bell rang for class. It's amazing how quickly those hallways can empty out. Soon it was just Will and me gathering up my books and papers.

We stood at the same time and he handed me the stack he had picked up.

I've always liked Will. He was a nice kid from a poor family just outside of town. Nobody in Deepwater was rich, but Will had less than most. His lanky frame was so thin that it was almost awkward. And his hair hung in a mass of inky black curls all the way to his shoulders.

"Do you want me to take care of him?" Will's low voice shook me from my thoughts.

"Tyler? No, Will, don't worry about him. He's just a giant douchebag," I replied.

Will flashing a killer smile surprised me. I hadn't expected the straight white teeth. I never knew him to have had braces. But his teeth were damn near perfect. His blue eyes sparkled, and I felt warm all of the sudden.

"I better get to class." I started to move away when his voice stopped me.

"Shay?"

I shifted on my feet, praying that he wouldn't ask me out again. I hated turning him down, but I wasn't interested in dating anyone after the Tyler fiasco.

"You want to see a movie Friday night?"

I closed my eyes before replying, "No thanks, Will. I'm just not ready."

My purity ring felt like it was burning into my skin, but I ignored it. Instead, I opened my eyes and looked at the disappointment on his face. I was a bitch to do this to him. Will wasn't a creep, not like Tyler. But my first and last attempt at relationships was still biting me in the ass.

It was better this way.

"Thanks, Will, for helping me."

His blue eyes bored into mine and the heat dialed up another notch. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I didn't like it. Suddenly I whipped around and fled to my next class not waiting to hear what he had to say.

I cursed myself for being rude to Will. And I cursed myself for ever thinking that I could be the one to tame Tyler Goldenberg. I needed to do well and get the fuck out of this small town. There was nothing for me here.

***

I CAME AWAKE WITH A jolt. I had tears on my face, which was highly unusual considering I hardly ever remembered my dreams, let alone cried over them. I had forgotten that day so long ago when Will had come to my rescue.

"How are you feeling?"

I looked over to where I had thought Gina was sitting and found a very grown-up sexy version of the boy I had just been dreaming about.

Whether it was stupidity or exhaustion, I couldn't tell you why I blurted out, "I was just dreaming about you."

His eyes blazed, and his nostrils flared. I could see that his intense stare wouldn't be leaving my face anytime soon. I reached up and tried to tame my hair. It felt messy and disheveled, so I couldn't imagine what it looked like in real life.

I needed to clarify. "I dreamed of the day when Tyler Goldenberg tripped me in the hallway."

Understanding lit his eyes, "That was a long time ago," he murmured.

I nodded. "A lifetime, it seems. I wonder what happened to Tyler?"

Will's jaw tightened. "Why do you ask?"

I laughed at his expression. "Not for any reason you might be thinking of. He was a douchebag then and is undoubtedly a douchebag now. I was just wondering if he ever fulfilled his dream of playing in the NBA. I don't really follow sports."

Will's face softened, and a rueful smile played on his lips. "He works at his dad's garage about three towns over from Deepwater. Last I heard he and Bobby Sue had four kids together."

My jaw dropped. "Do you mean to tell me that he turned into a decent human being after all?"

Will laughed at my look. "Not even close. Rumor has it that he runs a chop shop after hours and two of Casey's kids are the spitting image of Tyler Goldenberg."

I couldn't help the bubble of laughter that rose from the pit of my stomach.

"Poor Bobby Sue!" I wiped my eyes. "I know I shouldn't laugh. But some things never change, do they?"

He gave me a questioning look before answering, “Some things might appear to be the same. But we are all vastly different people than we were back then.”

I thought about the silver purity ring that I used to wear on my left hand and flushed. I had such high hopes for myself. I was going to be someone. I came to New York to pursue an acting career and now I was a hostess at a dumpy restaurant.

“You are right,” I whispered, “I’m nothing like the girl you used to know.”

He stood, and I had to crane my neck to see his face. The man was built like a truck with all the right bells and whistles. If he noticed me checking him out, Will was too polite to say anything about it.

Reaching out, he cupped my cheek. “None of us are who we once were, Shay. But there are still pieces of who we used to be mixed into what we have become. Don’t look so sad, Angel.”

That was what he used to call me in high school. He always told me that I was prettier than an angel. Will sat on the bed and it sank a little to accommodate his weight.

“I need to talk to you about something important, Shay. And I’m going to need you to be honest. I know that you got caught up in some serious shit a while back and that you served your time for it. But I need to know names of who you think might be trying to hurt you.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He sighed. “Shay, I was sent the job to kill you. Call it luck or a fluke, I don’t fucking care. But I wasn’t given this extra chance to have you in my life just to throw it away again. We will fight back, and we will win.”

Chapter 6

Shay

I was sent the job to kill you.

Kill you.

Kill you.

The words kept racing around my brain. Who would want to kill me? And since when did Will become a gun for hire? I was nobody—less than nobody.

“There must be some mistake,” I said, shaking my head. “Who would want to kill me? The only person with the slightest incentive would be Andrew and he is in prison.”

Will cleared his throat. “Andrew was killed two days ago in a freak accident in the state penitentiary.”

Shit, what?

“What are you talking about?” My voice sounded small and scared.

“Whoever you have messed with isn’t playing around, Shay. I need to know everything and everyone you have had contact with in the past seven years.”

What have I been doing for the last seven years; is he kidding? Millions of thoughts race through my mind as I try to think about what I could tell this man. I'm not the person that I used to be. I'm not the person that he knew all those years ago and now I'm supposed to bare my soul to him.

I don't think so.

I stared nervously at the bed before bringing my eyes up to Will and wondering what I had done to get myself into this position.

“Will, maybe we should start slow?” I fumbled for the words to tell him that this was hard for me. I spent most days trying to forget, and now he wanted me to drag it all up again.

“Shay, I am not trying to get into your business for the hell of it. I'm not that skinny kid that followed you around. However, I do want to protect you. Shit, the last thing I want to do is find you face down in a ditch somewhere. You have to trust me. Face it, at this point you have no one else to turn to.”

I had a sick feeling in my gut. “What about my family?” I asked worriedly. Did something happen,” I had to take a deep breath, “did something happen to mama?”

Will sighed, “No, your mama's fine. I have her someplace where she won’t be harmed, but she knows you're in danger, Shay, and she knows that I set out to protect you.”

I had been so embarrassed about the drugs and prison that when my mama had first come to see me all I could do was cry. Nobody in the world is like my mama. Tears poured down her cheeks as she held my hands and told me that there was nothing, I could do that would ruin her love for me. I was in a place where I thought nobody could ever care for who I had become.

My mama continued to visit me in prison. She could only come every few months, but she came. I would die if something happened to her, especially because of me. But there was something that had been bothering me and I needed to ask Will about it.

“Will, why would someone contact you to kill me? What do you do? It doesn't make any sense; are you some kind of assassin or mafia guy?”

Will laughed but it held no humor. “No, I’m not a mafia guy. I work for myself.”

I noticed that he didn't say anything about not being an assassin and it scared me how much I didn’t know about Will as an adult.

As if Will could sense my hesitation, he came closer to me and took my hand. “I will never hurt you, Shay.”

“But you do hurt other people.” The accusation was out before I could stop it. “Is that what you're trying to say? What is all of this? Where are we? How did you get involved?”

Will took a deep breath. “The usual way, I guess. Shay, it doesn’t matter.”

That didn’t work for me. “How about you answer the question and then I will answer the question—tit-for-tat. That is only fair and that way we can get to know each other. We were friends all those years ago, right?”

Will’s look was confusing me—it was like he knew something that I didn't know. I felt a stirring in my gut and wondered what on Earth this man was doing to me and to my life and why should I trust him, when everything around me said that I shouldn't.

“I guess I'll go first,” I said. “Do I have to stay in this room, or can I go into the rest of the house? I'm getting pretty sick of these four walls if we are being honest.”

Will smirked. “You're not a prisoner, Shay. I was just worried that something would happen to you if you didn’t stay with me. Also, I didn't know how you would take the news about the hit. There is

one thing I need to apologize for. You should never have been hurt and I'm sorry that Jamie hit you. I hope that Gina has been more to your liking."

I nodded. "Gina is nice, and she has been truly kind, but there is no information coming forth from her. It's worse than talking to the wall when it comes to finding out about you. The only thing interesting I heard from her was that everyone calls you the big boss. What does that mean?"

Will rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I am their boss; hers and Marco's, so I suppose that's why they call me that. The rest of them just call me by my last name. Nobody calls me Will anymore, not since my mama passed. It's actually kind of nice to hear it from you."

"I'm sorry about your mama, Will. How long was she sick?" I had heard that Mrs. Jennings had brain cancer and that she went quick.

"Three months from diagnosis to when we put her in the ground," he responded gruffly.

I had a feeling that this wasn't the sort of thing that he talked about and I reached out and grabbed his hand. "I really am sorry."

He smiled at me and I felt the heat infuse my cheeks.

"What question do you have for me?" I blurted out.

"Why did you move to the city from Otterville Falls?" His eyes were intently on my face and I knew I couldn't lie to him, but I didn't have a good reason for moving into the city.

I had just wanted to get out of that small hick-town to find myself. Oh, I had great aspirations of becoming an actress. It only takes a few months of not eating to realize that you're setting out on the wrong path; there were a million and one girls that were trying to do the same thing I was. To make matters worse, I couldn't sing, and I could barely dance. The producers and directors had wanted the whole package. I was insane for thinking that I had a chance.

Swallowing, I told him the truth. "I came to the city to be an actress."

His jaw dropped. "You wanted to be an actress? You never did anything like that in high school, did you?"

"I think you're over your question quota, Mister, but I'll answer anyway. I did a few things in high school, mostly behind the scenes. However, it was always my childhood dream, so I came here to take on the world. When I couldn't get any jobs, I decided to go be a waitress. Much like the thousands of other girls that do the same thing. That's when I met my friend Mandy and we became roommates. We shared a terrible apartment in the scariest part of town. But she made it fun. Mandy was a good friend to me."

This was the part that I hated to admit. “And I was good to her for a while. But after my accident, everything seemed to go to hell.”

Will looked at me sharply, “Mandy? Are you speaking of Mandy Brand? The same woman that was on the news accused of your disappearance?”

I hemmed a bit. “It’s not what you think. Besides, you've already had your question. You're going to have to wait, it’s my turn. How did you get into what you are doing now?”

“My uncle,” Will said shortly. “I needed the cash for mom’s medical bills. We never had any money and my uncle had work for me that paid well with no questions asked. It wasn’t like we had money for college. I would have done anything to help support my mom. So, when he asked, I accepted. Okay, tell me about Mandy Brand.”

Chapter 7

Shay

I went on to tell him about the falling out I had with Mandy. I didn't sugar coat it. I told him all of the terrible things that I did to her and the horrible way I treated her. I told him about Emma and Andrew and hated the disappointed look on his face. But I knew that I had to keep going. I told him about my 12-step program for drug abuse.

Hell yes, I was embarrassed. I didn't want him to know just how far I had fallen. Yet I had to because things were too much for me to handle on my own.

He didn't say anything for a while. His face was tense and then he muttered, "Sounds like Mandy has reason to want you dead. If not her, maybe her sister, Kim."

"You don't understand," I tried to make him see. "That's not Mandy's way. She's the nicest person on the planet. Will, she wouldn't try to hurt me. Listen, her parents were evil, manipulative druggies that did everything in their power to bring her down and she still didn't retaliate against them. I'm telling you, there's no way Mandy is behind this. What is worse, I hate that she was the last person that I spoke to before you came along and nabbed me off the street."

His eyes were challenging. "And why is that?"

"Everyone is blaming her for something she had no part of. She's never going to forgive me now. I mean there was hardly a chance before, but after this, it's not happening."

"Shay, it is not your fault that someone put a hit out on you. I get that you are making restitution, but that doesn't mean that you take the blame for everything. There are some really shitty people in life. My question is, does this tie into your relationship with Mandy, or does it have something to do with Kim, Andrew, or Emma?"

I hadn't thought about Emma for a long time until I told Will that I lived with her. It was strange how you can see a person every day and then they disappear out of your life. One I was caught with the drugs by the authorities, Emma was gone. She never once came to see me, called, or left me a message.

Some friend Emma turned out to be. The fact that I threw Mandy over to be closer to Emma makes me want to pull my toenails out. I hadn't realized it then, but when I came back from TN. I was already hooked on painkillers from my accident.

When they ran out, it was Emma who introduced me to street drugs. I told Will what I thought, and he agreed with me that she needed to be found. There could be a link there that we were missing out on.

“I said a bunch of shit; it is your turn for a question, Will.”

He smiled at me. “Shoot.”

I looked at my hands trying to get up the nerve, and then I spoke. “Do you kill people?”

Will stood up and walked across the room. He was facing the window and all I could see was his lean hips and broad shoulders, which were encased in the best cut suit known to man. The poor kid that I knew was so far removed from what was in front of me that I had to focus to remember that they were the same person.

I didn't think he was going to answer me. I thought maybe that I had gone too far or perhaps made him angry with the question. I almost apologized when he spoke up.

“What do you want me to tell you, Shay? If I tell you the truth, you may not trust me. If I lie to you, then you would be a fool to trust me. What is the answer? You tell me if you really want to know.”

I thought that I wanted the truth. I hated being lied to and he knew it. But there was another part of me that was scared to hear what he had done. Who he really was?

“Never lie to me, Will. We are too good of friends for that.”

He nodded. “The answer to your question is yes.”

When he turned around to face me, I saw no expression in his icy eyes. The only sign of discomfort was the way he was clenching his jaw.

“But before you decide that I'm the cold-blooded killer, which undoubtedly, I am, I want you to understand that I’m not a good person, Shay. I do bad things to bad people and they pay me a lot of money for it. I’m not ashamed of my life. But I am concerned about you and I will protect you.”

I closed my eyes and buried my head in my hands. Blowing out a breath I answered him. “I won’t sit here and pretend that this doesn’t scare the fuck out of me, Will. But I do trust you.”

I didn’t want to hear any more. I was done talking about the past and worrying about someone that was out there trying to kill me. I brought it all on myself anyway.

I should never have gotten involved with the drugs.

I should never have gotten involved with Emma.

And I never should have hooked up with Andrew when I ran out of cash.

Will seem to understand that I needed a break because he excused himself for a moment and went to the bathroom. He came back with a glass of water that I gulped down in seconds. I was scared that he was going to leave me alone again.

He opened the door and then turned back to me. “Let’s go see if dinner is about ready.”

“Really?” I felt something heavy lift from my chest.

He grinned at me. “Unless you would rather stay here?”

When we walked into the hallway, I noted that the lavishness was not just reserved for the bedrooms. This home was massive, everything was expensive and top of the line. The ornate moldings and plush carpets were nothing compared to the artwork that graced the walls as we walked down a spiral staircase that was fit for a queen.

Once we were at the bottom of the stairs, I saw Gina and Marco sitting with their heads close together. Their eyes nearly popped when they saw me, and I giggled at their surprised expressions.

Will must have noticed because he spoke in a stern voice that I wasn’t used to. “Shay is not our prisoner. She is my personal guest; please treat her with the respect that she deserves.”

They nodded quickly. But I knew that they were wondering what in the hell had happened.

I almost laughed but I didn't think that Will would appreciate the humor. He was in boss mode, something that I was just coming to understand.

“Gina,” Will barked, “Check with Raul as to when dinner will be served.”

I couldn’t believe the meal. It was the best food I've ever eaten. The chicken was moist and flavorful, the potatoes light and fluffy. The vegetables were steamed and yet still crisp enough, there was nothing soggy about them whatsoever.

“Do you cook, Will?”

He choked on the wine he had been swallowing. “No.”

I shrugged. “How did you get such an amazing chef?”

Will smirked. “I offered Raul three times what they were paying him at the restaurant where he was head chef. He’s been with me ever since.”

“Maybe he could teach you some things?” I teased and loved how he scowled at me.

“I could teach you a few things,” Will muttered as he cut another piece of chicken.

Perhaps his momentum was off because it went flying into his lap. The look on his face had me bursting into laughter. I covered my mouth hoping that my snort wasn’t too loud.

Will looked at me intently. “It has been a long time since I have heard you laugh like that.”

Marco and Gina, who were sitting opposite of Will and me, had their mouths open in shock. Much like they had when I assumed, they would be eating with us. Will covered the gaffe fairly easily, but I wondered who he usually ate with, or if he was often alone.

They seem to loosen up as dinner rolled on and soon, I was hearing stories about Marco when he was a teenager. Gina and Marco both grew up in Brooklyn. And if Gina’s stories were to be believed, it was a good thing that Marco pulled his shit together because he did some crazy things when he was growing up.

We had just finished eating when I said to the group, “So, I can go wherever I want to in the house, right? Just as long as I don’t go outside?”

Marco and Gina seemed to be bracing themselves for Will’s answer.

I glanced over at Will.

Smiling he raised a brow. “I assume you're saying this for Marco and Gina's benefit because you know I already told you that you have free reign.”

I laughed. “Of course, I'm saying it for Marco and Gina’s benefit. I don’t want you to disappear again and end up locked up in that room again.”

Marco looked horrified. “Hey, the door was never locked, not that much.”

I about called him on his bullshit. But Gina was giving me that look again. The one that said she couldn’t believe that I was talking so freely to the big boss. I wondered what kind of a boss Will had been before I arrived. Something told me that I wouldn’t have liked him.

By the look on Gina’s face, I knew that she would be interrogating me at the first opportunity. And I wasn’t wrong.

Chapter 8

Shay

“Girl, you have to tell me, were you two a thing in high school or something?” Gina propped her hands underneath her chin and settled in.

It was getting late, and we were back in my room again. Gina was making herself comfortable and I knew that she wouldn’t be going anywhere until she got some answers. I suppose that she felt entitled because Will had sent her out to pick me up some things.

I had been a little surprised at what she had returned with. The panties and bras were sexy as hell and the nightgown sheer silk. But once I touched it, I knew that I wouldn’t be asking her to return anything. The fabrics were so soft and comfortable that I knew they had to cost a fortune. I wasn’t used to such luxuries and if this was one of the perks of being kidnapped, I would gladly accept it.

I grabbed my things and walked to the open bathroom door. Calling out, loud enough to be heard over the running water, I answered her question. “I knew Will in high school, but we were anything but together. Will was just a friend. But the real question here is about you and Marco, spill it, sister. I see the way you sneak glances at him, and before you protest, he looks at you the same way.”

When I didn’t hear a response, I poked my head around the door and asked, “Well?”

Gina shrugged nonchalantly, not meeting my gaze. “There's nothing going on between us.”

I narrowed my eyes. “There might not be anything going on now but come on, Gina, there has got to have been something at some point.”

“Define something?”

Again, I shot her a knowing look. She knew I was right and was avoiding the question.

Gina rolled her eyes. “Look, it was a lifetime ago and I’m sure he has forgotten all about it.”

Having already finished up, I came back into the bedroom and sank down on the bed next to her. She looked unsure. It was the first time she had exuded anything but tough street chick. Not feeling confident in yourself is something that I knew a little something about. Some of my worst decisions all stemmed from my shitty self-esteem.

“I'm not so sure about that, Gina. It seems to me that he's still into you. And why wouldn’t he be? Shit, girl you are gorgeous. I would kill for that Latin body of yours.”

Gina laughed. “My fat ass? You can have it!”

We talked for another half an hour. Gina laughed at my silly banter but there was no way that she was going to admit that I was right about Marco. However, she seemed much happier than she had been before, so maybe the person she needed to admit it to was herself.

The next day was so much better when I got up and showered knowing that I could leave my room. After dressing in a sundress that Gina had picked up, I retraced my steps from the previous night to the kitchen. I stopped in the doorway to take in the scene before me.

Will was pouring himself a cup of coffee. Little did I know that he would only be in a pair of sleep pants. The contours of his muscular back had my stomach tied in knots and I could see a little hint of the faded tan lines just below the edge of his sleep pants.

Hot damn! I leaned against the doorway and watched the show. His tight ass was on display in those thin pants and his hair was tousled from sleep. I felt my mouth watering and knew that this attraction between us might just get me into trouble.

Just to be clear, that would be more trouble, because I was already in a shit load.

Will turned with his cup in hand and when he saw me there standing in the doorway, he shot me a panty melting grin that had my pussy sitting up and taking notes.

“You look really nice.” His voice was raspy, and I noticed a small line on his cheek from his sheets or the blanket. Nothing in this world could have been sexier than Will was at that moment.

“I was just getting ready to head up and shower.” He took a sip of his coffee and I was blasted with images of naked Will in the shower.

I strike my last statement, there is nothing sexier in this world than Will, naked in the shower.

“You alright?” He cocked his head to the side as my mouth opened and closed and opened again.

“Damn,” I muttered, not able to stop staring at his chest. Will, sure as shit, hadn’t looked like this in high school.

His washboard abs were perfection and there was a light dusting of hair on his pecs. But what really had me going was the happy trail that was leading right toward a rather large bulge.

“Shay?” His voice had dropped an octave.

“Hmm?” I asked absentmindedly, my eyes still on that flat expanse of skin.

I heard a clunk as the coffee cup hit the counter and second later, I was smashed between one ridiculously hot man and the door frame.

"Shay, I am not the same boy that I was back then," he growled.

I swallowed, "Yeah, I got that."

He leaned in close so that I could smell the coffee he had just had a taste of, suddenly I wanted to taste it, on his lips—his tongue.

"If you look at me with those fuck-me-eyes," he continued, "I won't just walk away like I did back then. I'm a man now, and I take what I want. So just you be careful, little girl."

I was shaking in his arms, half praying that he would ravish me right there in the kitchen. When we heard a door slam and voices, he pushed back a little, but I was still trapped in his arms.

"Do you understand me, Shay?"

Why did that sound like an invitation for all of my wildest hopes and dreams? I nodded, not really sure what I was going to do.

The voices became louder and Will stepped back and grabbed his coffee cup. With a quick nod to me, he passed Marco and Gina, who were staring at us the moment they had rounded the corner. Not saying anything else, he took his sexy ass back to his room. Suddenly I would have done anything to know what the inside of his room looked like.

When I turned back to Marco and Gina, I saw that he had started to pour himself a cup of coffee, but Gina's eyes were on me.

"Did we interrupt something?" she asked, wide-eyed as if begging me to say yes.

"No," I scoffed, "of course not, what are you talking about?"

"Oh," Gina grinned, "I don't know. Perhaps the fact that the Boss had you pressed against the wall?"

Shit, I was hoping they wouldn't have seen that.

Marco scowled at Gina. "He didn't have her against the wall."

Well, technically it had been the door jamb.

Gina ignored Marco. "Something happened, look at her. She's all flushed and dazed looking."

"Leave her alone, Gina," Marco warned.

He pulled out a jar of peanut butter and opened the lid.

Out of nowhere, a wave of nausea so strong that it almost knocked me to my knees overtook me. I raced to the kitchen sink, not seeing a garbage can, and retched.

Gina flew to me. "Are you alright? No, fuck, I can see you're sick. Hold on, Shay, let me help you."

When my stomach stopped trying to turn itself inside out, I weakly called out, “Put the peanut butter away.”

There was silence in the kitchen and then slowly Marco put the lid back on. I accepted a cloth from Gina and after rinsing my mouth I wiped the edges.

“I need to clean this up.” My hands were shaking as I looked underneath the cabinet for the cleaning supplies.

Gina shut the cabinet and hauled me to my feet, “No, you are going to lay down, you are sick.”

She and Marco exchanged a look, but I was feeling too terrible to try and decipher it.

“Listen to Gina, Novia,” Marco added. “I will get the housekeeper to clean the mess.”

Suddenly I was too tired to argue with them. Tears gathered in my eyes. “But I don’t want to go back to my room.”

Gina seemed to understand and led me to a soft couch. I sank down, and she covered me with a blanket.

“Do you want to watch something on the television?” she asked kindly, handing me the remote. I nodded but didn’t watch more than five minutes before falling back to sleep.

Chapter 9

Gina

When Shay hadn't awakened an hour later, I went over and touched her forehead. She's burning up. My first inclination had been that she was pregnant. Heaven knows that I sure struggled with smells in the first trimester.

Now, I am not sure at all. Maybe I was projecting something on Shay that wasn't true, and she is actually sick. I touch her head again and am surprised at how hot she feels. Shay is deathly white, huddled up under the blankets, and she looks miserable.

Will had come down after he showered, and I had explained what happened. He had some appointments that he had to keep but Marco and I were instructed to keep our eyes on her and to let him know if anything changed.

I know in my gut that if he found out that Shay was sick and I hadn't told him, he would be very angry, and my boss is the last man you want to be upset with you. I pull out my phone and dial his number.

Will picked up on the second ring. "Gina, is everything alright?"

Another thing is that it's not often that I call the big boss. I clear my throat. "Sir, Shay is running a fever, I don't have a thermometer, but she feels really warm to touch. I think she needs to be seen by someone."

His voice is hard when he responds. "Does she need to go to the hospital?"

I shook my head before realizing that he couldn't see me. "No sir," I reply, "But she may need an antibiotic or something if she has the flu."

"I'll be there in 15 minutes," he replies gruffly and then ends the call. The silence is deafening in the room. I put my phone away and rub my back, which had been aching. I just happen to look up to where Marco was working on the computer.

He hadn't said a word to me in the last hour and I wondered if maybe he was angry for some reason.

"Is everything alright?" I ask tentatively.

Marco meets my gaze. His look is hard and holds something that I have never seen there before. I instinctively place a hand on my lower stomach and take a step back. This only seems to anger him further.

“No, Gina, everything is not alright.” His tone’s frozen me to the core. What is his problem?

He continues on, “When were you going to tell me?”

I feel like the bottom of my world has just been ripped out from underneath me. His face is pinched and there’s a bitter quality that I’m not familiar with. I could have lied to him. Fuck, I lie to people all the time.

But at some point, he was going to find out. So, I answer him with a question of my own.

“What do you think you know?”

He laughs but there is no humor in it. “Gina, I've known you for a really long time. You can take out a guy at twenty yards, have guts spattered on your face and still want to stop for pizza.”

I feel my stomach turn and will the feeling away. I can’t show weakness—never show weakness.

Marco continues, “But there was something different about you this morning. It was almost like you were freaking out that Shay was pregnant. You don’t freak out about anything. And then it dawned on me that you have had that fucking flu for a long time now. I started piecing things together. You have been wearing baggier clothes and talked about getting out of the business. Fuck, Gina, do you think I'm stupid? Shit, obviously you must. Is the kid even mine?”

I knew that he would be angry. However, I had no idea that his words would feel like direct hits against my skin. I struggle to catch my train of thought. How dare he question who the father of my child is? I haven’t slept with anyone else in my entire life. It has always been him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I know that he considers our time together as ‘friends with benefits.’ Marco never offered me anything more than a quick fuck when we both couldn’t stand the tension any longer. But the next day it was always as if it had never happened.

A thought pops into my mind. What if I wasn’t the only person that he fooled around with? I feel the bile churning in my stomach. I would never force Marco to be a father. We both know what it was like to grow up not being wanted. I sure as fuck am not going to force this on him.

I look him dead in the face and lie my ass off. “I don't know who the father is.”

He blinks like he almost can’t believe my words and then I watch his face harden into a mask of disgust.

“Seriously, Gina? You slept with so many guys that you don’t even know?”

I raise my chin in defiance. If he really knew me, Marco wouldn't be asking such a thing. Any hope that I ever had of us being together crumbles and dies right before my eyes. It hurts like hell that he can think so poorly of me.

I've loved Marco since I was 14 years old and all he's ever done is hurt me. It's time to give up this stupid fantasy that we could ever be together.

I have to stay strong, not only for me but for the baby. I have already spoken with Will and this is to be my last mission. I'm getting out and moving somewhere far away from Marco. I keep telling myself that it will be better this way.

The baby and I will have a better life without him.

"Yeah," my voice is brittle, "You know what a slut I can be."

I turned, because looking at him with all of the hatred in his eyes was too much, I couldn't stand it. My eyes went back to where Shay was sleeping on the couch. Only she wasn't sleeping, and despite her flushed face and hazy eyes, she is looking right at me.

"Gina," her voice is raspy, "are you having a baby?"

I move to sit in a chair near where she is still laying. This isn't how I wanted to tell people. I place my head in my hands and take a few deep breaths. In the short time that I have gotten to know Shay, she has been open and honest with me.

I have never seen any reason not to give her my respect. For some reason, I know deep in my heart that she won't judge me. So, I answered her honestly. "Yes."

"How far along are you?" she asked softly.

I know that Marco is listening intently to our conversation. No doubt trying to calculate when the last time we were together was. In truth, I'm just under thirteen weeks and into my second trimester. But I lie and tell her I am eight weeks.

I hear something slam and Marco mutters something in Spanish.

The next thing I know, he is storming out the front door before I can say anything. My heart is in tatters and it's hard to breathe. It's a little strange to be at the boss' house without him here. Marco has never shown this much emotion about anything before. I know he is really pissed off. I turned to look back at Shay who despite looking like death warmed over, has a concerned look on her face.

"I know that we haven't known each other awfully long, Gina. But whatever just happened right there was fucked up. You don't have to tell me the truth. I just wanted you to know that if you need someone to talk to, I am here." She smiles sadly. "You look like you could use a friend and Lord knows that I could use one too."

I feel my heart breaking and am not sure that if I speak it will be coherent. I don't cry. Damn it, I never cry.

"I think I really screwed things up, Shay, and I don't think that they can be fixed."

She reaches her hand out to touch my knee and just a small act of kindness has tears flooding my eyes.

"You aren't alone," she whispers.

But I am alone. One day she will go back to her life. I don't mean anything to this girl. I don't mean anything to anyone.

"I know that you don't believe me," Shay huffs a bit of a laugh. "I wasn't there for my best friend when she needed me. I haven't been there for so many people in my life. But Gina, I want to be a better person. I want to help you."

She squeezes my leg, looking at me intently. "You are not alone," she repeats and this time?

I believe her.

Chapter 10

Marco

I didn't even know where I was going or why I was so pissed. It wasn't like we were exclusive. I mean, I was, but I'm well aware of what I look like. I have a large birthmark on my face. For as long as I can remember, people have been telling me how ugly it is—I am.

When we were kids, I thought I had a chance with Gina. Stupid, I know, but I was young and thought that maybe she saw the real me. And then one day I was waiting outside of the locker room and I heard her talking to one of her friends.

It's amazing that I can't tell you what my high school English teacher's name was, but I sure as fuck remember every word that was uttered.

"Why do you hang out with that Marco kid?"

It was Suzy Boyd, one of the most judgmental stuck-up cheerleaders in the school.

I heard Gina snort, "We've known each other our entire lives. He's my friend."

"Girl, that boy wants into your panties, and I don't think I could stomach it."

I heard what Suzy said, but it didn't really bother me. It was a whole lot better than some of the things people had slung my way.

"Eww, like I would do such a thing with Marco," Gina's voice rang out clear as day. "I mean, have you seen him?"

Both of the girls laughed, and I felt like vomiting. Obviously, I left immediately, and Gina was upset when I ran into her a few days later.

"Why did you leave me at the school? I had to catch a ride home with Jimmie Thompson."

I snorted, "I'm sure it was a trial to catch a ride with the captain of the baseball team. I hope that you can recover someday."

Her eyes were hurt, but I was hurting too—damn it. Things were different after that. We were still friends in a way, but that sweet innocent flirting that had been going on? I shut that down hardcore.

Over the years there were a few times that we got drunk enough that I forgot how she really felt about me. Hooking up with Gina was a mistake that I vowed never to make again. But she was so addicting. Being with her was like nothing I had experienced with anyone else.

I told her that we could never be a thing. I wasn't a family man. Shit, in my line of work, I was lucky to see the next day when I went to sleep at night. But that didn't mean that I didn't want her, crave her.

I called the boss and told him I would be getting some things for Shay. So, I pulled my shit together and started looking for a pharmacy. All I could think about was Gina though. If she was having a kid, she really would be leaving.

There had been more than a handful of times over the years that she had threatened to go. But I always managed to convince her to stay. I'm a glutton for punishment. But I hated the thought of her not being in my life, even if we were only fuck buddies.

Sure, I'm good enough for a night in the sack every once in a while, when you are lonely or knocked back a few too many. But never once has Gina stuck around in the light of day.

Fuck, I can't keep doing this to myself. I felt like I was dying inside, and this was the final nail in the coffin. I punched my fist into the brick wall of the pharmacy. Not caring about the customers who were eyeing me warily or the way that they were moving back in a hurried fashion.

I didn't care that my knuckles were bruised and bloody. I was just so damn angry.

How could Gina have been sleeping with someone else?

I know that I'm a thug and an ugly mother fucker. But shit, I'm not trash, she should have told me. Fuck, I wanted that baby to be mine. Why didn't I ever man up and tell her how I felt?

Yeah, because I knew how she really felt. I was just a good lay, not forever material.

I want to know who the prick is. I'm going to kill him. Okay, maybe that isn't the best idea for the kid.

I want to kill him anyway.

Will texted me that he had a doctor call in a prescription, so I went and picked up a thermometer, a box of antibacterial wipes, some vitamin-c, and a few other random items. I'm not used to taking care of someone else and I never get sick.

I also grabbed some bandages for my hand that looks like a meat grinder got to it. After picking up Shay's prescription conveniently called in under my name, I headed back to the mansion.

The moment I walked in the door I passed Doc Travis. He has patched all of us on more than one occasion.

"Hey Marco," Doc said in a pleasant tone. "That leg giving you any trouble?"

I looked at him for a moment, trying to remember what in the fuck I had done to my leg. A robbery three months ago, knife wound—the details trickled back to me.

“Right as rain, Doc.” I try and smile, and I know it looked more like a grimace.

He gave me an intense look, and all I wanted to do was get the hell out of there.

“Well, it was good to see you,” he said finally, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You too, Doc.”

I walked into where Shay had been earlier, but it looks like they moved her up to her bedroom. Taking the stairs two at a time I navigated my way back to the room where Shay had been staying. But it’s empty, all but for Gina, who is packing up some of the things Will got for Shay.

“What’s going on?” I asked gruffly, not wanting to rehash what had happened earlier.

My nerves were already on edge and I didn’t want to snap at her.

Gina’s cheeks flushed. “Shay insisted that she didn’t want to be alone, and Will insisted that she lay down. So, he has taken her to his room. She asked me to bring a change of clothes for her.”

I nodded and turned to leave, but Gina’s voice stopped me.

“Please don’t be mad at me, Marco.” I looked back and saw her long dark hair that was pulled haphazardly into a bun. Her dark thick hair has always been a turn on for me.

Her deep brown eyes looked sad and I noticed the strain around her eyes.

“I’m not mad, Gina,” I said gruffly.

I was pissed as hell so that was a lie. But I didn’t want to hurt her. Even after everything that’s happened, I still want her to be happy. That is all I have ever wanted.

“Do you need anything?” I added, not bothering with a smile that I knew wouldn’t come.

She shook her head, “No, we are fine.”

We.

Gina and the baby.

Not Gina and me.

I turned and walked up to the mansion’s master bedroom. With a brisk knock, I waited until Will answered the door. Then I thrust the bag into his hands.

“I’m going to work downstairs.”

Will nodded his head. “Sounds good. I will stay with Shay until she falls asleep and then we can talk more about the Demarco file.”

I winced. “Sorry, how is she?”

Will folded his arms across his chest. “She’s got strep throat. Doc Travis said that vomiting is pretty common with that. But he gave her something to settle her stomach and the antibiotics will help get the infection under control.”

I nodded. “Glad that she’s going to be okay.”

Chapter 11

Shay

Step Nine: *Whenever possible, make direct restitution to all persons you have harmed.*

"No, absolutely not," Will's jaw clenched, and his eyes flared, "You are not to contact those people, Shay. For all, we know they are behind the hit that's been put out on you."

I couldn't help noticing how incredibly attractive he looked in his fitted jeans and a black t-shirt that was stretched across his fantastic chest. We were sitting in the living room. I was in my pajamas with a blanket and my feet curled up underneath me.

This was the first day that I had felt like joining the human race again after being sick. I woke up determined to clear things up with Mandy. I still wasn't convinced that she was behind the attack and I was aware that she would most likely never forgive me.

In point of fact, I was positive that she wasn't behind the attack, but I didn't know her husband very well. In any event, I had approached Will with my intentions and he quickly shut them down.

"This isn't up for debate." Will frowned. "I don't know how I can stress this enough to you."

I moved my legs out from under me, they were starting to get that tingly feeling. Will reached over and took my feet into his lap. When he started to rub the instep of my right foot, I rested my head against the back of the couch and closed my eyes.

A moan of appreciation escaped my lips as he kneaded my aches and tingles away.

Absentmindedly I murmured, "Who knew what a keeper you would turn out to be?"

His hands stopped, and my eyes blinked open. I was grateful to see that he didn't look angry; if anything, there was a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"I'm glad that you found one redeeming quality," Will said wryly.

"I didn't mean it like that." I flushed and tried to move my feet, but his large hands held them still.

"I'm not finished," he said gruffly, and I sank back into position as he worked on one foot and then the other.

It felt amazing to have his hands on my skin. His touch was enough to send electric shocks coursing through my body. I knew that I wasn't supposed to be getting a lady boner from a foot massage, but damn if it didn't happen anyway.

My moans bordered on indecent and I murmured things like, 'don't stop,' and 'you have magic hands.'

I probably should have been embarrassed, but I wasn't, it felt too good.

"I want to marry your hands," I called out and heard Gina giggle from the office across the hallway.

I looked at Will, who was grinning at me. "Was that loud?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

Gina called out, "When is the big event?"

"Piss off, Gina," I called out with a smile on my face.

She walked into the room and Will stopped rubbing my feet.

"You were right," she addressed Will while handing him a paper to look at.

"Fuck!" He moved my feet off of his lap and stood. I tried not to notice that he was sporting a pretty impressive hardon; it looked like I wasn't the only one affected by his, erm—hand job.

"I tried to reach out to Renaldo, but his minions wouldn't let me though," Gina huffed. "They think they are so bad ass. I wish that you would let me teach them a lesson."

That got a small smirk out of Will. "You can't fuck up everyone that looks at you funny, Gina."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you want me to do boss?"

"I will contact Renaldo to see if he knows who is putting these hits out. Until we know for sure, every mercenary in the country is going to be after Shay. Whoever she pissed off isn't playing around."

I sank back a little. "Another hit has been put out?" My voice was scared and suddenly the severity of my situation came crashing back in. I had put it in the back of my head, minimizing what was truly happening.

"They upped the reward from a million to three million," Will said grimly. "Stay here with Gina."

He grabbed his coat and yelled for Marco to follow him. He picked up a firearm before they left the house and again another shock of reality hit me.

"Where are they going?" I asked Gina.

She sat on the couch where Will had just been. It was strange that I didn't feel the warmth and comfort that I had when he was sitting there.

"There is another crew like ours that works in the city. Renaldo is his name. To be honest, he's a scary mother fucker that I would never work for in a million years."

I wrinkled my brow. "How is one assassin different from another?"

She shook her head. "Will isn't an assassin in the respect that he will take any job. He only takes the ones where the suspect deserves to die."

"How can he know the difference?" My stomach was churning. I didn't want to think about this aspect of their work.

"There are a lot of bad people out there, Shay. Not just cheaters and petty thieves, but murderers, drug lords, molesters, child trafficking, embezzlers, you name it. Will doesn't take on a job unless he has thoroughly investigated the suspect and they are without a doubt guilty. Because he is the best in the business, he can be picky about what jobs he will accept."

"Kind of like a modern-day Robin Hood?" I asked, trying to gain some perspective.

Gina laughed. "I suppose, but he doesn't share what he earns with the poor. Not to say that he isn't a generous employer because he is. But Will doesn't have altruistic motives, he isn't a superhero."

"Then explain to me why he only takes out really bad people?"

I wanted to know more about him. To understand this dark and scary aspect of his life. I wanted to know why someone like Gina, who seemed so normal, could go out and kill people. One would expect a killer to be heartless and cruel. But Will just spent the last twenty minutes rubbing my feet.

I thought of his smile, the way his lips would curve up almost against his better judgment. The way his eyes would fall on me in concern or amusement. The person that I was getting to know wasn't a hardened criminal.

Gina shrugged. "I guess we all have standards of what we will and won't do. At some point, you have to look in the mirror and be okay with who you are."

I was quiet for a moment and Gina nudged my foot. "What are you thinking?"

"I am a bad person, Gina. Maybe Will should have taken me out." My voice was hardly more than a whisper. When she tried to protest, I stopped her. "Look, I cheated with a married man and destroyed a family. I betrayed my best friend in so many ways that I can't even count them. Shit, I stole, lied, and even sold my body for drugs. I'm one of the bad guys."

Gina's tone was firm when she spoke to me. "You need to get those fucking thoughts out of your head. They are toxic, do you understand me? You made some horrible mistakes, Shay. I'm not saying that you're an angel. You fucked up big time. But there is a difference between making bad

choices and being a bad person. You served your time in jail, you helped to get the man arrested that murdered your friend's parents, and you got yourself clean from the drugs. There is a time to hold onto the past, and there is a time when you have to make peace with it and let it go."

I felt my throat tighten with emotion. I wasn't used to someone defending me. I had destroyed every healthy relationship in my life. Even my momma was wary about coming around because of what I had taken from her.

"How do you let things go?" I choked out.

She looked right at me and I saw the pain and heartache written across her face. Suddenly I remembered the pregnancy and Marco. Here I was complaining about my shit and she was carrying a burden without uttering a word of complaint. There was a lot I could learn from Gina, and what was better was that she gave it to me straight.

"I will let you know when I figure it out," she said at long last.

Chapter 12

Will

After combing through some of the seedier parts of the city Marco and I were able to drum up Renaldo's nephew on his wife's side. It didn't take long before we were able to encourage Frankie to call his uncle for help.

The kid had to be in his late teens or early twenties. He was of medium height and had glossy dark hair that was slicked back in a retro gangster type of way. I half expected him to start breaking out into show tunes from Greece.

He obviously had no business being in the business.

A meeting place was set for one of my empty warehouses. I had made it plain to Renaldo when I picked the kid up that he had an hour to appear or Frankie would be disappearing. It was a calculated guess, but somehow as much as I knew the bastard could have cared less about his nephew, I figured that Mrs. Renaldo might be of another opinion.

Fifty-eight minutes later a man opens the side door. I have Marco train a gun on him as I wait to see what kind of bullshit that Renaldo would try and pull. Gina was a better sharpshooter, but I didn't want her in the line of fire now that she was pregnant. I am all for equality between the sexes, but I'm not about to mess with an unborn child.

"Where's Frankie?" the goon calls out as he fingers the gun in his pocket.

I don't answer him because there is no reason for me to interact with this idiot. I can see that he is nervous, and a nervous gunman is always a threat. But I stare at him without an ounce of emotion on my face.

There is a reason I have the reputation as a cold-blooded killer.

That is who I am, larger than life, I am a bad ass mother fucker that you don't want to knock on your door.

The man caves, as I knew he would. "I need to call the boss."

And now I speak. "By all means, use my phone."

He pales because he knows that if he wants to avoid a shot in the head, he will do things my way.

It's like a choreographed dance, only my opponent isn't aware of the steps. I know how to carry myself, when to move closer and what buttons to push.

With hesitant steps, he comes closer to me and reaches out his hand.

“Give me the number.” It’s a command, not a question. The man wisely repeated the phone number.

After two rings Renaldo picks up. “Jennings.”

Renaldo doesn’t pretend to not know who I am or why I’m calling. You don’t get to the top of this field without learning to calculate the statistics of any given situation.

“Is my guy still alive?”

He asked me this in the same tone that one would inquire if you wanted a turkey sandwich.

“For the time being,” I reply and motion for his man to back away from me.

Marco takes this cue and hauls Frankie forward. His gun is still trained on the other man. Frankie isn’t a threat. The poor kid pissed himself earlier and I almost felt bad—almost.

“What about Frankie?” Renaldo asks.

I held the phone out as Marco yanked Frankie’s gag out of his mouth.

“Say hello to your uncle,” I instructed, and Frankie did as he was told.

“Satisfied?” I put the phone back to my ear, waiting to see if Renaldo is going to play or not.

Renaldo clears his throat. “We don’t usually step on each other’s toes, Jennings. What is this all about?”

“You have a new job, the hit on Shay Montgomery.”

I hear his intake of breath. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

I roll my eyes and look over at Marco, who immediately releases a single shot into the air.

Renaldo panics just like I expected him to.

“Wait a minute, fuck, just wait a minute.”

“Time’s a wasting, Renaldo.” My voice is threatening because I know that this bastard is secretly a coward.

“It came in this morning,” he grunts unhappily. “Why do you care? Who is the girl to you?”

I want to deny even knowing her, but a kneejerk reaction is what he is looking for to gain the upper hand.

“This is my job,” I say menacingly. “Are you stepping on my toes, Renaldo?”

I could picture the little Italian man sweating like a pig, he's as predictable as he is cowardly.

"I didn't know," he blurts out. "I won't touch it, I swear."

"Not fucking good enough," I reply. "Who placed the hit?"

This is a tough one because Renaldo knows that if he tells on his source, he's a dead man. And if he doesn't give me the information I want, they are all dead men.

"You know I can't do that," the tone is almost pleading.

I nod my head at Marco who proceeds to shoot the unnamed man in the thigh. The sound reverberates through the empty warehouse, just as I knew it would. The man's scream is akin to a pig squealing, but I don't even flinch. I am done playing this game.

"No more chances, Renaldo."

"Redmont," he blurts out, "Fuck! Don't shoot anyone else! Look, he wants the chick dead, he's upped the price to five million."

"Why?" I fought to keep the emotion out of my voice. It's critical that I don't give him any leverage over me or my team.

"She ratted out one of his best dealers," Renaldo begins.

"Kill the boy," I interrupt. I know that Marco won't shoot Frankie. If anyone did that it would be me and the kid doesn't deserve to die.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!!" Renaldo screams, "I will tell you!"

I remain silent because he needs to be reminded of how deadly I could be.

"It's his girlfriend, he's fucking crazy about her and she hates the chick. He doesn't care about the money. You know that is a drop in the bucket to him. But his girl wants Montgomery dead."

I clear my throat. "Are you trying to tell me this is a chick fight?"

He's started to piss me off and I crack my neck to keep myself steady at the moment.

"I swear it," Renaldo is singing like a canary.

"What's the girlfriend's name?" I reply shortly.

"I don't know her last name, fuck, it's something like Emily or Elaine—no, it's Emma. The girl's name is Emma."

"Why does she have it out for Montgomery?"

Renaldo is quick to reply, “I don’t know, man. I don’t know.”

At this point, there is nothing left to be said. Renaldo is a coward but not a stupid fuck. He knows that if he crosses me his ass will be singing with the angels.

I end the call and hand it to the man who is trying not to let his leg bleed out. Marco knew right where to shoot him to avoid major arteries, but the man is crying like a pussy.

I grab Frankie by the collar. He couldn’t see me through the blindfold, and he is shaking like a leaf.

“You need to find a new line of work.” I twist his collar just enough to be painful and then motion to Marco that our time here is finished.

Without a second glance, the two of us walked out of the warehouse. Maybe I was getting too jaded for this because I didn't care that the man was still screaming or that Frankie was crying. They were stupid fuckers who got involved with the wrong man. Renaldo was not only a mercenary, but he ran a profitable money laundering gig and was involved in several shady gambling rings.

I blew out a breath and Marco looked at me in question.

I raised a brow. "We need to talk about some things."

His expression didn't change as I knew it wouldn't. Marco was not only my employee. He was my trusted friend.

"What are you going to do about Gina?" I asked bluntly.

He seemed to take my question as a blow.

"It's not my fucking kid," he said angrily.

I laughed, and it seemed to piss him off. Marco clenched his hands and I couldn't resist taunting him a little.

"You going to hit me?"

He shook his head, "No."

"Why don't you think it's your kid?"

He ground his teeth together, "She said it wasn't, and the dates don't match up."

I smiled at him. Poor stupid Marco, he couldn't see that Gina was so fucking in love with him.

"And you believed her?"

Chapter 13

Shay

"Who is Emma?"

Will stood before me with a clenched jaw and fire in his eyes. He hadn't seemed this upset since Jamie had struck me.

"Emma?" I repeated dumbly. "I used to have a roommate named Emma Graves, but I haven't seen her in over a year. Somehow when we were all hauled in on the drug charges, she was absolved of everything and walked free. Where on earth did you hear her name?"

I had been sitting at the table playing cards with Gina, but she hightailed it out of there the moment that Will came in looking like the Terminator.

I motioned for him to sit down in the chair that Gina had just vacated. "What's going on, Will?"

He sank down and ran a hand through his silky black curls. "Your roommate is trying to kill you."

I blinked. "Former roommate, and why would Emma do that? I was the one who served time, she didn't. I haven't even contacted her since I got out."

Will's glare was insistent, but I had a feeling his anger wasn't directed towards me.

"Tell me in detail what happened the night you were picked up."

I winced involuntarily. "There are a lot of things I have blocked out about that time. I was high more than not, Will."

"Just tell me what you remember." He reached out and took my hand. "Every little detail that you can recall; we need to know why the fuck this girl wants you dead."

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SIXTEEN MONTHS EARLIER...

"Emma, that was a really bitchy thing to do," I couldn't believe that she had actually shown up to Mandy's television interview pretending to be her best friend.

Unease churned in my gut as I eyed Emma realizing that she was a whole lot more dangerous than I thought she was. It had been fun at first. Emma knew a lot of powerful men and always had us invited to the best parties.

Good parties meant free drugs, and because of that, I had turned my head away when Emma had done some shitty things. But attacking my best friend, that was going too far.

Emma's eyes glittered dangerously, "Be careful who you call a bitch, Shay."

I scoffed, "Are you threatening me now? Shit, Emma, what did Mandy ever do to you?"

Emma took a challenging step forward. "Are you going to sit there and pretend that you are innocent in all of this? I know you fucked that douchebag brother in law of hers. Maybe she would be interested in learning about what her precious best friend has been up to? Does she know about the drugs, Shay? Does she know you are nothing better than a worthless prostitute?"

I shoved past her and ran out of the apartment. It was hours later that Andrew picked me up on his bike and like the total slut that I was, I proceeded to get high and pass out in his apartment.

Things were tense between Emma and me for the next little bit. I was more than upset with how she had treated Mandy, but I didn't feel like standing up to her again. There was always something a little off with Emma, slightly unhinged.

When she came home several days later and announced that we needed to get dressed up, I flat out told her no. Her boy-toy Redmont was scary and I didn't like the guys that hung around him. Emma picked up the phone and threatened to call Mandy right then and there.

She was going to tell her about Andrew and me and I couldn't stand the thought of it. I was weak and once again bent to her rules.

We were leaving the theatre when I heard Mandy's voice and I called out her name. "Mandy don't ignore me! Please, I didn't know that Emma was going to do that. We are best friends! Don't throw that all away."

Her fiancé, Brand, looked like he wanted to rip my head off. I took an involuntary step back, but I couldn't turn away.

Mandy's face was full of fury and disdain. "Shay, this isn't about Emma. I already knew that she was a bitch, I told you that time and again. What I didn't realize was that you were just like her."

I felt like she had punched me in the gut. What did she know? How could I spin this to save what little threads of our friendship were remaining?

"You don't mean that." I spoke the words, but in truth, I was pleading with her to not give up on me.

And then the final nails in the coffin: "I don't?" Mandy's laugh held to trace of humor. "You slept with my brother in law multiple times, Shay. How fucking stupid do you think I am? Is that supposed to be okay? You knew that Kim wanted to have a baby and you were sleeping with her

husband. You knew that Emma was bad news, but you insisted on hanging out with her. Shit, I don't know who you are, but one thing is for certain, you aren't my best friend. Friends don't do that."

Tears flooded my eyes and I could see Emma smirking, clearly delighted in the scene before her. I straightened my back. I wouldn't let Emma or Mandy see how much this hurt me.

The vile words came hurtling out of my mouth before I could stop them., "Fuck you, Mandy! You think that he is going to want to stay with a white trash loser like yourself? Just remember, you burned this bridge, not me. So, when he dumps you on your poor ass, and he damn well will, don't come running to me; we are through."

I didn't mean it, couldn't mean it. I was angry and wanted to hurt her and yes, I was high.

Elliot took a menacing step toward me. "If you ever speak to my fiancé like that again, woman or not, there will be consequences."

It was all dissolving right before my eyes. I laughed bitterly. "You're going to marry her? How stupid are you?"

Mandy grabbed Elliot's arm and tried to walk away. It was just like her to try and turn the other cheek. Mandy wasn't a fighter. She was good and kind—nothing like me.

I lashed out a final time. "She's just a pregnant whore!"

I heard Mandy's sharply inhaled breath.

Elliot stopped in his tracks.

"I'm sorry." Anguish coated the barely heard words, but it was too late. Elliot pulled out his phone and dialed a number.

"Agent Collins? Yeah, Elliot Brand, that suspect we were speaking of earlier? We just ran into her at Rightway Cinema on fourth. I have a home address as well. Get a warrant, I think the place is hot."

Panic raced through my body and I scrambled back to Emma. "The police, they are heading to your apartment, they have a warrant."

Her boyfriend grabbed my arm so tightly that I knew there would be bruises.

"What have you done, you stupid fucking bitch? You will pay for this, mark my words."

Then he threw me down on the street.

Emma didn't look sorry or even concerned that her boyfriend was manhandling me.

"Just leave the bitch." Emma's voice was devoid of emotion.

I don't know how I made it to Andrew's apartment, but when I got there he was freaking out. His clothes and hands were covered in blood and he said he couldn't remember what happened. I helped him clean himself up and then we got high again.

The next thing I knew the SWAT team was breaking down the door to Andrew's apartment. We were hauled into jail and given rookie lawyers that were still wet behind the ears. I saw Emma once while I was in lockup. It was out of the corner of my eye and she didn't say anything.

When I pleaded guilty and told them everything I knew, the police informed me about Mandy's parents. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. Andrew was convicted of first-degree manslaughter and I was given a year for cooperating with the police. My testimony helped to convict Andrew.

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I COULDN'T SEE WILL anymore through the tears. "I'm just so fucking sorry."

And when he wrapped me in his arms, I melted into him and sobbed. Not only for the horrible things that I had done but because of the people that I had hurt. And now Will knows just how awful I really am.

Chapter 14

Shay

Step ten: *Continuing to take personal inventory and admitting when one was wrong.*

There were two slip ups when I was on the inside. Drugs are rampant in the system. And it isn't hard to get between the dirty guards and high rollers that walk around the place as if they own it instead of are being confined to it.

To combat what government officials, know is going on, or perhaps because of some well-intentioned do-gooder on the outside, the government does offer an addiction recovery program for convicts.

Honestly, I started going to the meetings to get out of free time in the yard. As strange as it sounds, I didn't think I deserved to go outside even in lockup. I wasn't through with punishing myself, although I didn't realize it at the time.

I wasn't eating well, and certainly wasn't taking care of myself. I had resigned myself to die because that is what I deserved—or so I thought. I remember walking into that first meeting and hearing some of the other inmates crying. It was strange to me, these emotions that they were feeling so deeply.

I couldn't remember the last time I had felt anything that deeply.

But then I remembered what I had done to Mandy. Sure, I felt bad about it. But there was still a layer of indifference that I just couldn't shake. I didn't see why these women were so tied up getting clean. Surely, we weren't addicts—or at least I wasn't.

I was a fun girl who got mixed up with the wrong group. I liked to party with the best of them, but I wasn't a fucking addict.

Addicts overdose with needles in their arms and choke to death on their own vomit because they are too strung out to know any better.

That wasn't me, it couldn't be me.

Week after week I went back to those meetings. And it was there that a miracle happened. That layer of indifference began to melt away. Feelings so raw and hurtful threatened to overpower me. I didn't want to go back anymore. It hurt too much. I needed to use, fuck, I had to get my hands on something.

It wasn't like I hadn't fallen before. Just one taste, one snort, one hit, and then I would never do it again.

Part of the program is taking personal inventory—taking responsibility for your actions, accepting who you are and identify the changes you want to make.

I had to take a hard look at who Shay Montgomery was. What were my strengths—my hopes, beliefs, dreams, personal strengths, self-awareness, self-acceptance, acts of love? Would I ever learn how to be the kind and generous person that I once was?

When you take a good look at yourself and have a hard time coming up with even one positive attribute it's more than eye-opening. It can be completely devastating. But for me, this was when I truly realized I had hit rock bottom. I could stay there and most likely throw my life away or I could try and climb my way out.

They teach you to pick one thing to focus on; for me it was self-awareness. Being aware of how my choices affected not only me but others—shit, it was enlightening. Shockingly enough, I made friends while I was in jail. There were other women like me that had fucked up their lives but wanted better.

I learned how to get outside of myself. There was one girl, in particular, that was in for stabbing her husband to death. He had been verbally abusive but never laid a hand on her. The court system had failed her in the respect that she had poor advice and state representation.

Every night she would cry her eyes out because her two babies were growing up without her. But they were also growing up knowing that their mother was a murderer. You can argue justification all you want, but she knew that there was a stigma there that would never go away.

Another woman was involved in an embezzlement case. Millions of dollars went into an offshore account and then the man who happened to be her partner skipped town and tipped off the police. Everything she had thought they had been working for was a lie. He was never caught, and she openly admits that she was 100% wrong, about everything.

The more I got to know these other people the more I started to see that we all fuck up. Some of us do a fantastic job of trying to ruin our lives, but I wasn't the only one. The spiral of self-pity and doubt had to end, and there wasn't anyone that could do it for me.

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I WOKE WITH A START and tried to stretch but there was an arm around me holding me tightly against a warm body.

Will.

We had talked late into the night about Mandy, my accident, the drug addiction, and even my time on the inside. It had been cathartic to get all of it out, but in the wee hours of the morning, I felt embarrassed about everything I had shared.

The arm tightened, and I felt a rush of warm air near my ear, "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours, Shay?"

My voice was scratchy and laced with sleep. "I was dreaming about friends of mine that are still in jail."

He leaned forward and kissed my neck. I tensed because this was more affectionate than he usually was. Granted in the dark with our bodies soft from sleep, everything seemed more intimate. But I hadn't had a sexual relationship with anyone since Andrew. And despite my exhaustion, I felt my body tightening in awareness and if I am honest trepidation.

He let out a soft sigh. "Is it because of our talk last night?"

I nodded and felt his whiskered jaw against the top of my head. "I 'm just so confused. I want to move forward with my life. But it seems like roadblocks are constantly being thrown in my path."

Will was quiet for a moment. "You said that you have been clean since that second slip up in jail?"

"Yes," I whispered, "it's been a little more than a year."

"Can you not see how far you have come?" he admonished gently.

I laughed but the sound was humorless. "In hiding from a hitman?"

Will turned me so that I was facing him. I could hardly make out his face in the shadows, the sun hadn't yet begun to climb into the sky. But I could see those intense eyes, both calming and arousing at the same time.

"You have been clean for a year; that is an incredible feat. Shay, you are constantly thinking about me, Gina, and Marco. From what you told me last night, you are completely different from your days as an addict."

I flinched at the word but didn't deny it. I was an addict, a recovering one.

Will continued, "But you still don't see yourself clearly. You are strong and beautiful, Shay; not only on the outside, which—fuck yeah, you are gorgeous. But on the inside as well. You know the mistakes you have made, and you are trying to fix them. Your heart is so big that sometimes I feel my own start to kick up a little, and I would have sworn on a stack of bibles that my heart was dead a long time ago."

I cupped his cheek. "Will, that's not true."

He scowled. “We aren’t talking about me. Shay, I just want you to know that no matter what has happened in the past, I still care about you. I want you to walk away from all of this with your head held high. Whatever hopes and dreams that you have for the future I want you to pursue them. I have every confidence in you, Shay.”

“What about you?” I whispered bravely. “What happens to you when this is all over?”

For the first time, he looked away from my face. His jaw tightened, and my hand slipped away from his cheek.

Will pulled me closer against his chest so that my face was buried in his massive pecs and I couldn’t see his expression anymore.

“I will disappear,” his tone was gruff, “and you will get your happily ever after just like you deserve.”

Emotion balled in the pit of my stomach. “I won’t ever see you again?”

I was afraid that he wasn’t going to answer me. Moments stretched in seconds and then a minute or two slipped by. I was resigned to the fact that he just wasn’t going to answer or perhaps he had fallen asleep.

But then I heard him, “It’s better this way, Shay. I’m no good for you—for anyone.”

His tone was hard and had a finality to it that I hadn’t heard before. I had a small glimpse of who Will really was when he was out on a job. I shivered, it wasn’t intentional, but he felt it all the same.

His lips came down and kissed the top of my head. “Get some rest, Sunshine; morning will be here soon enough.”

Will thought I had fallen asleep because a half hour later he carefully extracted himself from my arms and slipped from the bed. But not before placing another soft kiss on my temple.

It made me want to cry. Will was still protecting me, but this time it was from himself.

Chapter 15

Shay

I was shaken awake by a firm hand. “Shh, Shay, there is someone in the house. We need to leave immediately.”

I recognized the urgency in Marco’s voice.

“Where are Will and Gina?” I whispered, climbing out of bed, and yanking on some clothes. Then I slipped my feet into shoes without worrying about socks.

“They are taking care of things. We will see them in a minute.” Marco motioned for me to follow him and it was then that I heard voices coming up the stairs.

I barely had time to run into the ensuite bathroom, following Marco blindly as the voices came closer. I heard the muffled sound of a gun followed by cries of pain. Suddenly there were so many shots I couldn’t tell how many shooters there were, and which ones were ours.

Marco pushed a tile and a door swung open in the back of the shower. I followed him through, and he shut it just as the door to my room was smashed in.

My heart was in my throat. I was terrified that something bad was going to happen to Will and Gina. Marco had a hold of my wrist and he was pulling me so quickly that I had to run to keep up. We raced through the secret corridor down some stairs and ended up somewhere below the house. There were several cars in this secret basement. Marco lost no time shoving me into a Bugatti Chiron and getting behind the wheel.

Marco revved the engine and he peeled out of the parking space and down a long tunnel.

I could hardly catch my breath. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to the meeting place, Will and Gina should be minutes behind us.”

“Who broke into the house?” My voice cracked a little on the last word.

Marco glanced over at me briefly. “Are you doing okay, Shay?”

I nodded, which we both knew was a blatant lie.

“I don’t know who those men were. But I have a feeling this all goes back to Redmont.”

“Emma,” I breathed her name. “It all goes back to Emma. I wish that I would have listened to Mandy. She told me a hundred times Emma was bad news. I’m an idiot.”

Marco reached over and patted my knee. “We are all idiots at times.”

I turned to him. “Where is the meeting place?”

“Airport,” Marco said, his eyes back on the road. “We are leaving the country.”

“Where are we going?” I felt a little panicked. “I don’t think I’m allowed the leave the country.”

Marco laughed. “There is nothing legal about anything we are doing, Novia. Stop worrying. Will takes care of his own, and you, Shay, are most definitely his.”

I felt color suffuse my cheeks. But on its heels the disappointment that Will didn’t want me for his own. Okay, so didn’t want wasn’t the right terminology. He was determined to send me away when my safety was assured. I might mean something to him, but not enough to break whatever personal code or standard that would allow me to get close to him.

“Does Will date women or just fuck them?”

Marco choked on his own spit. “Shit, what?”

“You heard me, Marco, don’t make me say it again.” I knew asking would be shooting myself in the foot.

The last thing I wanted to know about was Will’s conquests. Or even worse, that he had a steady girlfriend and that I was barking up the wrong tree.

Besides, sleeping beside me, and that was only when I was distraught, Will had been the perfect gentleman.

A dark feeling hovered near my stomach. “What kind of woman is he attracted to?”

Marco choked again. “Are you trying to get me killed? Novia, these are not questions that I can answer, and you know that as well as I do.”

“Why?” I demanded, “Is the car bugged? Can he hear us talking?”

Marco mumbled something like, I wouldn’t put it past him.

“I’m scared,” I blurted out. “What if something happens to them back there and I didn’t make a move? What if the last time I saw him really was the last time?”

“No, Shay, you can’t think like that, not in this business. You have to assume that everything will go right, it has to go right. They are trained professionals, the best in the business.”

I blew out a breath. “What if Gina’s pregnancy slows her down?”

He gripped the steering wheel tighter. “That has been one constant in my mind ever since we left the house. I can’t worry about it. I was already upstairs when I got the message to get you out. I couldn’t have gone to trade places with her. I have to believe that Will can not only keep her safe but that they both will come out of it unscathed. There isn’t any other option that is acceptable.”

It dawned on me that Marco was just as terrified as I was. He was only better at hiding those emotions. We drove for a long time, passing the commercial airport and heading out to the country. It was another hour before Marco pulled off to a little side road that appeared to be going nowhere. We followed it for a mile or two when it turned into a dirt road.

Another three miles of dirt road and we approached a massive hangar.

“What in the hell?” I clutched Marco’s arm.

He gently extracted himself and then came around the Bugatti and opened my door.

“Come along, Shay. We need to get out of the open. This is all Will’s land, but I don’t trust anything right now.”

We raced to the hangar and Marco opened the door using his code and a retinal eye scan. It was very James Bond, and I would have appreciated it more had we not been running for our lives.

“What now?” I asked as we waited in the dark space.

“We wait,” he said curtly.

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me, and then we sat in silence for thirty-eight minutes. It was the longest thirty-eight minutes of my life. I imagined both Will and Gina shot and bleeding out at the house. We were wrong to have left them.

Each second that ticked by had me coming up with worse scenarios. They had been taken captive. I was sure of it.

There was a squeaking as the door opened. Marco tried to grab me, I assume just in case it wasn’t Will and Gina. But I was fast, and in seconds had launched myself into Will’s arms. He stumbled back, not expecting my enthusiastic greeting, but I wasn’t done.

I showered his face with kisses as tears of joy ran down my cheeks. I was muttering over and over, “I thought you were dead.”

Will wrapped his arms around me so that I didn’t fall and allowed me to touch every inch of his face and neck with my lips.

“Don’t ever do that again!” I cursed at him, “I have never been so scared.”

He quirked a brow. “Not even when you were kidnapped?”

I was completely exasperated by the thought. “That was nothing compared to this. I can’t even…”

I broke off because the lump in my throat was making it hard to speak. But I had to make him see how much this affected me. I cupped his whiskered cheeks with my hands and laid one passionate kiss on him.

It only took a second for Will to become a willing participant and then a moment more for him to take charge of the kiss.

Best fucking kiss of my life. Will was an expert at many things, but kissing had to be his specialty. Never had I felt such an intense surge of want and need roiling around my gut. I dug my fingers into his black curls and sucked on his tongue the way I wanted to suck his cock.

I was wild and uninhibited. It wasn’t until the catcalls broke through that I realized we had an audience.

Gina was grinning at me. “Girl, it’s not that I don’t like free, live porn. But we need to get your ass out of here.”

I looked over at Marco, who was busying looking everywhere but at Will and me. My eyes traveled back to Will’s.

“I’m not sorry.” My voice was rough and needy.

His arms tightened for the briefest of moments before he whispered, “I should be, but Lord knows I’m not.”

“Are we leaving town or what?” Gina broke the silence and I reluctantly unwrapped my legs from Will’s waist and slid down the front of him.

Chapter 16

Shay

Eight and a half hours later we climbed off of Will's private plane into a long black limousine in Rome. I had never been outside of the United States. So, despite the situation and my fears, I was amazed at everything around us. My eyes were glued to the windows as we passed gorgeous architecture that had stood for thousands of years. It was beyond incredible and I could hardly believe that we were really there.

Gina had fallen asleep against Marco's shoulder on the plane. The way he tenderly held her all of those hours and the tender way he brushed his fingertips across her slightly bulging stomach spoke volumes. I don't know what his hang up was, but Marco loved Gina. It was as clear as night and day.

Marco was an incredibly handsome man with a rocking body. But he seemed to not realize it. He had a birthmark that affected one of his cheeks, but it did little to take away from his allure.

Surely this wasn't why he pushed her away? It didn't make any sense. I knew it was none of my business, but I could see that he was hurting, and I knew that Gina loved him. I just couldn't see what the problem was.

The moment she woke, Marco turned on the polite disinterested face that he usually showed her. It pissed me the hell off for both of them. However, until I spoke with Will about it, I wasn't going to mess with it. I had learned enough about sticking my nose where it wasn't wanted.

And besides, in the short time that we had been together, these people had become dear to me, like family. I wasn't about to fuck that up.

"Do you think they followed us?" I turned to ask Will.

He raised a brow. "They will follow, I'm positive of that."

I felt a frisson of unease race down my back. "Why did we go somewhere they could just follow us?"

"My villa is not far from here, Shay. I have many men and women on staff there. Let them come. We have nothing to fear. If they are stupid enough to chase us here, they don't deserve to live."

"Why here?" I asked. I knew that he had gorgeous olive colored skin and silky black curls so common in the Italian culture. But this was the first time I had heard of him having connections here.

“Have you heard of the Sicilian Vespers?” Marco smirked but then quickly coughed and turned away when Will gave him a death glare.

I wasn’t up on Roman politics, but I knew that there were a handful of major families that controlled the mafia in Rome. I wasn’t sure if I should have been impressed or horrified as I turned to Will.

The look on his face was impassive but his eyes blazed.

“How did you end up in Tennessee?” I choked out.

“There was some heat in New York, and I was sent to my grandmother who was retired from the business. I was just a kid, being raised by my uncle in the city.”

Suddenly things started clicking into place. The ease with which Will had become a mercenary. He had grown up in this lifestyle, in a sense it was all he knew. The mafia had been around in Rome since 1200’s and I had a feeling that Will’s family had been in it from the beginning.

“You’re gonna let in flies, Novia,” Marco teased.

I snapped my jaw shut and flushed. I couldn’t believe I had been staring with my jaw on the proverbial floor of the limo.

“Do you work for the Mafia?” I croaked.

Will shot me a dangerous look. “I know nothing of what you are speaking about. I am a businessman, pure and simple. We will be going to my family’s villa in the country and I expect we will be welcomed with open arms.”

It was clear that Will had no desire to discuss his family. I knew the driver worked for Will, so it wasn’t like he was being careful because of who might be listening. It was more, he didn’t want me to know and that hurt.

It actually hurt a lot.

I turned back to the countryside, but it didn’t hold the same allure that it had moments earlier. All I could think about was that Will was involved in a Sicilian gang and that I was in way over my head. Who was the bad guy and who was the good guy? Can you have two bad guys? Is that a thing?

Nothing was black and white as it is in the movies. We drove for a few hours before we came to a heavily guarded gate. Once we were cleared, we began down the drive of the most gorgeous villa that I had ever seen. It made Will’s mansion look like an apartment. I could hardly see the entire building it was that massive.

The limo pulled up to the front steps and staff came out just as one would expect in a Victorian novel. The driver opened the door and we exited. When Will stepped out there was a cry from the top of the stairs before a large Italian man came rushing down the steps?

Rapid fire Italian was flying from his lips as he wrapped his arms around Will and kissed both cheeks with enthusiasm. What surprised me was the way that Will responded in the same language, speaking like a native. I hadn't a clue what they were saying but it seemed that it had been some time since the two men had seen each other.

Will glanced my way and this time he spoke in English. "Julio, this is Shay Montgomery. Shay, this is my cousin, Julio."

Julio was just as tall as Will, although a little softer, less muscular stature, and at least ten years older. When he spoke, his English had a crisp British accent and I was certain he knew how attractive it was.

"This beautiful flower is Shay? It cannot be. I have heard so many things about you, Cara. My cousin was quite taken with you in his younger days."

I flushed, and Will scowled at his cousin, who went ahead blithely as if he hadn't said anything to make us uncomfortable.

He turned to Gina. "The lovely Gina, you are positively glowing! I've never seen you as lovely."

It's not that Gina wasn't as gorgeous as he said. But we had all left the house in the middle of the night and then flown and driven for another half of a day. There wasn't a one among us that couldn't use a strong bath and a toothbrush.

I tried to suppress a smile and Marco outwardly growled at Julio's attention to Gina. I also noted that Gina looked pleased as well.

Julio turned to Marco. "It's a pleasure to have you back with us, Marco."

Marco looked like he wanted to throw it back in his face, but he bit his lip and replied respectfully, "Thank you, Julio."

Julio turned a teasing eye to me and winked. I couldn't help but like the man. He wasn't like anyone I had ever met before, but he was humorous, and he clearly adored Will.

It was the last point that weighed the heaviest with me.

"Have you any word?" Will asked as we entered the spacious home.

Servants were on hand to escort us to our separate chambers, but I wanted to know what Julio was going to tell Will.

He glanced at me. “Go along, Shay. I will come to you in a few moments.”

Reluctantly I followed a pretty little maid up the stairs and into a gorgeous guest suite. She ran a steaming bath with scented oils and the moment I sank into the water I found my muscles starting to relax.

The maid dropped off some clothing and said something in Italian that I didn’t understand. I nodded and said thank you before closing my eyes again and letting the heat from the water calm me.

It wasn’t until I noticed a pounding on the door that I realized I had fallen asleep.

The door swung open and standing there with a look of panic was Will. He took two steps into the bathroom and it dawned on him that I was lying there naked in the tub. The water had cooled, and my skin was covered in goosebumps. My nipples were hard and tight, and I had nothing but my hands to cover myself with as I cried out.

“What are you doing here?”

Will ran his hand down his face and looked anywhere but at me. “You weren’t answering when I called your name. I thought that something had happened to you, Shay. I was terrified that you were hurt or worse.”

I stood up and his gaze whipped back to my naked body. I had been cold before, but I was feeling the heat from his gaze. Will looked at me like he was a dying man and I was his last meal.

“You are fucking killing me, Shay,” he rasped and took a step forward.

I pointed to the towel that was sitting on the vanity. “Can you hand me my towel?”

He grabbed me out of the water and sank his lips hard on mine. Suddenly a towel was the last thing on my mind.

Chapter 17

Will

There are few things in this world I'm afraid of. I can handle snakes, spiders, wild animals, serial killers, and psychopaths—as long as they are directed at me. But I can't begin to explain the terror I felt when those fuckers broke into my home and almost got Shay.

It was the closest I have ever been to completely losing my mind, and I never wanted to be there again. This is the first time I have ever involved my family in a problem of mine. In those short moments when I wasn't certain that we would be able to get her out, I knew then and there I would move heaven and earth to keep her safe.

My family can be—intense. One doesn't grow up in a life like ours without knowing the dangers we face every day. But there is one thing above all else, family.

The moment that Julio and I were alone he grinned at me, "So, this is the one?"

I didn't try and pretend that I didn't know what he was talking about. It was about time that I fessed up to my feelings for the woman. She was more than just an old friend, more than a job.

I love Shay Montgomery. She is mine.

A curt nod was all that he needed from me. Expressing my feelings had never been a strong point for me. Julio was aware that by my asking for his support I was in something deep. We spoke for some time about Redmont and possibilities on how to take him out.

It's kill or be killed in our business. I wouldn't have involved Shay no matter how long I harbored this secret devotion to her. However, now that she has a target on her back and I've gotten to know her again, I can't seem to let her go.

Call me selfish, call me idiotic, it wouldn't be any worse than what I have been saying to myself.

As soon as I could get away from Julio, I raced up the stairs toward Shay's room. My blood was still hot from that kiss earlier. I knocked but there wasn't an answer. I knew there was a possibility that she was sleeping. But after our scare earlier that day I couldn't go to my own room without seeing her.

I pounded this time, loud and clear, calling out her name.

No answer.

I tried to knob and felt my heart sink all the way through the floor when I opened the door and saw her bed was empty. How could they have gotten her?

What had they done with her?

I raced across the room and at the last minute grabbed the bathroom door, praying she would be inside of it.

My blood froze in my veins and then whooshed through my heart at a rate so rapid that I almost saw stars.

There in the bath was an incredible sight. Shay, naked, with her nipples tight and goosebumps covering her flesh. I said something to her, but I hardly knew what was coming out of my mouth.

Naked Shay was better than any wet dream. Her eyes on me, she stood, water sluicing down her perfect body in rivulets. Her long legs and curved hips drew me forward. I have never seen such perfect tits in my life. I knew she would be beautiful, but this, no one could have prepared me for this.

She asked me for something, her voice sounded hoarse and raspy. My control snapped, I had her wet body in my arms and my lips plastered to her sexy mouth. We could talk later; this was long overdue.

I carried her from the bathroom to the large bed and continued to kiss her. My tongue stroking her, coaxing Shay to open up a little further until she submitted and allowed me entrance.

I kissed her like I wanted to fuck her, long deep strokes, claiming her mouth. My lips could hardly get enough of this woman. I kissed her jaw, her neck, nipped at her earlobe and sucked at the base of her throat. She was perfection in my arms.

Shay moaned and slipped her hands underneath my shirt. She wanted it off and I was more than happy to go along with it. I yanked it over my head and reveled in the way her fingers danced across my skin.

My mouth traveled down to her perfect tits, needing to taste them, to know the feel of their satin inside of my mouth. The moment I sucked one bud into my mouth her hands sank into my hair and she smashed my face against her breasts.

I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. There was something so completely uninhibited about Shay. No artifice when we were together like this, and I loved it. Taking time to savor both breasts until she was panting and writhing beneath me. I kissed a trail down her flat abdomen and parted her creamy thighs.

"Shit, you are soaked, Baby."

I could smell her sweet honey that was coating her pussy and thighs. With the tip of my fingers, I ran it through her wet heat, loving the way her eyes were glued to my hand. I had to taste her. Using my thumbs, I opened her further and took in the sheer beauty of her pretty pink pussy.

"Gorgeous," I breathed, blowing against her fevered skin.

"Will," she gasped, her eyes wild, "please, I need you."

"I know, Baby, I will take care of you."

I flicked my tongue against her clit before licking her from end to end. She tasted musky and sweet and so fucking amazing that I knew I would be dreaming about it for the rest of my life.

Suddenly I had to have more of her. I kissed her deeply, thrusting my tongue inside of her heat, savoring her juices, and loving each new sound that was torn from her throat.

Her hands were back in my hair, yanking and pulling as she climbed higher and higher. I couldn't get enough of her. My mouth went back to her clit and sucked, loving how wildly she arched her back.

She was crying out my name, her hips thrusting against my face. My cock had never been harder, painfully pressing against the front of my jeans. I felt like I was on the edge with her and I hadn't even got my pants off yet.

"Will, I'm almost there," her plaintive cry spurred me on, and I sucked hard, slipping two fingers inside of her weeping pussy.

With a scream, she shattered around me, coming all over my face. I have never in my life seen anything so erotic as Shay finding her pleasure from my tongue. I stood, yanking my jeans and underwear off.

I snagged a condom and pinching the tip, rolled it on my cock. Stroking it I looked down at her. Shay's legs were splayed wide and her pussy was a bright pink from her orgasm. I knew that I could get myself off just looking at her. But that wasn't good enough, I had to be inside of her.

"Are you sure?" I ground out, praying that she was.

Shay smiled at me, it was shy, and I felt my heart flip in my chest.

"Never been surer in my life."

It was all it took for me, and I was back on her. My cock rubbing against her heated flesh as I devoured her mouth once again. I knew that she could taste herself on my tongue and that only fueled the beast inside of me.

"More," she demanded, and I slid into her balls deep, not waiting for her to ask again.

She cried out and I groaned low in my throat, “So fucking tight, shit, I’m going to lose it.”

Shay’s nails dug into my ass, “So good!”

I rammed into her, pulling out and going deep. I knew that I wouldn’t last long. I had been dreaming about this moment since high school. But I would be damned if I would come without her.

Leaning down I kissed her as my cock plowed into her over and over again. Wild thrusts that weren’t anything like how I usually conducted myself. Something about this woman brought out the beast in me and I couldn’t control my need to take and dominate.

I felt the familiar tightening at the base of my spine and knew that it was now or never.

Grabbing her ass and tipping her hips, I thrust harder, making sure to ram her g-spot over and over again. She came with a shrill cry, her body convulsing, squeezing me so hard that I could see black around the edges of my vision.

I released my seed, coming hard and fast as her body milked every last drop of cum from me.

We were both drenched in sweat, panting, and maybe an inch apart.

And then she cupped my face and said the words that I never expected anyone to ever say to a man like me.

“I love you.”

Chapter 18

Shay

It wasn't that I was expecting him to say it back to me. I mean, that would have been bloody brilliant and not nearly as uncomfortable as the complete silence that accompanied my declaration.

I almost wanted to take it back, not that I didn't love him, because I did. I was head over heels, tits over ass in love with Will Jennings. But maybe just minutes after sex with his cock still softening inside of me wasn't the best time to tell him.

I closed my eyes as the silence stretched, not wanting him to see the hurt that was gathering.

"Shay," even his whisper felt like a caress against my skin.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't hear him tell me, thank you, or that he was honored. I felt horribly young and dreadfully embarrassed. Why couldn't I just learn to keep my mouth shut?

To make matters worse, I had all but seduced him when he walked in on me in the bath. Was this all just a quick fuck to him?

Will had been clear from the beginning, after this was over, we were to go our separate ways. I felt the swirling of emotions overtake my stomach and splinter out across my entire body.

"I need to use the bathroom," I shoved at his chest hard.

"Shay," again with my name, I just wished he would get off of me. "Shay, we need to talk."

"I need to pee, please move."

Reluctantly Will moved off of me and I all but sprinted to the bathroom and locked the door. Not even pretending to use the bathroom I went over to the shower and turned it on. Having the water hide the sounds of my heartache that was even now slipping down my face.

I didn't deserve a happily ever after. People like me, karma has special plans for us, and it doesn't involve white picket fences and little girls with inky black curls. Stepping under the hot water I closed my eyes and tried to let it all wash away.

There had been a time when I would have been desperate for a hit. Especially in moments like this when I felt like a was breaking into pieces. The need was still there, but it wasn't nearly as powerful as it had been.

I suppose that was one consolation to all of this. I was truly working on my recovery. That was something that they taught us in those classes. That we would always have to work at recovering from our addictions. There wasn't a magical moment when one was suddenly cured.

I hadn't wanted to believe that. It seemed too much work for a rather dubious result. But standing on the other side of this journey, I can now see how far I have really come. And that I wouldn't trade for the world.

I finally have me back. The broken, used up, and apparently unloved version of myself. But it was still mine, and I wanted this life. I heard knocking on the bathroom door and Will calling my name.

But I shouted to him that I was feeling sick, which was truly my heart shattering, and that I would talk to him later.

When the water finally ran cold, I got out of the shower and climbed into the empty bed. All of the events that had led up to this night finally caught up with me and I fell into a deep sleep.

***

THE NEXT MORNING, I wasn't sure what to wear. I certainly didn't feel like putting on my pajamas that we had escaped in. But I needn't have worried because Gina came bounding in with an arm full of the latest Italian fashion.

"Can you believe how amazing this place is? We hardly ever come here, you know. So, Julio had one of his servants pick up a few things for each of us. And he is terribly handsome don't you think? For an older gentleman?"

I blinked in confusion, "What?"

Gina's eyes sparkled. "And did you see Marco's face when Julio was flirting with me? I could have kissed the man right then and there!"

I stood and took the things out of her hands. "Girl, you need to talk to him. Tell him how you feel, about the baby, you don't want your child to grow up without a father."

Gina's face dimmed. "He doesn't care, Shay."

"I think you are wrong," I said softly.

Dressing in a pair of leggings and a soft tunic, I braided my hair and we went down to breakfast. Will wasn't in the opulent dining room. However, Julio and Marco were having a hushed conversation that broke off the moment we arrived.

Gina narrowed her eyes. "Are you hiding something from us?"

Julio's face broke into a seductive smile. "I make it a point to share all of my secrets with beautiful women."

A gurgle of laughter escaped my lips as I watched Marco's expression turn thunderous. Then I caught Julio's eye and he winked at me.

So, he knew full well the mischief that he was making. I had to admit that Julio went up a few notches in my eyes.

I didn't want to ask, but I had to know, "Where is Will?"

"He had some business that needed immediate attention," Julio supplied smoothly. "But don't worry about that. Come and sit with us, my chef is Parisian and of the highest caliber."

He didn't have to ask me twice. I sank down in the chair offered and watched as Gina did the same on the other side of Julio. I glanced up at Marco and saw his jaw clench as Julio said something that caused Gina to laugh.

I couldn't help but raise a brow. He caught my eye and a pink flush stained his cheeks. It was crazy to me that these two individuals that clearly cared for one another couldn't work out whatever was between them.

We had a delightful breakfast and then afterward Julio offered to take me on a tour of the villa while Gina and Marco worked on something Will had left them. I graciously accepted and listened as he showed me priceless artifacts and expensive paintings. It was lovely, every inch of it, and I found myself enjoying Julio's company.

Out in the courtyard I turned to him impulsively. "Are you an individual that abhors meddling in other's affairs?"

Julio grinned. "I'm an individual that delights in meddling where I do not belong."

My smile matched his. "Perfect. I'm thinking that there has to be a way we can get those two together to work out their problems."

Julio scratched his whiskered chin. "Of course, it can be done, but we must be careful that they do not suspect."

I shrugged, taking his arm, and we walked through the immaculate gardens. "I don't mind if they blame us so long as they have enough time to work things out. It is obvious that they love each other."

Julio smiled kindly. "You have a good heart, Shay from America."

My heart thudded. "No, I am not a good person, Julio."

"Because of your addiction or time spent behind bars?"

I was shocked that he knew these things about me and stumbled a bit on the path. "Excuse me?"

"Bella, many people would say that I am a terrible man, and I suppose in some respects I am. Do you think I would allow my cousin to become close to a woman that I hadn't thoroughly checked out? We take our safety very seriously."

It was impressed on me immediately that this was an extremely dangerous man.

He tightened his grip, but his eyes were kind. "Do not be afraid of me. I will not harm you. Will cares very deeply about you to bring you here. We will keep you safe and get to the bottom of this mess."

Will did care about me, I knew that. In fact, I had always known that Will cared for me.

But he didn't love me, and I wasn't sure that caring would be enough.

"Never mind about that," I said, clearing my throat of the unexpected emotion. "Let's plan what we will do with Gina and Marco."

He looked like he wanted to press me further, but instead allowed the conversation to flow into a diabolical plan that would most likely piss off the only two friends I had in this world.

Chapter 19

Shay

"Are you sure they are coming?" Julio whispered as we hid behind the tapestries just outside of the library.

I snorted, albeit very softly. "They won't ignore my cry for help, and I texted both of them that I had fallen."

Sure enough, there was the sound of pounding feet coming their way. Julio placed a finger to his lips, and I nodded. It was doubtful that they would see us here simply because their focus would be on getting inside the library.

But talking drapes did tend to make one veer off course.

"Shay?" Marco called out in his strong voice just as he entered the library, "Shay, where are you?"

Gina raced in next, hot on his heels. We had seconds before they realized I wasn't in there. Julio and I burst out of the curtains and raced for the door. I caught sight of Gina's confused face just as we slammed it shut and he locked it from the outside.

There was cursing inside the library followed by gunshots. Julio rolled his eyes and pushed me behind him.

"You will not be allowed out until you work out whatever nonsense is between you."

Marco's voice was angry. "We are supposed to be guarding Shay."

Julio didn't seem disturbed in the slightest. "Are you implying that I cannot protect her?"

There was silence on the other side of the door, and I was reminded once again about how dangerous a man this really was.

"Come on, Shay," this time it was Gina, "Let us out."

"I can't do that," I called out to her. "Marco needs to know the truth."

There was an angry hiss and Marco barked out, "What truth?"

Julio raised his eyebrows. "Would you like a drink, perhaps wine from our vineyard?"

"You had better open this fucking door, Shay!" That was Gina, and my cue to take up Julio's outstretched elbow.

“What if they kill each other?” I asked hesitantly.

Julio smiled. “Then we won’t have their grumpy asses bringing down our day.”

I wasn’t sure if this was a good thing or not.

** Inside the Library **

“What was she talking about, Gina?” Marco’s jaw was clenched, making his birthmark stand out a little more against his white face.

Gina felt sick inside. She knew the day would come that she had to tell him the truth. But it came too quickly; she wasn’t ready yet. She didn’t want him to know how much his constant rejection had nearly destroyed her.

Gina glanced around for a place to sit and went over to the small settee near the window.

“Do you suppose we could get out this way?” she asked Marco hopefully.

He scowled. “You are pregnant, and this is a second story room. Not only that but do you honestly believe that the head of organized crime in Rome leaves his windows unlocked?

She blushed. “You’re right, that was stupid.”

Marco frowned. “No, you aren’t stupid, I’m just being a dick. Sit down and let’s just wait this out. If worst came to worst, we could wait until Will comes back.”

Gina nodded, rubbing her arms.

“Are you cold?” he asked, immediately taking off his jacket.

Gina hated when Marco did things like that. When he acted like he cared. Because in the next moment he would be pushing her away and breaking her heart just like he always did.

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine.”

He wrapped his jacket around her anyway and Gina scowled at him. “Stop being nice.”

Marco's lips tilted up. “You have always had a nasty temper.”

“Let’s just not talk to each other.” She turned her head and rested it against the wall, closing her eyes.

“I didn’t mean what I said that day.” His low words had her eyes popping open.

“What day? What are you talking about?” Gina demanded.

Marco ran a hand over his face. “I was just surprised that you were pregnant and hurt that you hadn’t told me. I shouldn’t have talked to you that way.”

Gina felt her hands begin to shake and she clenched them so that he wouldn’t see.

“Are you referring to when you asked if the baby was even yours?”

Marco nodded.

Gina’s eyes filled with tears and she cursed her stupid pregnancy hormones.

“I get it, Marco. You don’t want to be with me. I don’t know why it has taken me all of these years, but I finally get it. Trust me, I won’t be bothering you any longer.”

His gaze snapped to hers. “What are you talking about?”

She laughed but there was only harshness in the tone. “You obviously are okay with fucking me. I never even wanted to go into this line of work. Did you know that? I just wanted to be close to you. Ever since we were young, I wanted to mean something to you, anything more than just friends with benefits. I am a slow learner, but I have finally caught on.”

“That is bull shit, Gina, and you know it!”

His angry tone had her temper soaring.

“Fucking hell, are you now telling me how I can feel?” She was incredulous.

He shook his head. “No, that isn’t what I meant. I heard you, Gina, when we were kids. I heard you say something about my birthmark and how you could never love someone like that.”

Instead of a guilty look on her face, she laughed. “I don’t know what you think you heard or who, but I have never once stopped loving you. Don’t you get it? I have been in love with you since we were kids! Sure, people used to say crap to me, but it was mostly girls that were jealous and wanted you for themselves.”

He scoffed, and Gina took his jacket off and threw it at him. “Don’t believe me? I don’t care. It’s the truth. You can’t take snippets of conversations, Marco, and decide our entire future from them. I can’t keep doing this. It’s killing me.”

Marco could feel the terror enter his blood. Had he ruined everything?

“Gina, I don’t know what to believe.”

Tears started to spill down her cheeks. “It doesn’t matter. It’s too late, don’t you see? We had our chance. Look, don’t be afraid that I will cut you out of the baby’s life because I won’t. I was mad before, but you and I both know the baby is yours.”

All the fear of rejection and stupid prejudice that he had harbored all of these years fell away and, in its place, Marco saw what he had right in front of his face. What kind of fucking idiot pushed the woman he loved away?

“Gina, I am so sorry. I messed up.”

She looked away, her eyes glistening with more tears. “I don’t want you to be sorry, Marco. I just want to be finished with this. All we do is hurt each other over and over again. That isn't loving.”

Marco could feel her pulling away from him, “No, Gina, you were right. I was just afraid. I do love you. I’ve always loved you.”

The look on her face was heartbreaking. “I know you do, Marco. But it isn’t enough.”

“What does that mean?” His skin felt heated and his heart had sunk to his toes. “It isn’t too late. It's never too late.”

Gina shook her head, lips trembling. “I can’t do it anymore.”

“Let me prove it to you,” Marco pleaded, “Let me show you that I can change. I know I am a fuck up and don’t deserve you. I didn’t think anyone could love me with this birthmark on my face. I was wrong, I was so fucking wrong.”

Gina’s shaking fingers covered her mouth and she looked so young and afraid. Marco had never even considered that he could lose her.

“Please,” his voice was thick with emotion, “One more chance.”

She met his eyes and held his gaze. For a long moment, she held his dark eyes. And just when he feared that all was lost, she gave a short nod.

“One chance, but only until this mess with Shay is over.”

Marco flew out of his seat and wrapped his arms around her. But Gina didn’t melt against him like she had in the past. She was going to make him earn it.

Chapter 20

Will

"I need to speak with Elliot Brand."

There was a pause on the other end of the line before the secretary inquired, "And may I ask to which this is concerning?"

I sighed, not having time for this shit. "The safety of his wife and child; this is Will Jennings. He will take the call."

The woman put me on hold, and I ground my teeth until the phone was picked up.

"You have some fucking nerve, Jennings to call here."

I knew that Brand would be pissed, but there wasn't any other choice.

"Look, I'm not threatening your family. But I do know of a threat that is out there. And I know that someone I care about would never forgive me if I didn't tell you."

Brand was seething on the other end of the line. "Go ahead."

"Do you remember a woman named Emma Graves?"

Brand blew out a breath. "Vividly."

I was thankful that he didn't hang up yet, but I could tell that I hadn't earned his trust. "Look, Emma has a vendetta out for Shay."

He interrupted, "We are no longer involved in Shay Montgomery's life."

I wanted to pound my fist into his face. "Just wait a fucking moment. This Emma chick has it out for Shay. But what makes this dicey is that she has involved her boyfriend, Redmont."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Brand, I have intelligence that they might be coming after your wife. Emma knows how much Mandy means to Shay. I know that you both hate her. And frankly, yeah, she did some bad shit. But the woman has been through hell and back. Even still she is desperate to protect Mandy; if she knew about this threat, she would never have left the country."

"Where are you?" Brand barked out. "You can't just tell me my family is in danger and then disappear. Why should I trust you?"

I laughed, "You shouldn't. That would be a huge mistake. But I am not lying to you. I care enough about her to try and protect you. If you and your wife are willing there will be a jet at the airport leaving at 9:00 pm tonight. It will bring you to a safe location. If you don't I know that I tried."

Brand scoffed, "Shay fucked Mandy's brother. She said horrible things to Mandy, why would she try and protect her?"

"I guess you have to ask yourself that. I'm not asking either of you to forgive Shay. But a part of me can't help but wonder what kind of person harbors a grudge against a woman that has paid her debt to society. Life in prison isn't easy, Brand. Neither is getting off of drugs or dealing with your demons, but that is what she has been doing. And now she's running for her life. Look, I don't care if you board the plane or not. But for her, I had to do something."

I slammed the phone down before I could say anything else. My heart was already hanging on my fucking sleeve and I didn't need my guys to comment on it.

Marco was silent beside me. When I got back to the villa, I only had a few moments to eat dinner and kiss Shay before we left again. Things were looking like Redmont was going to attack in two areas. He wanted to split our reserves between the city and Italy.

I was one hundred percent serious with Brand, I wouldn't send anyone to save him or his family. The jet is the only offering that I can make. I have full forces allocated here along with my cousin's men we should be impenetrable.

"Do you think he will come?" Marco's question brought me out of my revelry.

"I have no idea," I started the car and headed back toward the estate. The rolling countryside so different from the city.

"Your cousin is a fucking prick," Marco rubbed the back of his neck and I smiled looking over at him.

"What has Julio done now?"

Marco closed his eyes. "It's my baby."

I laughed. "No shit!"

He scowled, "I know, I'm a gigantic idiot."

I couldn't help but commiserate with the man. I too loved somewhere that promised a grisly end.

"How does Julio play into that?" I asked.

"Shay and Julio locked Gina and me in the library."

I bit back another laugh. “How did that go?”

He shrugged, “She said she loved me and always had.”

“It doesn’t sound bad so far,” I said encouragingly.

“She said it was too late.”

The words were ripped from his throat and I could feel the heartache radiating from him.

My jaw clenched. “It’s never too late unless you give up.”

He nodded.

We were silent the rest of the way back, it was early morning before the sun had begun to rise. I couldn’t remember a time when I was more tired than at that moment. I went to my room and smiled when I saw Shay sprawled across the sheets.

Her little pajamas were snug and mouthwatering as I just sat for a moment and stared at her. It pissed me the fuck off that Brand and his wife still carried a grudge. Couldn’t they find an ounce of kindness in their hearts to let it go? It wasn’t like she wanted to be part of their lives. Shay just wanted their forgiveness and no matter what they may have said it was clear she didn’t have it.

Shay stirred on the bed. “Will?”

I removed my clothing down to my boxer briefs and approached. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Her eyes were tired as she gave me a faint smile. “You didn’t. I was waiting up.”

I couldn’t help the warmth that washed over me. When was the last time someone had waited up for me? Had given a damn if I even came home at night? The tightening in my chest became almost unbearable.

I leaned down and kissed her sweet mouth. “You need your rest.”

Shay pulled me into the bed and cuddled up into my arms, her body the perfect fit against mine. I wondered how I would ever go to sleep with her amazing body surrounding me.

She began to trace lines on my chest, and I was done for. My lips found hers in an almost frenzied movement. I couldn’t help the terror that raced through my veins. This woman was starting to mean more to me than the air I breathed.

I fucking hated that someone was trying to hurt her, no, kill her. I yanked at her clothes until they flew to the floor and in seconds, I had one of her perfect tits in my mouth. Sucking and pulling I lapped at the nipple until it was rock hard and then moved on to do the same to the other one.

Her legs parted open and my length nestled against her heated flesh. It felt too incredible that I had to catch my breath. I didn't want to hurt her, but everything inside of me was screaming to conquer, make her mine. I wanted to mark Shay so that she was mine and everyone would know it. It was animalistic, but I didn't care.

"Please," she pleaded, and I drove to the hilt.

Her nails scaled my arms as I pounded into her again and again. Her body's juices making a sound with every pass. She was so wet, so needy, and I knew that she felt the urgency just as badly as I did.

Our fucking was frantic like we were holding on tightly despite the knowledge that unseen forces were trying to pull us apart.

My cock felt deeper than it ever had, it was wetter, tighter. I couldn't explain how incredible it was with Shay.

She screamed as the pleasure hit and the intense gripping of her walls sent me hurtling into my own release. I panted and thrust through every last spurt until she had milked me dry.

"Will?" her voice was panicked, not what I was expecting after such mind-blowing sex.

"What is it?" I was still buried inside of her, the moment intensely intimate.

"We forgot a condom."

Chapter 21

Shay

“For heaven’s sake would you please just sit down?” Gina scowled at me. “I am supposed to be mad at you and I can’t even do that properly with you freaking out.”

“You don’t understand,” I was wringing my hands, wearing out a hole in the carpet. “She hates me, Gina, they both hate my guts and now because of me they are forced to come here.”

Gina raised a brow, “Unless you are God and can control what that bitch Emma does, it is not your fault.”

“I introduced them, Gina!” I insisted.

She scoffed, “Brand is one the wealthiest companies in New York besides maybe Sutton Enterprises. Do you honestly think that he hasn’t made enemies of his own? Look, I get that you are crawling with guilt. But isn’t it part of your recovery to let it go?”

I looked up at her with a hollow expression and she jumped to her feet.

“Shay don’t listen to me. I’m a pregnant bitch with too many hormones. I shouldn’t have been so callous about your program.”

I shook my head, trying to reason out what she had said to me.

“Please don’t be mad at me!”

I took her hand in mine and answered her, “I’m not Gina. You are right.”

She blinked, “I am?”

“The eleventh step is seeking the help of a higher power, essentially putting it in God's hands. And then the last step is to help others who are in need. I was stuck on admitting I was wrong. And yeah, I did a lot wrong. But I hadn’t turned it over to God because I felt like I didn’t suffer enough for it.”

Her gaze softened, “Oh Shay, I don’t know much about turning things to your God or whatever you believe in. But I know it’s time for you to let that shit go. Send it out into the universe, girl, you are only hurting yourself.”

I felt a lump in my throat, “You are right. I need to let it go. I’m just not sure how to do that.”

There was a short knock on the door and then Marco entered. Gina tensed but didn't move from my side.

"Well?" she demanded shortly.

"The Brands' plane has arrived in Rome; they are en route to the villa as we speak."

I felt dread in the pit of my stomach.

Gina turned to me. "Do you want to go swimming?"

"Swimming?" I looked at her blankly.

How could she think about swimming at a time like this?

"Yeah," she smiled, "You need to take your mind off things, and we are in one of the most beautiful places in the world. Let's go swimming."

Julio looked up from where he was reading. "That is a wonderful I idea, I think I will join you."

Marco's jaw clenched. "I will as well."

We all turned to him, knowing that Gina was assigned to me today.

He cleared his throat. "For extra protection."

Julio didn't bother to smother his broad smile. "But of course, Marco. We would love your—protection."

Marco turned on his heel and left before Gina and I could dissolve into laughter. The thought of the Don needing extra protection was clearly asinine. But it was so sweet that he was jealous of Julio.

"You are mean to tease him," I smiled at Julio.

He shrugged. "A man worth anything will rise to the occasion when tested. If not, he isn't good enough for you, Gina."

I looked over at Gina whose cheeks had taken a pink hue.

In confusion, she grabbed my hand. "Let's go get changed."

We were just outside her room when I pushed inside after her and pounced. "Do you have feelings for Julio?"

She shook her head. "Lord, no! It just caught me off guard for a moment. He has been charming since you arrived, Shay, no doubt to lull us into a state of relaxation. He wants you to like him because he knows how important you are to his cousin. But don't ever forget who he truly is."

A killer, that is what she was implying, and Gina was right.

She placed a hand on my arm. "We are all not what we seem."

"I know that you want me to think badly of you Gina, but I won't. Whatever your work has been, I know who you are inside. I have known plenty of others that pretend to be good and are rotten to the core. At least, you are honest about what you do."

She bit her lip. "I have to get out. I can't raise a baby this way."

I nodded. "Will has said that he would let you out?"

"Yeah," she gulped, "This is our last mission."

That word caught my attention—*our*.

It stayed with me as we played in the warm Italian sun. I felt my skin darkening and of course, gained a few freckles along the way. We received word that Mandy, Elliot and their child had arrived and were resting in their rooms.

Despite the fact that I wanted to freak out, I stayed and swam until my body was good and tired. We went into shower and change for dinner. I steeled myself with the knowledge that Mandy might refuse to even eat in the same room as I did.

After slipping into a summer dress I was just adding lip-gloss when I heard a knock on my bedroom door.

"It's open, Gina," I called out, thankful that she hadn't left me to enter the dining room by myself.

"It's not Gina."

My head snapped up at the sound of Mandy's voice. I couldn't form words, so I just stared at her. The marriage had been wonderful to my friend despite the current drama we were in. She had put on a few pounds with the pregnancy and didn't look so terribly thin. Her long blond hair was in a loose braid over her shoulders. Those honest blue eyes were staring right back at me.

"May I come in?" she asked.

I nodded, "Of course, please do."

"I pictured this in my head a thousand times." Her voice was tense. "I had a million things I wanted to say to you, scream at you if we are being honest. I have spent the past year being so angry with you that I didn't stop to think about anything else, anyone else."

"I'm so sorry," I blurted out, my eyes shiny with unshed tears.

Mandy nodded. "I know you are."

“But you still hate me?” I couldn’t help the question of escaping.

She slowly shook her head. “I don’t hate you, Shay. I did. But when Mr. Jennings called and spoke with Elliot, he said something that I just couldn’t shake.”

“Will called Elliot?” I repeated stupidly.

Mandy nodded. “He told him about the danger that we were in and who was behind it. I knew that Emma was trouble, but I had no idea to what degree.”

I gulped. “What did Will say?”

“Something about, what kind of person won’t forgive someone who has paid their debt and is trying to make things right. I don’t know the precise words. I am just paraphrasing. But Elliot said that Jennings didn’t want to offer the plane to bring us here. It was only because of you; how much he loves you, that he called.”

Another tear escaped. “He doesn’t love me, not like that.”

Mandy shook her head. “You’re wrong about that. He might not have said it to you, but only a man in love would do what he did. And I know it is because you wanted us to be safe. How can I hate you, Shay? When you are trying to save our lives?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Mandy nodded shakily, “I know. I can’t say that we will ever be close again, there is too much water under the bridge.”

A sob escaped my throat. “I understand.”

She sighed and looked me straight in the face. “But I do forgive you.”

Chapter 22

Shay

We fell into a certain pattern at the Villa, I was able to spend time with Mandy and her daughter and slowly she began to thaw towards me. It was never the close relationship that we had once shared, but I could tell that she didn't hate me and that meant the world to me.

Will was often gone in the daytime and then when he returned, we would make passionate love all night. I loved him more than the air I breathed. I would often tell him so and every time he didn't return the statement a little bit of me died inside.

Julio split his time between working with Will and entertaining us. Elliot was often working remotely in an office that Julio had provided so there was plenty of time to spend with Mandy, Gina and when he wasn't out with Will, Marco.

The relationship between Marco and Gina had also started to change. I saw a softer note in her eyes when she spoke to him and I know that she caught him staring more than once. He was thoughtful, bringing her a drink or offering to prop her feet up.

Mandy and Gina talked babies and pregnancy while I listened in with rapt attention. It had been several weeks since they had come, and I had a secret of my own.

I wasn't sure how Will would take knowing that we were going to be parents. A part of me wondered what the right thing to do would be.

I finally decided that I didn't want to be chosen for our baby. When all of this was said and done, if he didn't want me, I wasn't going to tell him until the baby came. I would never keep him out of his child's life. But I wasn't about to hang onto something that wasn't there.

Life was soft and gentle at the villa. Occasionally I could see guards with their black suits and handguns, but this was the only reminder that we weren't living an idealistic life but were in fact hiding.

Maybe that was why I never even considered the possibility of the villa being breached. It was a night when Will was working late and when I first heard movement in the room. I mumbled something to him about locking the door.

When he didn't respond I turned over and saw three men with guns pointed at my head. I am not stupid enough to think that if I left with them, I would be okay. But this villa was stocked full of some of the most important people in the world to me. If I raised the alarm, they would all be in danger.

"Get up, Bitch, we are leaving."

I slowly pushed the covers back, but apparently wasn't fast enough for the masked man because he grabbed me by the hair and threw me to the floor.

"It's been a long time coming; the boss is going to be really happy when I bring you back."

Something was tied around my eyes and a gag was shoved into my mouth. The next thing I knew blackness surrounded me. I didn't have time to worry about if they had already gotten to Will. I wasn't able to sound any kind of alarm. I was nothing.

***

I COULD HEAR RUNNING water in the background as I struggled to find consciousness. It wasn't until a huge bucket of ice-cold water was thrown on my body that I snapped awake. My head was pounding, and my hands and feet were tied to a chair.

I appeared to be in a warehouse of some kind. Looking at the writing on the boxes I would say we were still in Italy. There in front of me, looking far too sexy, was my old pal, Emma.

She smirked. "Good to see you, Shay."

I tried to respond, but I was still gagged.

"You are one slippery bitch, you know that?" she continued on. "How you managed to find protection with Will Jennings I won't ever understand. But even the great Jennings isn't any match for Redmont."

A tall man with pock-like scars on his handsome face appeared. "This is her?"

Emma nodded.

He stalked up to me and yanked the gag off, scraping my cheek.

I gasped as the pain sliced through me.

"Where is it, bitch?"

I blinked in confusion. "Where is what?"

He backhanded me so fast that I didn't see it coming. But the sound of his hand striking my flesh will always be fresh in my mind.

"I don't know what you are talking about." I tried to focus as the world kept spinning.

Redmont turned to Emma. "You said she had it!"

Emma looked nervous for the first time. "She does. She is lying!"

"Have what?" I cried out.

"The location of our money. That bastard Andrew stole seven million dollars and I want it back."

"Seven million dollars?" I gasped.

He shoved his face into mine and I could smell his rancid breath, "Don't play dumb, bitch, where is the money?"

"I don't know." I winced as his hand came back, striking me on the other side. The room was spinning, and I felt like I was going to throw up.

"Liar!" Emma shrieked, "He said you took it!"

I tried to find her, but my vision was blurry, "I never once took money from Andrew. He gave me coke a few times but made sure I paid for it with favors. Where would I have put it? I don't have a dime to my name."

Redmont raged at Emma, "You bitch, you said she had the money."

Emma whimpered, "She does, can't you see she's lying?"

He grabbed my hair and pulled it back. I had tears streaming down my face, but I didn't say anything.

"I could kill you." His smile was so evil that it shook me to the core.

"Do what you have to do," my words were slow and steady. "I don't have your fucking money. Emma knows that; she is just trying to punish me because she's a bitch."

Redmont rounded on Emma, who started backing away.

She pleaded with him, "Baby, you know that I love you!"

In seconds he had a gun up to her throat. "Did you honestly think I ever gave a shit about you? Where is the money, doll-face? She doesn't have it, so you must."

Emma started to cry and continued to claim that she didn't know. But we all knew that she did. And the saddest part was that I was going to die because Emma couldn't go down on her own. I don't know what she had been expecting, but this wasn't how I wanted it all to end.

Redmont jabbed the gun under her chin. "Last chance, doll face, where is the money?"

I heard the click of the gun being cocked and she blurted out, "It's in an offshore bank account. Don't hurt me, baby, please. I was saving it for us. So, we could get away from all..."

He pulled the trigger and her head exploded.

I closed my eyes, but the sight kept playing over and over in my mind. There was blood everywhere and I knew I was next.

I thought about our unborn child and all of the things that I hadn't said to Will. I thought about the stupid choices that I had made in this life that had led me to this moment. I thought about seeing my Papaw and Nona again because surely, I wasn't long for this world.

Redmont turned to me and smiled. The expression was so sinister that I felt ice racing through my veins.

"You know what comes next, right?"

I nodded.

Tears were falling, those were involuntary, and I couldn't do anything about them. But I wouldn't beg this man. He was what he was, and I had made my bed. It was time to face whatever consequences from my selfish life before.

"No pleas?" he asked in surprise, and he walked over toward me.

I tried not to notice that he was covered in Emma's blood.

I shook my head. "Just make it fast."

He nodded, a glint of respect in his eyes as he raised the gun and pointed it directly between my eyes. I closed them and waited for the gunshot.

'BAM'

I waited for the impact of the bullet that never came, and when Redmont slumped to the floor in front of me, I knew it was over.

Chapter 23

Will

I hated being away from Shay at the Villa, but the truth was that if we were ever to have a future together, I was going to need to get out of the family business. Julio understood where I was coming from and promised to take good care of her while I went about tying up loose ends.

In between all of this, the threat of Redmont was still weighing on us. I knew that he would be coming after her. That crazy son of a bitch just didn't know when to stop. Most people would have thrown in the towel long ago, so I knew there had to be more involved.

That was when I uncovered the offshore accounts in Shay's name. There were millions of dollars stashed away and I knew that my girl had nothing to do with it. It suddenly made sense as to why Redmont couldn't let things go.

Millions of dollars are nothing to sneeze at even in today's day and age, with billionaires running Wallstreet. The difference was that Redmont wouldn't want to have it known that some nobody conned him out of seven million. He wanted to teach her and anyone who ever tried to fuck with him again a lesson.

It's too bad I got the funds first and had Marco relocate them back to the authorities. It was my first coming clean step. I would never be in a position to walk back into the United States as a model citizen. But when you hand the Feds seven million, they tend to be a bit more lenient on past misdeeds.

I was actually whistling when I made my way up the stairs back at the Villa. I finally felt like I was in a place to tell Shay how I really felt about her. How I had always felt about her. Shay was my reason for breathing and I was tired of pretending otherwise.

I had lived years thinking that I didn't have a heart. What I hadn't realized was that Shay took it with her all those years ago and now that she's back in my life I can never let her go.

Gina was already interested in getting out and Marco wanted out to make things work with Gina. It only made sense that this would be our last case.

The moment I opened the door to our suite I felt her presence missing from the room.

"Fuck!" I screamed, and half a dozen armed me raced into the room. "She's gone! Get an ABP on the vehicle, they have to be on the surveillance somewhere."

The next thing I knew I was stomping into the command room. My ears were ringing, and I was having a hard time focusing on the monitors as tapes were searched. Finally, we saw something, a license plate.

Julio had an ATL out and was about to locate the vehicle that had traveled all the way to the coast and was parked outside of a warehouse at the docks. We loaded the helicopters and were off. Julio figured by the time we arrived she couldn't have been there more than forty-five minutes.

A lot can happen in forty-five minutes. My entire world could be completely destroyed in less time. Julio called the local authorities that the family had a connection with. We were pulling out all the stops, every favor owed to us we were cashing in on.

"She will be alright, Cousin." Julio said it like a promise.

I prayed that he was right.

The chopper was barely landed when I stumbled out the door, falling to the ground. I got up and ignoring the winds from the blades, I forced my way over to where some of the local men had gathered. I could tell that they were getting ready to go in.

No one asked who I was, they just seemed to know, or perhaps they knew Julio's operation. He was the kingpin in this country.

"We've got a tap in the situation, they are on the second floor," someone in black announced. And we set off after him, quietly as possible, guns raised and ready to go.

The first few men we encountered Julio's guys took out with tranquilizer darts. I could see this was his way of appeasing the Carabinieri, a military force with police like duty. If this had been a personal mission those men would be dead.

We heard voices, a few higher ones that sounded like women and a lower one that must have been Redmont. When I heard the first gunshot and blood-curdling scream I felt my heart freeze in my chest. I literally stumbled and almost fell.

My stomach lurched, and my vision clouded.

"Keep it together," Julio clamped a strong arm on my shoulder.

I nodded, but clearly, this was the most not together I had ever been in my life. All the training, all of the deadly calm nerve flew out the window. The woman I loved was being held by a madman.

Half of the men took the back entrance and the other half came in with me to the side. There were boxes that we hid behind as the muffled voices became clearer. And then I heard her speak, she was scared but it was her. Shay was alright.

"You know what comes next, right?"

That stupid son of a bitch was taunting her. I was finally able to get a visual. He had the gun held between her eyes. I didn't know what she said to cause him to smile, but I knew then it was now or never.

I shot, aiming at his forehead; he never saw it coming. Blood spattered over Shay and Redmont slumped to the floor.

I was to her in seconds, finally seeing her face, how battered and bruised she was.

"Baby, we are going to get you out of here." My hands shook, and Julio pushed me away, working on the restraints himself.

There was a shout from a policeman, indicating another body had been found, it was a woman he said. I didn't care.

When Shay was free, she launched herself into my arms and I blurted out what I should have said to her so long ago.

"I love you, Shay. I fucking love you so much! I almost lost you and like a fucking idiot, I hadn't told you. Baby, I love you so much!"

Shay shook in my arms. "I love you, Will. I love you so much."

The paramedics arrived, and they insisted on taking Shay to the hospital. I wasn't leaving her, so I climbed into the back with the medics and first responders. We traveled to the hospital and then I waited for what seemed like an eternity before they finally allowed me back with her.

They had given Shay something to put her to sleep. The doctor was kind and spent a lot of time reassuring me that she would be okay.

"You were very lucky," he patted me on the back. "And the baby is fine."

I froze, "What?"

"You are a good man, Mr. Jennings, your wife and child will be fine."

Wife and child.

Wife and child.

I sat down next to Shay, taking her listless hand into my own. A baby, we were going to have a baby. I don't know how long I sat there holding her small hand.

I remember Julio coming in and assuring me that she really would be okay. Gina and Marco came as well, his arm around her in a protective manner that led me to believe everything would be okay with them.

We were having a baby. Shay and I were going to be a family. No matter how many times I repeated it to myself I could hardly believe it. At some point, I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew there was a soft hand running fingers through my hair.

I awakened with a start to see the woman I loved smiling back at me. Her bruises looked terrible and I felt the flare of anger at Redmont. If he wasn't dead, I would have killed him all over again.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up. "Aren't I supposed to be asking you that?"

She smiled wide and then winced when it pulled on her split lip. "I must look pretty amazing."

"Beautiful," I kissed her hand. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world. I love you."

Her eyes glittered. "I love you too."

I held her hand against my cheek. "I'm getting out, Shay. We are going to find a way to be together, to be a family."

Her hand went to her stomach, eyes growing wide. "You know?"

Chapter 24

Shay

Months later, sitting at the computer putting the finishing touches on a manuscript...

A lot has happened since our stay at the Villa. As I began to recuperate Will was busy selling his mansion and finding us a new forever home. It was obvious that going back to the United States wouldn't be in his best interest.

Will wasn't precisely on the Feds list, but they weren't exchanging Christmas cards either.

Mandy, Elliot, and their adorable little girl had gone back home. But not before a tearful goodbye between the two of us.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to forgive you," Mandy whispered as she hugged me tightly.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you and your family," I replied, squeezing her every bit as tight.

We had time to talk more about things that had happened. For the most part it was water under the bridge. She was right that we would never be close like we once were. But I knew from that moment she no longer hated me, and it set me free.

Marco and Gina were very chummy, and it wasn't a surprise to anyone when they announced they were officially together. Gina was getting closer to her third trimester and Marco wanted to take her home before the baby came.

Another tearful goodbye came and went.

"Please don't be a stranger." I wiped my tears and smiled.

Gina was just as weepy as I was; we blamed it on the pregnancies and not the fact that I wasn't sure when I would see them again.

When all was said and done, we thanked Julio profusely and flew to our new home. Julio promised to visit just as soon as he tied up some loose ends. I didn't even want to contemplate what that entailed.

Our new home was on a small island near New Guinea, it was completely different than life in the city. The crystal-clear water and gorgeous beaches combined with the tranquil lifestyle was just what we needed.

Will told me he loved me often, but he showed me his love in everything he did. I had thought I was hopelessly in love with the man before, but now I knew he was my reason for living.

I often thanked him for saving me. Will would usually brush it away, not wanting to think about those days. But that wasn't precisely what I meant.

Will saved me. I was lost before he and his men took me off the streets that day. A moment away from breaking down and using again. It had been a long and difficult journey, but I was no longer that woman. And I know it's because of Will's love and faith in me that gave me the push I needed to do this for myself.

The last step of the twelve-step program says that after you have a spiritual awakening as a result of the program that you will carry this message to others and practice them in all of your affairs.

And so that is why I spent the last several months writing everything that happened from the moment Will came back into my life. Isolated as we are, I don't know how many people I will reach. But my story, published under a different name, will hopefully bring someone the courage to try and fight for themselves.

The words came from the depths of my soul as I wrote the forward to the book.

I know how debilitating addiction can be. I thought I would never be free of it. I had convinced myself it was all I deserved. I called myself the worst names imaginable and worse, I believed them.

There is hope, and when you feel at your darkest point, completely alone, remember that I believe in you. I don't need to know your name or your situation to know that somewhere inside of you is the person you were meant to be.

Don't give up. Someday, you too will be free.

***

"SHAY?" WILL WALKED into our bedroom as I closed out the document I was working on.

I turned my head up and he kissed me softly on the lips.

"Are you doing okay?"

The love he had for me was shining in his eyes.

"I am more than okay, I just finished writing my story."

His face broke into a wide smile. "You did? I'm so proud of you!"

The next thing I knew he was lifting me and my huge belly up and spinning us around. I squealed holding on for dear life. He kissed me hard on the lips upon setting me down.

"I just spoke with Marco and Gina; they are going to bring Bella here so that she can meet her godparents."

My throat clogged with emotion and I beamed at Will. “When?”

“Next week,” he smoothed a strand of hair back from my face. “They wanted to get here before the baby arrives.”

I rolled my eyes and patted my massive stomach, “I don’t think your son is ever coming out of there. The doctor said that I wasn’t even thinning yet.”

Will hadn’t been comfortable with a local physician, so he had one of the top OBGYN’s in the world flown in and living like a king until I delivered.

“You aren’t due for another two weeks,” Will reasoned.

I huffed, “That is beside the point!”

Will raised a brow, “You know, if Gina and Marco are coming in…”

He trailed off as he sank down onto one knee and pulled a small blue box out of his pocket.

“Shut up!” I exclaimed, “Shut up, shut up!”

Tears began to gather, and my hands were shaking. Will couldn’t hold back a massive grin as he took my hands in his.

“I love you, Shay. I have loved you for what seems like my entire life and that will never change. Please, will you be my wife?”

“Shut up,” I whispered, the tears now coursing down my cheeks.

“Is that your answer?” he laughed.

“Yes,” I pulled on my hands so that he could stand and take me in his arms.

“Yes, that is your answer or yes you will marry me?”

I choked on a sob, “Yes, you crazy man, I will marry you. I love you so much!”

This time when Will picked me up and spun me it had a different effect.

It was poor timing on our son’s part, because at that moment my water broke.

SEVENTEEN HOURS, THIRTEEN minutes and eleven seconds later Alexander William Jennings made his appearance into the world. He was seven pounds, fourteen ounces and eighteen inches long. He reminded me a bit of a fat old man. And he wasn’t at all amused with my vagina, life on the outside, or childbirth in general.

He was perfect.

They say that you bond automatically with your child. And to a large degree I would have to say this is accurate. We both were horrified and shared that common bond.

I am told that childbirth is a beautiful moment you will never forget. Because I have resolved to try and help others in this world, I will say this with all assurance, if the doctor asks you if you want a mirror to witness the birth the answer is ALWAYS no.

I told Will that I loved him, but sex was now off the table. Anyone with stitches in their lady bits and nipples that raw would understand my plight. Somehow Will managed to see Alex and me through. He loved us through breastfeeding, giving up and going to the bottle. And then back to lactating when I was sure I had one more go in me.

He loved us through postpartum and stretch marks—there is a reason God doesn't let you see underneath your belly when you are pregnant.

Will loved us through each and every stage, and at some point, it became easy. We had our ups and downs, but we were a family. I don't know what would have happened to me if he hadn't had had me kidnapped off the street.

We certainly debated on what we would tell the children when they got older.

Okay, so obviously I let Will back in again. Amanda Grace was born two years later, and Sophia Marie came three years after that.

There were rare moments when I would receive an email from Mandy checking in. She and Elliot were deliriously happy. We didn't ever speak about what happened between us. But it meant the world to me that she cared enough to keep in touch.

Marco and Gina came every summer and two weeks at Christmas. They have three girls and just found out that she's expecting a boy.

Life didn't turn out how I thought it would. But as I cuddled up to the man I loved and listened to the kids arguing down the hall I had to admit.

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